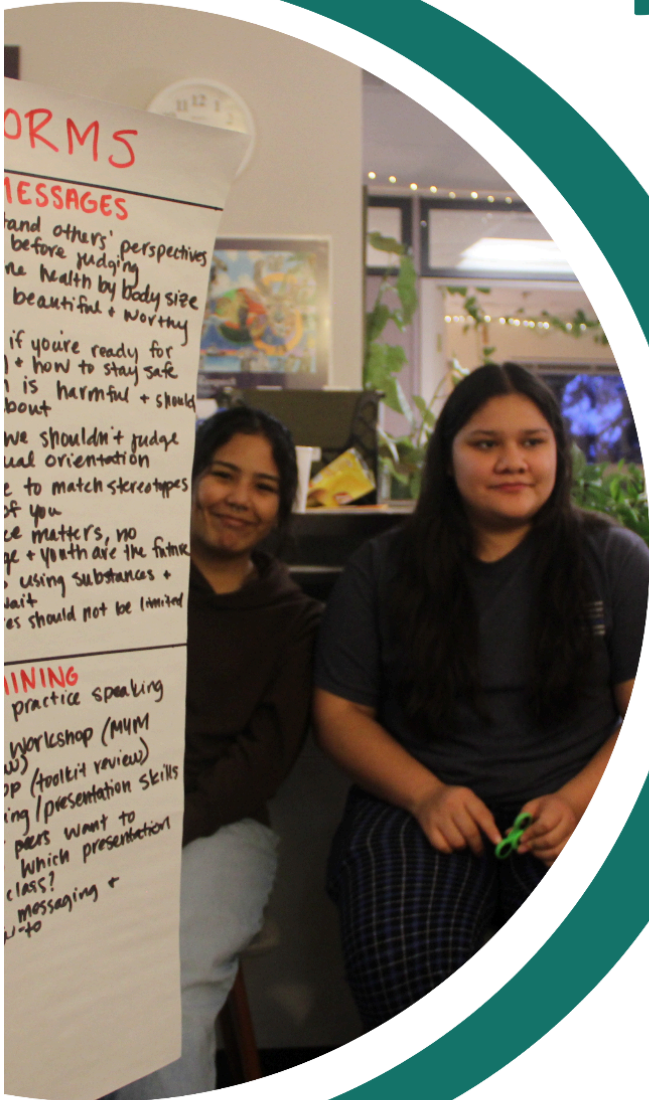


YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Community Needs Assessment



Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership

Overview

The Pathways to a Safer Sitka Coalition is a group of local agencies and individuals working together to create a healthier, more equitable community. We aim to reduce negative health outcomes, such as domestic violence, substance use, and suicide by building equitable, accessible, and culturally-responsive services and systems. This Community Needs Assessment (CNA) was developed to compile current data regarding the health of the Sitka community to determine focus points for the Pathways Coalition moving forward within each of its goal areas: school environments, youth leadership, male engagement, family engagement, and community environments.

Data collection was a collaborative effort between coalition members. This involved several methods, including focused conversations with members in the Sitka Youth Leadership Committee (youth coalition), the Family Engagement Workgroup (subcommittee of the community coalition), and the Pathways Steering Committee (community prevention coalition). Additionally, six members from the coalition worked together in a subcommittee to determine the secondary data needed, sources to review, and to divvy out roles for collecting, analyzing, and compiling this data. For additional context about Sitka, the methodology, and its limitations, please refer to [this document](#).

The focus in this section is youth leadership, which is reflective of Pathways' second goal: Youth are proactive within school and afterschool settings that support positive peer culture.

Key Findings

The Pathways Coalition works to support youth in becoming leaders in their community to proactively foster a positive peer culture both during school and in after-school settings. Coalition members recognize there are a number of protective factors which set youth up to be successful in achieving this outcome, as well as a number of risk factors making it more difficult for youth to develop into healthy thriving individuals who give back to their community. Connection to positive adults, having a supportive peer network, participating in extracurricular activities, having a sense of pride in oneself, and learning social-emotional skills are just a few of the necessary ingredients for youth to become positive influencers in their schools and community. Conversely, youth who have experienced bullying, sexual violence, teen dating violence, or lack opportunities for engagement and connections to healthy positive adults, are much more at risk for harming themselves or others, experiencing depression and anxiety as well as other mental health issues, and engaging in risky or delinquent behaviors (e.g., drinking, drug use, vandalism, theft and other crimes).

