



OPPORTUNITIES TO GROW

Relationships, activities, interests, and activities that engage Itasca area youth beyond the school day



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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EXPLORING INTERESTS AND CONNECTIONS OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

When young people in the Itasca area are not in school, they have access to the beauty of northern Minnesota's lakes, parks, and forests. They also can participate in a wide variety of clubs, sports, religious, volunteer, civic, farming, and recreational opportunities.

How are the Itasca area's young people spending their time outside of school? What interests them? Who are they connecting with? And are there opportunities to engage with those young people who have not found the right fit?

Highlights from this report

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 focuses on how those students spend their time after school. It highlights three key areas:

- **Interests:** Itasca area youth express interest in a wide range of activities outside of school, with learning life skills, sports, electronic games, and hunting and fishing topping the list. They are, on average, least interested in homework and tutoring after school—though these are priorities for some young people.
- **Participation:** When asked what they actually do, Itasca youth are most likely to participate in sports, hunting and fishing, and electronic games. When asked where they do things, they most commonly say they do them when hanging out with friends, or using the parks or outdoors, or participating in programs or activities at school. They are much less likely to talk about other programs in community or religious organizations.
- **Relationships:** Although only 11% of Itasca area youth point to non-family adults outside of school as key resources for them, these relationships are powerful and positive for those young people. An important challenge is to discover ways to increase the opportunities for more young people—and adults—to experience those relationships.

The out-of-school hours offer a unique and powerful opportunity for young people to explore the world around them, who they are, and how they connect with adults and each other. These survey results point to ways leaders, youth, youth workers, families, and others in the Itasca area can work together to ensure that this time is truly a time of creativity, discovery, connection, growth for young people.

THE VALUE OF PARTICIPATION

When Itasca area youth participate in more of these activities in their communities, they are also more likely to*:

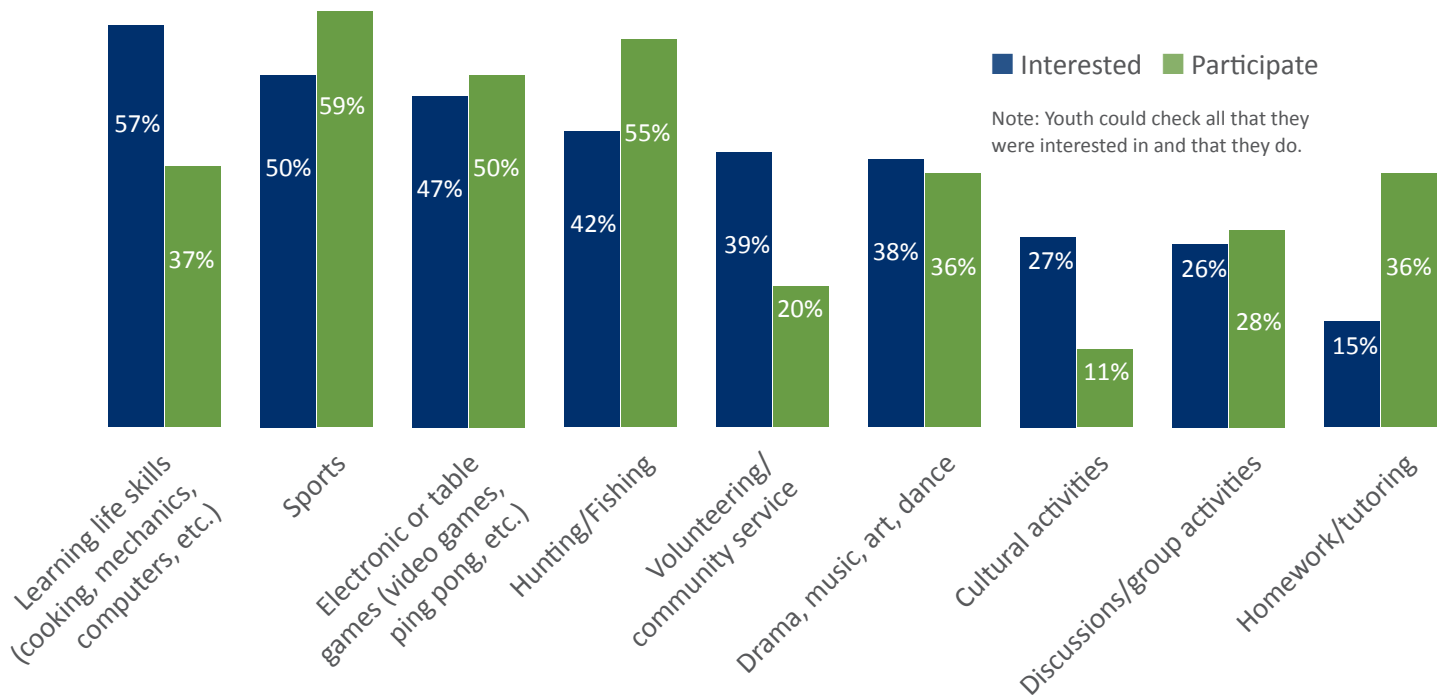
- ✓ **Have stronger relationships with their parents**
- ✓ **Feel like they belong in their school**
- ✓ **Feel like their community values them**
- ✓ **Feel like they belong in their community**
- ✓ **Have stronger relationships with their friends**
- ✓ **Have stronger relationships with other adults in their community**
- ✓ **Believe their community is safe and provides them opportunities**
- ✓ **Feel more accepted by their teachers**
- ✓ **Feel more accepted by other adults in their community**

