

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO OUR KIDS 2009 Executive Summary

In March of 2009, the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families conducted the fourth survey of Developmental Assets among youth in Arlington's public middle and high schools. Unlike earlier surveys, sixth grade students filled out a different questionnaire. This report focuses on the experiences of older youth in grades 8, 10 and 12.

Steady progress

The survey data show a number of promising developments:

- In 2009, the average number of Assets among youth in grades 8, 10 and 12 was 19, up from 18 in 2001.
- In 2009, 10 percent of youth in grades 8, 10 and 12 reported having from 0 to 10 Developmental Assets; 46 percent reported having 11 to 20; 35 percent reported from 21 to 30 and 9 percent reported having from 31 to 40 Assets, the ideal level.
- Even modest changes in the level of Developmental Assets have a potentially large impact on the community given the tremendous differences in behavior between young people with different levels of Assets. For example, youth with only 0 to 10 Assets are six to more than 20 times more likely than youth with 31 to 40 Assets to engage in risky behavior.
- Since 2001, there has been a significant increase in 16 Developmental Assets, including seven of the external Assets and nine of the internal Assets. There have been no significant decreases in *any* of the other Assets.
- Changes in the characteristics of the sample do not appear to explain the changes in the level of Developmental Assets.
- Young people this year also reported improvement in two of ten high-risk behaviors, four of five developmental deficits, and two of eight thriving behaviors since 2001. The other indicators showed no change.
- These improvements should not be taken for granted. While only a handful of communities administer the Developmental Assets survey on a regular basis, rarely do these report such uniformly positive results.

More work to be done

The 2009 survey also found, once again, some disturbing patterns in the distribution of assets among Arlington youth.

- Youth are less likely to report many of the Assets as they grow older. This suggests that adults (including, but not limited to, parents) are withdrawing support and guidance too soon – before young people have developed the values and skills they need to be caring and responsible adults.
- Girls are more likely than boys to report having Assets. This is true for 12 of the 20 external Assets and 18 of the 20 internal Assets. Not surprisingly, then, boys are also more likely than girls to engage in five of six high risk behaviors. Girls are more likely to report only one of these behaviors.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO OUR KIDS

Findings from the Arlington County Developmental Assets Survey

In March of 2009, the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families conducted the fourth survey of Developmental Assets among youth in Arlington's public middle and high schools. This report summarizes the findings from this survey, focusing on the following questions:

- How is our community changing? There are signs that efforts to improve the developmental foundation for our youth are having an effect. But more work needs to be done.
- What specific Assets in the community are having a positive effect on the development of our youth? What kinds of deficits are weakening our efforts to help young people grow up to be caring, responsible, and healthy adults? While the survey reveals real strengths, such as high levels of Family support, few young people have the ideal level of Assets.
- Are youth in our community making healthy choices or are they engaging in risky behaviors with potentially serious consequences for their health and safety? The data show that in most cases, less than one-third of youth are engaged in a particular risk behavior. But there is real cause for concern for those engaged in multiple or high-risk behaviors.
- How do Assets and deficits shape the behavior of our young people? Research has shown that key Developmental Assets *protect* youth from risky behaviors and *promote* positive outcomes such as school success, healthy lifestyles, and leadership. The survey results for Arlington County confirm and reinforce these findings.

The Partnership anticipates that the data from this survey will continue to benefit the community in several ways, by:

- Helping shape the Partnership's recommendations to the County and School Boards;
- Giving schools, agencies, and non-profit service providers insights into how to improve their programs and target their services;
- Supplying foundations and organizations with data needed to identify the community's most pressing needs for funding from grants.

We hope that all community members will reflect upon the findings here. We ask that adults, in particular, consider how they can help – as individuals and as part of larger organizations – to strengthen the developmental foundation for youth in our community.

BACKGROUND

The Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families (“the Partnership”) is an advisory group made up of 16 citizens and eight senior School and County staff who work with youth. The Partnership makes recommendations to the County and School Boards on how to improve the health, well-being and safety of children, youth, and families in the community.

The Partnership is responsible for reviewing and disseminating data on the status of county youth. To meet this charge, the Partnership sponsors two surveys of young people enrolled in Arlington's public middle and high schools. Together, the Developmental Assets Survey and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey give county decision makers and the community reliable and comprehensive information on the needs, characteristics, and behaviors of young people.

Using the Developmental Assets Framework to Guide Our Work

Much of the Partnership's work has been guided by the Developmental Assets Framework. This framework emerged from research by Search Institute to identify the "building blocks" that all children need to become healthy, caring, and responsible adults. The framework gives Arlington a common language for understanding what makes a family-friendly community and how to support young people so they grow in positive ways.

