



A PLACE TO BELONG

How youth think about growing up—
and staying—in the Itasca area.



The SPARK Youth Voices Survey is a partnership between Itasca area schools, SPARK: Stronger Futures for All, and Search Institute, with support from the Blandin Foundation.

The survey is designed to:

- Amplify youth voice by telling the story of youth in the Itasca area aligned with the themes in SPARK’s Pathway for Student Success.
- Identify opportunities for enhancing student success by strengthening relationships and opportunities for young people in their schools and communities.
- Focus attention on a shared commitment to young people’s growth and thriving across the Itasca area.
- Motivate individual and collective actions among youth and adults to create stronger schools and communities where all young people learn and thrive.

SPARK: Stronger Futures for All (www.sparkfutures.org) drives community engagement to ensure success for all Itasca Area youth.

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About This Report

This report was prepared for SPARK by **Search Institute** (www.searchinstitute.org), a non-profit organization that bridges research and practice to help young people be and become their best selves. Our current work seeks to surround young people—particularly those from marginalized communities—with developmental relationships that put them on the path to become thriving and contributing adults.

Special thanks to the students, administrators, staff, and families in the schools that participated in the survey. Thanks to the students, school leaders, and community leaders who guided the design of the study.

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COMMUNITIES WHERE YOUTH THRIVE IN RELATIONSHIPS

Will today's young people stay in the community to be tomorrow's workers, parents, citizens, and leaders? As the population and economy of the Itasca area continues to change, this is not an idle question. How do today's young people think about growing up in the Itasca area? And how do they think of their own future here?

In fall 2018, more than 3,000 6th- to 12th-grade students from 11 Itasca-area public schools completed the SPARK Youth Voice Survey. This report begins a conversation about what it's like for these young people to grow up in the Itasca area, what they experience in their communities, and how they think about their future here. Among the key findings:

- **Relationships:** 28% of young people report not having any strong relationships (out of four that they were asked about) to support them. Only 23% experience three or four strong relationships.
- **Experiences:** Many young people do not see a lot of opportunities for themselves in the Itasca area both now and in the future, with 48% saying they don't see a future for themselves in the community. Although most feel safe and trusted in the community, relatively few feel like adults listen to them or understand them.

When young people have a stronger web of relationships, they are more likely to feel valued and see a future for themselves in their communities. Strengthening the young peoples' relationships enriches their lives now and builds communities for the future. Through strong webs of relationships in their families, schools, and communities, young people thrive.

DEEPENING COMMUNITY BONDS

Youth who have more strong developmental relationships in their lives (out of the four studied) are...

ONE AND A HALF TIMES AS LIKELY

to say they see a future for themselves in the community;

TWICE AS LIKELY

to say the community values youth; and

TWICE AS LIKELY

to say they belong in the community

...as those who do not have as many strong developmental relationships.

Strengthening relationships across young peoples' lives is an opportunity to enrich their growth now and build communities for the future.

When young people have stronger relationships, they see a future for themselves in their communities.






RELATIONSHIPS BOND YOUNG PEOPLE TO THEIR COMMUNITY

The beauty of the Itasca area is remarkable. So, it can be easy to think of this place primarily in terms of the physical spaces—the land, lakes, rivers, forest, and towns. Indeed, several survey participants wrote that the outdoors is central to how they grew up. One wrote, “It’s nice to be able to go camping, fishing, and swimming in the summer and then to go hunting in the winter.”

Yet for many people, relationships can be more important to quality of life. Relationships within and beyond young people’s families are vital for their growth, learning, resilience, and well-being. They can also play an important role whether and how young people establish deep roots in their communities (in addition to other factors, such as economic and educational opportunities).