Teen dating violence and sexual violence rates are prevalent among teens in Alaska. According to the Alaska 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), of high school students who dated or went out with someone, about 6.3% report having experienced physical dating violence in the last year. In addition, about 1 in 7 female and 1 in 19 male high school students report having experienced sexual dating violence



Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership



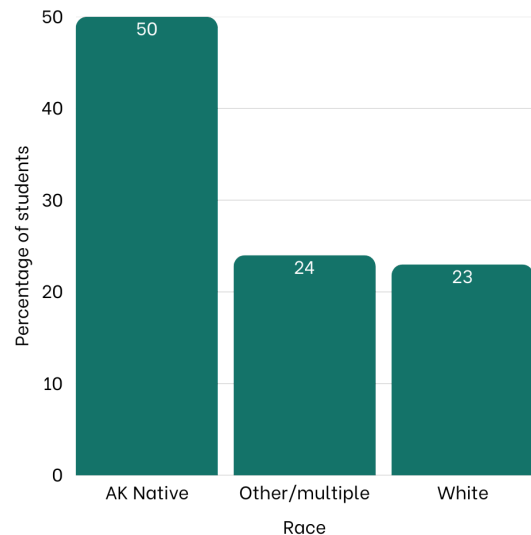
in the last year; this statewide data is significantly higher than national data from 2021, in which 1 in 25 male high school students reported experiencing sexual dating violence in the last year¹ (CDC, 2021). Further, almost 20% of surveyed female high school students experienced sexual violence by anyone during the past year, and 15.4% reported ever being physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to (State *Alaska*, 2023).

These statewide rates of sexual violence are about 2% higher than the national average (CDC, 2023). And they are on the rise; the percentage of female students who experienced sexual violence by anyone increased both statewide and nationally from 2017 to 2023 (CDC, 2023 & State *Alaska*, 2023). Additionally, sexual violence disproportionately impacts American Indian/Alaska Native students, as these individuals were more likely than students from every other racial and ethnic group to have ever been forced to have sex² (State *Alaska*, 2023).

Locally, sexual dating violence and physical dating violence data is suppressed for Sitka High School and Pacific High School, likely due to low numbers of reports. In contrast, 26.5% of Mount Edgecumbe High School female students reported experiencing sexual dating violence, and 19% reported experiencing physical dating violence. Additionally, about 1 in 3 MEHS female students reported ever being physically forced to have sex when they did not want to (State *MEHS*, 2023).

In Sitka, rates of bullying remain steady - 19% of Sitka high school students reported being bullied on school property during the past 12 months in both 2019 and 2023 (State *Sitka*, 2023), and 18% of students in 6th-12th grade reported witnessing other students threaten or bully other students between 3-12+ times (AASB, 2023). However, the percentage of Sitka

Sitka High Schoolers Who Reported Any Form of Bullying (Disaggregated by Race)

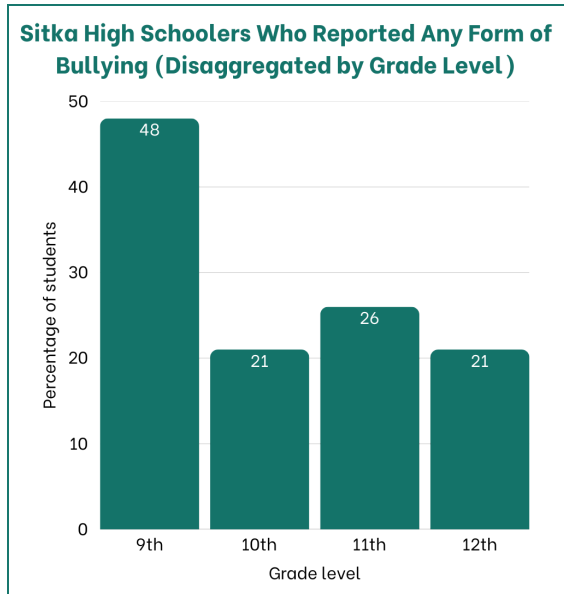


¹ As of 2023 CDC data, approximately 1 in 33 male high school students report experiencing sexual dating violence.

