UP for Learning's 'Getting to Y' Program:
Youth Bringing Meaning to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey

Evaluation, Year VI:
Middle School Pilot Program

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**Executive Summary:**

UP for Learning's Getting to Y program, in conjunction with the Vermont Department of Health, is designed to train teams of youth leaders and adults to work in partnership to lead the analysis of their school's data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Surveys are two state-wide surveys which collect school-level data from every educational institution in the state of Vermont and measure youth risk and resiliency factors for both middle and high school age students. For the past five years, high schools across Vermont have participated in the Getting to Y program. In the program's sixth year, the Getting to Y program is being piloted for the first time with middle school youth-adult facilitation teams using the recently available middle school YRBS data. Youth-adult teams lead other middle school students through a day of analyzing the data, followed by an evening Community Dialogue Night where the results of the data are shared with parents, teachers and community members. Youth then formulate action plans meant to leverage their community's strengths and resilience to address challenges or potential risks within their community's challenges.

*Evaluation objectives*: This evaluation was designed to investigate how the program changes the perspectives of youth and adults around adolescent risk and resiliency and healthy behaviors, the ways in which it promotes or constrains positive youth development, and to understand what challenges and opportunities it has created for implementing youth-adult teams.

*Methods*: This evaluation conducted focus groups and interviews with a total of 17 middle school aged youth leaders and 5 adult advisors from five out of the nine schools participating in the Getting to Y program in the fall of 2013-2014. Additionally, the Getting to Y one day training was observed by the researchers and curriculum and other related documents were reviewed. The data was analyzed using a constant comparative method, where unique concepts discussed by the participants were assigned codes and then as new codes are created, those codes were compared with previous codes, added to and revised to reflect the evolving nature of that concept (Saldana, 2013). These codes included categories related to conceptual understandings related to healthy behaviors, leadership, and personal growth, the process of translating the training into action, working in youth-adult partnership, and working with the broader community.

*Findings*: We find that UP for Learning's Getting to Y Program stands as a promising model of excellence in providing transformative opportunities for middle school students and teachers to engage with asset-based thinking and to work together to create increased opportunities for dialogue on issues of risk and resiliency in the school and in the wider community. The program structure creates its own natural momentum, sustaining excitement amongst both youth and adults for sharing the strengths and concerns generated by the data analysis with broader and broader swathes of the community.

The success of the program seems to be largely attributable to a) the engaging one-day training designed to support implementation; b) the provision of extensive support documents and curriculum in the Getting to Y program guide; and c) the implementation of the program in the context of existing middle school leadership groups that enjoy a recognized position within the school's organizational structure.

We find that the one-day training does an excellent job preparing teams to return to their schools to engage in a year-long process of analyzing and sharing the YRBS data with their

school communities. The training clearly communicates the underlying research base around which the program is designed and allows youth-adult groups to apply the principles derived from that research in their implementation of the program in their home schools. Schools' experiences of the action-research process, including Data Analysis Day and especially the Community Dialogue Nights, were largely positive and affirming, although a few schools experienced some challenges in implementing their action plans.

The most notable outcomes resulting from the program were the litany of positive individual outcomes for youth leaders. Youth participants were enthusiastic and forthcoming in describing personal changes resulting from their participation in the program and adult advisors corroborated many of the youth's observations. The dialogue-driven approach and the asset based framework encourage youth to engage with their peers and adults in the communities in new ways that support coming to new understandings of adolescent risk and resiliency in their schools. Youth leaders who participated in the training were able to clearly identify strengths and challenges for their own communities and to discuss root causes and potential solutions articulately. They were themselves impressed by the ways in which the program pushed them to develop new self-confidence, leadership ability and a sense of belonging within their community.

The implementation of the program within the context of established leadership groups allowed the project to maintain momentum over the course of the year, regardless of unexpected challenges such as receiving the data later than expected and having to push back the scheduled dates for the Data Analysis Days. Youth-adult work in the school context can be delicate and easily derailed by unexpected organizational or contextual disruptions (Mitra & Biddle, 2012; Biddle & Mitra, 2014); therefore, it is a testament to the structure of the program itself, the way in which the program is integrated into the school and the commitment of the youth-adult teams that they were able to weather such changes and implement each stage of the Getting to Y program over the course of a year.

One opportunity for UP for Learning to increase the impact of the Getting to Y program is potentially to facilitate additional support during the complexities of the action phase, perhaps through direct, one on one site-based support or through a peer consulting model where adult advisors are able to brainstorm with other Getting to Y adults about how to best support their youth leaders in their action plans. A consultancy model might also, as was suggested by one of the adult advisors, serve to provide support for adult advisors who are working largely in isolation or without additional adult support at their schools.

*Conclusion*: Middle school aged students, in the process of developing nascent leadership skills and a sense of self (Marcia, 1966), have the potential to benefit greatly from the opportunity to act as leaders within the context of the Getting to Y program, while school communities have the opportunity to become stronger and more connected through youth to youth and youth to adult dialogue. The concrete nature of the topic of youth risk and resiliency, combined with the natural connection with community adults and peers provided by the program model assures that this program holds great potential with this age group.