*Based on statistical correlations. A cause-and-effect relationship cannot be interpreted from this analysis. Results are shown in decreasing order of strength of the correlation.

YOUNG PEOPLES' INTERESTS DON'T ALWAYS MATCH THEIR PARTICIPATION

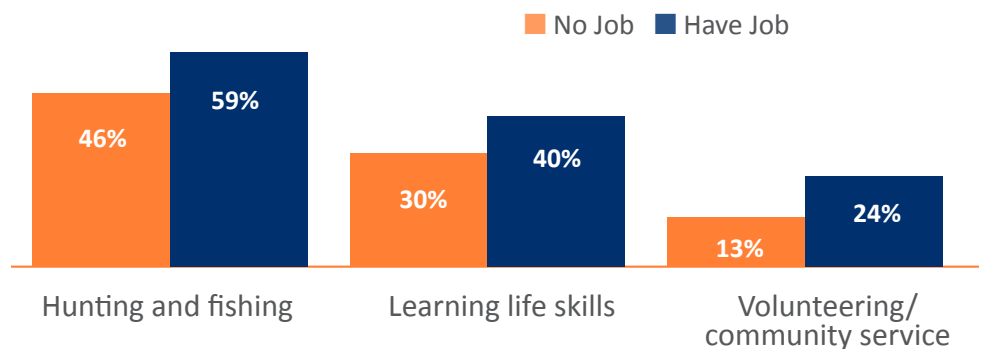
WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO SPEND THEIR TIME DOING WHEN THEY'RE NOT IN SCHOOL? WHAT DO THEY ACTUALLY DO?

What young people say they are interested in does not always line up with what they participate in. For example, they are most likely to say they are interested in learning life skills, but it is not something most do. They are more likely to say they participate in sports, hunting and fishing than they are to say they are interested in them (though many youth are interested in both).



DO JOBS INTERFERE WITH PARTICIPATION?

Although the survey cannot address in specific cases, the overall pattern would say the answer is “no.” **Youth who have a job are more likely to participate in several other activities.** (There are no activities in which youth without a job participate more than youth with a job.)



Graph depicts percentage of youth who participate in each activity

NOT ALL YOUTH HAVE THE SAME INTERESTS

All young people do not share the same interests, though levels of interests are often consistent across subgroups of youth. (For example, interest in each type of activity remains fairly consistent between middle school and high school.) Below are areas where the survey showed differences of 5% or more in interest between subgroups of youth.

