

## **A Developmental Perspective:**

An Analysis of Qualitative Research  
Exploring Views of Youth Programs

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## Strategic Overview

This research focused on understanding how adults in the state of Minnesota view adolescence in general and youth development programs in specific. Minnesotans recognize that youth development programs that happen in the out-of-school hours benefit young people, but they do not view these programs as critically necessary in the way a good quality education is, for example. Therefore, responsibility for engaging adolescents in youth development programs is left largely to parents, while education is viewed as the responsibility of parents and the broader community. Building the public will for stable, long-term funding for youth development programs for all young people requires that the public begin to perceive these programs as critically necessary for successful development, and not simply an interesting way to spend time.

Typically, advocates are tempted to tap into public fear and worry to build a sense of urgency to address a problem. However, instilling a sense of urgency in the public about the status of youth is counterproductive. The public is already highly concerned about the state of young people today, and a conversation that taps into that concern simply makes the problems seem overwhelming. Any solution short of societal transformation is viewed as inadequate.

By framing youth programs as crime prevention, one may succeed in heightening public priority for after school programs in the short term, only to undermine the long-term objectives for youth development programs. Program quality becomes unimportant; keeping kids busy until parents return home is the only criterion that is necessary for a successful program. Furthermore, this Crime Prevention frame cues images of scary teens, deficient parents, and a damaged society, which undermine public support for other youth policies.

A second approach that children's advocates tend to rely upon is to focus on convincing people that children are important and that society has a stake in raising successful children. The Stewardship Frame, which states that children are our common future, is one example of this approach. While this frame resonates with the public, it is insufficient in building support for youth programs. Minnesotans are already convinced that they have a stake in raising healthy children, but they do not understand why youth development programs are a means to that end.

By contrast to these two relatively weak ways of framing the issue, this research suggests a clear path to lead to stable, long-term public support for youth development programs for all young people. First, the public needs to begin to view these programs as critically necessary. To accomplish that task, advocates need to deploy a series of developmental frames. This research tested three different developmental frames, and all three have a role to play in building public understanding and support:

**Adolescent Development:** The public needs a better understanding of how children develop and needs to be reminded that adolescence is a developmental

stage. A Child Development Frame, incorporating a simplifying model of child development such as Brain Architecture, helps the public to have a better understanding of the process of child development.

**Developmental Benefits of Programs:** In addition, the developmental benefits of youth programs need to be communicated, which the Experiences Frame tested in this research does effectively. Youth development programs are neither about filling time nor learning new information. Rather, they are about the experiences that adolescents need to shape who they will be in adulthood. By communicating that it is important to provide a range of experiences because all kids are different, the public will be less likely to respond that lots of opportunities are already available.

**Role for Community:** One of the central barriers to public support for these programs is the core belief that parents should be solely responsible for children. The Environment of Relationships Frame helps to address this perception by reminding the public that a variety of people in the community have a role to play in helping children develop well. So that parents do not feel displaced by community actors, it will be important for communications to suggest a role for parents, such as making sure that programs are available and affordable, or volunteering as program leaders to be a role model for children other than their own. Importantly, grandparents and parents of grown children are an important audience for engagement since they remember how important these programs were for their own children during adolescence.

Combining these three angles of development – how children develop, how youth programs provide developmental experiences, and how engaging with people in the community is necessary to development – will, over time, lay a solid foundation for public engagement and support.

This understanding, then, allows advocates to demonstrate the potential impact of the loss of quality programs, a key ingredient in effective messaging of this topic. To engage the public, the problem needs to be defined more narrowly than troubled youth which quickly becomes an overwhelming problem with no solution. Rather, the problem needs to be manageable: *Important programs are not widely available, are being eliminated, or are becoming too costly for parents, due to state budget cuts.* In this way, citizens can engage in the solution by looking into what the community offers adolescents, and working to improve upon what is available.

## Method

This phase of qualitative research was designed to explore perceptions about adolescents and policies for adolescents, particularly such youth programs as out-of-school-time programs. In addition, participants were exposed to a series of hypothetical reframes for this issue. Specifically, the research was designed to explore answers to the following questions:

- When people think about activities for youth, what associations come to mind?
- What do they believe is the current state of youth activities?
- What are the barriers to people's support for youth policies and development programs?
- What frames advance support for youth policies and development programs?

To explore answers to these questions, eight focus groups were conducted with engaged citizens in Minnesota (i.e., people who say they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue.) Some groups were conducted with parents of children under 18 years of age, while others were conducted with those who do not have children under 18 years old. Focus groups were conducted with residents from the following locations:

- September 20, 2004
  - Little Falls, parents of children under 18 years old
  - Little Falls, no children under 18 years old
- September 21, 2004
  - Minneapolis, parents of children under 18 years old
  - Minneapolis, no children under 18 years old
  - Minneapolis, African American residents, mix of parental status
  - Minneapolis, Hispanic residents, mix of parental status
- September 22, 2004
  - Rochester, parents of children under 18 years old
  - Rochester, no children under 18 years old

Throughout the report, focus group participants are noted by their location and gender. In addition, participants in racially segregated groups are noted by race. Participants in the groups of parents of children under 18 years old are noted by parental status. (Those in the groups without children under 18 years old may or may not have older children, so they are simply noted by gender.) The focus group guide is included in the Appendix.

## Summary of Findings

### Youth and Community

Prior research by Public Knowledge and the FrameWorks Institute found that negative images of teenagers are readily available in public discourse. Once this negative image of youth is invoked, focus group participants have difficulty discussing positive connections to community. Therefore, focus group participants were asked to conduct a series of exercises at the beginning of the discussion designed to get focus group participants past this conceptual hurdle by providing them with explicit reminders of the variety of people that influence youth, the mix of activities that benefit youth, and only then with the range of dangers that threaten youth.