**Introduction:**

Cultivating adolescent resilience is of paramount importance to supporting the positive and healthy development of young people. Resilience in young people is defined as their ability to adapt to changing circumstances, to weather hardship and to be able to recover from negative events (Olson et al., 2003). Increasing youth resilience has been shown to be an important part of increasing pro-social youth behaviors (Olson et al., 2003) and decreasing risky youth behaviors while increasing community assets (Benson, 2007; Benson, Leffert, Scales & Blyth, 2012; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). In partnership with the Vermont Department of Health and the Agency of Education, UP for Learning's Getting to Y program focuses on cultivating youth awareness of adolescent risk and resiliency factors by training youth-adult teams to work with peers at their schools to conduct action-research using their school's data from the state-wide Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

The Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is a statewide, school-based survey that is designed to monitor six types of health-risk behaviors among young adults. These behaviors include those that contribute to unintentional injury or violence, unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol, tobacco or drug use, unhealthy diet, or inadequate physical activity. These behaviors have been identified as the leading causes of death or disability of young adults (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). The Vermont Department of Health and Agency of Human Services has overseen the administration of the YRBS for the past two decades and it has been implemented in Vermont every two years since 1993. In 2011, the survey was split into two surveys, one for 9th – 12th grade and another for 6th through 8th grade, and revised for the middle school level.

When YRBS data has been used to inform work with youth, it has largely been left up to the discretion of school officials and community organizations to determine how to use the information gleaned from the data. Youth have rarely been involved in the process of making meaning of the survey and never in the role of partners or leaders. Drawing on research on the benefits of youth-adult partnership for positive youth development as well as an asset-based framework of youth development, UP for Learning's Getting to Y program invites youth-adult teams to facilitate the analysis of the YRBS data for their own schools.

Youth-adult teams identify three assets and three challenges in youth risk and resiliency at their school in the YRBS data. Youth leaders then bring their identified strengths and concerns to the broader community through a Community Dialogue Night, where parents, teachers and community members convene in conversation about the data. Finally, youth-adult teams formulate action plans designed to address the community's concerns and work to carry these out. Action plans have ranged from school wide public service campaigns on binge alcohol consumption to introducing a self-defense component to the health curriculum to revising the sex education curriculum.

Now in its sixth year, the Getting to Y program has been successful with high school aged students and mixed groups of both middle and high school students in both Vermont and New Mexico. Almost half of all the high schools in Vermont have participated in the Getting to Y program, and an outside evaluation of the program conducted in 2011 concluded that the program demonstrated an ability to successfully engage youth, benefited from strong support and network building between schools coordinated by UP for Learning, and created alignment between the program and existing resources for youth around resiliency, such as school-based Student Assistance Program (SAP) counselors (Koliba, 2011).

In the 2013-2014 school year, UP for Learning made the decision to pilot this program with groups of middle school students, capitalizing on the existence of the new statewide middle school YRBS, and requested an outside of evaluation of the pilot year of the program. Nine middle school youth and adult teams participated in a one-day training in October of 2013, with an additional nine teams participating in the training in January of 2014. Youth-adult teams from each school participated in a one-day training co-facilitated by two high school aged facilitators and the director of the UP for Learning, Dr. Helen Beattie. The following evaluation examines the experience of these schools over the course of the pilot year of the Getting to Y program with middle school aged groups.

*Theory of change*:

The stated goal of the Getting to Y program as articulated in the Getting to Y program guide is to "reduce the high risk behaviors of young people, by increasing healthy behaviors or assets." One of the great strengths of the program is its basis on three central ideas, all derived from current research on youth development: a) dialogue driven change; b) developmental assets and c) youth-adult partnership.

*Dialogue driven change:* The dialogue driven approach is derived explicitly from the work of developmental psychologists such as Baumeister and Leary (1995) and Maslow (1968), whose work centers around the ways in which individuals need to feel a sense of belonging within a community. The program marries this work with that of social scientists and organizational theorists such as Margaret Wheatley (2011) and Michael Fullan (2007), whose work suggests that such belonging is achieved for youth within schools when democratic processes are in place that allow them to be heard. As the curriculum states,

More than anything, the YRBS data is a starting point for discussion. Whether you agree with the numbers or not, it will get a conversation going about important parts of your lives, provide a way to share your insight with the community, and enlist their help on the changes that you have identified.

*Developmental assets:* The Getting to Y program is also based in the research from the Search Institute ([www.search-institute.org](www.search-institute.org)) on community development and the forty adolescent developmental assets (Benson, 2007). The concept of developmental assets links both internal and external factors in youth's lives to create a framework for supporting positive youth development. These factors include both beneficial features of local environments and youth skills and competencies related to support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Benson et al., 2012). Getting to Y teams frame their approach to the data in the idea of reducing risk by increasing and leveraging developmental assets.

*Youth-adult partnership:* Additionally, the program is based in research on the potential of youth-adult partnership to engage students in both their learning and in community development (Mitra, 2008; Wheeler, 2000; Zeldin, Camino & Mook, 2005). Youth-adult partnerships exist when youth and adults engage in equitable, cooperative relationships to work towards a specified end (Wheeler, 2000). In the case of the Getting to Y program, student leaders and teachers work together in order to facilitate groups of other middle school students in a cycle of action-research based on their analysis of the YRBS data. As a form of student voice, youth-adult partnerships have been shown to increase students' sense of agency, belonging, self-confidence, public speaking ability and engagement with school (Mitra, 2004).

*Evaluation objectives:*

The purpose of this evaluation was to address the following focusing questions:

1. How does the program change the perspectives of youth and adult leaders about youth-adult partnership and about youth risk and resiliency?

2. How does the program enable or constrain positive youth development (agency, belonging, competencies, discourse, civic/social responsibility, etc.)?

3. How does the program enable or constrain the development of students' understanding of healthy behaviors?

4. What have the challenges and opportunities been for implementing this program from the perspective of adult and student leaders?

