Brookfield Cares Community Conversation 2023
What the Community Told Us

On October 12, 2023 Brookfield Cares hosted a community forum called *Empowering Our Youth Through Building Assets*. The purpose of the forum was to explain to the community some of the key findings of the most recent Attitudes and Behaviors Survey from Search Institute that was given (with parents having the opportunity to opt their child out) to students in grades 7 through 12. Brookfield Cares has worked closely with the Brookfield Public Schools in giving this survey – in fact we've surveyed students 6 times since 2009.

You can access the full report presented at the forum here:

https://brookfield-cares.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/BCares-Community-2023-final.pdf

Search Institute has identified 40 positive supports and strengths that young people need to succeed – they are known as Developmental Assets. Half of the assets focus on the relationships and opportunities they need in their families, schools, and communities (external assets). The remaining assets focus on the social-emotional strengths, values, and commitments that are nurtured within young people (internal assets). It is important to note that Search Institute's years of research shows that the more Assets a youth has or experiences, the less likely they are to engage in risk-taking behavior.

You can learn more about Developmental Assets and download grade-specific descriptions of the Assets here:

https://brookfield-cares.org/wp-content/files/Developmental-Assets.pdf

Our first goal at the forum was to discuss the results of the survey and explain Developmental Assets so community members in attendance would have a grasp of the importance of what assets were. But the most important part of the forum was the moderated breakout sessions we had where community members could

discuss interactively ideas on how we could work collaboratively as a whole to increase assets within our youth.

The four areas we focused on were: Businesses – Neighbors – Families – Schools.

What follows is a recap of the ideas suggested by community members at the forum. For each of the four areas we first show the prompts that moderators gave each group, then we list the ideas offered by the community on how Brookfield could increase assets in youth. We thank them for the remarkable insight and effort.

And this is not the end, but the beginning of the work for our community.

Businesses Building Assets

Only 16% of our 9th to 12th graders feel like our community values youth.

How might Brookfield's business community work to improve that percentage? What would some specific examples be?

Businesses could:

- Offer employment to youth of all ages (some bigger businesses don't employ younger youth) by:
    → Offering more flexible hours with part-time jobs.
    → Offering more summertime jobs for students.
    → Offering job sharing with shorter shifts to fit better with the study & sports schedules of busy students.
    → Advertising some jobs specifically FOR students.
    → Opening more skilled positions for youth within a business (i.e., not assuming they must do the least demanding jobs).
    → Being more inclusive of ALL young voices for business input on the job (which may also increase business relevance/profitability).
    → Paying youth employees to coach & onboard younger youths (Brookfield Parks & Recreation & YMCA offer youth counselor programs).
    → Offering specific mentorship program and/or unpaid internships. (Could work with SCORE – one participant was from the Western CT chapter of https://www.score.org/)
    → Putting younger youth on teams with more experienced workers.

BROOKFIELD CARES
Promoting social health and emotional well-being in our community.

Page 2

- Businesses could deliberately market themselves to attract youth consumers by:
  - → Aiming programs and promotions especially toward youth market. (Many businesses already donate food and products to school events/sports events, showing kids they matter.)
  - → Collaborating with PTO, such as a deli's after-school delivery app.
  - → Providing a "kids corner" in a shop where kids could buy something affordable for themselves or their family.
  - → Training employees to say hello and greet youth customers with respect, speaking directly to them (and not to parent).
  - → Putting a bike rack outside the business, for youth customers.
  - → Offering "study hall" cafe space atmosphere, with fast & free WiFi. (But don't allow phones at dinner tables in restaurants!)
  - → Encouraging youths to "post and share" good news about a local business on social media (Proudly marketing themselves as "youth friendly" businesses).
  - → Promoting cultural acceptance and inclusivity.

- With supportive advertising, businesses could encourage local news outlets to do more coverage of youth sports & school activities
- Brookfield Police Department School Resource Officers could sponsor annual BPD Awards … for things like anti-bullying, most improved behavior, more.
- Businesses could encourage parents/schools to prepare youth employees for jobs by:

  - → Organizing a local business internship fair.
  - → Offering more resume building assistance. (Sharing what skills are most needed for the jobs they have to offer.)
  - → Pressing schools to offer more job skills training in the trades (since BHS doesn't have what Abbott Tech offers).

Neighbors Building Assets

Only 31% of our youth grades 9-12 feel that they live in a caring neighborhood:

Why do you think they feel that way? What's working and what is not?

- Suburbs are isolating:

BROOKFIELD CARES
Promoting social health and emotional well-being in our community.

Page 3

- → People often aren't home or aren't outside, so it is difficult to get to know your neighbors
- → There is no place to walk to, and traffic can be inhibiting.
- Kids might interpret getting in trouble as someone didn't like them or people not communicating with them.
- Many kids are getting picked up from school by parents so they are not sitting on school bus and meeting neighborhood kids
- Sports are played to be competitive.vs. just for fun. You don't go down to the corner for a pickup game.
- Kids spending more screen time vs outside in the neighborhood.

What do you think a caring neighborhood looks like?

- Sidewalks.
- Block parties to bring neighbors together.

How can we build more caring neighborhoods?
- Community organizations reach out to guidance department to offer volunteer opportunities.

What role, if any, do you think faith communities can play in creating a caring community?
- They could play a large role.
- Have youth groups and charity events.
- Host intergenerational community events.
- Promote trusted adults.