Search has identified two broad types of Developmental Assets:

- *External Assets* are the expectations, relationships and opportunities provided by families, individuals, and organizations within the community. Examples are Caring neighborhood, Family support, and School boundaries.¹
- *Internal Assets* are personal qualities, skills and values that youth need to make good decisions as independent adults. Examples include Achievement motivation, Honesty, and Cultural competence.

The Assets Framework was chosen because research showed that the Assets help *all* young people develop positively. Developmental Assets promote positive outcomes, cushion the impact of negative influences such as poverty on children's lives, and allow young people to thrive, rather than merely survive. In contrast, the lack of Developmental Assets is associated with behaviors, such as repeated alcohol use and violence, that jeopardize the health, safety, or development of youth.

The Assets Framework does not cover every community resource or problem. In its research, Search focuses on the relationships, social experiences, and behavioral norms that shape our youth's development. Communities must recognize and try to influence the effect of economic conditions, human services availability, and social forces (such as racism) on a young person's passage to adulthood. But the Assets Framework gives communities a place to begin that acknowledges the clear and important role played by parents, teachers, neighbors, coaches, religious leaders, and other caring individuals who come into daily contact with our youth.

Collecting the Data

The level of Developmental Assets among young people in a community can be measured using the responses to a 160-item questionnaire (known formally as the Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors Survey and informally as the Assets Survey). The Partnership most recently administered this questionnaire in March of 2009 to a random sample of about 2000 students in grades eight, ten and twelve in all public middle and high schools in

¹ More detailed definitions of each of the 40 Developmental Assets appear in the Appendix.

Arlington County. (About 700 students in 6th grade filled out a different version of the survey. Those results will be reported separately.)

The Assets Survey asks students about many aspects of their lives, including:

- *Developmental Assets* or the 40 positive experiences and qualities that *all* our young people need to become healthy, caring, responsible adults.
- *Developmental Deficits* or experiences that work against a young person’s development. An example is being a victim of violence.
- *Thriving behaviors* that indicate that a young person is doing well. Examples include demonstrating leadership and helping others.
- *Risk behaviors* such as use of alcohol use, fighting, or depressive symptoms that threaten to compromise the health or well-being of youth.

The Partnership took a number of steps to ensure that the results of the survey would be reliable and valid. We used scientific methods to sample students so the results would be representative of all young people. The survey is conducted anonymously so students will respond honestly to sensitive questions. We consulted with cultural experts and hired translators to ensure that each eligible student understood the survey. We held information sessions for teachers to explain the purpose of the survey and the need to use a consistent set of procedures.

FINDINGS FROM THE ASSETS SURVEY OF ARLINGTON YOUTH

More is Better: Average Number of Assets

Figure 1. Number of assets by students in grades 8, 10 and 12 Arlington County, March 2009	
Grade	Average Number of Assets
8	20
10	19
12	18

Research has shown that high levels of Developmental Assets both protect youth from problem behavior and promote positive attitudes and actions. What level of assets do Arlington County youth report? According to Figure 1, young people in grades 8, 10 and 12 have about half, with eighth grade students reporting the most and 12th grade students reporting the least.²

Researchers at Search Institute believe all young people should have 31 or more of the 40 Developmental Assets.

In 2009, 10 percent of youth in grades 8, 10 and 12 reported having from 0 to 10 Developmental Assets; 46 percent reported having 11 to 20; 35 percent reported from 21 to 30; and 9 percent reported having from 31 to 40 Assets, the ideal level.

In earlier surveys in Arlington, the pattern of Asset levels across grades was similar to the pattern found in other communities – highest at grade six and then falling as young people grow older. The data from other communities also shows that the greatest part of the decline happens by 8th grade – a time when young people begin to push away their parents and spend an increasing

²The data in this report comes from “Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth for Arlington, VA” © 2009 by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN. The data were collected with the survey Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors, copyright ©1996, Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN

amount of time with peers. While separation from parents is natural and inevitable, it does not mean young people no longer need guidance or support from family and other caring adults.

Creating a Safe, Supportive Community: External Assets

Figure 2 shows the percentage of youth in each grade (8, 10 or 12) reporting each of the *external* Assets; that is, the Developmental Assets that grow from relationships and opportunities created by adults and peers. The external Assets reflect the support and concern young people receive in their families, their neighborhoods, and in school.