**Methodology**:

Nine middle schools participated in the October 2013 facilitator's training for the Getting to Y program. All nine schools were asked at the one-day training and again over e-mail to participate in the evaluation. Of these, five schools fully participated in the evaluation by participating in both interviews and focus groups. Three schools did not respond to successive attempts to contact them and one school declined because they were unable to implement the program. In order to gain a complete picture of the training and resulting projects, this evaluation draws from a variety of data sources collected during the 2013-2014 school year, including interviews, small focus groups, observation of the facilitator's training and document review.

*Interviews and focus groups*: Four phone-based focus groups were conducted with both youth and adults participants, ranging in size from three to seven participants. In total, 17 students participated in these focus groups. Additionally, brief individual interviews were conducted with adult advisors at participating schools, resulting in five individual interviews. Adult advisors' roles in their schools ranged from the principal to classroom teacher to substance abuse advisor. Most of the participating youth were in the seventh or eighth grades at their

schools, with a small number of groups including sixth graders. Focus groups and interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 45 minutes and were conducted over the phone. In the case of one focus group, the speaker phone made it very difficult for the interviewer to hear and therefore the teacher did a lot of paraphrasing of what the participating students said. Where possible, however, the original words of the students are reported. Interviews and focus groups were centered on understanding the experience of youth and adults in translating the curriculum into a Data Analysis Day and a Community Dialogue Night at their schools, as well as understanding how youth understood the concept of "healthy behavior" and leadership as a result of participating in this curriculum and on their leadership team [See Appendices A and B for interview protocols].

*Observations:* In addition to interviews, observation of UP for Learning's Getting to Y one day training in October of 2013 allowed the researchers to establish a base line for both the dynamics of the youth-adult partnership groups at each school and the primary engagement of youth with the content of the training and an understanding of the curriculum. During this time, the observing researcher did not participate, but sat separate from the activities and took detailed field notes.

Getting to Y's curriculum documents as well as other materials such as videos and handouts designed to support implementation were reviewed. The data was analyzed using a constant comparative method, where unique concepts discussed by the participants were assigned codes and then as new codes are created, those codes were compared with previous codes, added to and revised to reflect the evolving nature of that concept (Saldana, 2013). These codes included categories related to conceptual understandings related to healthy behaviors,

leadership, and personal growth, the process of translating the training into action, working in youth-adult partnership, and working with the broader community.

**Findings:**

Both youth and adult participants described their participation in the Getting to Y program as nothing short of transformative. Youth facilitators described feeling newly empowered to make a difference in their schools and communities, while adult advisors reported that community members, administrators and teachers demonstrated revitalized interest in the Youth Risk Behavioral Survey data with youth as the messengers of this information. In the following section, each of the implementation phases of the Getting to Y program are discussed in detail to illustrate the factors which contribute to the successful implementation of the program and the resulting skill development in youth-adult facilitation teams. In this section, we also address opportunities for additional support for school-based teams as they work to implement the program. Finally, we discuss the outcomes for participating individuals, schools and communities resulting from the opportunities for dialogue that the program provides and resulting action plans.

*Training:*

Both middle school facilitators and their adult advisors saw UP for Learning's one day training as being an important foundation to their successful implementation of the Getting to Y program. Key factors contributing to the success of the training included the co-facilitation of the training between an UP for Learning adult and high school aged youth, the integration of train-the-trainer style facilitation skill building appropriate for middle school students, strong communication of the asset-based program philosophy, and the opportunities for adults to work

with youth in their groups to scaffold youth engagement with the program's key ideas. We discuss the way in which each of these factors contributes to a sophisticated one day training in detail.

● *Modeling co-facilitation with youth:* The training was co-facilitated by UP for Learning's director, Dr. Helen Beattie, and two high school seniors who had participated in the high school Getting to Y program. This co-facilitation made a strong impression on the middle school students who identified the two high school facilitators as role models for their own facilitation of their data analysis day. As one adult advisor reflected, "Our student group really liked the trainers…Those trainers were really very well skilled." Another adult said, "The activities were run by students, and I know afterwards that my kids felt very confident in coming back and leading some of those activities themselves."

During the day, adult advisors demonstrated an understanding of youth-adult partnership principles by allowing students to lead and to work together within their groups to discuss their school context, how to analyze YRBS data, and their reflections on the activities. Adult advisors brought their unique perspectives to bear in order to help students come away with a clear understanding of the key concepts of the day, including strategies for data analysis (such as inverting the percentages) to identifying assets (rephrasing negatives as positives and clarifying confusing vocabulary).

● *Built-in facilitation training:* The training was conducted using the loop-input method (Woodward, 1988) in which youth-adult facilitation teams were invited to participate in the activities which they will subsequently facilitate. At the end of the activities, groups participated in a guided reflection on how the activity was facilitated and possible alternatives or adaptations

that would allow the activity to work across a diversity of contexts or presentation formats. As one of the facilitators emphasized:

> Every activity - most every activity that we do today are activities that you should be thinking, do I want to use this back home? Did I like this activity? Did it engage me? Be a critical consumer here. What did I like during the course of the day that really helped me to understand this work?

The facilitators took the groups through the different aspects of the Getting to Y program that they would be expected to lead: Data Analysis Day, Community Dialogue Night, formulating action plans, and reflecting on and celebrating their team's successes. The role that the middle school students would take in leading each of these events was discussed extensively by the high school facilitators, who shared their own experiences as student facilitators of these activities. For each activity that the groups performed throughout the day, students and teachers were asked to fill out a "So what, now what" sheet where they could think through how to bring this activity back to their school. Through this guided reflection, youth began to learn the habits of mind of a facilitator while also learning from experiencing the activities themselves.