² 10.8% of American Indian/Alaska Native students compared to 9.8% of white students



Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership



high school students reporting any kind of bullying (on/off school property and/or electronically) went up from 25% in 2019 to 31% in 2023. While this is less than the statewide rate at 41%, it is important to note that 50% of Alaska Native students reported bullying in Sitka, which is over double the rate reported by white students (State *Sitka*, 2023). And at MEHS, 46% of female students reported any kind of bullying in comparison to 22% of male students (State *MEHS*, 2023). Additionally, ninth graders experience bullying at approximately double the rate of their peers in other grades across high schools. Disaggregating the data reveals stark disparities in who is bullied most often in Sitka.³

Bullying, sexual violence, and teen dating violence in adolescence can lead to later in life issues and are often a precursor to intimate partner violence and other forms of victimization/perpetration in adulthood. According to the 2020 Alaska Victimization Survey, 70% of Alaskan women experienced intimate partner violence, (e.g., physical, emotional, psychological, financial) in their lifetime, while 73% of Alaskan women experienced sexual violence (contact and non-contact) in their lifetime (University of Alaska Anchorage, 2020).

These adverse experiences early in life can make it difficult for a young person to make healthy choices or to engage in productive ways with others in their school and community. Without the right supports and interventions, youth are left to cope on their own, often experiencing severe mental health decline such as depression and anxiety, and sometimes contemplating suicide. Additionally, drugs and alcohol often become a coping mechanism as well as acting out in other reckless and impulsive ways. Sitka's School Climate and Connectedness Survey (AASB, 2023) shows that in the past 12 months at their school or at school events, 48% of Sitka students in 6th-12th grade reported witnessing another student destroy things like school property or other people's personal items between 1-12+ times; 18% reported seeing another student carrying a weapon at least 1-12+ times; 38% of students reported witnessing their peers get in a fight 1-12+ times; 15% of students reported seeing other students under the influence of drugs like meth, heroin, cocaine, etc.; 21% of students report seeing their peers under the influence of alcohol 1-12+ times. In December of 2024, the HOPE

³ Alaska did not conduct the YRBS during 2021, hence why statewide data is lacking for that year.



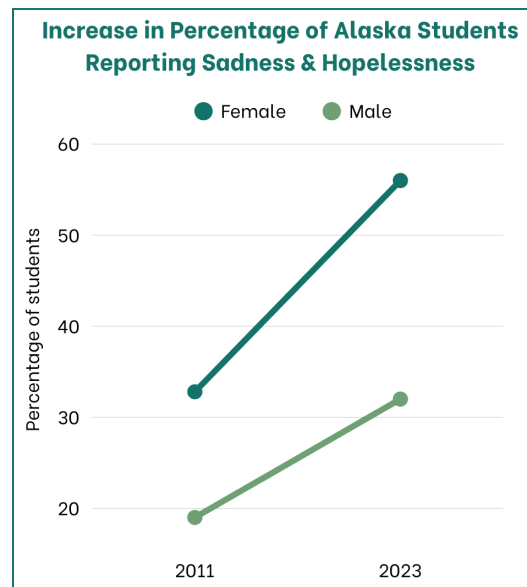
Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership

Coalition⁴ published the Substance Use Survey for Youth (SUSY) in the Sitka School District, gauging substance and alcohol use among 6th-12th graders. They found that approximately 50% of Sitka high schoolers reported easy access to marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco products. Furthermore, rates of binge drinking among high school females were about 18% higher than among high school males in grade 12. And even at the middle school level, youth reported the highest rate of alcohol use (5%) since the start of this survey in 2020 (Sitka Counseling, 2024).

According to the most recent Sitka YRBS data, 21% of 12th graders reported binge drinking within the past 30 days, which is 7% higher than the statewide average. And consistent with SUSY data, female Sitka high schoolers report higher rates of binge drinking than youth across the state; 11.6% of Sitka females binge drink compared to 9% of all youth statewide. Furthermore, 23.4% of female Sitka high schoolers reported currently drinking alcohol compared to 9.6% of their male peers (State *Sitka*, 2023).