For good or ill, families are the biggest influence on young people, assert focus group participants. Frequently, focus group participants have difficulty naming many influences on young people outside the family. When these are provided, however, focus group participants quickly recognize the influence of several community actors. Teachers plant seeds. Religious leaders help to develop character, decision-making, and a sense of right and wrong. Even camp counselors can make a big difference. “I happen to know my children have been influenced by their summer camp experiences that have been life altering,” remarked a Minneapolis woman. Surprisingly, Minnesota residents are less enthusiastic about coaches. “I’ve had three kids go through all kinds of sports...coaches aren’t a good influence on kids in learning values. They should be. They’re focused on the sport and winning and not on teaching the kids to enjoy the game or how to be good sportsmen,” a Minneapolis man complained. The category of professions encompassed by “youth development professionals” is a confusing, unfamiliar category. Until better terminology is developed, it is preferable to use specific, familiar terms: community center director, camp counselor, etc.

What is a youth development professional?

I don't know.  
 Social workers. I don't know.  
 Child psychologist  
 That's what I was wondering, what is it?  
 Never heard of one  
 School counselor

Focus group participants also see value in a variety of activities in which adolescents participate. Household chores and homework are frequently seen as among the most influential activities. Household chores are beneficial because they instill responsibility. Homework helps young people develop skills, discipline, and preparedness. Performance arts, volunteerism, and community groups are seen as equally valuable. Performance arts help to develop self-esteem, while volunteering allows young people to practice being a citizen and a part of a community. Church youth groups are valued because they are a controlled, safe environment for young people to be social. Interestingly, part-time jobs are generally ranked as less important by focus group participants. “You can still teach them a work ethic without them having to punch a time clock at McDonald’s,” stated a mother from Little Falls. Focus group participants, particularly parents of grown children, recognize the importance of youth activities:

*I think it helps them establish their own identity. Their own uniqueness. It gives, if they have success in it, theoretically they're going to pursue those things that give them warm fuzzies, that builds their self-esteem and gives them recognition for who they are and who they're becoming. (Little Falls man)*

*My daughter was in band and it was just great for self-esteem. I am a writer and I just think that more emphasis should be put in there and less on sports. (Minneapolis woman)*

*Big Brothers Association probably saved a friend of mine's life when we were little. He didn't have the family. This guy just took them under his wing. But he had a role model. He took the place of that family. He was there for him, and I think that we, as individuals, should take a part in making sure there is stuff for the kids to do. (Rochester man)*

*I've worked with the YMCA, youth groups. I've worked with boys and girls clubs. I've worked with 4-H extensively and I see nothing but positive results from all of those. They learn how to deal with each other, they learn responsibility, they have opportunities that they wouldn't have in most cases any other way. (Minneapolis man)*

Focus group participants are more reserved about the value of sports. Some participants are very enthusiastic about the benefits of sports. "Sports kept them focused. It's gotten them very athletically motivated. They become very nutritionally motivated," a Minneapolis mother asserted. "Sports gets the parents, coaches and teachers in town involved with the whole community spirit," stated a Rochester man. Others feel that sports have become too competitive. "It's no longer the game anymore, it's the win, so we've eliminated letting the other 30 children who want to play ball to play. Because it's the win," a Little Falls woman complained.

While drugs, sex, and alcohol are typically the first fears that come to mind about young people, with reasoned discourse, a different set of threats emerge. Consistently, focus group participants rate low self-esteem and depression as bigger threats facing young people than a range of other concerns. "Low self-esteem starts causing those other problems," a Rochester man explained. "Every year there is some child who has killed himself at our school," a Minneapolis mother shared. "I'll tell you, I see a lot of kids that don't have self-esteem and if you go back, it's the same kids that are not involved in sports, not involved in these other things that we just looked at," noted a Rochester father.

## **Cross-Cutting Themes**

As focus group participants reviewed a series of articles designed to reframe youth policies, a number of concerns emerged repeatedly across the conversations. These cross-cutting themes are challenges of which advocates will have to be aware, so communications can be adapted to avoid triggering problematic associations and assuage known concerns.

**Theme: Parents Should be Responsible, not Communities**

The most persistent critique throughout the focus group conversations was the perception that the news articles suggest placing responsibility for children with the community instead of parents. Focus group participants, particularly those who have children under 18 years old, are very protective of parental responsibility. A conversation about community programs for adolescents quickly shifts into a conversation about communities raising children.

*A lot of our focus has been on the community raising the children. I firmly don't believe in that. (Hispanic woman)*

*The parents of these kids should try and help them get involved in something instead of having society have to have somewhere for them to go. (Minneapolis mother)*

For many, the only appropriate role for community is to act as a safety net for deficient parents. Note the conflicting assumptions in the following conversation between a man who assumes that a role for community is unfortunate, and a woman who sees the community as a benefit:

*The sad thing is that sometimes they don't get any of that training they need at home. They have to go out in the community to get the training that they need. (Rochester man)*

*It's not necessarily sad though. That to me is a whole launching point into the community. (Rochester woman)*

**Theme: Opportunities are Readily Available**

One hurdle that advocates will have to overcome in promoting youth development programs, is the common assumption that there are plenty of opportunities already available.

*I can't speak for out-of-state, but I think people in Minnesota tend to be pretty involved. They tend to be pretty child focused. (Minneapolis mother)*

*I think there are a whole lot of things that are attracting kids like videogames, like TV, like things that are maybe competing for their time. So I'm not sure that opportunity is not there. I think it is there, but I think some kids are choosing not to do that because they have other things that are distracting them. (Minneapolis father)*

In fact, several focus group participants insist not only that there are plenty of opportunities, but too many. Kids are over-scheduled.

*Kids are so over-scheduled right now. It's sickening. I think just hanging out, doing things with your family, [is important] at this point. Have your sports and whatever but you don't have to be so involved and so scheduled... what happened*

*to just hanging out and having a good time with your family? (Minneapolis mother)*

*I think the programs are there but not everybody is aware of that. (Hispanic man)*

*I get fliers on my door daily of different things going on for different children. (Hispanic woman)*

Others suggest that, while opportunities may be available in most communities, there are several children who may not be able to participate due to cost, transportation, or limited programs in their community.