● *Strong, consistent focus on asset-based approach:* The training emphasized the program's asset based approach throughout the day, starting with "Asset-based Bingo" at the beginning of the day, in which all students are given a bingo card with statements such as "someone who speaks two or more languages" or "someone who plays a sport". All of the training participants were then encouraged to find someone who possesses these assets and at the end of the activity are asked to reflect and share some of the unique skills and qualities that they learned about other youth and adults attending the training. This basic introduction to the concept of "assets" was then reinforced through an activity called "Assets Web" in which students are introduced to research around assets and healthy communities. Students were challenged to think

of as many assets in their school community as possible, and these were put together into a large puzzle-like web that can be viewed all at once. Throughout the day, the facilitators emphasized that strengths are as important as challenges when thinking about how to address the information that groups gain from the data. As one facilitator said, "The more we always, always start with strengths, the more people will feel empowered to do the work."

*School-based Action Research Process:*

All participating schools followed the same implementation pathway following the one-day training provided by UP for Learning. The first stage of this process is to organize a one-day retreat, refered to as Data Analysis Day in the Getting to Y curriculum, during which student leaders facilitate the activities for their peers that they themselves experienced at the UP for Learning training and analyze the YRBS data that is specific to the students at their school. The second stage of implementation is the putting on a Community Dialogue Night, to which both school and community members are invited. At the Dialogue Night, student leaders present the findings from the data and open the floor for discussion of the root causes and potential solutions. Finally, groups take the information from their Dialogue Night to form action plans to leverage their school's strengths to address their concerns.

It is worth noting that, because much of this work happens in the context of existing middle school leadership groups at the school or among groups of students recruited specifically for their leadership ability, the student leaders tend to be described by themselves and their teachers as "motivated" and "leader-y". Many of the students had to go through a rigorous application process to be a part of a year-long student leadership group, a process which itself speaks to their internal motivation for leadership.

The implementation of the program through established school leadership groups supported both maintaining momentum and the long-term sustainability of the work in sometimes uncertain and challenging organizational contexts. However, because many of the middle school leadership groups participating in the program served multiple purposes within their school in addition to implementing Getting to Y, there seemed to be a tension between finding a stable home base for the program within the school structure and involving additional students in facilitative leadership who do not necessarily demonstrate traditional leadership skills or success in school. This tension is well-documented within the literature on youth-adult partnerships. Because of the paucity of opportunities for meaningful student involvement in school and the difficulties of establishing such groups, existing student leadership groups often become the conduit through which most if not all formal leadership opportunities for students become available (Mitra, 2008).

The Getting to Y curriculum provides tips to schools for recruiting a diversity of students to participate in the Data Analysis in a non-leadership role and some student leaders mentioned working with a diverse cross section of their peers during that day. However, one school participating in Getting to Y was able to successfully involve a diverse cross section of students in leadership roles through their Vermont Kids Against Tobacco (VKAT) group. Although this is only one case, it is possible that standing groups specifically catering to health, risk and resilience may have more success in involving a greater diversity of students in facilitative leadership roles.

Table 1: *Description of the Participating Middle School Groups*

| Group description | Adult Advisor | Youth Leaders | Other Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| Year-long student leadership group to which | Principal | 6th, 7th and 8th grades | 6th, 7th and 8th grades |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| students must apply and have their application approved by adult advisors. | | | |
| Year-long student leadership group to for which students must interview with adult advisors | Classroom teachers | 7th and 8th grades | 7th and 8th grades |
| Vermont Kids Against Tobacco Group focused on issues related to healthy behaviors and substance abuse | Student Assistance Program (SAP) Counselor | 7th and 8th grades | 7th and 8th grades |
| Adult advisor identified 8th grade leaders in consultation with classroom teachers for Getting to Y team | Guidance Counselor | 8th grade | 6th, 7th and 8th graders selected by youth leaders |
| Adult advisor identified small group of 8th grade leaders to participate in Getting to Y | Guidance Counselor | 8th grade | 7th grade |

*Data Analysis Day:*

Data Analysis Day was the first big event that student facilitators had to prepare for following the training. It is during this event that all of the data from the YRBS survey for a group's school is examined and classified as a strength, a concern, or a neutral. At the end of this analysis, student participants vote on the top three strengths and the top three concerns that they have identified to present at a Community Dialogue night and to then form action plans to address. Groups of youth leaders must recruit participants or choose which of their peers who did not attend the training will participate, which activities they will facilitate, and how and where the day will happen.

Because of a delay in the release of the YRBS data from the state Department of Health (it was expected at the beginning of December and was pushed out till January), the Getting to Y groups were not able to capitalize on the momentum and excitement gained from the training in this program year. However, for many groups, the prospect of a full day retreat at an off campus location was enough to renew interest and energy when the data was finally released in late December. One adult advisor observed that, for her group, the extra time was actually a gift because it gave middle school students, who still lacked confidence in their public presentation and small group facilitation skills, more of an opportunity to practice these skills in preparation for the Data Analysis Day. As this teacher recounted,

> When we first started, we put together a Powerpoint. They decided that that would be the best way, so that they could read off of a paper and look at a Powerpoint as they were going along. They felt pretty overwhelmed at the beginning and I think part of that might have been because we had gone from attending the conference, just thinking that we were going to have to do the process with the seventh graders in December but because we didn't get our results back till after the Christmas break, around that time, it was too soon. I was meeting with them regularly and there just seemed to be a lot of information to learn and then present to the students in a short period of time. So that was a pretty big challenge and I think that actually it was somewhat of a relief that it didn't happen in December because they had more time to prepare.