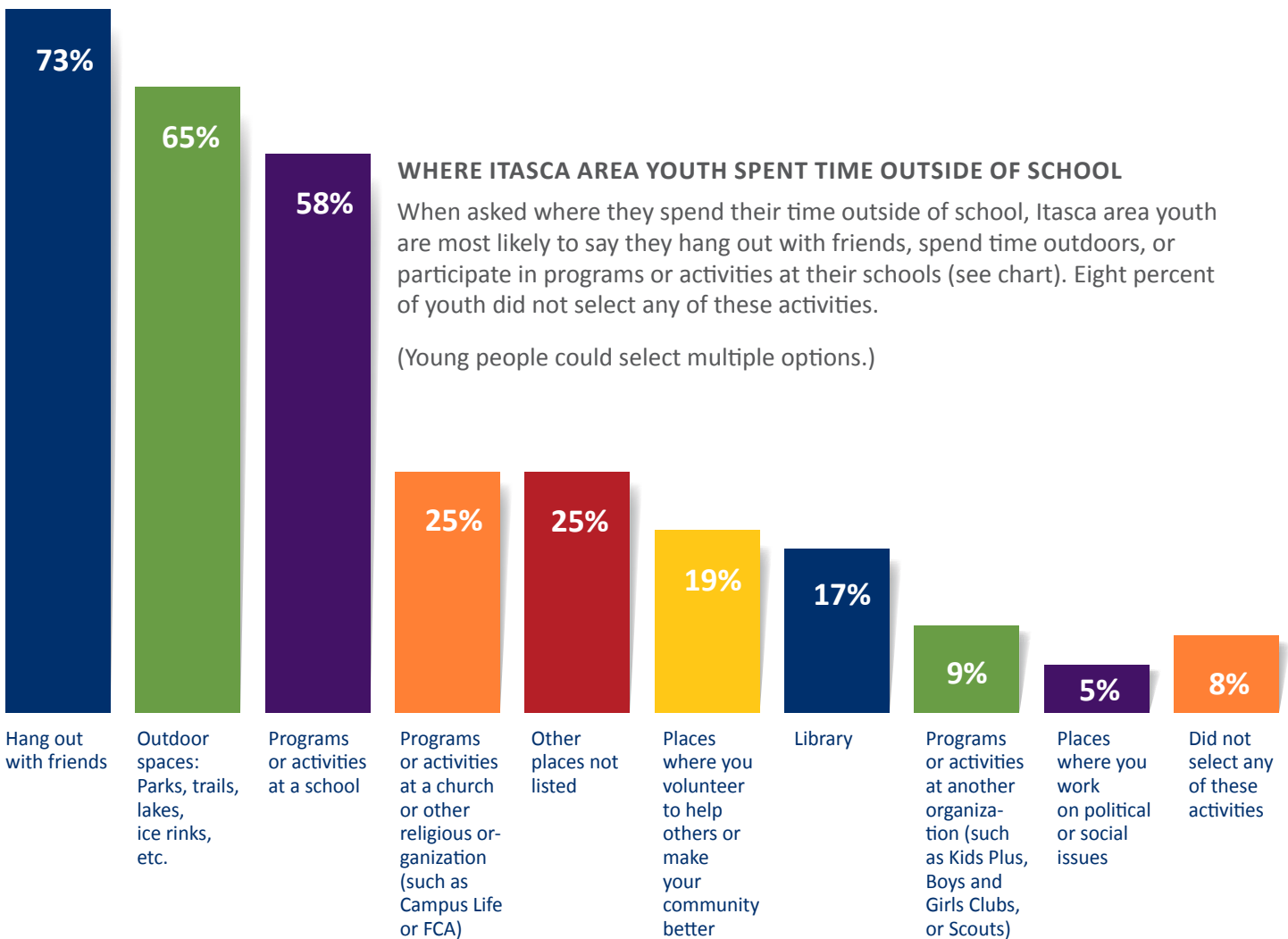
WHAT YOUTH ARE INTERESTED IN:

GENDER	Females	Males
Learning life skills (such as cooking, mechanics, computers)	61%	55%
Sports	48%	53%
Electronic or table games (such as video games or Ping Pong)	41%	53%
Hunting or fishing sports	36%	48%
Volunteering or community service	54%	27%
Drama, music, dance, art	52%	25%
Cultural activities based on your own heritage	34%	21%
Discussions or group activities	30%	23%
Homework or tutoring	20%	9%
FINANCIAL STRAIN* IN FAMILIES	Not Financially strained	Financially Strained
Sports	55%	48%
Electronic or table games (such as video games or Ping Pong)	48%	53%
Drama, music, dance, art	36%	43%
Cultural activities based on your own heritage	25%	34%
Homework or tutoring	12%	21%
ETHNICITY	Native	White
Sports	44%	52%
Drama, music, dance, art	34%	39%
Cultural activities based on your own heritage	37%	24%
Homework or tutoring	20%	15%

Darker shading indicates areas of greatest differences.