As highlighted above, while substance misuse still persists as an issue among youth in Sitka, there have been positive changes across the state. According to the statewide Alaska 2023 YRBS, smoking rates among high school students have been cut in half since 2011. In addition, fewer students drank alcohol at all within the last 30 days, down from 21% in 2019 to 17% in 2023. Education efforts surrounding the use of electronic vapor products have had a seemingly positive effect as well; 41.6% of students now think people greatly risk harming themselves if they use electronic vapor products every day, which is up nearly 15% since 2019. However, it is still important to recognize the disparities that persist in these statistics. Although smoking rates have been cut in half, American Indian/Alaska Native youth reported 6% higher rates of smoking. And although the percentage of students who have ever used marijuana continues to decline, this rate is 23% higher among American Indian/Alaska Native youth than their white peers (State *Alaska*, 2023). This highlights a critical theme across key findings: the need for equitable prevention work that takes into account the many social and environmental factors that play into these health outcomes.

Another key health outcome—mental health—is of significant concern among youth across the nation. A national emergency in child and adolescent mental health was recently declared by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2021). According to the CDC’s nationwide 2023 YRBS, 40% of youth felt so sad and hopeless



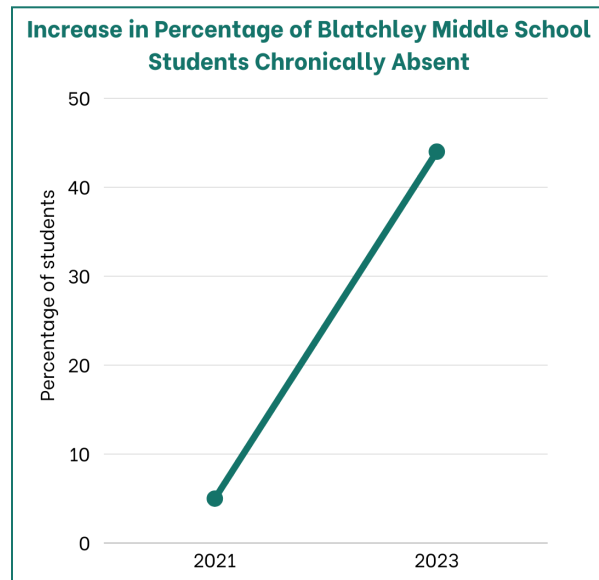
⁴ The HOPE Coalition is a community collaborative under the umbrella of Sitka Counseling dedicated to addressing and preventing substance misuse in Sitka.



Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership

almost everyday for two weeks that they stopped doing their usual activities; this includes 53% of female high school students, which marks a 14% increase from 2013 to 2023 among this population. These numbers are even starker for teens who identify as LGBTQ+. More than 3 in 5 LGBTQ+ students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year, and more than half had poor mental health during the past 30 days. Additionally, 1 in 5 LGBTQ+ students attempted suicide during the past year nationwide (CDC, 2023). In Alaska, the statistics for poor mental health are even higher; 43.2% of youth felt so sad and hopeless almost everyday for two weeks that they stopped doing their usual activities. By disaggregating the data, this represents a 23.2% increase in feelings of sadness and hopelessness among Alaska female students, and a 12.4% increase among Alaska male students between the years of 2011 and 2023 (State *Alaska*, 2023). In Sitka specifically, nearly half of female high schoolers reported feeling so sad or hopeless almost everyday for two weeks that they stopped doing their usual activities; a 25% increase between 2019 and 2023 (State *Sitka*, 2023). And at MEHS, 68.4% of female students and 47.6% of male students reported these same feelings of sadness and hopelessness (State *MEHS*, 2023).

