
Executive Summary

SIGNS OF PROGRESS IN PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST

Developmental Assets among Youth in St. Louis Park, 1997 – 2001

For the past decade, St. Louis Park and its Children First initiative have been at the forefront in a national movement to create strong and healthy communities for children and adolescents. Guided by Search Institute's framework of 40 developmental assets and its vision of asset-building communities, a citywide partnership has worked to encourage youth and adults, parents and neighbors, businesses and schools, synagogues and churches—everyone in the community—to work together toward a positive future for St. Louis Park's young people.

Beginning in 1997, St. Louis Park partnered with Search Institute in a multiyear study of developmental assets among 6th- to 12th-grade youth. This study is unique in measuring developmental assets longitudinally (1997, 1998, and 2001) and in linking young people's asset profiles to their actual school records. This report presents the findings from this study and their implications for St. Louis Park's residents, leaders, and institutions.

An Asset-Based Profile of St. Louis Park Youth

- On average, St. Louis Park young people experience 20.4 of the 40 assets. This overall level has risen significantly across the three survey administrations.
- While there are some slight differences in overall levels of assets when comparing youth from different family backgrounds, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and family income levels, what is most striking is that these differences are not as profound as one might presume.

Normal Patterns of Asset Development

- As is true in all communities, levels of developmental assets in St. Louis Park decline sharply for both females and males from grades 6 to 8 and begin to show recovery by grade 12. Throughout that process, females, on average, report higher asset levels than males.
- Almost all of the gender differences in assets are found in the area of internal assets. Levels of external assets are roughly the same for both females and males in each grade.
- In the same way that assets tend to decline normatively during adolescence, this study also shows a steady increase in the levels of engagement in high-risk behaviors between grades 6 and 12.

A Solid Foundation for Life: The Power of Assets

- Young people who have more assets are much more likely to do well in school, avoid high-risk behaviors, and engage in positive, thriving behaviors. Levels of assets when youth are younger also associated with achievement, as well as high-risk behaviors and thriving, up to three years later.
- The relationship between assets and positive outcomes is evident for all ages of youth, for youth from different cultural backgrounds, and for youth from different family structures and economic situations.

- ❑ Young people's level of developmental assets is a much better predictor of students' academic achievement, risk behaviors, and thriving than other measures that are often used, including race/ethnicity and family economic status.

Have Levels of Assets Changed in St. Louis Park?

- ❑ Assets have increased on average, and risk behaviors have decreased.
- ❑ Some young people show substantial gains in assets that persist over time.
- ❑ After appearing to be headed toward serious trouble, some groups of youth have shown dramatic reversals and have achieved good high school outcomes.

An Innovation with Impact: The 9th Grade Program

- ❑ Although not integrally linked to the longitudinal study of St. Louis Park youth, the 9th Grade Program at St. Louis Park High School is an important innovation. It provides some of the first evidence from an independent evaluation that a focused, intensive asset-building approach can have measurable impact in the lives of young people.
- ❑ An evaluation conducted by the Minnesota Institute of Public Health has found that the program has helped to cut academic failure rates in half and also to reduce use of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana during the first three years of implementation.
- ❑ Although not designed as part of the evaluation of the program, analysis of data from the longitudinal study suggests that the 9th Grade Program may also be enhancing young people's developmental assets.

Implications for the Future

- ❑ This study points to encouraging signs of progress. It also reminds us that the work is not complete, and suggests some new directions for dialogue and action. These include:
- ❑ Celebrate progress and commitment in the community.
- ❑ Reach out to those who are not yet on the asset-building team.
- ❑ Examine who is being left behind
- ❑ Continue to develop creative innovations
- ❑ Continue to monitor and learn in order to strengthen and sustain efforts.

Making Asset Building a Way of Life

This study points in a positive direction. We see initial evidence of positive change in St. Louis Park. The city can celebrate that today's young people appear to be better prepared for the future. The challenge and opportunity are not only to learn more about what has contributed to these positive changes, but also to renew and strengthen efforts so that all children and youth in St. Louis Park from all backgrounds, cultures, and family situations have the opportunity to grow up in a strong, healthy, and caring community.

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