*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.

PLACES YOUTH SPEND TIME



HANGING OUT WITH FRIENDS

The most common option for spending time was “hanging out with friends.” The survey asked youth where they do so. Here are their most common responses (in descending order):

- At their own house, a relative’s house, or their friend’s house
- At school, such as on a team, in gym class, or attending a sports event (football game)
- At local area restaurants, entertainment, or businesses
- At gas stations, department stores (such as Target), or movie theaters.
- “Around town” or “driving around town”
- Outdoors, including hunting, going to a cabin, going camping, or going to a lake
- Online, using devices such as a video game console

FEMALES, HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS, AND THOSE WHO DON'T EXPERIENCE FINANCIAL STRAIN ARE MORE LIKELY TO PARTICIPATE

Levels of participation in many activities are quite consistent across different subgroups of youth. However, some differences are important to note:

- **Gender:** Females are more likely than males to hang out with friends and to participate in the activities shown in the table on page 5.
- **Grade level:** High school students are more likely than middle school students to participate more in school activities and places to volunteer.
- **Financial strain:** Youth whose families experience financial strain* are somewhat less likely than those whose families don't experience financial strain to spend time hanging out with friends or to participate in activities at school and at religious organizations.

(There were no meaning differences between groups of youth on other activities shown in the figure on page 6.)



PROVIDING MORE OPPORTUNITIES

The SPARK Youth Voice Survey asked young people for their ideas of what the community could do to provide more opportunities. Some of their suggestions focused on out-of-school time opportunities.

MORE OPTIONS AFTER SCHOOL AND DURING THE SUMMER

Young people who aren't involved described a lack of activities, clubs, or programs that interested them. "They don't have many things besides sports, and we don't even have many sports," wrote one student. Further, "there are no occasions for people to learn things outside of school. You either learn it in school or not at all. We also don't have access to different things because we are so rural."

DESIGNATED LOCATIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO SOCIALIZE

Youth who are not involved expressed frustration with a lack of places for young people to hang out together or socialize outside of school or their own homes. "Me and my friends always get kicked out of store parking lots, and even the high school itself," one young person wrote. "Make more places to hang out safely," another youth suggested. Some options participants would like to see include a skate park geared for older teens, or a public pool.

INVOLVE YOUNG PEOPLE IN COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

Youth wrote that they wished young people would be asked to be more involved: "They need to do more involving the teens of our community. We are everyone's future after all." Additionally, they expressed an interest in community members reaching out to them to get to know them, or help them feel wanted in their community.



RELATIONSHIPS: BRIDGING INTERESTS AND PARTICIPATION

CONNECTING WITH ADULTS BEYOND HOME AND SCHOOL

What might happen if—in addition to the topics being “right”—more young people had deeper connections with trustworthy adults and peers in youth programs? What might it take to create programs and settings in the Itasca areas where young people could explore and expand their interests alongside adults and peers who shared those interests?

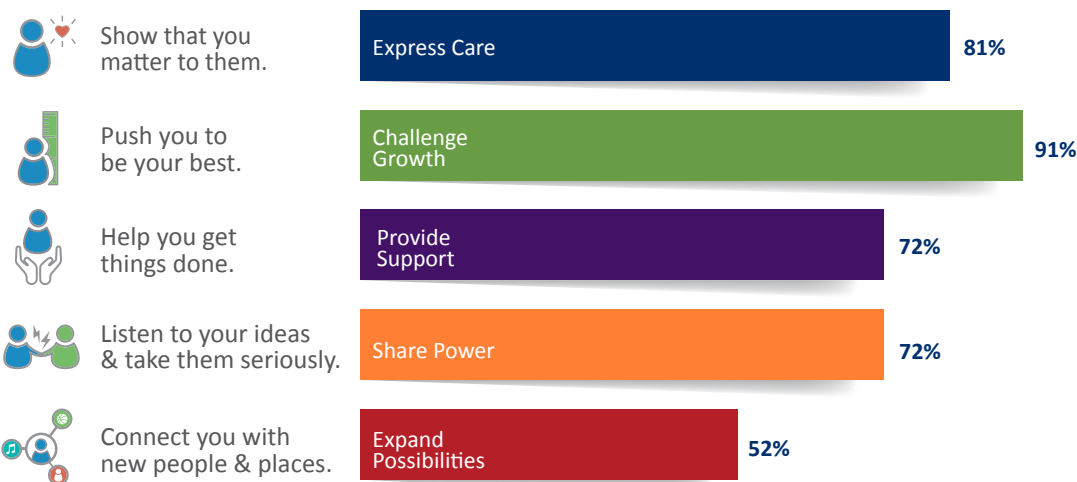
An essential feature of out-of-school time is the opportunity to connect young people with trustworthy, caring adults outside of home and school. These adults can be important resources for young people as they shape their identity and find their place in the world.