Young people’s experiences of developmental relationships

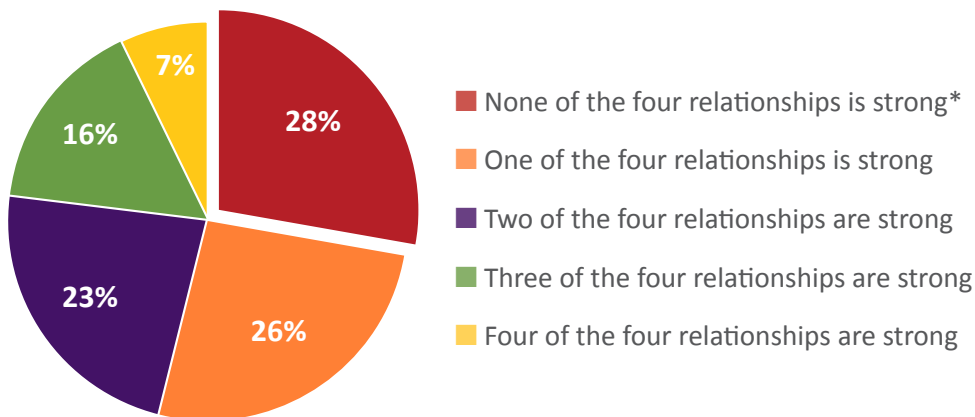
A central part of the SPARK Youth Voice Survey was a series of questions that asked young people about four important relationships in their lives: with their parenting adults (broadly defined), teachers, friends, and another significant adult in their life (whom they selected). The young people reflected on how much each of these people did five things in their relationships, which represent five elements of a “developmental relationship” (see back cover):

-  Show you that you matter to them (Express Care)
-  Push you to be your best (Challenge Growth)
-  Help you get things done (Provide Support)
-  Listen to your ideas and take them seriously (Share Power)
-  Connect you with new people and places in your community (Expand Possibilities)

Too few of Itasca youth experience a strong web of relationships.

In the Itasca area, as in other communities, too few young people experience a strong web of relationships in these five elements.

Overall, 28 percent of youth experience none of the four* relationships as “strong.”



* The four relationships are: parents, teachers and school staff, friends, and another significant adult (whom they selected).

WEAVING WEBS OF RELATIONSHIPS— NOW AND FOR THE FUTURE

Connecting many more young people in a web of strong relationships can help them see a future for themselves in the community. They feel important, trusted, understood, accepted, and like they are truly part of the community—both now and in the future. Strengthening the web of relationships in young people’s lives becomes an opportunity to enrich their lives now and also to build communities for the future.

Strong relationships influence educational commitments and workforce readiness

When young people experience more developmental relationships with parents, friends, teachers, and others, they are more likely also to report positive educational commitments and aspirations for their future education and and workforce readiness.* They are...

- ✓ **1.8 times more likely** to set and work toward realistic goals.
- ✓ **1.8 times more likely** they can get “smarter” by putting in effort.
- ✓ **1.7 times more likely** to be committed to learning and to care about school.
- ✓ **1.6 times more likely** to focus on learning in school rather than focusing on just getting a good grade.
- ✓ **1.4 times more likely** to have two- or four-year college aspirations beyond high school.
- ✓ **1.3 times more likely** to have both academic and vocational or technical school aspirations beyond high school.