Figure 2. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each External Asset

External Assets, March 2009	All Students	Male	Female	Grade		
				8	10	12
<i>Support</i>						
Family support	68	67	69	72	67	65
Positive family communication	28	29	28	32	29	24
Other adult relationships	49	47	50	48	45	53
Caring neighborhood	36	35	37	43	35	30
Caring school climate	36	33	38	38	31	37
Parents involved in school	22	25	20	30	22	14
<i>Empowerment</i>						
Community values youth	22	20	23	25	19	20
Youth as resources	32	30	33	32	31	32
Service to others	48	43	53	52	43	48
Feels safe in community	54	64	46	49	54	61
<i>Boundaries and Expectations</i>						
Family boundaries	36	33	39	41	37	30
School boundaries	48	46	50	55	43	44
Neighborhood boundaries	41	38	44	49	41	32
Adult role models	29	24	35	32	27	29
Positive peer influence	60	56	63	78	57	42
High expectations	51	51	51	55	45	51
<i>Constructive Use of Time</i>						
Creative activities	23	20	25	25	23	21
Youth programs	63	62	64	63	66	60
Religious community	49	46	51	56	48	42
Time at home	73	70	76	72	79	79

The survey shows a number of strengths in the community. Substantially more than half of youth report Family support, Positive peer influence, Youth programs and (supervised) Time at home. About *half* of youth in grades 8, 10 and 12 report Other adult relationships, Service to others, Safety, High expectations, and Religious community. But *fewer than one third* of students report having Positive family communication, Parent involvement in schooling, Community values youth, Youth as resources, Adult role models, and Creative activities.

Changes since 2001

Young people in 2009 (in grades 8, 10 and 12) were significantly more likely than Arlington County youth in 2001 to report seven of the external Assets. In particular,

- 68 percent of young people reported Family support, compared to 62 percent in 2001;
- 49 percent reported Other adult relationships, compared to 41 percent in 2001;
- 35 percent reported Caring school climate, compared to 29 percent in 2001;
- 32 percent reported Youth as resources, compared to 24 percent in 2001;
- 48 percent reported School boundaries, compared to 42 percent in 2001;
- 51 percent reported High expectations, compared to 41 percent in 2001;
- 66 percent reported supervised Time at home, compared to 53 percent in 2001.

More recently, between 2006 and 2009, there were increases in the percentage of youth reporting Positive family communication (from 24 percent to 28 percent) and Community values youth (from 18 to 21 percent). Finally, there were *no* significant declines in the percentage of youth reporting *any* external Asset since 2001. There were also no declines between 2006 and 2009.

Findings for specific groups of students

The data also show that boys and girls and students in different grades report different levels of Developmental Assets. As in the past, we found that:

- With a few exceptions, most notably Safety, the percent of students who report each external Asset is highest for students in grade eight and lowest for students in grades ten or twelve.
- Generally, girls are more likely than boys to report the external Assets. Boys are more likely than girls to report two of these Developmental Assets: Safety and Parent involvement in schooling.

Comparisons with other communities

From time to time, Search Institute examines the responses to all of the Developmental Assets surveys that have been administered since the previous update. These findings typically combine the results of hundreds of communities who have participated in the survey. It's possible to compare Arlington County's results with those of these other communities. However, there are two problems with such a comparison:

- First, these other communities are not a scientific sample chosen to represent the entire nation. That means that we only know how Arlington youth differ from youth in these selected areas, not all young people.
- Second, the data from these other communities is older (specifically, from the 2002-2003 school year) than the data from Arlington. In addition, these communities may or may not have included 6th grade students. In 2009, Arlington did not.

Because of these problems, this report focuses on current findings and changes within Arlington since 2001. However, it is worth noting that other communities typically find the decline in Assets from 6th grade on and that girls report higher levels of Developmental Assets than boys.

Strength from Within: Internal Assets

Figure 3 shows the percentage of youth in each grade reporting each of the *internal* Assets. These Developmental Assets reflect the values and competencies that young people need to be self-regulating adults. Between 28 (Reading for pleasure) and 74 percent (Integrity) of students in grades 8, 10 and 12 report each of the internal Assets.

At least half of students report experiencing four of the five Commitment to Learning Assets; five of the six Positive Values Assets; one of the five Social Competencies Assets; and three of the four Positive Identity Assets. At most one-third of students report Reading for pleasure and Planning and decision-making.

Changes since 2001

Since 2001, more young people report nine of the 20 internal Assets. Specifically,

- 68 percent of youth report Achievement motivation, compared to 62 percent in 2001;
- 55 percent reported School engagement, compared to 49 percent in 2001;
- 60 percent reported Bonding to school, compared to 47 percent in 2001;
- 55 percent reported Caring, compared to 50 percent in 2001;
- 62 percent reported Equality and social justice, compared to 56 percent in 2001;
- 65 percent reported Honesty, compared to 58 percent in 2001;
- 66 percent reported Responsibility, compared to 56 percent in 2001;
- 55 percent reported Self-esteem, compared to 46 percent in 2001;
- 63 percent reported a Sense of purpose, compared to 54 percent in 2001.