The size of the middle school groups that participated in the Data Analysis Days at each school varied, but usually ranged from 15 to 30 students. In order to make the event special and attractive to students participating in non-leadership roles, the retreats were usually held off campus at local colleges, community centers or restaurants, or offered additional incentives such as pizza or ice cream.

Youth leaders facilitated activities for their peers modeled on those that they themselves had participated in at the Getting to Y one-day training. Youth and adult leaders reported in the focus groups that they drew heavily from the Getting to Y manual and from the modeled

activities such as the "Asset Web" and an activity which asked students to match national level YRBS data with the appropriate percentages of incidence for middle school populations. Youth leaders also explained what the YRBS is designed to measure and the procedure for analyzing the data that youth would use.

Through working in small groups and then reconvening with the larger group, the students identified a variety of concerns that were specific to their school, which ranged from eating breakfast every day to playing videogames excessively to suicidal ideation. As one adult advisor said, "It was really eye-opening for students to work through and manipulate the data." Although the percentage of students affected by some of these concerns was relatively small, as one student reported, "Four percent doesn't seem like that many [to have abused prescription drugs], but in our school of 200, that's 8 people. That's too many for us, I guess." One adult advisor talked about how the conversion of percentages into concrete numbers aided students' quantitative reasoning in identifying strengths and concerns. "If we talked about a percent in terms of the classroom," she said, "that really helped them to understand what that represented." While youth leaders had not heard their peers discussing the findings from the data analysis much, they were optimistic that their actions resulting from their action-research process would result in increased awareness and dialogue.

Youth leaders found the Data Analysis Day different from other programs focusing on health that they had participated in because it really allowed them to engage in dialogue with other students about healthy behaviors. While some students did not feel that the information was new, they felt more engaged by the program because "it was so interesting to hear what other students thought." This sentiment was repeated over and over in the focus groups with student participants.

Some adult advisors and student participants mentioned that the format of the Data Analysis Day – a single, day long retreat – was difficult for some of the participating students because of the longevity of the focus that such a task required. Some groups were successful at adapting this format for the middle school level by including energizers, dodgeball sessions and other activities to keep groups active and to break up long sessions of working with and manipulating data. However, two adult advisors reported that for some students, the day was simply longer than their attention span allowed for and put a strain on the student facilitators' abilities to redirect their energy. In the focus groups, a number of student facilitators did mention the challenges of engaging all students consistently throughout the day. As one student leader said, "it really made me realize how challenging it is to keep all the kids attention not just for one day but for everyday."

*Community Dialogue Night:*

Each school planned and conducted a Community Dialogue Night, a time when the school community and the broader community are invited to an event to participate in activities facilitated by youth around the strengths and concerns in the school's YRBS data identified at the Data Analysis Day. The purpose of the event is to spur a community wide dialogue about both root causes and potential solutions for these strengths and concerns. For many of the groups, this took the form of convening parents, teachers and community members at the school on a specific evening and having student facilitators present the findings of the Data Analysis Day through a Powerpoint presentation. At some schools, student facilitators then worked with small groups of community members to discuss root causes and possible solutions for these strengths and challenges.

Both youth and adults were enthusiastic about the success of their Community Dialogue Nights. Students were impressed by their own ability to facilitate conversations with adults, as well adults' effusive engagement with the strengths and concerns that students had identified. As one student observed, "The adults had different ideas and perspectives than the kids which helped a lot with the data." At one school, the adults helped to fill in the asset web that the students had begun to create during their Data Analysis Day, adding their unique perspective on assets in the community. For youth facilitators, the most challenging aspect of working with adults at Community Dialogue Night was leading a conversation where adults held many different opinions. One youth facilitator observed, "At my table, I would try to bring those opinions together to a compromise, and sometimes that set a challenge for me."

The enthusiasm generated by Community Dialogue Night amongst those who attended ranged among the participating schools from moderately enthusiastic to very enthusiastic. At one school, one of the students in the focus groups told us that, "They [the attendees] wanted to have more meetings! I thought it was great. We got very positive responses."

*Creating Action Plans:*

Youth-adult teams then synthesized the input of the community and their peers on the root causes and potential solutions for the challenges identified within their schools to create action plans. While the action planning was reached by most groups at the end of the year and so, in many of the cases, had not progressed beyond the planning stage, the action planning stage had on-going importance for many students as the goal towards which they were working. Many groups described plans that they had made to continue to work on implementing their action plans in the following school year, or described the steps that they had taken to bring their plans to adults in the school building, such as administrators or other teachers.

Table 2: Examples of Action Plans Created by Middle School Youth-Adult Teams

| Concern | Action Plan |
| --- | --- |
| Percentage of students who had experienced bullying | Identified in dialogues that homophobia was one of the root causes of bullying in their school community. Students proposed a public service campaign and community meeting to raise awareness about these issues with the whole school community. |
| Percentage of students who had considered suicide | Dialogues with peers and adults linked this statistic to the number of concussions occurring amongst students. Group screened a film on this topic for the student body and invited an outside speaker to come and discuss traumatic brain injury and the importance of wearing a helmet while biking, skiing and snowboarding. |
| Percentage of students who skipped breakfast in the morning | Students created a survey to give to peers about what alternative breakfast options they would like the school to offer to expand the school's breakfast menu. |
| Percentage of students who played video games for three or more hours a day | Proposed a video game lending program through their school that would promote video games that included more physical activity, such as games for the Wii system or Wiifit. |