Just 11% of Itasca area youth identified adults outside of school and home as people who play a big role in their lives. These adults include coaches, youth leaders, faith leaders, librarians, mentors, and others. Young people rated different aspects of their relationships with these adults based on Search Institute’s framework of developmental relationships, shown on the back cover of this booklet.

Although a relatively small portion of youth selected these non-family adults as key relationships, **those who did report having these relationships with adults in the community experience them as particularly powerful.** As shown in the figure, youth report that each of the five elements of developmental relationships is strong, though “expand possibilities” is less common than the other actions.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH SELECTED ADULTS BEYOND HOME AND SCHOOL

Youth who report that selected non-family adult outside of school do each of these actions “often” or “very often”:



Because only youth who selected these adults as important rated these relationships (11% of the total sample), these percentages cannot be compared to those for parents, teachers, and friends, which were rated by all youth.

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS... AND VALUING MORE

These Itasca area youth who identified a community adult as a key relationship say that each of these actions in their relationships with these significant adults beyond home and school are at a level they want. Almost none of them (less than 4 percent) would want these adults to do any of these actions less.

Some young people—especially high school youth—would value these adults doing these actions more. As shown in the table below, 18% of high school youth would like these community adults to push them more to be their best, and 17% would like these adults to share power with them more.

			ALL	Middle School	High School
	Express Care	Show that you matter to them.	9%	2%	12%
	Challenge Growth	Push you to be your best.	15%	7%	18%
	Provide Support	Help you get things done.	9%	5%	11%
	Share Power	Listen to your ideas & take them seriously.	15%	10%	17%
	Expand Possibilities	Connect you with new people & places.	12%	11%	13%

These findings push against the myth that young people are pulling away from adults during high school. They certainly are renegotiating their relationships with their parenting adults and other family members, and they are definitely engaging with their friends in new ways. But they are also eager to learn how to engage with and become part of the adult world. When they find and connect with a trustworthy, significant adult beyond the family, that relationship can be an important catalyst for their growth and development.

The challenge for the Itasca area is that **only about one in ten area youth identified an adult beyond their families and teachers as being someone who plays a big role in their lives.** So while almost 60 percent of youth participate in programs or activities at schools, 25 percent say they participate in religious organizations, and others participate in other programs, they may not always be building strong relationships with adults (or peers) in these settings. Strengthening the relational practices and cultures of these organizations and programs may be an opportunity to engage more young people in deeper ways.



ACTION IDEAS

The out-of-school hours offer unique opportunities for young people to connect with adults and peers through a range of interests and activities in their communities. These activities can help them discover new things about themselves and new possibilities for the future. The following pages contain some ideas for how youth workers, young people, parents, and educators can deepen relationships and enhance experiences beyond the school day.

DOING WHAT INTERESTS YOU... WITH PEOPLE YOU ENJOY

This report highlights how many Itasca area youth spend time outside of school in spectacular, invigorating settings. They're forming deep and lasting bonds with friends and caring adults. They're developing skills and interests that will shape their futures.

Other young people, however, aren't connecting with those opportunities. Perhaps they encounter barriers such as transportation, costs, or a lack of options that fit their interests. Perhaps they feel self-conscious showing up when they don't know anyone or don't know if they'll fit in.

When young people connect with people they enjoy, they're more likely to show up and participate in a wide range of activities. (That's one plausible explanation for why participation is higher than interests in some activities on page 4.) If youth are really interested in something, that interest can be the foundation for building new connections and relationships.

Each approach offers a way to engage young people who aren't involved now. Connecting through both interests and relationships both work. And, of course, the true power comes with young people experience both at the same time.