*They're cutting out programs for kids. These after-school programs. They're making kids pay for football. Everybody don't have that kind of money. (African American woman)*

*Overall a huge percentage of the kids that aren't taking part in band and aren't taking part in sports, they can't buy a \$500 clarinet. They can't buy sparring gear for \$300. (Rochester father)*

*There's nothing for these kids to do after school and I think it's a major problem. When I was growing up, we had roller skating rinks, and we had stuff we could do instead of wandering around the streets trying to figure out what kind of trouble we could cause. Am I right? (Little Falls mother)*

Some focus group participants were unaware of the expense of youth development programs. They were stunned by the fees parents pay:

*I was thinking when my boys were in sports, I don't remember that it was that expensive.*

*That's exactly right, but it is now.*

*Now it is.*

*We're funding it all as parents.*

*Are you saying that if they are on a baseball team that they have to pay \$50 or something*

*Or \$85 just to be on the team.*

*Really?*

*It's \$150 to be on a hockey team.*

*Every sport has a price to pay. My daughter's tennis was \$85 or \$120.*

*Just for one year?*

*Just for one fall term.*

*Wow.*

Rochester residents

Though they recognize that some families might not be able to afford these program fees, several believe that no child would be turned away due to an inability to pay. "If you are very committed and you want your kid to really be involved competitively, there is a high cost that comes with it," a Minneapolis mother explained. "But there are also community sponsored support programs for kids or families that can't financially afford the burden of it."

**Theme: Teens are Young Adults**

Few focus group participants have a sophisticated understanding of adolescent development. Note the following conversation among Hispanic respondents:

*Because, by the time they're getting to the school age we're talking about, these children are set in their ways. They already know right from wrong. They already know where they're headed. There is not much we can do. It has to start before then.*

*Moderator: Are you saying by the time they are 12 it is too late?*

*I'm saying that by then they are pretty set in their ways and by then, if they don't know right from wrong, they're never going to.*

*If you have never been involved in their life...*

*By then it's too late.*

*They make wrong choices; they have to pay the consequences. But they know what they're doing.*

*They know what they're doing by that age.*

This does not mean, however, that they would give up on troubled youth. This same group of Hispanic respondents insisted that kids should be helped:

*By 12 to 18, they already know what's up, but I also believe firmly that if they are troubled, they should be helped. They should be picked up. They should be led right or corrected. (Hispanic man)*

*I don't think they should be abandoned or forgotten. I think they should be looked at harder. (Hispanic woman)*

**Theme: Problems Facing Youth are Overwhelming**

Consistently throughout the focus group conversations, participants wanted to discuss what is wrong with kids, rather than keep the conversation focused on the narrow questions raised by the articles. If people become focused on what is wrong with kids, they quickly become enmeshed in complex societal problems and solutions. Given the opportunity, people will make the problems overwhelming:

*Here we talk about children, but never is discipline mentioned. And part of the problem with youth is – they're good kids – but discipline, there is not the discipline from the parents and I think that is so important. (Rochester woman)*  
*A lot of that too is giving guidance to these kids. If they got a decent family at home, they're going to help take up some of the slack with their decision-making. (Rochester father)*

*We want to educate, so then we've got the women educated and the men educated, that are all out in the workforce in Minnesota, we are one of the highest with women in the workforce, along with the men...so are we expecting someone else, then, to take care of our children from three to six? (Little Falls woman)*

Effective communications, then, should strive to keep the problem definition manageable and not imply that advocates have the solution for all the problems facing young people.

## Changing the Conversation

As noted in the Introduction, the objective of this research is to develop a communications framework that will build public support for positive youth development, including out-of-school-time programs. To that end, focus group participants reacted to a series of “news articles” that were designed to represent different frames to advance the discussion.<sup>1</sup> The mark of success was not which frame focus group participants *liked* best. Rather, the objective was to determine how focus group participants’ dialogue and understanding of the issue changed as they considered each frame. By determining the strengths and weaknesses of each frame, it is possible to determine the mix of frame elements that will result in public support for youth programs.

Importantly, the articles tested in the focus groups were designed to reflect one of two approaches: 1) the existing dominant conversation about out-of-school time, or 2) learning from earlier FrameWorks research on communicating policies for children and adolescents. Specifically, earlier FrameWorks research recommended:

- Avoid using the word “teenager,” which triggers negative associations. Instead, refer to “young people” or “adolescents.”
- Remind the public that adolescence is a developmental stage. Specifically, include the Brain Architecture simplifying model to communicate the concept of development.
- Explain the ways youth activities reinforce responsibility, teamwork, commitment, goal-orientation, learning leadership, etc.
- Prime the discussion with Level One values like nurturance, community, and future.
- Use an exchange or future model, i.e., give to children who give back.
- Connect adolescents to the larger community outside the nuclear family.

This section reviews participants’ reactions to the frames. Each tested news article is included within the section that discusses reactions to that article.

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<sup>1</sup> The articles are fictional and were developed by the FrameWorks Institute and Public Knowledge and adapted from numerous unverified sources. They should not be used as a source for factual information.

## Crime Prevention Frame

**One of the most commonly used frames to promote the need for youth programs is the Crime Prevention frame. In this frame, the goal of youth programs is to keep kids safe and out of trouble. (The article tested in the focus groups appears at right).**

**This approach brings to mind an image of scary teenagers who need to be metaphorically locked up during the after school hours. The frame suggests no value to youth programs other than filling time until parents return from work. This provides focus group participants with a welcome cue to blame parents for troubled kids. If dual income families were less materialistic, focus group participants suggest, parents would sacrifice to keep one parent home with the children.**

This frame heightens the priority of youth programs among many focus group participants. However, it reinforces damaging perceptions of teens and communicates a very narrow image of youth development programs.

This approach cues two different images of safety: 1) keeping adolescents from becoming victims of crime and violence; and 2) keeping adolescents from engaging in crime and violence. The latter image of dangerous teenagers is readily available and immediately reinforced by this frame. “We live right by an apartment building and there are a lot of teenagers there,” a Rochester mother shared. “I’m not racist, but a lot of them wear the big heavy gold chains. They don’t have jobs. They race down the block in their cars...it’s very scary.” “I see an awful lot of high school kids out at 11 or 12 o’clock at night in car crashes or smoking or drinking. Who knows what they’re doing at three to six?” a Rochester man asked.

Some focus group participants believe this article prioritizes low-income youth, but they believe all young people are at risk of engaging in criminal activity. “It definitely sounded like it was targeting or really focusing on a group of low-income [kids] or single

### America’s After-School Choice: Juvenile Crime or Safe Learning Time

America’s anti-crime arsenal contains no weapons more powerful than the proven programs that help kids get the right start in life – programs like pre-kindergarten, youth development programs for the after-school and summer hours, and intervention programs to help troubled and at-risk kids get back on track.