The action planning stage, as the least explicitly structured part of the Getting to Y process, proved challenging for some groups. The action stage had the least clearly defined roles for students and adults and for a few adult advisors, students' proposed action plans raised some significant dilemmas in thinking about how to best scaffold students in their efforts to implement them. These dilemmas centered around both the level of support to provide, as well as the challenges in providing enough supplemental training on the specific topics that students wished to address to allow them to knowledgeably address these issues proactively with their peers. Even for adults who possessed specific training for working with youth on issues of health, identity development, and self-concept, the challenges of helping youth to work with other youth in culturally and socio-emotionally sensitive ways was difficult. In one illustrative example, an adult advisor lamented,

The group that looked at mean behaviors found that it was homophobia that is the source of these put downs or negative talk. They don't have any training…Do I stop and do a homophobia workshop with them or do they get to say they're going to do a kiva, which means a team talk, about homophobia? They can't lead that, really, because they don't have any training themselves on homophobia, at all. It really won't go very far. Then it becomes, I don't want the school to say we've already tried that, kids did a talk about homophobia. [The students] really have no knowledge and they're scared even to call the center that would give them more information about homophobia.

In this example, dialogue was able to surface one of the root causes of the particular issue (mean behaviors resulting from homophobia), but it was difficult in the limited time available for the students to lead an effort to address this with their peers. The adult advisor's comments indicate that she felt there was a tension between allowing the students to lead the projects on their own terms (addressing this issue directly with their peers versus, for example, proposing to an administrator that it be addressed) and equipping them with the knowledge and skills that they needed to do so.

*Key successes and challenges for the school-based Getting to Y process:*

In summary, schools were able to successfully implement the program as the result of several important factors scaffolding their success, including:

● *Stability of working through established leadership groups*: Momentum is a key driver of success for youth-adult initiatives where students are expected to take on leadership roles. The regular meeting times for many of the groups and the stability of institutional resources allowed groups to gain and maintain momentum in this work.

● *Opportunities for dialogue built into the action-research cycle*: The dialogue driven approach created a new way for students to engage with their peers and adults in meaningful ways around risk and resiliency factors for adolescents. Students emphasized over and over again how much they learned from hearing other's opinions about the data and what it meant to them.

● *Youth-adult partnership in facilitation:* Between the curriculum guide, which provides tips to youth facilitators, and the activities modeled at the one day training, student facilitators were able to confidently lead their peers in the analysis of the YRBS data and to present the strengths and concerns to the community at large. Focus group participants perceived excitement amongst community members at the leadership role that students assumed within this process.

Challenges for middle school Getting to Y teams included:

● *Diversity of student leaders*: As with many youth leadership initiatives, it can be challenging to involve a diverse cross section of students in leadership activities. There is a tension between the need to achieve stability for the initiative within the school so that momentum can be maintained and the need to try to expand who can be involved as a facilitator.

● *Data Analysis Day format:* For some schools, implementing the day's activities, even with ice breakers, proved challenging for some students to stay focused. For inexperienced facilitators, it was challenging to work with the handful of students that became disengaged. Adult intervention was helpful in these situations, although physical activity was one way that some groups chose to anticipate this issue proactively.

● *Balancing enthusiasm for action plans with capacity for carrying them out:* Because of the nature of the issues on which the YRBS gathers data, middle school students may not have the specialized knowledge necessary to create direct action plans for their peers that are sensitive to their social and emotional needs. The action plans that seemed to be most successful in this regard were those that served to connect the school community to a resource that could provide that specialized knowledge or that required students to speak directly to adults about arranging a change (e.g. additional breakfast food items in the cafeteria).

**Outcomes from Getting to Y:**

The most notable outcomes from the program were the changes which youth observed in themselves and that teachers noticed in their student leaders. Youth leaders were grateful for their increased awareness around adolescent risk and resiliency and expressed a heightened sense of responsibility to their community and peers to share this awareness. Additionally, youth reported feeling empowered by the structure of the curriculum to actually make change in their schools in partnership with adults, and reported many of the typical benefits of participating in youth-adult partnerships, such as feeling a sense of belonging within their group, increased self-confidence, and increased ability to express themselves, particularly in public and with adults. Each of these outcomes is discussed in detail in the following section, followed by a discussion of outcomes for the school more broadly as a result of participating in Getting to Y.

*Perceived individual outcomes for youth leaders:*

One of the most notable outcomes from the Getting to Y programs mentioned by both the adult advisors and the students were the positive outcomes for the student facilitators. Students reported feeling more empowered to make change, a sense of belonging within their group, increased confidence in public speaking, and a real sense of ownership and responsibility towards the health of their peers and their community more generally. We address each of these outcomes in turn to capture the variety ways in which both student leaders and participating peers experienced the benefits of participating in the Getting to Y program.

● *Sense of responsibility for peer and community well-being:* Youth leaders in the focus groups were quick to discuss the risk and resiliency factors that were most relevant to their communities. Many of the youth leaders reported that their analytical engagement with the YRBS data had changed their perspectives about their communities. Many youth were extremely

concerned, for example, to learn that a small number of students at their schools had struggled with suicidal thoughts, prescription drug abuse, laxative use, and bullying.

The action-research cycle gave youth leaders new opportunities to interact with peers and adults (teachers, administrators, and parents) around issues of health, stimulating dialogue on these topics and topics about what healthy and risky behaviors they observed in their own community. The asset-based approach ensured that attention was spent on both opportunities and challenges for the community, helping youth to evade the trap of deficit thinking and to focus on leveraging strengths to address challenges. As one student put it,

> Before I was a part of Getting to Y, I didn't know about any of these, and I didn't really -- it changed my perspective on how these problems can be serious. How it's good to work towards the strengths because it makes all our lives better.

Within the context of an institution which often emphasizes individual achievement and a society that increasingly emphasizes individual over collective well-being, students in the Getting to Y program demonstrated an awareness of and concern for the well-being of their communities as a whole, and particularly for their peers. As another student said, "I've learned about myself that even if I don't want to be a leader sometimes I should be a leader to help others".