Anecdotally, teens in the Sitka Youth Leadership Committee (SYLC) have shared that mental health is a concern among young Sitkans. They have trouble accessing supports as parent permission is usually required and sometimes a barrier, and there is limited capacity within the school environment to support mental health issues among district students. Young people are telling us in numerous ways that their mental health is in decline and worsening. It's hard for them to show up to school or to participate in afterschool programs and engage fully in any activity. According to a radio interview



on KCAW in March of 2023, the principal of Blatchley Middle School shared that chronic absenteeism⁵ at his school has increased tremendously from 5% of the student body chronically or severely chronically absent in 2021, to 44% as of March 2023 - from 11 to 117 students (Apathy, 2023). SYLC students report that young people don't know where to turn or how to get help and unfortunately, the messages they often get from adults, and even from their loved ones, is to push through. Many adults confess they don't have the knowledge or tools to provide adequate help. Additionally, mental health providers are seeing an uptick in demand for services amongst both adults and youth, and have shared at community

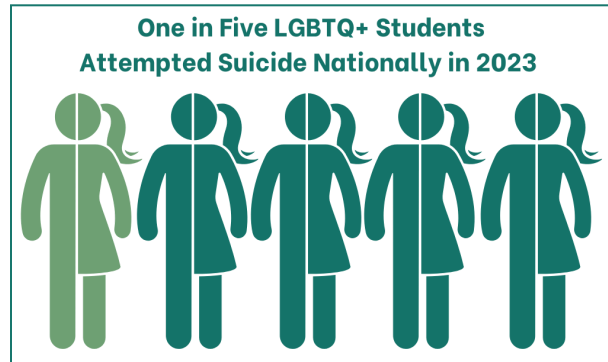
⁵ A student is considered chronically absent if they miss more than ten percent of school days while being enrolled for at least half a year.



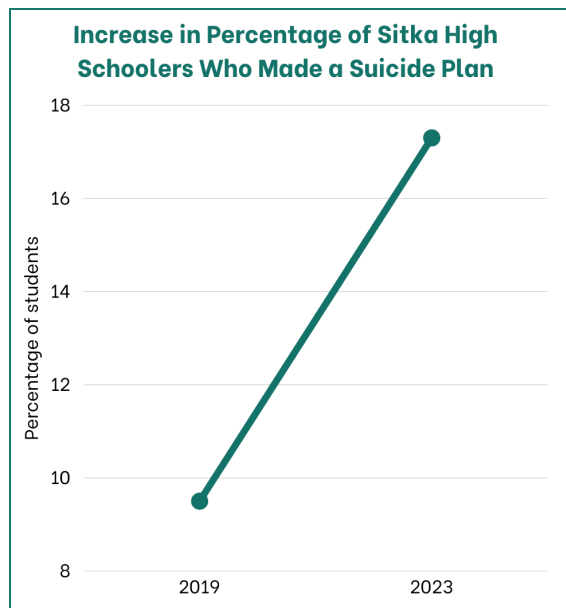
Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership

meetings and through informal conversations that agencies are over capacity with long waiting lists.

Struggling with mental health issues can lead to a number of negative outcomes, not only missing school or withdrawing from friends and family, but also engaging in more dangerous behavior such as self-harm. Nationally, 20% of students seriously considered attempting suicide while 16% of high school students made a suicide plan during the past year (CDC, 2023). In Alaska, these numbers are elevated as 22.6% of students seriously



considered attempting suicide, and 20.5% made a suicide plan (State *Alaska*, 2023). Female students were more likely than male students to seriously consider attempting suicide as well as make a suicide plan both nationally and statewide, and LGBTQ+ students or students who had any same sex partners were more likely than their straight peers to both consider attempting suicide as well as make a suicide plan across the nation⁶ (CDC, 2023 & State *Alaska*, 2023). Among Sitka High School students alone, 17.3% had made a suicide plan compared to 9.5% in 2019 (State *Sitka*, 2023). The numbers are also concerning at Pacific High School and MEHS, with 29.5% of PHS students and 25.6% of MEHS students reporting having made a suicide plan (State



MEHS, 2023). Additionally, district wide in Sitka, 30.6% of those who made a plan were American Indian/Alaska Native youth compared to 12.8% of white youth (State *Sitka*, 2023).

As stated above, there are a number of ways to support youth to grow into healthy thriving young adults who positively influence others and their community. Youth who have positive connections to adult mentors are showing better outcomes overall as they grow and develop. According to the 2023 Sitka SCCS, adult support seems to be adequate with 74% of students agreeing that they have at least one adult at school who they feel comfortable talking to about things that are bothering them; 85% of students can name at least five adults who really care about them; 93% of

⁶ Alaska data for LGBTQ+ students is not available, as Alaska does not include this demographic question on their statewide survey.