More recently, between 2006 and 2009, there were increases in the percentage of youth reporting Integrity (from 70 percent to 74 percent); Restraint (from 34 percent to 38 percent); Planning and decision-making (from 31 to 34 percent); Resistance skills (from 40 to 44 percent); Personal power (from 44 to 49 percent) and Positive view of the future (from 70 to 73 percent). There were no statistically significant declines in the internal Assets reported by youth in Arlington between 2001 and 2009 or between 2006 and 2009.

Findings for Specific Groups of Students

How does the percentage of students reporting each Asset change, as grade level changes? There is no single pattern. Between 8th and 12th grade, some Assets show successive declines (e.g., Restraint) while the remainder first decline and then increase somewhat (e.g. Caring). Of notable concern are strong declines in two Assets between 8th and 12th grade:

- Restraint (i.e. with respect to the use of alcohol, drugs, and sexual activity), which declines from 60 to 19 percent; and
- Resistance (which refers to the ability to resist peer pressure and avoid dangerous situations), which declines from 47 to 39 percent.

Declines in both assets likely contribute to increasing engagement in risk behaviors.

Generally, a significantly higher proportion of girls than boys report each of the internal Assets and the differences can be quite large, particularly in the areas of Commitment to Learning and

Social competencies. For example 76 percent of girls but only 60 percent of boys report Achievement motivation. 58 percent of girls but only 33 boys report Interpersonal competence.

Figure 3. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each Internal Asset

Internal Assets, March 2009	All	Male	Female	Students in grade:		
				8	10	12
<i>Commitment to Learning</i>						
Achievement motivation	68	60	76	71	66	66
School engagement	55	48	61	54	59	52
Homework	66	58	73	67	71	61
Bonding to school	60	58	61	55	63	62
Reading for pleasure	28	20	35	31	26	27
<i>Positive Values</i>						
Caring	55	48	63	57	50	58
Equality & social justice	62	54	70	66	56	64
Integrity	74	69	79	69	73	80
Honesty	65	59	72	66	63	67
Responsibility	66	62	69	65	63	69
Restraint	38	32	43	60	32	19
<i>Social Competencies</i>						
Planning and decision making	34	32	35	32	34	35
Interpersonal competence	46	33	58	49	43	45
Cultural competence	54	50	58	55	51	56
Resistance skills	44	40	48	47	46	39
Peaceful conflict resolution	46	36	55	47	46	44
<i>Positive Identity</i>						
Personal power	49	47	51	45	46	57
Self-esteem	55	58	52	51	54	59
Sense of purpose	63	65	61	63	61	66
Positive view of future	73	71	76	73	71	76

Pulling in the Wrong Direction: Developmental Deficits

While the Assets Framework generally takes a positive approach to youth development, communities must also monitor the negative influences in young people’s lives. Search Institute has identified five deficits that work against positive development by limiting young people’s access to external Assets, blocking the development of internal Assets, or leading to risky behavior. For example, kids who spend too much time home alone may not be participating in constructive activities or developing strong relationships with peers and caring adults.

These five deficits can be measured with a self-report survey. However, because young people fill out the surveys in school, the sample does not include dropouts. These young people are likely to experience these deficits more often than young people who stay in school. For this reason, we believe deficit levels among *all* county youth are *likely to be higher* than the rates shown in figure 4.

Figure 4 shows Arlington County data on the five deficits and how this changes by grade. From 8th to 12th grade, physical abuse and victim of violence decline, attendance at drinking parties and alone at home increase and TV overexposure doesn't change. Boys are much more likely than girls to report TV overexposure and being the victim of violence. Young men and women reported similar levels of the other deficits.

Figure 4. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Developmental Deficits

Deficits, March 2009	Students	Male	Female	Students in grades:		
				8	10	12
Alone at home	46	47	45	43	41	53
TV overexposure	27	31	24	29	23	30
Physical abuse	22	22	22	26	22	17
Victim of violence	23	27	20	28	23	18
Drinking parties	53	55	53	30	55	78

Note: The "drinking parties" deficit refers to attending parties where other young people are consuming alcohol. Definitions of other deficits appear in the appendix.

Between 2001 and 2009, the percentage of youth reporting each developmental deficit but one declined. These declines are statistically significant, and so extremely unlikely to have resulted from random differences in the sample. The exception was attendance at drinking parties. However, this did decline significantly from 2006 to 2009.