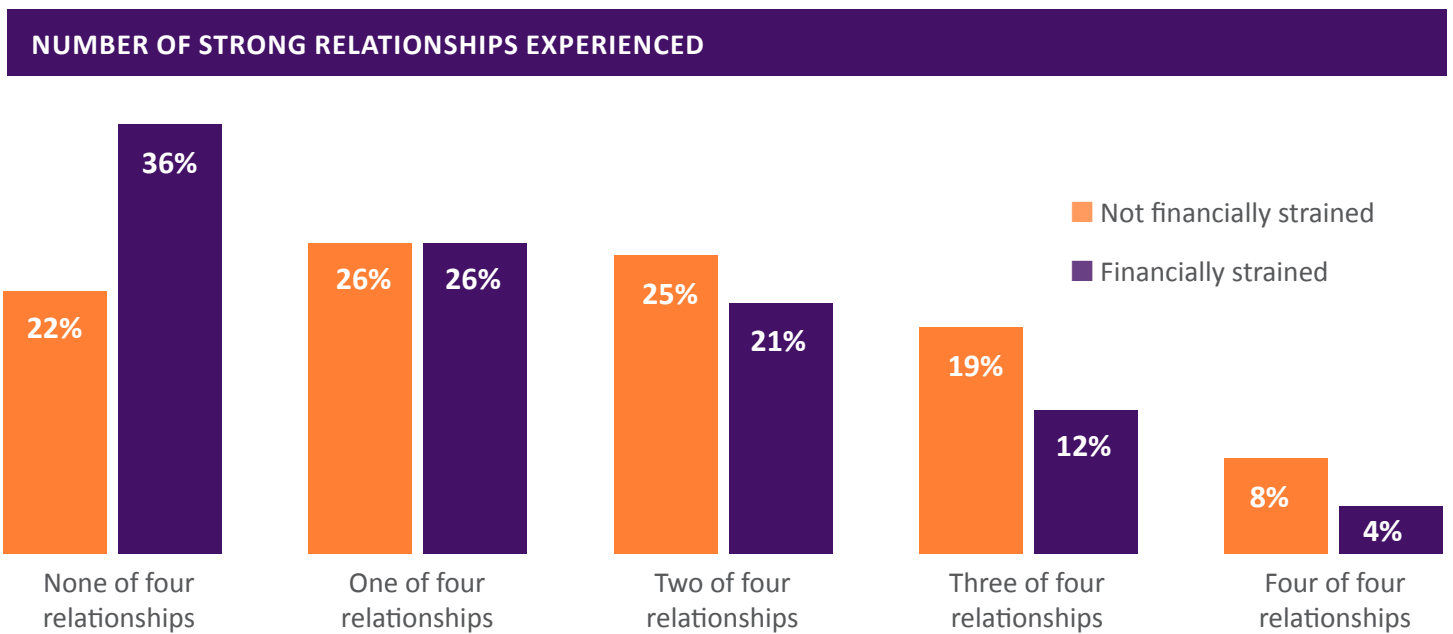
*Inviting young people
into workplaces
expands possibilities
for their future in the
community*



* Based on logistic regression analyses after controlling for age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

YOUTH FACING FINANCIAL STRAIN EXPERIENCE FEWER STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Overall patterns of developmental relationships are fairly consistent across different subgroups of young people, including by grade level, gender, and race-ethnicity. However, those whose families face financial strain* are more likely to experience no strong developmental relationships in their web (out of the four relationships we asked about: Parent, teacher, friend, and another significant adult):



Thus, while all groups of young people could benefit from a stronger web of relationships in their lives, a particular concern is to ensure that those facing financial challenges are supported and not isolated.

* A young person's family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can't buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

EXPERIENCES IN COMMUNITIES

Different groups of youth experience their communities differently. Pages 7-10 highlight key findings on important themes, which have been illustrated with comments young people offered through the open-ended questions on the survey.

MANY ITASCA YOUTH DON'T SEE A FUTURE FOR THEMSELVES IN THEIR COMMUNITY

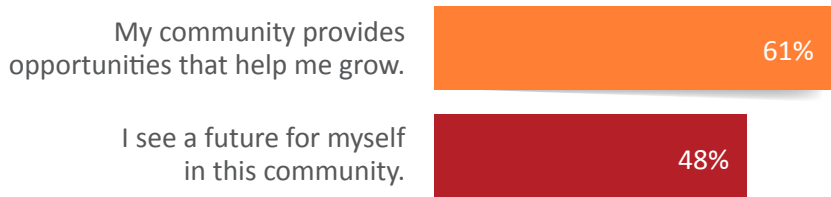
Although 61 percent believe their community provides opportunities that help them grow, only **48 percent see a future for themselves** in their community. Some differences:

- **High school youth** are less likely to say they have opportunities both now and in the future when compared to middle school youth.
- Youth whose families experience **financial strain** are also less likely to say they have opportunities to grow.
- **Native youth** are less likely than other youth to see opportunities being available for them both now and in the future.

Some young people said living in an isolated area or a smaller town, they couldn't participate in job shadowing and internships that are available in larger cities.

Some participants were interested in careers that did not have a presence in their community, but had a desire to know more about them: "A larger farm community would help me have better opportunities in the field of work I want to go into." Classes that exposed students to a variety of fields and skills were also suggested: "Some game programming and coding classes would be nice."