When the school bell rings, turning millions of children and teens out on the street with neither constructive activities nor adult supervision, violent juvenile crime soars. On school days, the hours from 3-6 PM are the peak hours for teens to commit crimes, be victims of crime, cause or be in a car crash, or smoke, drink or use drugs.

Quality youth development programs can cut crime immediately and transform this prime time for juvenile crime into hours of academic enrichment, wholesome fun and community service. For example, five housing projects without Boys & Girls Clubs were compared to five receiving new clubs. At the beginning, drug activity and vandalism were the same. But by the time the study ended, the projects without the programs had 50 percent more vandalism and scored 37 percent worse on drug activity.

Gang violence in America is once again on the rise, with gang homicides up 50 percent since 1999, spreading to include adolescents in many urban, suburban and rural areas. Serious violent criminals need to be arrested, convicted and locked up. But in order to curb gang violence we must find ways to intervene and offer alternatives to the gang lifestyle in order to save at-risk children before it’s too late. Quality after-school programs cut crime and save money.

parents,” stated a Minneapolis woman. “In reality, when we talk about youth development, we need to talk about all kids. Because drugs, crime, violence – for me it is through all socioeconomic backgrounds – urban, rural, suburban. We’ve seen it. We’ve seen it in all the school shootings. We’ve seen it in kids getting into meth.”

Since safety is the objective of youth development programs according to this frame, a successful program merely has to keep kids occupied until a parent returns to take over guard duty. Enrichment is irrelevant. After reading this article, Rochester adults stated that the main objective of after school activities should be “to keep kids busy, working,” and “not bored.” “If kids are kept busy enough, they won’t have time to do anything else. That means the parents have to be very proactive setting up lots of activities,” stated one Hispanic man.

The concept of prevention is apparent to focus group participants, but it does not suggest to the reader that juvenile crime prevention requires anything more than occupying time. “I think we need to learn how to play a simple game of checkers,” suggested an African American woman. “And Scrabble, excellent. All those games,” added another African American woman.

When exposed to the Crime Prevention Frame, focus group participants place responsibility upon society to provide youth programs, but only because parents have failed. Note the following conversation among Rochester adults:

*Moderator: Where does the responsibility lie for fixing this problem?*

*Parents.*

*You could say parents, but if they are not going to do it, someone else has to.*

*That’s the trouble with two parents working.*

*Or not just both parents, it’s the single-parent household.*

*Yeah.*

*And parents, too, are not responsible. They drink too much.*

*Do drugs.*

*Whatever.*

A recurring theme in response to this article is parental failure. Since the article conveys no inherent value to youth development programs other than filling time until parents return home, focus group participants view youth development programs as an unfortunate by-product of dual income families. Parents are failing children because they are placing work and wealth before family. “One of the biggest problems I see in this nation is the fact that we’re a two-family income [society] to keep up the lifestyle and this has done away with the mother or father that was home after school and was the Den Mother for the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scout leader, the campfire girls,” a Little Falls father complained. “What this is showing here, is that these clubs are taking the place of these parents that had to go out and they are working to get this higher lifestyle. Two- and three-thousand square-foot house versus the one thousand or 900 square-foot that we grew up with in the fifties, sixties and early seventies.” If the problem is defined as dual income families, then the solution is returning to one income. “Rather than putting out

all this money for programs, why not offer money to parents to go home from the hours of three to five?" asked a Little Falls mother.

### Economic Development Frame

**The objective of the Economic Development Frame is to link success in childhood with future economic success for the state as a whole. It is intended to provide a motivation to invest in kids. (The article tested in the focus groups appears at right).**

**As written, the Economic Development Frame requires the reader to make two associations. First, it ties a successful education system to economic prosperity. Second, it defines youth development programs as part of the educational system. This research demonstrates that focus group**

**participants are generally able to understand and comment on education as economic development. However, in-school education quickly becomes the dominant concern, and youth programs are virtually ignored by focus group participants. At this stage of public understanding, the Economic Development Frame is more effective as a frame for public education than for youth development programs.**

The main message of this article, according to focus group participants, is to "invest in youth." Many firmly believe that Minnesota is not making the kind of investments that youth need. They point to cuts in education funding as proof that the state is not investing in children. "With the schools closing and the number of students per classroom, we're not doing all we can to educate our children," stated one Hispanic woman. "We should be investing and spending more but we're not. We're actually cutting back," stated a man from Rochester. "We need to put more money back into education. We've taken so much out in the last 10 years and now we've got to start putting it back, because Minnesota used to pride itself as being the best education system in the country," a Minneapolis man stressed. "[They are] putting more investment in bringing refugees over here than they are on education for the kids," an African American man complained.

Some focus group participants are comfortable taking the investment message beyond funding for public education, and connecting it to economic prosperity. "People make up

#### Youth Development is Economic Development

In America, we have a long history of valuing public education for every child. A good education is fundamental to democracy and to individual opportunity. Education is also central to a strong economy. Minnesota has one of the strongest economies in the country because it has traditionally invested in one of the most educated workforces. (In all groups but Little Falls: *Minnesota's future workforce will need multiple skills to be successful – the ability to communicate well, the self-discipline and focus to see a problem through to its solution, and the ability to work effectively with lots of different kinds of people, to name a few.* Little Falls heard: *In 2000, almost one-third of adults in Minnesota held a college degree, the sixth highest in the nation.*) As we look for ways to ensure future prosperity, we need to think of education as economic development. One's quality of life and contributions to society can be traced back to patterns and opportunities established in childhood and adolescence. The return on investment of quality early childhood and youth development programs far exceeds the return on most projects that are currently funded as economic development. To ensure the future success of the state's economy, we must continue to invest in youth.

companies. Without people, it just doesn't exist – 3M doesn't exist and so on. So, if we have capable people here that have the education, more college degrees or tech college or whatever...we'll just have a more capable workforce," stated a man from Little Falls. Others interpreted investment as being about raising children who can give back to society. "I didn't think of my son as being an investment, but I guess I saw it as if I taught him and gave him the opportunities, he will grow up to be a responsible, productive citizen and if I did not do that, then I would be probably taking on responsibility for him pretty much for the rest of his life, even as an adult, because he would not be a self-sufficient person." an African American woman explained.