Taking Chances: Risk Behaviors and High Risk Patterns

The Assets Survey contains questions on twenty-four risk behaviors; that is, actions that young people take that put their health or safety at risk. Examples include drug and alcohol use, fighting, and depressive symptoms.

Findings

Figure 5 shows the percent of Arlington youth in grades 8, 10 and 12 who report each risk behavior. Overall, less than one-third of young people in Arlington report each of these behaviors. In some cases, however, the figure for a particular grade is much higher than the overall number. For example, overall, 28 percent of youth report using alcohol in the past month. But in 12th grade, 44 percent of youth report alcohol use. By 12th grade, more than one-third of youth report using marijuana, driving with a drinking driver, sexual intercourse, shoplifting, and skipping school. Nearly one-third of 8th and 10th graders report hitting someone.

Figure 5. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Risk Behaviors, March 2009

Risk Behaviors, March 2006	All			Students in grades:		
	Students	Male	Female	8	10	12
Alcohol use in past 30 days	28	30	26	14	27	44
Got drunk once or more, last 2 weeks	19	21	17	9	19	30
Smoked cigarettes in past 30 days	12	14	10	4	11	21
Used smokeless tobacco, past year	4	7	2	2	5	6
Inhaled substance to get high, past year	7	7	7	11	7	3
Marijuana use in past year	26	29	23	9	27	44
Other illicit drug use, past year	5	6	4	2	5	7
Drove after drinking, past 12 months	11	13	10	3	8	24
Drinking and driving (as passenger)	34	33	35	27	30	45
Sexual intercourse, ever	31	35	27	12	25	56
Shoplifted in past year	29	36	24	24	29	36
Committed vandalism in past year	17	26	10	19	20	13
In trouble with police in past year	21	28	15	18	20	26
Hit someone in last year	30	41	20	32	32	26
Physically hurt someone in last year	14	20	8	17	12	11
Used weapon to get something, last year	4	7	2	4	6	3
Been in a group fight in last year	17	24	10	21	15	14
Carried a weapon in past year	12	18	6	13	12	11
Threatened to hurt someone	25	32	18	27	25	21
Skipped school in past month	34	34	34	16	30	58
Gambling	24	36	13	20	24	29
Eating disorder	16	14	17	15	17	16
Depressed or sad most or all of the time	13	10	16	13	13	14
Attempted suicide, ever	11	8	14	12	10	11

Changes since 2001

While some of these figures are clearly cause for concern, there has been no worsening of risk behaviors since 2001. The percentage of youth in grades 8, 10 and 12 who reported alcohol use, tobacco use, skipping school, gambling, depressive symptoms and at least one suicide attempt all declined from 2001 to 2009. In addition, there were declines in the percentage of youth who reported getting drunk in the previous two weeks, having sexual intercourse, and threatening to harm someone. These findings are consistent with the modest but significant improvements in Developmental Assets.

Findings for Specific Groups of Students

Because boys report *fewer* Assets than girls, we expect to find that boys report *more* risk behaviors. The data confirm this. Boys are more likely than girls to report 14 of the 24 risk behaviors shown in Figure 5, with especially large differences in hitting someone, gambling, vandalism, and getting into a group fight. Girls are more likely to report persistent feelings of

depression and attempting suicide. Girls and boys are equally likely to report other illicit drug use (i.e. other than marijuana and alcohol) and skipping school.

Are these numbers cause for alarm? Both the levels and patterns suggest that, at minimum, community members should be concerned. From one-quarter to a third or more of high school students report alcohol and marijuana use, getting drunk, drinking and driving, sexual intercourse, shoplifting, hitting someone, skipping school and gambling. Twenty percent or more of 8th grade students report shoplifting, hitting someone, threatening to hurt someone, getting into a group fight and gambling.

Some adults may dismiss these findings by noting that youthful experimentation is just part of growing up. Indeed, most experts feel that some experimentation in risky activities is part of normal adolescent development. However, some Arlington youth are not merely experimenting, they are developing a risky lifestyle.

High-risk Behaviors

To make this point clear, Search has defined “high-risk” patterns of behavior that indicate a more serious and persistent problem (see appendix for details on how these are constructed). For example, a student who has used alcohol in the past 30 days is engaging in risk-taking. A student who has used alcohol at least three times in the past month or gotten drunk in the past two weeks is engaged in high-risk alcohol use. Figure 6 shows the percent of Arlington youth who report each high-risk pattern.