● *Increased sense of empowerment to make change*: Youth leaders felt empowered to make change after participating in the Getting to Y Data Analysis Day and the Community Dialogue Night. During the training day, we observed students discussing the potential challenges that they might face in bringing this data to their schools. "Other students won't listen to us," was a worry that some students shared during the one-day training in response to a teacher's question about whether their peers could change their behavior. However, in focus group discussions after working with their peers on Data Analysis Day, students expressed happy surprise that their peers were extremely engaged by these issues and were respectful of student

leaders' desire to stimulate dialogue and create action plans designed to address their collective concerns. As one student said,

> Some were really interested in and some weren't, but when they were interested, they were really interested and they really cared about what we were saying.

The curriculum also gave students a clear opportunity and structure to work towards action in their community in a way that they might not have been able to navigate themselves. One student said,

> It kind of helps you see what is happening in your school versus what you see. Like you can actually see results in what people do that you might not know about otherwise.

For another student, this "ability to see" shifted his perspective about his relationship to the community. In his own words,

> I think that it's changed my perspective because I've learned so much more and I've come to a realization on different things. Before I was sort of detached, I mean I didn't really know about any of this stuff. I didn't really have a role to kind of learn about it, kind of fix it, so it's changed my perspective and view on things, now that I know than when I didn't.

● *Increased sense of belonging, feelings of competence and ability to lead:* In keeping with much of the research around the benefits of youth-adult partnership for young people (Mitra, 2004), students participating as facilitators in the Getting to Y program reported, among other things, feeling more connected to the peers in their facilitation groups as a result of participating in the program. Planning and facilitating multiple activities with different populations (peers, teachers, parents) over the course of the year allowed groups to develop a sense of identity and purpose in their continued action. "I got to know some of the seventh and eighth graders a lot better," one student reflected, "as well as their parents."

A great number of students expressed a deep satisfaction in just having "pulled everything off." The teamwork, flexibility and planning that moving forward with the Getting to

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Y program required, particularly in light of rescheduled meetings, rescheduled Dialogue Nights, and the delay in the release of the data left some students feeling that it was amazing that they had been able to accomplish so much in such a short period of time.

Additionally, students said that their role as facilitators allowed them to try new leadership skills, such as small group facilitation and public speaking, in a safe, supportive environment. As one student said, "It was sort of hard first, public speaking, because I'm not really a big public speaker personally. Once I started to do it I felt more comfortable, especially with other people backing me up, and helping me out more."

*Perceived outcomes for school culture*:

Teachers reported that the structure of the Getting to Y program allowed youth concerns to shine through more strongly to adults within their communities. As one teacher noted,

> Adults can come up with all kinds of concerns and action plans and strengths but if the full community and the broad community don't hear it from a student voice then it doesn't make a huge difference.

For some schools, the dialogue that was stimulated by the curriculum sparked new awareness about issues specific to a school's culture that could be changed to promote on-going dialogue about healthy behaviors.

In one case, the adult advisor related that there had been four adult suicides within the broader community in which her school is situated, including some adults who had worked at the school. During some of the dialogue relating to the YRBS data relating to the number of students who had considered suicide, it came out that students felt that suicide was a taboo topic within the school. As this adult advisor said,

One of their comments was, 'You know, no one wants to talk about suicide. Whenever we try to talk about suicide, everyone always gets quiet. Why doesn't anyone want to talk about it?' I didn't realize we were doing that.

The students felt that this silence made them uncomfortable asking questions about the topic and had resulted in a chilling effect on student-teacher conversations around suicide.

For another school, the dialogue built into the Getting to Y curriculum served a similar effect, also cathartic. A high school student had taken their own life in the year prior to this school's participation in the Getting to Y program. The opportunity for dialogue at Data Analysis Day allowed both students and teachers to revisit this painful community event together, giving them space to unpack the effect of this event on the school and the broader community, as well as to think about what their community could do to decrease the risk of youth suicide and to better provide support for youth contemplating self-harm.

**Conclusion:**

This evaluation was designed to investigate how the program changes the perspectives of youth and adults around adolescent risk and resiliency and healthy behaviors, the ways in which it promotes or constrains positive youth development, and to understand what challenges and opportunities it has created for implementing youth-adult teams. We find that UP for Learning's Getting to Y Program stands as a promising model of excellence in providing transformative opportunities for middle school students and teachers to engage with asset-based thinking and to work together to create increased opportunities for dialogue on issues of risk and resiliency in the school and in the wider community. The program structure creates its own natural momentum, sustaining excitement amongst both youth and adults for sharing the strengths and concerns generated by the data analysis with broader and broader swathes of the community.

The success of the program seems to be largely attributable to a) the engaging one-day training designed to support implementation; b) the provision of extensive support documents and curriculum in the Getting to Y program guide; and c) the implementation of the program in the context of existing middle school leadership groups (student council, VKAT, student cabinet, student ambassadors) that enjoy a recognized position within the school's organizational structure.

We find that the one-day training does an excellent job preparing teams to return to their schools and engage in a year-long process of analyzing and sharing the YRBS data with their school communities. The training clearly communicates the underlying research base around which the program is designed and allows youth-adult groups to apply the principles derived from that research in their implementation of the program in their home schools. Schools' experiences of the action-research process, including Data Analysis Day and especially the Community Dialogue Nights, were largely positive and affirming, although a few schools experienced some challenges in implementing their action plans.