Interestingly, several see this message as being about prevention, even though the article spoke of opportunities, not problems to be prevented. "We fix things after they are already broken rather than making sure that they never get broken," stated one Hispanic man. "How much are we paying to incarcerate people in just a lifetime cost for whatever period of time, and the jail population is at its highest ever...we don't ever say, 'oh let's cut funding to the prisons' because who would want to leave criminals out there on the streets? But if we cut funding [for education], we're creating a situation that may ultimately cost us anyway," a Rochester father complained. That people think of prevention in response to this opportunity message indicates that people do not need to be warned about the consequences of failing to provide for children; they already know the consequences.

Most Minnesotans believe that the state's public education system is broken, so many view this statement as positive spin with an ulterior motive. "It makes Minnesota sound very good...but I don't know how much I value the school system," stated a skeptical Little Falls mother. "Somebody is coming after me for more money. They want to raise taxes to stuff it into some ridiculous program where you throw dollars in it and you don't necessarily get results, or you can see the results or quantify the results," a Minneapolis father complained.

While most recognize that schools are in trouble, they are not convinced that more money is the answer to the problems facing education. "I have a hard time quantifying our return on investment in education. We pour dollars into education and I'm not so sure the quality is better by pouring more money into it," a Minneapolis father asserted. Instead, many believe it is more important to invest time and energy. "You have to invest time in order to make them better people. You can give them all the educational opportunities you want but...it is not just going to happen unless there is someone there to guide him and help them," one Hispanic man stated. "But I don't think of [investment] as money. I think it's the time of the parents, of the neighbors, the youth group leaders, everyone else," argued a Rochester man.

Finally, there are two important distinctions in response by demographic group. Respondents in the Hispanic group were particularly likely to state that Minnesota has among the best schools in the country. "The schools here are great, especially in St. Paul. There are more programs, whether they are funded enough, whether they are accessible

enough, at least they exist here. They don't always exist everywhere," stated a Hispanic man.

Some blue collar residents in the rural groups were offended at the assumption that a college degree defines success. "There are many people who have never graduated high school that are very successful. My husband is one of them. He does very well for himself and our family. I don't think it matters that one third of Minnesotans held a college degree, because that doesn't make you a better person. You can work just as hard without one," insisted a mother from Little Falls. "They're talking about college and so forth in here and the big problem statewide for education is they aren't teaching skilled crafts anymore. There are so many youth out there that would be so much better suited for skilled crafts," asserted a man from Little Falls.

### Stewardship Frame

**Stewardship is a common frame for advancing policies for children. The objective of the Stewardship Frame is to remind people that the future of society rests on what is done for children today. (The article tested in the focus groups appears at right).**

**The Stewardship Frame promotes a motivating value for making children a priority – children are the future. However, it is insufficient on its own in providing a compelling rationale for youth programs. Without a clear sense of the impact of the programs, focus group respondents default to a conversation about deficient parents. The Stewardship Frame is an effective supporting frame, but it should not be the dominant frame for youth development programs. Importantly, this is not to suggest that youth programs should resist the need to frame in terms of values, or even the value of "future," but rather that this value alone may not be enough to move opinion in the right direction.**

#### Children are the Future

The future of society depends upon how we raise our youth. We give to children now and they give back later on – as citizens and workers, as the people who inherit our communities and raise the next generation. Are we doing what we can to make sure that the future of our society will be in good hands? If we want our children to be fully prepared to be successful in the workforce, to be good parents, and to be committed and decent citizens who give back to society, then we need to lay a foundation for that behavior. These skills do not magically appear overnight. They are nurtured throughout a young child's life through community service projects, quality education, sports, and a range of experiences like being part of a team or a choir. As a society, we have a stake in making sure that kids have access to these experiences and encourage them to participate in them.

Focus group respondents have generally favorable reactions to this frame. It reminds them of what they want for children. "You want your child to get through school successfully. You want them to go on to higher education of some sort. You want them to be happy and fulfilled in a job that they get, that gives back to society, and you hope that they meet somebody and raise another successful family," stated a Minneapolis father. "Kids aren't *just* the future, they are valuable contributors as youth," suggested a Rochester woman. "They are a part of the community, the life of society now." For a few, it provides a reason to take personal responsibility for helping youth. "It's

reminding us that we are responsible. Are we being role models? Are we showing them what needs to be done? It's not in the hands of kids," noted a Minneapolis woman.

Most believe that society is not placing enough priority on investing in children. "I don't think the effort is being put into our children that should be, because people are, or society in general is, too focused on 'me,'" stated one Hispanic man. "This is telling us there is an investment here, folks, and we need to put our hands around that, to embrace that," stated an African American woman. "A lot of the investment is our time," noted a Rochester mother. Investing in youth programs is particularly important for troubled youth, according to some focus group participants. "If you take clubs and you take the opportunities away, then there is no hope of saving that kid, period," insisted a Rochester father.

As written, the Stewardship Frame reminds people of the importance of the nuclear family. "The answer, I think we all probably are going to agree, is the home," stated a father from Rochester. "If I want my child to be a good parent, a decent citizen that gives back to society, I need to be a good parent that gives back to society," noted a mother from Little Falls. "It starts with every parent," noted a man from Little Falls. "That's what's scary," responded a woman from Little Falls, "because the parents aren't always there." "If the parents aren't an influence on those kids then it is sometimes pretty hard to reach them, I think. Parents have to lay the foundation for the type of environments they're going to raise their kids in," asserted a Minneapolis man.

Furthermore, the Stewardship Frame, standing alone, does not give focus group participants a new way to think about youth programs, so they default to a parental responsibility mindset. "It's the parents' responsibility. They have the kids. They are the ones. I'm not saying that society can't do anything and offer things, but there are times...that it's almost like it's blaming society for these messed-up kids. I don't agree with that," a Minneapolis mother argued.