Figure 6. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting High-Risk Behaviors, March 2009

High -Risk Behaviors	Total Sample			Students in grades:		
		Male	Female	8	10	12
Alcohol	21	23	19	10	20	34
Tobacco	6	8	4	2	6	12
Illicit drugs	20	23	17	6	20	34
Sexual intercourse	22	24	21	5	15	48
Depression/suicide	20	15	24	20	20	20
Anti-social behavior	22	29	15	18	23	26
Violence	26	36	16	29	26	22
School problems	27	28	27	16	22	45
Driving and alcohol	16	16	17	9	14	27
Gambling	11	19	4	9	10	13

Twenty percent or more of 8th, 10th and 12th grade students report high risk behavior patterns related to alcohol, sexual intercourse, depression suicide, anti-social behavior, violence and school problems. These problems often worsen as young people grow older. Over one-third of 12th grade students report high-risk patterns related to alcohol use, illicit drug use, sexual intercourse and school problems.

Not Just Surviving: Thriving Indicators

Helping young people to avoid risk behaviors is only one way to enhance their development. As parents, teachers, mentors, and neighbors of youth, we want to do more for our young people. We want to know that they are not just surviving to adulthood, but are thriving.

There is no single, accepted measure of thriving. As a starting point, Search has defined eight behaviors, skills or dispositions to serve as markers of successful development. Figure 7 shows the percentage of youth who report each behavior. Only about one in four report school success and resisting danger. In contrast, eight out of ten report helping others and nearly three out of four report leadership.

Figure 7. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each Thriving Indicator

Thriving, March 2009	Sample	Male	Female	8	10	12
Succeeds in school	25	20	30	29	24	23
Helps others	80	77	83	79	78	83
Values diversity	65	61	69	67	60	67
Maintains good health	57	56	58	63	57	50
Exhibits leadership	72	70	74	69	69	79
Resists danger	23	17	27	23	23	22
Delays gratification	50	50	50	54	50	47
Overcomes adversity	66	66	66	65	66	67

Young women are more likely than young men to report school success, helping others, valuing diversity and resisting danger. Young men and women are equally likely to report the other thriving behaviors.

Since 2001, there were significant improvements in two of the thriving indicators – maintaining good health and overcoming adversity. Several others showed improvement but we can't rule out statistical issues as the cause. None of the thriving indicators declined.

Putting the Pieces Together: How Assets and Deficits Affect Our Kids

Assets are powerful. In communities across the country, Search Institute has found that Developmental Assets play three critical roles in the lives of young people:

- Preventing youth from engaging in many forms of high-risk behavior, such as alcohol use and violence;
- Enhancing the lives of our youth and helping them to thrive by making it more likely that they will help others, follow a healthy lifestyle, and demonstrate leadership; and
- Helping youth to minimize the effect of deficits in their lives.

Figure 8 demonstrates some of these relationships by looking at measures of risk-taking and thriving for groups of youth reporting different levels of Developmental Assets in their lives.

- Young people with *many* Assets (that is, 31 to 40) are two to four times *more likely* than youth with *few* Assets (that is, 1 to 10) to report each thriving behavior. For

example, only 26 percent low-Asset youth (i.e. who report zero to ten Assets) report maintaining good health. But 94 percent of high-Asset youth report this measure of thriving

- Young people with *few* assets are six to more than twenty times *more likely* than youth with many Assets to report each risk behavior. For example, 41 percent of low-Asset youth but only 5 percent of high-Asset youth report high risk use of alcohol.

The numbers in Figure 8 also suggest that simply moving kids from the lowest-Asset category to the next (i.e. 11 to 20 Assets) would result in significant declines in risk behaviors. For example, 22 percent of youth with zero to ten Assets use tobacco but only nine percent of youth with 11 to 20 Developmental Assets.

As in other communities, the same pattern holds for each thriving indicator and risk behavior defined by Search Institute – more Developmental Assets mean fewer risk behaviors and more thriving. While these patterns don’t establish a cause and effect relationship between Assets and behavior, other research does suggest a connection.

Figure 8. Percent of Arlington Youth (Grades 8, 10 and 12) Reporting Thriving Indicators or High Risk Behaviors, by Number of Assets, March 2009

Thriving Indicator	All Youth	Number of assets reported			
		0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40
Succeeds in school	25	8	17	34	52
Helps others	80	65	79	89	97
Values diversity	65	43	60	75	91
Maintains good health	57	26	51	69	94
Exhibits leadership	72	53	73	82	88
Resists danger	23	7	14	28	44
Delays gratification	50	30	43	54	76
Overcomes adversity	66	51	62	76	84

High-Risk Behavior	All Youth	Number of assets reported			
		0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40
Alcohol	21	41	28	17	5
Tobacco	6	22	9	2	0
Sexual intercourse	22	42	31	18	6
Depression / suicide	20	32	23	13	4
Anti-social behavior	22	51	28	12	2
Violence	26	54	30	17	5
School problems	27	57	35	20	5
Driving and alcohol	16	38	20	14	3
Gambling	11	28	12	8	3

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This report presents a wealth of information about the world according to Arlington County youth – perhaps a very different world than many adults expected to find. What can community members conclude from all of this data? Here, we try to focus on broad patterns revealed by the

survey results and the implications of those patterns for strengthening and improving the world inhabited by our young people.

