

Pathways for Boys: Finding Involvement in Out of School Activities

A conversation for families, boys, teachers, program staff, and community members



Community members were invited to participate in a learning exchange on Coös County boys' participation in out of school activities hosted by North Country Listens and the Coös Youth Study researchers at the Carsey School of Public Policy at UNH. The events were held in Colebrook on June 2, 2015 and Berlin on June 3, 2015. Over thirty five people participated in the two events.

The following is a summary of key themes heard during the community conversation portion of the learning exchange.

Role of Mentoring

Issues Discussed

Role of mentoring, few male mentors, mentorship for all ages, peer mentorship

Participants mentioned the important role of mentorship in the lives of young people from adult leaders, peers, or older students. It was noted that there are fewer adult male leaders, role models, or mentors in the school setting for boys, especially at the Elementary School level where the majority of staff are female. Outside school, participants wondered about the number of men in boys' lives who are positive role models. Participants emphasized the importance of building opportunities for the "long term significant relationship with a caring adult" for boys as well as mentorship through all ages and critical stages of life.

Strategies for Change

Recruiting and reaching new volunteers, appealing activities for boys, building connections and programs with local resources and people.

Participants discussed the importance of creating spaces where boys feel like they belong. It is hard to get male volunteers or activity leaders. Participants discussed the need for new strategies to do so. One idea was to expand the subject matter of activities to attract more men and boys. One successful activity shared was a program to rebuild snow machines or small engines. Participants discussed creating a volunteer resource list, where programs could incorporate several sessions highlighting local people and their skills. For example, a one-time program with a local martial artist created a lot of excitement especially among boys. The new football program in Colebrook is led by community members and is open to 14-19 year olds. The program is attracting boys who may not have other activity involvement, along with students who are more actively involved.

Reaching the Most Uninvolved

Issues Discussed

Trust, youth led programs, professional skill building, individual activities in groups

Participants emphasized the role of youth led programs. Some schools are involving students to help create a culture where everyone is involved in something. Youth Leadership Through Adventure (YLTA) was mentioned as a successful example. Participants were interested in the idea of activities connecting to professional skill

development such as farm career technical education (CTE). The maple sugaring program in Colebrook was popular for this skill building approach, but the program was cut because of lack of resources.

For the students who are uninvolved, there needs to be huge time investment to build trust. After a rejection, it can be very difficult to reengage boys. Participants noted that hearing from boys directly would be valuable and considered different ways that students, especially the uninvolved, could be convened to discuss what they'd like to do. There was discussion around whether maintaining certain grades should be used as participation requirement. Rebuilding trust with those who fell out of traditional school setting or are not thriving is time consuming for schools and programs. Putting trust in students to allow student-led programs was mentioned as key factor, but challenging because it is difficult for adults step away from the leadership role.

Strategies for Change

Youth led programs, gathering spaces, informal opportunities

Youth to youth connections and youth led programs were a focus of conversation. Allow students to get the word out directly about programs and activities and allow them to initiate their own ideas. Youth owned programs such as a former gathering space in Pittsburg was successful as an informal youth center. Allowing youth-led programs and gathering spaces requires trust and while it can be difficult, it is a beneficial component. North Country Community Recreation Center (NCCRC) in Colebrook gives youth freedom and ownership over their programs and space as often as possible. Participants discussed alternatives such as a January term of one week activities or at the beginning of the school year. Individual activities can be valuable such as swimming, as not all kids are set out to be on team sports. More arts and out of school setting activities are needed such as garage bands or youth centers.

Outdoor and Screen Time Activities

Issues Discussed

Screen time as distraction or opportunity, outdoor activities

Screen time activities were a topic of discussion and was sometimes juxtaposed by unplugged or outdoor activities. Many participants consider the outdoors of the North Country region to have a wealth of recreation opportunities, including hiking, fishing, boating, hunting and adventuring. There are many organizations and programs available for outdoor activities with scholarships available, including the AMC, 4-H, and Northern Forest Canoe Trail. There is some concern that while there is a lot of opportunity in the outdoors, the community and youth are not accessing these opportunities. Participants discussed concerns about screen time including gaming as a distraction, the length of time, and the violence level. It was noted that video games are a popular activity for boys and are largely played individually or with a small group of friends at home.

Strategies for Change

Combining technology and the outdoors, positive youth development and gaming, gaming clubs

The North Country has a wealth of resources in outdoor activities and organizations. Not all students like outside activities, so some school-based programs have offered opportunities to use technology in the outdoors such as photography or geocaching. Adults need to view technology or gaming as an opportunity to master a skill. Participants pointed out that programs could apply a positive youth development framework that exists in other

programs, such as outdoor activities, to technology or gaming clubs. Provide opportunities for students to do gaming with other students, with a supervising adult, and build in positive youth development.

Information, Resources, Collaboration

Issues Discussed

Referrals, program information, transportation, diversion program

Participants noted that program awareness remains a challenge even among the people who are in key referral positions. Program progression, connecting students to the next program after they age out, remains a challenge. Participants discussed needing more collaboration and communication between schools, programs, and community resources. The information about programs is not distributed well to all people who interact with youth and have the potential to give referrals. It was mentioned that schools are asked to do so much, including being on the front line of services, including juvenile delinquency issues in partnership with the police department. Police officers want information to connect youth with a program or activity, especially to help those getting into trouble. The former diversion program was seen as very successful in helping youth avoid the court system, but that program is no longer available. Resources, including money and transportation, continue to be a barrier. Transportation issues, including no late bus, difficulty reaching regional events, and restrictions on adults providing private transportation for students creates challenges for connecting students to activities.

Strategies for Change

Referral resource, outreach and communication, restart diversion program

There was interest in a centralized, shared resource or information portal that can be accessed by law enforcement, schools, parents, and community members who want to connect youth to programs. There needs to be collaboration across service providers, because reaching the uninvolved youth can't be achieved by one group individually. It requires schools, law enforcement, families, and community to work together. There are many resources available, but communication and outreach need to be reinforced between community agencies who can share the information about opportunities. Participants were interested in following up on why the diversion program went away and what can be done to replicate or return the program locally. In addition, exploring legal options for creative transportation solutions could add flexibility for adults working with youth.

Family Life and Challenges

Issues Discussed

Family environment and influence was noted among many participants. Parents can pass along recreation skills like hunting and fishing, which are individual and self-entertaining. While many participants focused on challenges that families face, some participants pointed out that all families and all kids are at risk for facing struggles and circumstances can change quickly for families. Some youth haven't seen other options for ways to live and continue to make bad decisions because of the example of parents' bad decisions. Temptation for alcohol and drug use is a factor for some youth as well as dealing substances to make money. There is also a lot of boredom. Participants wondered about the gender differences in the messaging about the future that is told to youth, including how it affects their participation choices. Are girls told about a positive future, while boys face different expectations?

Strategies for Change

Programmers and educators need to emphasize to parents and families, “You can’t start young enough.” Efforts to connect with parents when kids are younger, are seen as a key strategy that will have an impact. This includes engaging whole families and finding ways to create multi-generational opportunities. Create parent and kid connections through program offerings. Provide incentives such as food or performance that is interesting. There is stigma around accepting help in programs, but opportunities that entice all families can have an impact.