

NEWS HERALD

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Building youth assets a community venture

Three years ago, the Penridge area launched the Healthy Communities/Healthy Youth (HCHY) program geared to help develop better adolescents. The program is based on developing youth assets, the building blocks young people need to grow into healthy, principled and caring adults.

Basically put, the more assets youth have, the more likely they will engage in positive behaviors, like volunteering in their community, or doing well in school. They are also less likely to engage in at-risk behaviors, such as drug or alcohol abuse. Forty assets have been identified and provide a framework for everyone in the community to build up assets and "stack the deck" on behalf of youth.

A recent survey taken by our youth shows we've got a long way to go, some 75 key community leaders were told at a recent meeting.

A year ago, nearly 1,200 Penridge students in grades 8, 10 and 12 participated in a 156-question survey on a variety of teen issues, ranging from drug and alcohol use, family life, homework and attitudes toward school. Results were somewhat disappointing, showing that our local youth possess an average of 17.3 assets, slightly below the national average of 18. "That's not enough - we can do better than that and that's our call to action," stressed youth counselor Lee Rush, community mobilizer for PAHCHY.

Penridge's assets were compared to national data from over 217,000 students in grades 6-12 who were surveyed in 2000.

The survey showed, for example, that Penridge seniors had higher use of alcohol, binge drinking, tobacco and marijuana compared to national averages, and that, as expected, the use increased from 8th to 10th to 12th grades. And while 70 percent of the students felt they have family support, only 29 percent said they have positive family communication and only 21 percent said their parents are involved in their education.

In 2001, PAHCHY received a three-year \$105,000 grant from Pennsylvania's Communities That Care program for the project. Regularly, members from the community, schools, businesses, organizations, churches, law enforcement and parents meet to strategize to creatively propel the youth asset-building effort forward. Their task is not an easy one.

Committee officials said the goal is to increase the number of local assets in area youth to 21 in 2006 and to 31 by 2012. It's a long-term effort, but one that can only benefit the home, school and community.

Central to asset building are strong relationships between all age

groups, with consistent messages about what's important and what's expected from families, schools and their communities.

The mission is to build a community where: "Adults and youth appreciate human value and accept each other's diverse needs, gifts and character, and where families, schools, faith communities, law enforcement, government and community agencies work cooperatively to nurture understanding across generations, promoting vital assets for healthy youth."

The benchmarks to measure against have been established and the student survey has clearly shown the need for improvement. All of us have a role to play in laying the foundations for youth development.

The dedicated HCHY committee members so far have been the key stakeholders in the Penridge effort, but the actual asset building is a far-reaching process that involves all individuals and organizations in the community.

Building assets in youth is not just a parenting matter, nor just a school matter. It is truly a community concern of the highest order.