

## Youth Forum Summary

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### Demographics and Details

On December 5, 2024, the Natrona Collective Health Trust hosted a youth forum for middle and high school students from Natrona County. The forum provided a platform for students to discuss the challenges they face, explore potential solutions, and envision what thriving looks like in their lives. Invitations were extended through flyers distributed by members of the Youth Mental Health Collective, and participants were asked to pre-register. Attendees were compensated for their time. A total of 31 students participated, representing a diverse range of schools, including Natrona County High School, Kelly Walsh High School, Dean Morgan Junior High, Centennial Middle School, CY Middle School, Casper Classical Academy, as well as virtual and home-schooled students. One student not currently enrolled also participated. The group, composed of students aged 12 to 18, was evenly divided between middle and high school participants.

### Challenges

Themes from youth feedback include:

- Distrust and disrespect from adults
- Peer pressure, bullying and safety
- Mental health and emotional well-being
- Gender and sexual identity issues
- Lack of safe spaces and activities

These themes underscore a broad range of concerns, including a desire for greater support from adults, safer environments, better mental health resources, and more respect and understanding in both school and social settings.

### Solutions

- **Adult accountability and respect:** Youth desire increased accountability and responsibility from adults, including parents, teachers, and authority figures. They also want adults to be more respectful and understanding toward youth.

- **Third spaces and safe spaces:** There is a strong emphasis on the need for more third spaces—places outside of home and school where youth can gather, feel safe, and engage in activities without being judged or restricted.
- **Inclusivity and acceptance:** Youth are advocating for greater inclusivity and acceptance in their communities, emphasizing kindness, open-mindedness, and the reduction of judgment, especially regarding gender, sexuality, and other personal attributes.
- **Mental health and emotional support:** Youth are calling for more accessible mental health resources and support systems, such as counseling and support groups, while advocating for reduced stigma around mental health issues.
- **Empowerment and self-expression:** There is a focus on youth empowerment, encouraging self-expression, self-care, and the pursuit of happiness while promoting mindfulness and empathy toward others.
- **Enhanced educational environment and relationships with teachers and staff:** Youth want improvements in their educational environment, including teachers trained in trauma informed care, less discriminatory practices, and a more equitable dress code.
- **Safety and protection:** Safety is a concern, with youth emphasizing the need for protection from harm, including restricting access to lethal means, addressing discrimination, and better handling of harassment and violence.
- **Community and social connection:** Youth seek stronger community connections based on friendship, caring, and peace, promoting more supportive and connected environments for all.

## Youth Well-being

- **Connection with friends and family:** Strong relationships with friends and family play a central role in youth well-being, with an emphasis on feeling cared for, safe, and connected emotionally.
- **Self-acceptance and positive environment:** Youth desire environments where they feel accepted, free from judgment, and supported by others, including teachers, friends, and the community.

Our mission is to build the foundation for lifelong health among Natrona County community members by advancing the mental wellbeing of young people through trust-based philanthropy and systems change.

- **Emotional well-being and support:** Trust, gratitude, emotional support, and the willingness to seek or offer help are important aspects of youth well-being. They value kindness, encouragement, and emotional safety.
- **Personal growth and accomplishment:** Achieving personal goals, maintaining productivity, and having a sense of purpose are critical to youth well-being. They also value self-care and support in achieving educational and life goals.
- **Physical and creative outlets:** Physical activity, creative expression, and artistic outlets (such as music, art, and sports) are essential for youth well-being. These activities offer an opportunity to express themselves and stay physically active.
- **Safe spaces and community involvement:** Youth seek safe, inclusive, and accessible community spaces where they can gather, participate in activities, and find opportunities for personal and social development.
- **Freedom from violence and judgment:** Safety from violence and bullying is a significant concern for youth. They also want better support systems in place, such as trauma-informed responses from teachers and enforcement of anti-violence measures.
- **Self-expression and identity:** Youth value the freedom to express their identity, whether through personal choices (like tattoos), gender and sexual orientation (LGBTQ), or self-expression in safe spaces.