The most notable outcomes resulting from the program seemed to be in the litany of positive individual outcomes for youth leaders. Youth participants were enthusiastic and forthcoming in describing personal changes resulting from their participation in the program and adult advisors corroborated many of the youth's observations. The dialogue-driven approach and the asset based framework encourage youth to engage with their peers and adults in the communities in new ways that support coming to new understandings of adolescent risk and resiliency in their schools. Youth leaders who participated in the training were able to clearly identify strengths and challenges for their own communities and to discuss root causes and potential solutions articulately. They were themselves impressed by the ways in which the

program pushed them to develop new self-confidence, leadership ability and a sense of belonging within their community.

The implementation of the program within the context of established leadership groups allowed the project to maintain momentum over the course of the year, regardless of unexpected challenges such as receiving the data later than expected and having to push back the scheduled dates for the Data Analysis Days. Youth-adult work in the school context can be delicate and easily derailed by unexpected organizational or contextual disruptions (Mitra & Biddle, 2012; Biddle & Mitra, 2014); therefore, it is a testament to the structure of the program itself, the way in which the program is integrated into the school and the commitment of the youth-adult teams that they were able to weather such changes and implement each stage of the Getting to Y program over the course of a year.

One opportunity for UP for Learning to increase the impact of the Getting to Y program is potentially to facilitate additional support during the complexities of the action phase, perhaps through direct, one on one site-based support or through a peer consulting model where adult advisors are able to brainstorm with other Getting to Y adults about how to best support their youth leaders in their action plans. A consultancy model might also, as was suggested by one of the adult advisors, serve to provide support for adult advisors who are working largely in isolation or without additional adult support at their schools.

In conclusion, middle school aged students, in the process of developing nascent leadership skills and a sense of self (Marcia, 1966), have the potential to benefit greatly from the opportunity to act as leaders within the context of the Getting to Y program, while middle school communities have the opportunity to become stronger and more connected through youth to youth and youth to adult dialogue. The concrete nature of the topic of youth risk and resiliency,

combined with the natural connection with community adults and peers provided by the program

model assures that this program holds great potential with this age group.

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APPENDIX A: Adult Interview Protocol

**Individual Involvement**

Tell me about what motivated you/your school to get involved in Getting to Y?

**Group process**

Tell me about your school's team. What are the students you co-facilitate with like?
    Academically engaged? Socially engaged? Extroverted? Etc.
How would you describe the current dynamics of your facilitation team?
    Who are the leaders? Why?
    What other roles do you think group members play?
    Why are the student facilitators interested in this work?
What role do you play as the adult co-facilitator? How do you work in partnership with youth?
Tell me about the process of data analysis. How did your class analyze the YRBS data?
    What was surprising for your group as you went through this process?
    What roles did the student facilitators play in the analysis?
In what ways did students make meaning from the data?
    Strengths? Areas of concern?
What areas of concern has your class decided are most important to address? Why?

**Outcomes**

What is the thing your group has accomplished that you are most proud of? Why?
How do you think the program has affected students outside the facilitation team?
What do you think is the most important thing for your group to work on next? Why?

Has your perspective on teaching health literacy changed? If so, in what ways?
Has your perspective about your students changed? If so, in what ways?
Have you noticed changes in your teaching as a result of participating in this program?

**Focus/Meaning of the work**

Is the work what you expected it would be?
    What has been the best part of the program so far?
    How do you think the program could be improved?
In what ways did the training you received in October prepare you for the challenges you've encountered? In what ways could it be improved?
What kind of training do you think is necessary in order to engage in this kind of youth-adult partnership work as an adult?

**Contextual Factors**

In what ways does your school integrate youth-adult partnership or student voice outside of the
    Getting to Y program?
What possibilities do you see for integrating youth-adult partnership in other parts of your practice? Other parts of your school?

How do other staff/your administration regard partnership with youth?
Has that changed as a result of your participation the Getting to Y program?

**Big ideas/Final reflections**

Why is health literacy important for your students?
What does student engagement mean to you?
What is the most important thing for an adult who wants to partner with youth to know?

APPENDIX B: Youth Interview Protocol

**Individual Involvement**

Tell me about how you got involved as a facilitator in the 'Getting to Y' program.
Why did you get involved?
What do you like best about working as a student facilitator?
Has there been anything difficult about being a facilitator? Tell me about what those challenges have been.

**Focus/Meaning of the work**

How would you describe the main focus of the 'Getting to Y' work?
Why did your class choose this as their focus?
Tell me about the data analysis process. What did you do first? Next?
      What surprised you most about the YRBS data?
      Was there anything in the YRBS data that didn't surprise you?
Why do you think the teachers and administrators here are interested partnering with students
      for this work?
How do you think this program changes perceptions about healthy behaviors for the students who aren't facilitators?
How do you think this program changes the perceptions other students in your class have of their peers?

**Group process**

What is it like participating in a facilitation team?
      Who are the leaders in your facilitation team? Why?
      What other roles do you think other group members play?
      Why do you think the other students got involved in this work?
      Why do you think [adult leaders] got involved in this work?
What do you see as your role in the group?
Do you ever feel frustrated with the group? (If yes, ask about specific time/why)
How do you feel you've changed since participating in this work?
What new skills do you think you've developed as a part of this experience?
Has your perspective about healthy behavior changed? If so, in what ways?
Has your perspective about your classmates changed? If so, in what ways?

**Outcomes**

What is the thing your group has accomplished that you are most proud of? Why?
How do you think the group's work is perceived by your classmates? Your teachers?
What do you think is the most important thing for your group to work on next? Why?

**Big ideas/Final reflections**

What is the most important thing for a teacher who wants to co-facilitate with a student to know?