OPPORTUNITIES IN THE COMMUNITY:



OPPORTUNITIES		My community provides opportunities that help me grow.	I see a future for myself in this community.
All		61%	48%
Grade Level	Middle School	66%	56%
	High School	58%	42%
Gender	Female	60%	45%
	Male	64%	52%
Race-Ethnicity	Native	53%	43%
	White	61%	48%
	Other*	61%	51%
	Multi-Racial	63%	48%
Financial Strain**	Not Strained	66%	50%
	Strained	53%	42%

Darker shading indicates areas of greatest differences.

* Includes students who self-identified as being Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a American, Pacific Islander, or other.

** A young person's family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can't buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

"It is such a small community that there just aren't many options for us to expand our horizons and do internships or gain experiences locally, we have to go to another town."

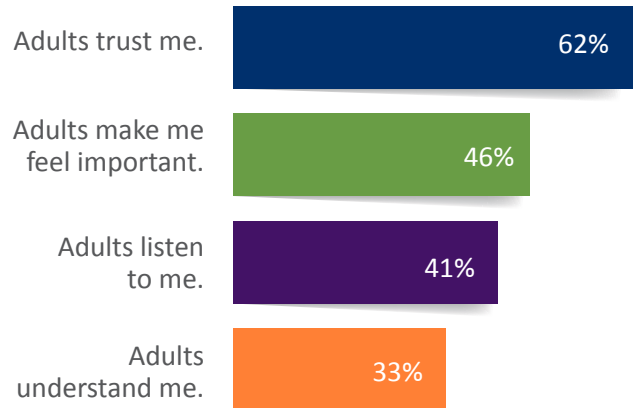
-survey participant

YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL TRUSTED BUT NOT VALUED, BY ADULTS

Fewer than half of all young people feel valued by adults in their communities. Though differences are minor between middle school and high school and between genders, differences between Native youth and White youth are striking. **Native youth are 20 percent less likely to experience adults in the the community trusting them.** Similarly, youth who experience financial strain are consistently less likely to say they are valued in their community.

Some participants who described themselves as people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, or having a mental or cognitive disability wrote that they are “not able to fit in” and “it is hard to find your place.” Participants expressed a desire for people to be more accepting, less prejudiced, and to treat them the same as others. One participant wrote, “White people look at me and my mom all the time... they look at us with a **dislike that shoots through me.**”

BEING TRUSTED AND VALUED



BEING VALUED		Adults trust me.	Adults make me feel important.	Adults listen to me.	Adults understand me.
All		62%	46%	41%	33%
Grade Level	Middle School	62%	48%	42%	37%
	High School	63%	45%	41%	30%
Gender	Female	68%	46%	41%	30%
	Male	61%	49%	44%	37%
Race-Ethnicity	Native	46%	37%	34%	29%
	White	66%	48%	43%	33%
	Other*	57%	43%	43%	36%
	Multi-Racial	57%	41%	38%	33%
Financial Strain**	Not Strained	67%	51%	46%	37%
	Strained	57%	39%	36%	26%

Darker shading indicates areas of greatest differences.

* Includes students who self-identified as being Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a American, Pacific Islander, or other.

** A young person’s family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can’t buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

MOST YOUTH FEEL THAT THEY BELONG BUT SIGNIFICANT GROUPS DO NOT

Participants wrote that they recognized a small town or community as being unique in some positive ways, particularly in how they interact with others. “It is a very nice community, people here seem pretty nice,” wrote one participant. Another wrote, “It’s a small community, but that **makes it easier to find people you can depend on.**” Some participants wrote that they felt people were welcoming in Itasca, and it was easy to get to know your neighbors.

Having a sense of belonging and that they can be themselves is lower for high school youth than middle school youth and for females when compared to males. Native youth also are less likely than White and other youth to feel like they belong in their communities. Finally, those whose **families experience financial strain** are less likely to feel like they belong in the community than those who do not.