Since it does not give them a new way to think about youth programs, focus group respondents even use participation in these programs as an example of parental deficiency. In praising the benefits of the Boys and Girls Club, one Hispanic mother stated, "I bring my kids there for a couple of hours on a Friday night because they want something fun to do. There are people that have their kids there from after school until nine o'clock every night. When are they getting their homework done? Or getting their dinner?"

Finally, African American and Hispanic respondents are far more likely than white respondents to see community programs as an extension of what is taught in the home, rather than competing with what is taught in the home. "Community agencies help to build on what is actually taught and fostered in the home," stated an African American woman. "If you have somebody that you look up to that is outside of the nuclear family, you can really sometimes listen to them much better," stated one Hispanic woman.

## Environment of Relationships Frame

**The Environment of Relationships Frame is constructed to cause people to think developmentally about how adolescents engage in the community. The objective of this frame is to create positive reasons for teens to interact with adults outside their immediate family. (The article tested in the focus groups appears at right).**

**The core concept is generally effective in reminding people of the relationships in the community that influence youth development in positive ways. The last sentence, however, distracts focus group participants from the broader message.**

Conceptually, the Environment of Relationships Frame provides a rationale for youth to engage with adults other than their own parents. It reminds focus group participants of the importance of the “socialization of teenagers or young people, how it is important to have opportunities to engage in relationships with other people who they might never have a chance to be with” (African American woman). Adolescence is the time when young people begin to figure out who they are and what they will be, assert focus group participants. “As a person you look to the outside world to see where you fit in,” stated one Hispanic man. “If kids aren’t given a positive place to choose where they fit in within the outside world, they’re going to probably end up in a bad place.” “Other people help young people dream dreams – what they could do. And a lot of times these dreams come true. They really do,” insisted a Little Falls man.

This approach allows older people to see the relationship they can have with young people. “We, as neighbors, have a lot of children on our block and we try to be involved,” stated a Rochester woman. “My husband fixes their bikes. We want to instill a safe environment, knowing that there are some good people out there who aren’t going to hurt them, and it’s a safe place to come, if they want.” In fact, advocates have an enormous opportunity to engage older people in supporting youth programs, and the Environment of Relationships Frame gives them permission to be involved. Grandparents and parents of grown children are especially supportive of youth development programs, because they remember how their adolescent children struggled with self-esteem and the importance of youth programs in developing confidence.

The last sentence in this statement causes many to react negatively: “but today, many kids rarely venture beyond their schools and homes, because communities no longer offer

### An Environment of Relationships

Kids experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development -- intellectual, social, emotional, and moral. Relationships in childhood and adolescence lay the foundation for a wide range of developmental outcomes that really matter -- self-confidence and sound mental-health, motivation to learn, achievement in school and later in life, knowing the difference between right and wrong, having the capacity to sustain friendships and to be a successful parent. Relationships with neighbors, teachers, coaches, mentors and others, engage kids in the community in ways that help them to find out who they are, what they can become, and how and why they are important to other people. Adolescence is the time when young people traditionally become part of the community and begin to try on their roles as adults in training. But today, many kids rarely venture beyond their schools and homes, because communities no longer offer safe and meaningful opportunities.

safe and meaningful opportunities.” Focus group participants, particularly those with children under 18 years old, believe this is overstated. Consequently, many reject the conclusion that there are not enough youth programs. “I think there are a lot of safe and meaningful opportunities,” stated a Little Falls mother. “I think it’s how active you want to be in seeking them out.” “Don’t tell me there is not a church that doesn’t have a youth group of some kind,” argued a Rochester mother.

However, many recognize that their community may be exceptional, and that other communities may not provide the same level of activity for young people. “This area that we live in, for the most part there are plenty of activities and plenty of opportunities...but I have seen communities where there was virtually nothing for kids to do in the community. All they did was get in trouble,” said a Rochester father. “I think they’re out there if they look for them,” stated a Rochester man. Another Rochester man disagreed: “but if you are on the south side of Chicago or Northeast St. Paul, I could see where something like this could be valid.”

Mentioning “safety” in the last sentence of the article suggests to some focus group participants that the article is referring to the situation faced by inner-city communities. “You are back to the inner city, because I know my community offers several opportunities beyond the school and home. They are safe and meaningful,” stated a Minneapolis man. “Are you in the inner city? Are you scared to go out? Are you scared to go to a Boys Club?” asked a Minneapolis father.

Furthermore, cueing safety reminds focus groups participants that there are dangerous people in the world, which causes them to fear, rather than embrace, adolescents interacting with other people in the community. “I remember as a kid one of the most meaningful things that I would do is get on my bike during the summer, ride down to the park about four blocks away. We played tetherball. We made arts and crafts. We did things with kids. Came home and had lunch...you don’t let a 10, 12-year-old just ride their bikes somewhere by themselves anymore,” stated a Minneapolis woman. This reasoning does not necessarily lead to more support for youth programs. Instead, focus group participants wax nostalgic for the simpler, safer times of yesteryear. “Communities used to be a different structure when I was younger...watching over each other and being concerned,” remembered a Little Falls woman.

## Brain Architecture Frame

**The Brain Architecture Frame is also a developmental frame, but it emphasizes brain development and includes a simplifying model<sup>2</sup> of child development constructed by Cultural Logic. (The article tested in the focus groups appears at right).**

**This frame provides focus group participants with a new understanding of adolescent development and creates increased sensitivity to adolescent experiences. This leads to a broad range of objectives for youth programs - building self-esteem, providing guidance, offering a training ground, etc. It also causes focus group participants to rethink the way education and juvenile justice should operate. Importantly, this frame appears to provide a role for the community without threatening parental control and responsibility.**

When exposed to the Brain Architecture Frame, many focus group participants gain new understanding about how adolescents develop. "I think before we thought their brain was pretty well done," noted a Little Falls mother. "Have faith in your kids and keep working with them is what I'm getting out of this. They are still developing and don't think that their brain has just shut off and it's the end of their development." "I just got done raising three teenagers. This is true. Their frontal lobes develop and they don't think before they act," said a Little Falls man.