YOUTH WORKERS

YOUTH

Express Care



- Let young people know they can come to you and talk—that you will give them a listening ear (or advice, if they want it.).
- Ask young people about things they have shared with you in the past, so you can show them they you are listening and invested in who they are.
- Invite friends to join you in activities and programs you enjoy. Let them know you'd enjoy having them there with you.
- When you participate in activities and programs, really “show up.” Put away technology and focus on connecting with the others who are there.

Challenge Growth



- Have participants set personal goals in your programs—or for things they want to work on in life. Check in regularly about their progress.
- Help young people find their own solutions, rather than just telling them what to do.
- See your participation in activities as great opportunities to work toward your personal goals. Ask leaders to push you to work toward dreams that matter to you.
- Follow through on your commitments in your programs, even if the programs are voluntary. Others are counting on you.

Provide Support



- Help young people think through options and resources when they encounter obstacles that get in the way of their participation or other goals.
- Show young people how to ask for help when they need it.
- Ask friends, leaders, teachers, or family members for help if you're having trouble finding an activity that fits you—or finding ways to get there. They may be able to help you figure out creative solutions.
- If a friend isn't involved in activities, offer to help them find something of interest. Offer to go with them a couple of times.

Share Power



- Make it a standard practice to involve young people in planning (or at least to give input into) activities and decisions that affect them. Explain the rationale for why you do things the way you do.
- Provide opportunities for young people to lead programs based on their interests.
- If you would like something to happen in a program you're part of, let leaders know. They're likely to be very open to your ideas.
- Pay attention to other youth who don't have a voice. How can you help ensure that they are also being heard?

Expand Possibilities



- Talk informally with young people about their futures, their aspirations, and their dreams. When you can, integrate their interests into programming.
- Model being a curious learner by asking questions and sharing what you're learning in your own life.
- Think of things you're curious about. Then find an organization that addresses that interest. Ask an adult to help you connect to the organization.
- Be open to trying activities that you hadn't considered before (at least once). You may discover a hidden interests or talent!

PARENTING ADULTS

TEACHERS AND LEADERS

Express Care



- Be interested in what your kids are doing in their out-of-school activities. Regularly check in on what they're doing, enjoying, or struggling with.
- Thank the staff and volunteers in the programs where your kids participate.

- Ask students about their interests and activities outside of school. When possible, attend an event they are part of.
- Share your interests outside of school with your students. It may create a new connecting point for some students.

Challenge Growth



- Set clear expectations with your children for their out-of-school activities. Make these shared priorities.
- If your children try programs or activities that don't work out, talk about what happened. What made it a bad fit? What can you learn from what happened?

- Connect students' interests to classroom learning, challenging them to set learning goals that help them grow in their interests while achieving your curriculum aims.
- If other activities compete with learning expectations, hold students accountable without giving messages that their other interests are not important.

Provide Support



- If your children are not having a good experience in particular activities or programs, think through a plan together. Maybe they need to offer suggestions to leaders. Maybe you need to say something. Or maybe they need to move on.
- If participating in programs is a practical challenge for your family (due to transportation, fees, schedules, etc.), talk with the program leaders, friends, or others. Maybe they have access to other solutions or can help think of creative solutions.

- If students are having trouble finding opportunities to develop their interests in the community, help them find potential options and connecting them with people you may know.
- Create a "lending library" of musical instruments, sports equipment, art supplies, or other materials that students may need for activities they may want to do but can't afford. Invite community members and graduating students to contribute used items they no longer need.

Share Power



- When thinking through your children's participation in activities, be sure their priorities are a major consideration (as well as things that are important to you).
- When you're running into scheduling and other practical challenges, brainstorm practical and creative solutions.

- Encourage students to integrate their interests into their classroom assignments and presentations.
- If you don't have them already, establish ways for students to propose and start school-based activities, clubs, or groups based on their own passions and interests.

Expand Possibilities



- Brainstorm ways you can explore a shared interest as a family. There may be programs or activities you would enjoy trying together—or just something you do your own as a family.
- Talk with other parents about activities and programs that their kids really enjoyed. Particularly ask about leaders who really connect with young people, since those relationships are key to young people's experiences in activities.

- Introduce students to a wide range of interests through classroom readings and assignments, particularly showing how people have many interests that do not fit other people's expectations. (This can give students permission to explore things that interest them that may not be widely shared interests among their peers.)
- Bring speakers and guests to the school and classroom who expose students to a wide range of activities and interests, not just the obvious or most popular ones.

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/