While some participants felt as though the character of the area is welcoming and kind, this is not the experience for all participants. “Some [community members] aren’t as willing to give up their prejudices as others,” wrote one participant. Others felt they were not welcome if they did not hunt, fish, or participate in similar activities as others in the community. It was difficult for some participants to feel they could be themselves growing up in Itasca. As one participant noted, **“Even if adults tell you to be yourself, they don’t really mean it. I will never be able to be myself in this area of Minnesota.”**

BELONGING IN THE COMMUNITY



BELONGING		I can really be myself in my community.	People in my community accept me for who I am.	I really feel like part of my community.
All		58%	56%	50%
Grade Level	Middle School	63%	61%	55%
	High School	55%	53%	46%
Gender	Female	54%	51%	46%
	Male	65%	64%	56%
Race-Ethnicity	Native	54%	48%	46%
	White	59%	58%	50%
	Other*	59%	53%	53%
	Multi-Racial	54%	56%	49%
Financial Strain**	Not Strained	63%	62%	54%
	Strained	50%	47%	42%

Darker shading indicates areas of greatest differences.

* Includes students who self-identified as being Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a American, Pacific Islander, or other.

** A young person’s family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can’t buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

MALES FEEL SAFER THAN FEMALES. THOSE FACING FINANCIAL STRAIN FEEL LEAST SAFE

Most youth feel both physically and emotionally safe (though there is still work to be done). **Females feel less safe than males**, and Native youth feel less safe than White and other youth. Native youth are also less likely to say that they are expected to follow the same rules as others. Similarly, those whose families experience financial strain are less likely to say they feel emotionally or physically safe in their communities, and they are also somewhat less likely to say that their community expects them to follow the same rules as everyone else.

SAFETY AND FAIRNESS



SAFETY AND FAIRNESS		I feel emotionally safe in my community.	My community expects me to follow the same rules as everybody else.	I feel physically safe in my community.
All		68%	73%	69%
Grade Level	Middle School	67%	75%	68%
	High School	68%	71%	69%
Gender	Female	63%	72%	63%
	Male	76%	76%	77%
Race-Ethnicity	Native	61%	64%	60%
	White	69%	74%	71%
	Other*	65%	76%	67%
	Multi-Racial	63%	72%	65%
Financial Strain**	Not Strained	74%	76%	74%
	Strained	58%	68%	61%

Darker shading indicates areas of greatest differences.

* Includes students who self-identified as being Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a American, Pacific Islander, or other.

** A young person's family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can't buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.



ACTION IDEAS

Working together to strengthen communities where all belong

Everyone in the Itasca area plays a role in creating a place where all young people feel valued and like they belong—both now and in the future. On the following pages are some action ideas for how community leaders, businesses and organizations, youth, and all adults might get started. The ideas are organized around the five elements of developmental relationships. (The framework is shown on the back of this booklet.)

RELATIONSHIPS THAT TRANSFORM... OUR COMMUNITIES, OURSELVES

The challenges facing the Itasca area are well known and common to rural communities across Minnesota and the United States. A changing economy, workforce, technologies, and social interactions compete with the resources, beauty, and deep roots of the community, tradition, land, culture, and family life.

No single factor alone counterbalances these trends. However, if young people feel deep bonds to each other, to their families, and to the adults in their communities, they are much more likely to put down deep roots and invest in their communities.

Not only do those relationships enrich the lives of young people, but they also enrich the lives of the parenting adults, the grandparents, the teachers, the coaches, the mentors, the neighbors, the supervisors, and the many other people who get to know, guide, learn from, laugh with, and grow with today's young people. Forming those connections is not only a gift to young people. It's a gift to each of us.

And it's a gift to our communities, both now and, perhaps, for the future.

COMMUNITY LEADERS

BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS

Express Care



- Regularly listen to young people from different backgrounds. What bugs them? What do they wish for?
- Publicly celebrate when young people contribute to the community in small and large ways. Ensure that many different youth know that all young people are known and valued.

- Welcome young people from all backgrounds into your business. Let them know you're glad they are there.
- Show care to young people on special occasions—sponsor school events, offer discounts on prom nights, recognize graduates.

Challenge Growth



- If young people imagine moving to another community when they grow up, challenge them to imagine what kind of community they hope to live in. Then imagine what they could do to make elements of that possible here.
- Push young people to identify—then create—the kinds of opportunities they would value in their own community, not waiting for adults to do something for them.