First, the Bad News

Assets are too low and the pattern is all wrong. In particular:

- In an ideal world, all kids would experience 31 or more Developmental Assets. In 2009, only nine percent of youth in grades 8, 10 and 12 report this ideal level. The average number of Assets falls from 20 to 18 between 8th grade and 12th grade.
- In an ideal world, younger kids should experience high levels of *external* Assets and that level should stay high as they gradually develop the *internal* Assets they need as adults. In fact, the percentage of youth reporting the external Assets generally falls between 8th and 12th. Few of the internal Assets show the kind of increase we would like to see as young people prepare to leave home and lead more independent lives.

As the community begins to wrestle with these problems, we must recognize another clear conclusion from the data. Families can do much to firm up the developmental foundation of our youth but they cannot do everything.

What *can* families do? Data on both risk behaviors and Assets suggest that parents may be prematurely reducing their involvement in the lives of their children. Parents need to think about how they communicate with their kids, how they set boundaries, and their involvement with school. Fewer than half of young people report these Assets. Parents also need to look at how their role changes as their children grow older. Young people may need adults to change how they express their support but do not need it any less.

There are limits to what families can do. Many young people already report high levels of family support. What's missing is support from the community as reflected in the low percentage of youth who report having Developmental Assets such as community values youth (22%) and adult role models (29%). More generally, at most half of Arlington County youth in grades 8, 10 and 12 report having any given external Asset, those provided by family, neighbors, school, and community. For six of the external Assets, the results were even less satisfying with fewer than one-third of students reporting these. In other words, many young people here don't feel supported or valued and lack clear boundaries, a voice in what happens in their schools and community, and caring adults to guide them.

The lack of external Assets is mirrored by the lack of internal Assets and the prevalence of associated risk behaviors. For example:

- Only 30% of 12th graders report family boundaries, an external Asset and even fewer (19%) report the internal Asset "restraint" with respect to the use of drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity. 44% of 12th graders had used alcohol in the 30 days leading up to the survey and 44 percent had used marijuana in the past year.
- From 8th grade to 10th grade, parent involvement in school (an external Asset) falls from 30 to 14 percent. School success, a thriving measure falls from 29 to 24 percent and school problems (a high-risk pattern) increases from 16 to 45 percent.

Both research and many discussions with teens suggest that young people significantly downplay the life-threatening nature of some of their behaviors. According to the CDC, alcohol is a major factor in over half of suicides, homicides, and accidents among young people aged 15 to 24. Despite this fact, nearly half of 12th graders report driving in a car with someone who had been drinking. Adults in the community have a clear responsibility to respond to this information.

Steady Progress

The good news is that we can strengthen the developmental foundation for our youth by building Assets in our community and our efforts to do so appear to be working. As in other areas, the more Assets that young people in Arlington have, the more likely they are to report thriving behavior and less likely to report high risk patterns. Assets work in a cumulative way to reduce the probabilities that our kids end up in a crisis situation. While we can never guarantee that any individual child will thrive, we can stack the odds in their favor.

We can begin by reaching agreement that the status quo is not acceptable and by setting goals for creating a healthy community for children and youth. The Partnership believes that a shared vision of a healthy community (including specific, measurable goals for both assets and for risk behaviors) is essential for creating the shared effort to build Assets in our homes, schools, places of worship, and meeting places.

With a shared vision, the community can build Developmental Assets in a number of ways.

- We can start with areas of strength – family support, youth programs, and time at home. We can talk to young people about what it means to be a good friend one who has a positive influence on peers. We can use these opportunities with our youth to look for ways to build skills such as planning and decision-making and restraint.
- We can capitalize on the relatively high levels of Assets reported by 6th graders in the area of “commitment to learning” and take steps to prevent a downward slide as they move through middle school and enter high school. We can recognize and look for ways to counter the “sophomore slump” evident from the data and affirmed by students.
- We can and should applaud our kids for the many positive values they embody: their caring, their honesty, their integrity, and sense of responsibility, equality and social justice and look for ways to further increase these assets.
- We can acknowledge the real strengths and abilities of young people in Arlington County and look for ways for them to make meaningful contributions to the community.