The result of this new understanding is increased sensitivity to adolescence as a developmental period. "Not just allowing that behavior to ramble unchecked, and yet having compassion about remembering when you were young" stated a Little Falls mother. "This puberty thing is horrendous for some kids. The mood swings, the

### Adolescent Brain Architecture

Research is revolutionizing our view of the adolescent brain and providing new insight into how to make adolescence go well as a stage of development. A host of structural changes occur in the architecture of the human brain during these critical years. In fact, the last area of the brain to mature is the part capable of deciding, "I'll finish my homework, take out the garbage, and then I'll email my friends. The difficulties that young people have with planning, setting priorities, and weighing consequences are literally wired into the brain temporarily. "The parts of the brain responsible for things like sensation seeking are getting turned on in big ways around the time of puberty," says Temple University psychologist Laurence Smith. "But the parts for exercising judgment are still maturing throughout the course of adolescence. So you've got this time gap between when things impel kids toward taking risks early in adolescence, and when things that allow people to think before they act come online," Smith explains. "Those connections will happen eventually, but in the meantime, kids need guidance to make the right choices. At the same time that they are becoming independent from their parents, they need role models and other adults to guide their choices. (In all groups but Little Falls: *That's the real value of programs such as 4H, Big Brothers, Big Sisters and intramural sports.*) As a society we need to pay attention to the unique needs that kids have at different ages, provide the right opportunities and structures, and set our expectations appropriately.

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<sup>2</sup> Cultural Logic explains that "people typically rely on analogies in order to learn complex, abstract concepts. These concrete analogies are simplifying models - they help people organize information into a clear picture in their heads, including facts and ideas that they have been exposed to, but never been able to put together in a coherent way." For more on simplifying models, see the FrameWorks Institute e-zine, Issue No. 19, "Opening Up the Black Box: A Case Study in Simplifying Models" by Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady for Cultural Logic, with Susan Bales of the FrameWorks Institute, available at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

depression. I've got a 13-year-old and a 17-year-old who hit puberty completely different," a Little Falls mother shared.

Importantly, this approach provides a broader rationale for the importance of youth programs. For example, building self-esteem is underscored as an important goal. "I suppose it goes back to again, keeping them busy and thinking about other things and having high self-esteem – things that will give them self-esteem," a Minneapolis woman asserted.

People return repeatedly to ideas of guidance and structure in response to this article. "You need to help guide them in how they need to prioritize things," explained one Hispanic woman. They see this as a phase during which children should be able to try and fail. "I would say that it's important that a young person have the opportunity to make decisions and to fail, and adjust their decisions," a Little Falls man suggested. Youth programs allow for a safe environment for adolescent experimentation. "When you're an adolescent, you are out trying to figure out who the hell you are, really. And so these types of places give you a chance to go out and figure out who you are, but you are in a nice, controlled kind of positive environment," said a Rochester father.

A developmental mindset causes focus group participants to rethink the way the education and juvenile justice systems should operate. Teachers should be trained to understand adolescence as a developmental period, they assert. "They try to make kids grow up very fast," complained a Little Falls mother. "I found in high school, not only was there a lack of opportunity to volunteer, but when I talked to the band instructor...he basically told me, 'You know, they're young adults now. It's a dog-eat-dog world.'...I think people are all kind of guilty of making them seem like little adults."

The juvenile justice system should be less adversarial, and more focused on rehabilitation, according to focus group participants:

*I think it should take into account that some of what they have done has been a function of how their brains are wired at that particular point. It's not to say that they don't need to learn consequences. (Little Falls man)*

*I think kids are being locked up too quickly...They don't have the capacity to understand...I think our juvenile system needs to revamp itself and look at how we help children make decisions. How do we help them see? Locking them up isn't the answer. (Minneapolis woman)*

*This child is still in the process of forming his or her abilities to form judgments. It kind of covers then how you mete out the appropriate consequences as you recognize that very often youth who do something wrong like that are treated adversarially, and this research almost allows us to see...that they are still learning, they are still growing, they are still shaping. (Rochester man)*

At the same time, focus group participants struggle with the appropriate response when an adolescent commits an adult crime. "It's a hard one. How do you weigh

consequences with a brain that isn't an adult, but their crimes are adult crimes?"  
(Hispanic man)

Most focus group participants view science as an unbiased, credible messenger. "The article is clearly making a social statement based on what I believe is probably very sound science. And I think, as a society, we need to pay a lot of attention to good behavioral science," a Little Falls man stated. However, a few people complain that this science sounds like an excuse or experts trying to tell people how to raise kids. "That sounds a little bit to me like so-called experts telling us why this child did this or did that or does this or does that. But it just looks like an excuse," a Minneapolis father complained.

Finally, the Brain Architecture Frame does not threaten the parental role as much as some of the other messages. Nevertheless, a few focus group participants continue to react to the perceived invisibility of parents in these messages. "I think they're trying to put too much responsibility on the real value of the programs of 4H, Big Brothers. I think a lot of the way a person is going to think when they are 12 and 13 is being instilled earlier," warned a Rochester father. Others, however, see this article as providing information to parents and believe more should be done "to help the parents understand the reason, the importance of having their children involved in extracurricular activities, the reasons why the child is going to benefit from it."(Little Falls woman)

### Developmental Experiences Frame

**The Developmental Experiences Frame is designed to cause people to think developmentally about youth programs. The objective of this frame is to inform people of the developmental benefits of youth programs and to suggest that the role for adults is to make sure these opportunities are available in the community. (The article tested in the focus groups appears at right).**

**The Developmental Experiences Frame is a critical component of effective communications on this issue, because it reframes youth programs as a developmental issue. This frame reminds people of the beneficial experiences they had as youth, and shifts people's understanding of these programs from being a "nice extra" to "centrally important for development." Parents need a role to play in supporting these programs, or they will feel pushed out by government.**

#### The Power of Experience

Experiences shape the kind of people we will become. Sports teach teamwork and discipline. Volunteerism provides experience in caring for others, which in turn makes one a good citizen in society. Performance arts promote determination, confidence and positive self-esteem. These are the experiences that shape adolescents now and into adulthood. But too many youth don't have an opportunity for these enriching experiences. (In all groups but Little Falls: *In fact, in recent years Minnesota has substantially cut the funding for out of school programs.*) It's important that our schools and communities provide them with these opportunities as they go through this stage of life where they practice the roles and values they will take on as adults. And it's up to us as adults to do all we can to control the environments that affect young people's lives, especially those that would derail their healthy development.