- Set high expectations for young people you interact with—and prepare them to be successful in the roles they assume.
- When young people make mistakes or fail, use it as an opportunity for learning how to grow and improve. Give second chances.

Provide Support



- Connect young people who want to get involved in the community with a guide who can coach them in ways to contribute.
- Pay particular attention to building positive connections for youth and families that may be isolated because of financial strain.

- Find formal or informal ways to mentor young people who are interested in your business. By building relationships with young people who share your interests, you can help them set goals.
- Be intentional in standing up for young people who may be overlooked by other businesses or organizations.

Share Power



- When making decisions that affect young people, have them be part of making the decisions.
- Establish youth leadership groups to inform or make decisions on key issues that affect youth and the future.

- Ask young people for their perspectives on issues that affect your business. What might make it a more attractive place for youth to work, shop, or do business?
- Invite youth to work with you to solve problems in your organization or business that might involve them—or that they may have particular expertise to resolve.

Expand Possibilities



- Ask young people what they're curious about, then introduce them to other community members who share those interests.
- If youth have interests and expertise they could share with adults, ask them if they would share them. That would expand their connections and share power at the same time!

- Listen for things young people are curious about. Explore how those interests might connect with possibilities in your business or others in your community.
- Introduce young people to other business leaders you know who share their interests or who can answer questions they have.

YOUTH

ADULT COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Express Care



- Greet adults when you see them in the community, even if you don't know them. Your friendliness may catch them off guard . . . in a good way.
- Take time to talk with—and listen to—adults in the community. Ask them about things that interest them. Listen to their stories.

- Greet young people when you see them with a warm smile—even if you don't know them.
- Pay attention to young people when they are talking about things that matter to them. Put away your cell phone and really listen.

Challenge Growth



- When you and your friends experience things you don't like in your community, challenge yourselves to find ways to make it better.
- Push yourself to connect with other youth who may not feel like they fit in because of their background, personality, or identities

- Talk with young people about the things they look forward to or dream about in your community. Push them to work hard to reach those goals together.
- Emphasize that mistakes are a necessary part of learning. Praise them for hard work, whether they succeed or fail.

Provide Support



- Invite your friends to try things you enjoy in the community. Sometimes they may not participate because they feel awkward going by themselves.
- When friends are being overlooked or put down in the community, stand up for them so they know they are valued and have allies and a voice.

- Offer information and practical help to solve a practical problem, or loan them something they may need.
- Show young people how to ask for help when they need it

Share Power



- Treat adults with respect when you interact with them in the community. Expect them to do the same with you.
- When you hear that issues that you care about are being discussed in the community, ask to be part of in the discussion and decision making.

- Let young people make decisions about activities you do together and what you talk about.
- When you can, offer choices (“So, what could you do differently to tackle this problem?”), rather than always giving instructions.

Expand Possibilities



- When you're curious about something in your community, ask an adult you know to introduce you to someone who is involved in that part of community life.
- With your friends, try one new activity in your community every month. Think outside the box to come up with things that you didn't even know were out there.

- When young people seem curious about an activity, topic, or issue, ask questions such as, “What strikes you about this?”
- Introduce young people to a wide range of people, places, ideas, cultures, and vocations. Start with ones they're curious about.

BACKGROUND

The SPARK Youth Voices Survey

Survey development: The survey used in 2018 was updated from a survey conducted in 2014 based on extensive input from students, teachers, and leaders in Itasca area schools and the SPARK Council to ensure that the findings are relevant and valuable.

Data collection: Between August 31 and October 15, 2018, a total of 3,253 Itasca area students were surveyed via computers or tablets during a class period. A total of 242 surveys were dropped from the sample during data cleaning (due to missing data or suspicious responses), resulting in a final sample of 3,011 students.

