



Research Summary: TEGA Capacity Building in Adams County

Understanding Youth in Adams County

July 2018

The Challenge

The Youth Initiative of Adams County (ACYI) hopes to garner authentic voice and perspective from key stakeholders to deepen its understanding of the lives of youth in Adams County and inform the work of its Partnership.

To do so, ACYI through its national network StriveTogether, partnered with Girl Effect to establish a network of TEGAs - Technology Enabled Girl Ambassadors - to inform the work of the ACYI partnership.

TEGA (Technology Enabled Girl Ambassadors) is a mobile-based, peer-to-peer research app that empowers adolescent girls to conduct research within the communities in which they live. TEGAs are part time ACYI employees. They receive training to become Market Research Society (MRS) certified digital interviewers.

As part of the training, our Adams County TEGAs conducted six rounds of research which 1) built their research capacity and understanding of the TEGA technology and 2) enabled us to understand context around the lives of youth in Adams County.



Over three months TEGAs interviewed over 180 youth, parents and community members, all from diverse backgrounds, about their daily life in Adams County. They explored topics like livelihood, education, safety in home and at school, peer relationships and power dynamics.

As with all TEGA research, the process was iterative and agile; we adapted the research questions based on findings from each wave of research, so we were able to explore emerging themes and answer new questions posed by unexpected findings. In addition, our TEGAs demonstrated their strong interview skills and in particular their ability to build trust with youth, parents and community leaders, which led to richer and more authentic findings.

This executive summary identifies the key findings from this research, suggests recommendations for future research and outlines youth inspired improvements for organizations who directly serve youth in Adams County.

The findings

Our training research identified three main themes which will inform our future research. Additionally, the research provides ACYI and its partners with meaningful insights into the behaviors, attitudes and needs of Adams County youth.

1. Education

Youth are very vocal about the school system and how it is supported and funded. Youth of all ages, as well as their parents, are concerned about the perceived value of education. They think everyone should value education more and are disappointed about the level of optimism students have about school; they're just not excited to be there.

Youth and parents also expressed concern about a lack of funding. Whether it was them citing not enough taxes being allocated to education as a problem, or just the 'cycle of poverty' at home and at school, TEGAs learned that sometimes families don't have enough money to allocate toward educational costs – be it fieldtrips, extra supplies or post-secondary education.

However, youth know what they want and need to do in order to improve their educational experience. Youth think the government should provide more financial support and they recognize the potential impact on their futures if they do not attend a post-secondary program. Overwhelmingly, youth feel the cost of college is too high and want politicians to make it more affordable. The high costs and pressure to get scholarships causes stress and anxiety for some youth. Parents vocalized concern as well, but believe their kids have the power and ability to make a difference and push for change. They see this generation as politically and socially active in their community and willing to put in the effort to be agents of change.

2. Youth Services and Activities

Youth in Adams County routinely engage in ‘typical’ suburban pursuits like going to movie theaters, restaurants, roller skating, the mall and spending time outdoors exploring Colorado. However, they mention that access to places where teens and kids can spend time safely together is often lacking; places that are just for them, safe from peer pressure and crime, and fun enough to keep kids, particularly teens, coming regularly.

It’s no surprise that they crave their own hangout spaces as the majority of youth prefer to talk to their peers in person, particularly when it comes to sensitive topics. Youth mentioned that some municipalities have more to do than others (e.g. Thornton & Brighton vs. Commerce City), and that there isn’t enough access to public transportation to move between municipalities easily. Suggestions for activities they’d like include volunteer opportunities, jobs and teen cafés!

In addition to activities, kids want guidance on what services are available and need direction on how to find and access them. They also require additional guidance outside of the home to help them make informed choices about ‘day-to-day challenges as well as bigger goal-oriented decisions. Parents and guardians echoed this sentiment. They too feel more can be done, specifically increasing access to positive role models and mentors. Respondents identified more human services, specifically mental health services and closing access gaps for people with language or transportation barriers ,or people who can’t take part, as ways that community leaders and schools can improve Adams County.

3. School Safety & Bullying

Safety was the most salient topic among youth and parents. Both groups describe their neighborhood as safe, saying that neighbors look out for each other. Youth see the home as a place of familiarity and trust. In contrast, schools are seen as less safe than home; 80% of students said they feel safer at home than at school. This is for a host of reasons, including fear of physical violence and school shootings, as well as bullying and harassment.

Bullying and harassment was of particular concern. School is the place where young people say they make most of their friends, but friendships can also be a source of anxiety; 23 of 26 students surveyed said they had been bullied or shamed at school or knew someone who had. Bullying takes many forms and includes judgement based on physical appearance, class and even ‘majorism’, which was described as judging others based on which major they selected. Whilst they don’t always seem to have the knowledge or skills to seek support when facing emotional harm, youth are equipped to deal with serious threats, particularly to their physical safety. If things do escalate and become a serious safety threat, they will seek a trusted adult’s advice. Moms were cited as most helpful in these instances.

Parents are an important source of information on safety – 50 percent said they are having conversations with their parents about safety threats at school and have developed a safety plan. 34 percent don't talk to parents all. The remaining 16 percent talk to their parents, but not in detail. The majority of these conversations are about the logistics related to physical harm (e.g. where to go in the case of a school shooting). Youth did not mention anything specific about emotional and mental support in these instances. Kids know the drill when it comes to physical safety at school. Lockdown drills are the norm and all students surveyed could recite exactly what to do in the case of a lockdown.

Safe2Tell (an anonymous website where kids can express their concerns about their peers and school threats) is seen as a positive resource and taken seriously by the majority of students. More students knew what and how to use Safe2Tell than not. While not many students mentioned actually using Safe2Tell, they do think it's an effective way to support youth. Overall, there appears to be more focus on support and procedures in the case of a physical threat compared to potential emotional harm experienced through bullying and peer pressure.



Recommendations

Our research led to four main recommendations to improve the lives of youth in Adams County:

1. Circulate more curriculum on socialization strategies

Arm kids with appropriate tools to navigate the social and emotional changes they are experiencing and how to combat judgement from their peers. Teach them more about peer relationships, mental health and managing feelings pertaining to personal safety, power and other life skills.

2. Connect the dots

There is a disconnect between services available and what kids perceive they have access to. Provide youth with more information about social & human services available and where to access them (e.g. linking human services to the Safe2Tell platform).

3. Schools should continue to take the lead when it comes to mapping out safety plans for kids Parents and kids rely on schools to be leaders when it comes to school safety and particularly and how families should address the topic at home.

4. Strengthen mental and emotional health provision for youth

Take a familial approach to the interventions offered to students concerning bullying and safety. Give kids more of a sense of the familiarity and comfort that makes them feel safe at home, through more emotionally-led messaging.

Next Steps

The training research has already allowed ACYI to strengthen community relationships and validate the impact of their partnerships. Over the next six months, the TEGAs will conduct research to directly support ACYI's Collaborative Action Networks (CANs) including Middle Grade Math, Post-Secondary Success and a newly formed group of community members focused on the cross-cutting issue of juvenile justice. Our ambition is that the research findings lead to informed CANs, who better understand youth needs. In turn they will be able to develop improved strategies and interventions that truly support young people from cradle to career.