This article fits with focus group respondents' assessment of the genuine value of youth programs. They readily see the power of experience. "I agree that all these opportunities are really good for children and that they shape them," stated a Little Falls mother. "Sometimes it's so much in textbook. I think you need to go out there, and people who want to be an accountant, I think spend time with an accounting firm, follow somebody around and get a role model," added a Little Falls mother. They remember how important these experiences were to their own growth. "I was just thinking back when we were in 4-H. It was a good organization, it taught leadership, responsibility, recordkeeping, how to speak in front of a group," a Little Falls man noted.

As noted earlier in this analysis, sports are a less convincing example of beneficial activities, because of the highly competitive nature of sports that they see emerging. "It's no longer the game anymore, it's the win, so we've eliminated letting the other 30 children who want to play ball to play. Because it's the win," a Little Falls woman complained. "Unfortunately we're pushing kids into one experience and excelling at it, rather than experiencing several different things," a Minneapolis father remarked. A sports image also undercut the notion that youth programs are underfunded. "We've got a dome for the guys to practice football indoors during the winter. We've got an activity Center that has 6 courts....maybe funds have been cut but I don't see a lot of suffering," a Minneapolis father smirked.

The Developmental Experiences frame lifts youth programs from being nice, fun experiences, to being central to a child's well-being. According to a conversation among Minneapolis residents, children who do not have these experiences are at risk for a variety of negative consequences:

*Moderator: What happens if a kid doesn't have these kinds of experiences?*

*They may still turn out to be great kids.*

*Drugs, violence, sex*

*Boredom, depression*

*Something is going to happen.*

*Yeah, you just have to be involved in something, whether it's the arts or volunteering or whatever.*

*Moderator: Because?*

*Because I think you'll learn by experience – helping and volunteering and working with other people.*

As was the case with several other frames, the role of community and the role of parents continue to be a fault line. Some insist that these programs are so important that communities need to ensure they are available. "I think this is saying that society has an obligation to provide opportunity," stated a Little Falls man. Yet, communities are choosing to cut these programs, some focus group participants assert. "They just can't fund them. If you have a choice between paying a teacher to teach the basics versus after school, that wins out every time....the school board makes choices," one Hispanic man stated. Several recognize that cost and convenience are frequently barriers to

participation. “In rural areas, I know when my kids were going to school, there were a lot of parents that could not take their kids back and forth because they were both working,” a Little Falls woman suggested. “As a family we had to keep dishing out more and more money,” a Minneapolis father complained.

Parents, however, frequently feel that this conversation pushes their role to the sidelines. “Myself, I’d rather take part in what my child is doing outside of school,” argued a Rochester father. Some parents feel displaced by “government.” “I don’t think that the community needs to raise our children. I think our children need to be raised at home and I think the home is the first place the children learn good citizenship and how to care for others,” a Rochester mother insisted.

One possible approach to bringing parents into the message is to suggest that it is up to parents to make sure these programs are available and funded. African American focus group participants immediately insisted that it is up to parents and the community to make sure these programs are available. “The Boys and Girls Club in St. Paul, it’s on Jackson Street, they are talking about closing that. That was an avenue for a lot of kids after school to go participate in different programs,” an African American woman remarked. “The only way to have an effect or try to combat those kinds of activities is to vote,” stated an African American woman. “If we as parents don’t come together and try to do something to save the community, then it is eventually going to die,” an African American woman asserted.

## Recommendations

- Create the public perception that youth development programs are critically necessary to healthy development, like education, healthcare, etc. This requires a Developmental Frame that incorporates three elements:
  1. **Adolescent Development:** A child development frame, incorporating a simplifying model of child development such as Brain Architecture, helps the public to have a better understanding of the process of child development.
  2. **Developmental Benefits of Programs:** The Experiences Frame effectively communicates the developmental benefits of youth programs. Youth programs are neither about filling time nor learning new information. Rather, they are about the experiences that adolescents need to shape who they will be in adulthood. In addition, it is important to explain the importance of a range of programs, i.e., “something for everyone, because all kids are different.”
  3. **Role for Community:** The Environment of Relationships Frame reminds the public that a variety of people in the community have a role to play in helping children develop well and places responsibility for these programs with the community.
- Define the problem narrowly: *Important programs are not widely available, are being eliminated, or are becoming too costly for parents due to state budget cuts.* If the public sees this problem too broadly, i.e., children are in crisis, families are failing, the future of society is in danger, then the public will view youth programs as an insufficient solution to the problem.
- Provide a role for parents, so they do not feel displaced or threatened by community actors. Importantly, this needs to be done in a way that avoids inadvertently triggering the parent v. community tension. Communications could suggest roles for parents, such as making sure that programs are available and affordable, or volunteering as program leaders to be a role model for children other than their own. In addition, find roles for grandparents and parents of grown children, who are especially supportive of youth programs because they remember the role of these programs in building adolescents’ confidence.

## About the Author

Meg Bostrom, President of Public Knowledge LLC, is a veteran communications strategist with a unique perspective resulting from her rich and varied experiences as communicator, public opinion analyst, advertising agency executive, and political consultant. With degrees in both communications and public opinion research, Bostrom's work is grounded in a cross-disciplinary focus.

She started her career as a political pollster: Senior Analyst at Greenberg Lake, Vice President at Mellman Lazarus Lake. In both of these capacities, Bostrom consulted for a variety of nonprofit groups, political candidates, foundations, national associations, and corporations. Desiring a better understanding of how communications is developed and implemented, Bostrom joined Trahan, Burden and Charles, an advertising and communications agency headquartered in Maryland. As Executive Vice President of Strategic Planning at Trahan, she was responsible for determining communications strategy for a variety of national and international corporations, as well as non-profit organizations.

With practical communications experience added to her background in research, Bostrom launched her own business in 1998 to bring her personal passion for social issues to bear on specific communications challenges. The organization has researched public opinion and analyzed communications strategies on a variety of social issues, including the environment, children's issues, foreign policy, healthcare, and the working poor, among others. Public Knowledge works closely with the FrameWorks Institute, which has as its mission advancing the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for addressing social problems.