Sample Characteristics:

Participating Schools	Students in the final sample
Bigfork High School	114
Deer River High School	352
Floodwood School	98
Grand Rapids Area Learning Center	66
Grand Rapids High School	865
Greenway High School	480
Hill City School	133
Nashwauk-Keewatin High School	170
Northern Lights Community School	86
Northland High School	125
Robert J. Elkington Middle School	522
TOTAL	3,011

Grade Level

Middle school (Grades 7-8)* **42%**

High school (Grades 9-12) **59%**

*Includes 183 sixth graders in four schools: Deer River, Northern Lights, Hill City, and Greenway.

Gender

Female **47%**

Male **51%**

Other* **3%**

*The 'Other' category includes youth who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. This sample was too small to include in the broad gender analyses for this report, but will be used for focused analyses.

Race-Ethnicity (self-reported)

Native **5%**

White **66%**

Other* **6%**

Multi-racial **24%**

*Students who selected Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, or Other have been combined due to insufficient sample sizes.

Financial Strain (self-reported)

63% (n = 1,584)

Not financially strained—Family has little or no problems buying what they need or can buy special things if they want to.

37% (n = 928)

Financially strained—Family sometimes can't buy the things they need or has just enough money for the things they need.

NOTE: Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

Use this page to reflect on your own—or with others—about the findings in this summary report.

What?

What 2-3 things stood out for you the most as you read the findings?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Gut?

How did you react to the findings? Where you surprised? Upset? Pleased? Puzzled?

What do you think made you react the way you did? What experiences did it stir up for you?

So What?

What possibilities do you see that need to be considered? What actions need to be taken? What's most important to you?

How do you think young people might want others in the community to respond to these survey findings?

Now What?






What questions do you want to ask someone to help you understand the “why” behind the findings?

Who can you share the findings with who could really use them?

What's one thing you'll be willing to try to respond to the finding?

SEARCH INSTITUTE'S FRAMEWORK OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Young people are more likely to grow up successfully when they experience developmental relationships with important people in their lives. Search Institute has identified five elements—expressed in 20 specific actions—that make relationships powerful in young people’s lives.

ELEMENTS	ACTIONS	DEFINITIONS
 <p>Express Care</p> <p><i>Show me that I matter to you.</i></p>	<p>Be dependable.....</p> <p>Listen.....</p> <p>Believe in me.....</p> <p>Be warm.....</p> <p>Encourage.....</p>	<p>Be someone I can trust.</p> <p>Really pay attention when we are together.</p> <p>Make me feel known and valued.</p> <p>Show me you enjoy being with me.</p> <p>Praise me for my efforts and achievements.</p>
 <p>Challenge Growth</p> <p><i>Push me to keep getting better.</i></p>	<p>Expect my best.....</p> <p>Stretch.....</p> <p>Hold me accountable.....</p> <p>Reflect on failures.....</p>	<p>Expect me to live up to my potential.</p> <p>Push me to go further.</p> <p>Insist I take responsibility for my actions.</p> <p>Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks.</p>
 <p>Provide Support</p> <p><i>Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.</i></p>	<p>Navigate.....</p> <p>Empower.....</p> <p>Advocate.....</p> <p>Set boundaries.....</p>	<p>Guide me through hard situations and systems.</p> <p>Build my confidence to take charge of my life.</p> <p>Stand up for me when I need it.</p> <p>Put in place limits that keep me on track.</p>
 <p>Share Power</p> <p><i>Treat me with respect and give me a say.</i></p>	<p>Respect me.....</p> <p>Include me.....</p> <p>Collaborate.....</p> <p>Let me lead.....</p>	<p>Take me seriously and treat me fairly.</p> <p>Involve me in decisions that affect me.</p> <p>Work with me to solve problems and reach goals.</p> <p>Create opportunities for me to take action and lead.</p>
 <p>Expand Possibilities</p> <p><i>Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.</i></p>	<p>Inspire.....</p> <p>Broaden horizons.....</p> <p>Connect.....</p>	<p>Inspire me to see possibilities for my future.</p> <p>Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.</p> <p>Introduce me to more people who can help me develop and thrive.</p>

NOTE: Relationships are, by definition, bidirectional, with each person giving and receiving. So each person in a strong relationship both engages in and experiences each of these actions. However, for the purpose of clarity, this framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person.

More information on developmental relationships: www.searchinstitute.org/developmental-relationships/