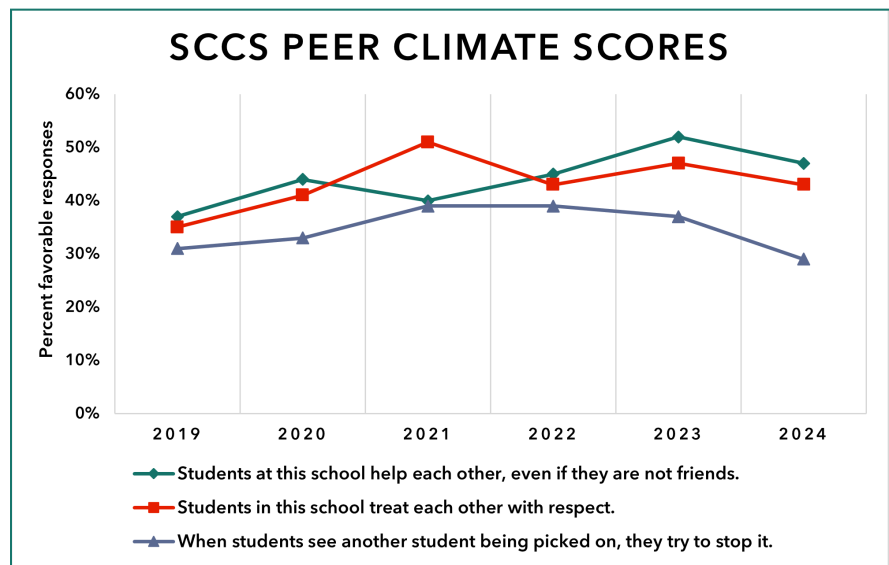


Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership

students know at least one adult who encourages them to do their best outside of school or home. YRBS data supports this as well, with 63% of Sitka high schoolers feeling comfortable seeking help from three or more adults besides their parents with an important question, and 77% of Sitka high schoolers feeling their teachers both care about them and give them plenty of encouragement (State *Sitka*, 2023). While 70.5% of MEHS students feel that their teachers really care about and encourage them, it is important to note that only 47.8% of these same students would feel comfortable seeking help from three or more adults besides their parents if they had an important question affecting their life (State *MEHS*, 2023).

Peer connectedness is another indicator of success for youth development. In Sitka, however, only 52% of students agree that students in their school help each other, even if they are not friends; 47% of students agree that at this school students treat each other with respect; and only 37% of students agree that when students see another student being picked on, they try to stop it⁷ (AASB, 2023). As mentioned earlier in the Key Findings under School Environments, the peer connectedness results are significantly lower than the support youth are getting from adults in their school environment and suggest an area of concern. Meaningful engagement and community service hours are other indicators of success in youth development. Though 43% of students responded favorably to participating in 4+ hours of afterschool and weekend activities, 19% are not involved in anything at all (AASB, 2023). Similarly, 40% of students reported they spend 2+ hours on an average week helping other people without getting paid, while 22% don't contribute any volunteer time at all (AASB, 2023). This suggests an area of concern as a fairly large percentage of students are not involved in anything outside of school at all. In fact, according to the 2023 Sitka YRBS, about 60% of high school students

reported taking part in one or more organized afterschool activities at least one day a week, leaving 40% not involved at all. Disaggregating this data reveals significantly higher rates of involvement among both females (71%) and white students (70%) compared to males (49%) and Alaska



⁷ As of 2024 SCCS data, this number has dropped to 29%.