65% of our high schoolers always feel safe walking in the neighborhood, but that number changes when looking at males (83%) vs. females (52%).

What would a "safe" neighborhood look like?
- Sidewalks.
- Bring able to run to a neighbor if help was needed.

Why do you think that discrepancy exists?

- Kids have not developed good interpersonal skills, especially due to increased screen time.
- Cognitive dissonance. An example: Blue Lights at colleges….women are taught that they need to look out for their safety.
- Girls/women who have been assaulted always feel unsafe.

BROOKFIELD *CARES*
Promoting social health and emotional well-being in our community.

Page 4

- The disparity could be attributed to the massive social networks that continue to disparage women and male attitudes of aggressive nature as well. One example: boys/men whistling at girls/women.

What can we do to make females feel safer?

- Schools could offer self defense classes.
- ILT periods could also be used as a check in time.
- Teach boys/young men to be more empathetic and caring.
- Cultural shift-promoting safe language.
- Consistent rules in the classroom (one class/teacher may react to a situation and others may not).

Families Building Assets

While 70% of our 9th-12th graders reported strong family support, only 29% reported positive family communication.

What does positive family communication look like?

- Talking without yelling — no shouting
- Asking opinions and respecting responses — an opening to dialogue
- Listening — being open and responsive — caring.
- Be available. Make time. Include the extended family.
- Slow down to make time.
- No phones at the table.
- Make sure to talk about highs as well as lows — emotions/feelings are important.
- Be open and non judgemental.
- Having conversations — finding time in the car provides a safe space.

In what ways do you think communication within a family is difficult?

- Everyone has a busy schedule.
- Over-scheduling with each family member having their unique things to do can lead to separation/less closeness.
- Not enough cars in the family can exacerbate the situation.
- Financial stress can add to difficult communication.

BROOKFIELD *CARES*
Promoting social health and emotional well-being in our community.

Page 5

- Different work shifts also effects communication — many times the family as a group is not home.

What different forms can family communication take?

- Calendars are helpful.
- Talking is always good.

How can communication be improved?

- Schedule weekly time to have family discussions. This has reduced anxiety.
- Schedule time together — such as meals.
- Check in daily — as part of a daily routine.
- Have activities where the family can enjoy time together — sometimes adults doing what the kids enjoy.
- Don't rely only on text to communicate with your children. Text can be an additional way to communicate but shouldn't be the primary way.
- Coordinate to have time with family members – individually and groups.
- No phones at dinner/restaurants.

What can families do to show their children that they live in a caring community?

- Get involved in youth sports.
- Volunteer — there's a benefit in children watching their parents do volunteer community work.
- Pay attention – not divided attention.
- Have uncomfortable conversations.
- Find more opportunities for parents to get involved.

What role, if any, do you think social media plays in the assets of youth? What can families do to lessen or improve the impact?

- Depends on how much access is allowed.
- Social media creates a lot of pressure.
- Creates a fear of missing out (FOMO).
- We don't listen to youth if they disagree, so we need to be more accepting and open to understanding youth perspective.
- Social media affects all aspects of a youth's life.

BROOKFIELD CARES
Promoting social health and emotional well-being in our community.

Page 6

Schools Building Assets

Only 23% of our youth feel they experience a caring school climate.

In what ways can a school establish a caring environment?

- Students need to feel connection with an adult. Students who are not involved in sports or clubs don't feel connected with adults in the schools, and not as many are in the "13-year club".
- Work to build feelings of Inclusion in the classroom and school, so students feel part of the school community. For example:
  → "Wingman Program" or "Harbor Program" (I'll be your anchor): Students who are trained to recognize those needing a connection/sitting alone.
  → Buddy Bench for younger grades.
  → Round tables vs long rectangle tables in cafeteria-promotes more conversation/connection.
- Make the school environment feel more personal: staff should work to know student's names. Have greeters at the door.
- Students' mistakes shouldn't follow them … use error correction vs punishment. Establish policies for restorative vs. punitive action.
- Reduce stress: students are overwhelmed with academics/sports/ pressure to overachieve and do not have enough time to relax.
- Every adult in the school is perceived as an authority figure, so students feel like they cannot confide in anyone. Some staff should present themselves as something other than authority figures.
- Fix broken equipment/do repairs. It's hard for students to feel like the schools care when the chairs are broken and the roofs are leaking.

26% of our 7th and 8th graders and 35% of our high schoolers tell us they do not feel safe at school.

How could this be improved?
- Limit cell phone use during school hours
- Male/female security at the schools: at least one security guard in each school should be female.
- Teachers standing at the classroom doors during class changes can be the "eyes and ears" to what's happening in the hallways.

- Create "safe zones" where students can go to speak to someone if they are not feeling safe.
- Address cognitive dissonance: let students know they are safe vs. their perceived sense of security and safety.
- Happy to see the Anonymous reporting system/Sandy Hook Promise. Those will help.
- Address bullying. We need to work to create empathy and acceptance for those kids that are outside the norm.

Is there anything we, as a community, can do to support this?
- Students feel ostracized if they are culturally/ethnically different: we can promote cultural acceptance and inclusivity.
- Help support the schools in their efforts.
- Give bullied kids a community somewhere outside the schools where they feel they belong.
- Encourage more community activities for youth that are perceived as outside the norm.
- Promote programs in the community that students can run themselves.

BROOKFIELD *CARES*
Promoting social health and emotional well-being in our community.

Page 8