Perhaps most important of all, we must recognize and accept that if we want honest, responsible, caring young people, we need to make sure that they have regular and repeated contact with honest, responsible, caring adults. Without that first step, the survey results show us what to expect and that world – the world according to our kids – is far less than they deserve.

For More Information

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Appendix A

Definitions of Assets, Deficits, Thriving Behaviors and High-Risk Behaviors

Definition of Developmental Assets

1. **Family support** - Family life provides high levels of love and support.
 2. **Positive family communication** - Young person and his or her parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.
 3. **Other adult relationships** - Young person receives support from 3 or more nonparent adults.
 4. **Caring neighborhood** - Young person experiences caring neighbors.
 5. **Caring school climate** - School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
 6. **Parent involvement in school** - Parent(s) is actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.
 7. **Community values youth** - Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
 8. **Youth as resources** - Young people are given useful roles in the community.
 9. **Service to others** - Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
 10. **Safety** - Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.
 11. **Family boundaries** - Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.
 12. **School boundaries** - School provides clear rules and consequences.
 13. **Neighborhood boundaries** - Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
 14. **Adult role models** - Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
 15. **Positive peer influence** - Young person's best friends' model responsible behavior.
 16. **High expectations** - Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.
 17. **Creative activities** - Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
 18. **Youth programs** - Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.
 19. **Religious community** - Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
 20. **Time at home** - Young person is out with friends with "nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week.
- The commitments, passions, and values that young people need to internalize as they grow.*
21. **Achievement motivation** - Young person is motivated to do well in school.
 22. **School engagement** - Young person is actively engaged in learning.
 23. **Homework** - Young person reports doing at least an hour of homework every school day.
 24. **Bonding to school** - Young person cares about his or her school.
 25. **Reading for pleasure** - Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.
 26. **Caring** - Young person places high value on helping other people.
 27. **Equality and social justice** - Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
 28. **Integrity** - Young person acts on convictions and stands up for his or her beliefs.
 29. **Honesty** - Young person "tells the truth even when it is not easy."
 30. **Responsibility** - Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
 31. **Restraint** - Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
 32. **Planning and decision-making** - Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
 33. **Interpersonal competence** - Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
 34. **Cultural competence** - Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds.
 35. **Resistance skills** - Young person can resist negative peer pressure & dangerous situations.
 36. **Peaceful conflict resolution** - Young person seeks to resolve conflict non-violently.
 37. **Personal power** - Young person feels he/she has control over "things that happen to me."
 38. **Self-esteem** - Young person reports having high self-esteem.
 39. **Sense of purpose** - Young person reports that "my life has a purpose."
 40. **Positive view of future** - Young person is optimistic about his or her personal future.

Definition of Developmental Deficits:

Alone at home:	Two or more hours per school day
TV Overexposure	Watches TV or videos three or more hours per school day
Physical abuse	Reports one or more incidents of physical harm (resulting in scars, bruises, welts, bleeding or a broken bone) by a family or household member
Victim of violence	Victim of physical abuse (causing pain or injury) in past 2 years
Drinking parties	Attended one or more parties where other kids the same age were drinking.

Definition of High-Risk Behaviors

Risk Behavior	Definition
Alcohol	Alcohol use 3 or more times in last 30 days or got drunk one or more times in last 2 weeks
Tobacco	Smokes cigarettes every day or uses chewing tobacco frequently
Illicit drugs*	Used marijuana 3 or more times in the past year or reported 2 or more uses of LSD, heroin or amphetamines
Sexual intercourse	Has had sexual intercourse 3 or more times in lifetime
Depression/suicide	Is frequently depressed and/or has attempted suicide
Anti-social behavior	Three or more incidents of shoplifting, trouble with police, or vandalism
Violence	Three or more acts of fighting, hitting, injuring a person, carrying or using a weapon or threatening physical harm in past 12 months
School problems	Has skipped school two or more days in last four weeks and/or has below a C average
Driving and alcohol	Has driven after drinking or ridden with a drinking driver three or more times in the last 12 months
Gambling	Has gambled three or more times in the last 12 months

- Note that the definition of high risk drug use changed slightly in 2009. Previously it was defined as 3 or more uses of any illicit drug in the past year.

Definition of Thriving Behaviors

Succeeds in school	Gets mostly As on report card
Helps others	Helps friends or neighbors one or more hours per week
Values diversity	Places high importance on getting to know people of other racial/ethnic groups
Maintains good health	Pays attention to healthy nutrition and exercise
Exhibits leadership	Has been a leader of a group or organization in the last 12 months
Resists danger	Avoids doing things that are dangerous
Delays gratification	Saves money for something special rather than spending it all right away
Overcomes adversity	Does not give up when things get difficult