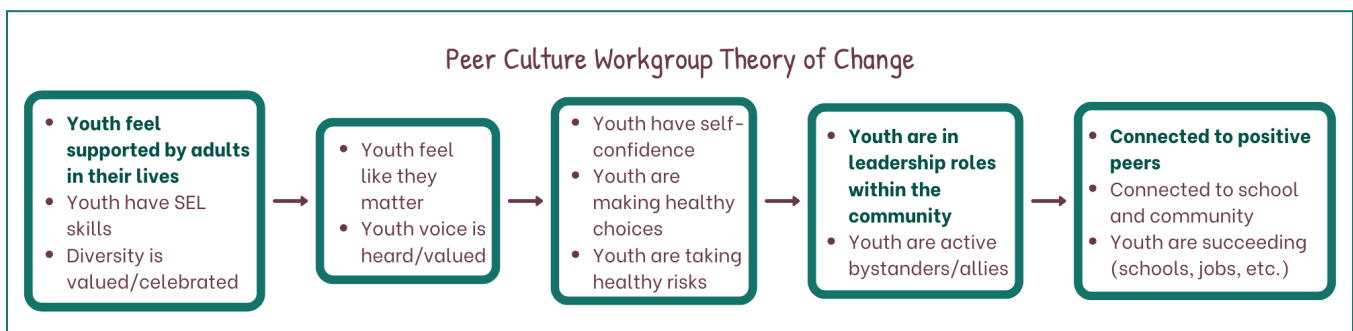


Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership

Native students (58%). However, opportunities for leadership within school are higher with 79% of students agreeing that students are provided with meaningful opportunities to develop leadership skills, and 74% of students agreeing that at their school they have opportunities to talk to staff about their ideas for school improvements⁸ (AASB, 2023).

Additionally, having high expectations for oneself, a sense of pride and connection to one's culture and identity, as well as healthy social emotional skills, indicate positive outcomes for youth. Eighty-one percent of students responded favorably to the SCCS questions, "I try to do well in school," while 64% of students agreed they set goals for themselves. In response to, "I have a strong sense of belonging to my culture, 14% strongly agree, 44% agree, 24% agree some/disagree some, 12% disagree, and 5% strongly disagree. Seventy-seven percent of students agreed they know what their strengths are. In terms of social emotional skills, 88% of students responded favorably regarding getting along with classmates, while 81% reported knowing what people may be feeling by the look on their face, and 80% agreed they respect a classmate's opinion during a disagreement (AASB, 2023).

The Pathways Peer Culture Workgroup, formed in 2019, aims to better coordinate and improve partner agency collaborations to be more aligned around youth programming for 6th-12th grade students in Sitka. The workgroup identified three shared outcomes as a focus for the group to collectively mobilize around and track progress towards. These outcomes include adult support for youth, peer connectedness, and leadership opportunities for youth. Using the data to determine priority areas when the group first formed, members noted the 2018 SCCS suggested adult support was adequate (higher than state numbers), whereas peer climate needed to be addressed. Additionally, bullying was high in the schools, drug and alcohol use were worrisome, engagement in extracurricular activities were lacking among a concerning percentage of students, and though students reported high agency in SEL skills, they reported a low belief in their peer climate. Though some of the numbers have shifted slightly and improved since 2018, others remain constant and necessitate concern in the 2023 SCCS (e.g., bullying, peer climate, substance use, lack of engagement in activities). During the focused conversation at the Pathways Steering



⁸ As of 2024 SCCS data, this number has dropped to 67%.

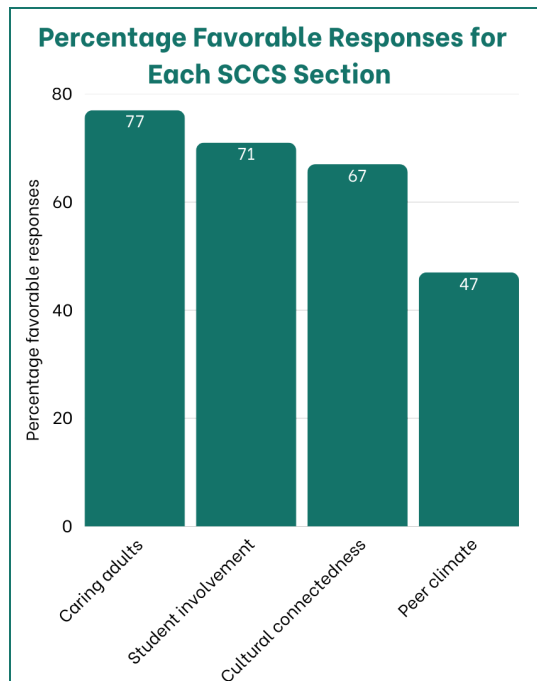


Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership

Committee meeting in 2023, participants identified respectful and meaningful partnerships between youth and adults as a need, as well as establishing better tracking systems to identify which youth are very involved in extracurricular activities, and which youth are falling through the cracks. Establishing a system like this would help service providers and schools more intentionally reach those who are under engaged.

Recommendations

This year, through SYLC's Peer Education program's efforts to increase education around healthy and unhealthy relationships in the school and afterschool setting resulted in an uptick in disclosures among teen participants. Considering the high prevalence of teen dating violence nationally, this was not surprising. As teens become more aware of what an unhealthy relationship is, they begin to recognize when they have experienced it personally or when it has happened to someone close to them. During the school year 2022/2023, there were more disclosures among teens during classroom presentations than in previous years combined, making this an area of concern. Unfortunately, there are minimal systems of support in place for teens who disclose, causing frustration amongst the presenters who encourage their peers to seek help. A potential solution is increasing coordination among schools (admin and counselors), youth-serving agencies, and advocacy agencies like SAFV to ensure there



are support systems and clear communication protocols in place if/when disclosures occur. Another area of concern that surfaced is the status of the peer climate within the school environment. The data has remained constant with some slight improvements from 2018, when the Peer Culture Workgroup first reviewed the SCCS to determine areas of concern and strategies for moving forward. The overall peer climate scores on the SCCS are significantly lower than the other sections of this survey which are generally in the 70-80th percentile range versus the 30-40th percentile range for peer climate, and the 60th percentile range for cultural connectedness.⁹ This suggests some obvious areas to work on. It is also interesting to note that students report high agency in social emotional skills, but a low belief in the peer climate. A potential solution would be to work together as partners to ensure opportunities are

⁹ As of 2024 SCCS data, Peer Climate is the lowest scoring category at 39%, followed by Respectful Climate at 68%. Cultural Connectedness scores have increased to 76%.



Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership

provided for building connectedness among peers as well as teaching bystander intervention skills. These strategies could be integrated into the classroom setting as well as into afterschool youth programming. Additionally, the SCCS shows very little change for student engagement in meaningful activities from 2018–2023. Over 40% of students are very involved in extracurricular activities, whereas, close to 20% of students are not involved in any activities at all. According to YRBS data, only 60% of Sitka high schoolers are involved in one or more afterschool activities once per week, with only 49% of male students involved (State *Sitka*, 2023). In comparison, 66% of MEHS students are involved in one or more activities per week, including 70% of female students and 61% of male students (State *MEHS*, 2023). Community partners have noted that many of the students who participate in their programs are also involved in various other opportunities in the community causing these students to be over-committed and unable to fully participate in any one program. A potential solution is to develop a tracking system that can be shared across partnerships to determine who is accessing afterschool programming and who is not, and then develop a strategy for better reaching those youth who are consistently under-engaged.

Lastly, the mental health status of young people and the lack of resources and support systems available to them in our community is also a big concern. In this post-pandemic era, youth have shared how much they are struggling with their mental health and feeling hopeless about accessing the help they need. The data shows alarming increases in both the percentage of students who feel sad and hopeless and who made a suicide plan between 2019 and 2023. Students feel isolated and alone, and are left to cope with their circumstances without tools and little guidance from adults. The messages youth often get from adults is to push through. As highlighted in the Key Findings under School Environments, adults are also admitting that they too are struggling with mental health decline and don't have the tools or capacity to help youth in mental health crises (see [SYLC's Mental Health is Health Campaign](#) below).

SYLC's Mental Health is Health Campaign Posters



Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership

This increase in mental health struggles could be connected to the increase in substance use among youth, another area of concern. Potential solutions to address these areas of concern are to increase coordination among community agencies/partners to offer training for adults to become more equipped with knowledge/tools to better recognize when a youth needs mental health support and provide the necessary help. Additionally, working together as a community, bringing schools, parents, community partners, and youth together to establish systems and structures that allow for increased visibility, accessibility, and availability to mental health resources is another potential solution.

Needs Statement

Goal 2. Youth Leadership - Establish meaningful and respectful youth/adult partnerships in order to best support the needs of young people, specifically in regards to establishing a positive peer climate within the schools; mental health supports; concrete systems when disclosures happen; and tracking systems to better reach under involved students in extracurricular activities.



Community Needs Assessment: Youth Leadership

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