Ideating Programs to Support Teen Mental Wellbeing: Insights from Focus Groups in WNY

The Collaborative Center for Social Innovation, Inc. Released May 2023



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Introduction

The Collaborative Center for Social Innovation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that empowers youth to better our community by fostering empathy and instilling a sense of purpose and belonging. We use innovative educational opportunities to address declining youth mental health^{1,2}, educational outcomes³, and readiness for dynamic economic landscapes⁴.

With the purpose of informing the development of effective programs and initiatives aimed at fostering mental wellbeing among teens, The Collaborative Center for Social Innovation presents the findings from a series of in person focus groups conducted in Western New York, with a specific emphasis on Erie County, between the months of January 2023 and April 2023. By capturing the voices of 276 teens, 32 parents/caregivers, and 19 community leaders representing diverse backgrounds, educational settings, and community organizations, this research provides comprehensive insight into the needs and wants of teens in terms of mental wellbeing and support.

It is our hope that the findings presented in this report will spark conversation and collaboration to contribute to the ongoing efforts to prioritize and support the mental wellbeing of teens, ultimately creating a healthier and more resilient generation in Western New York and beyond.

The Focus Group Process

The focus groups were interactive and incorporated creative problem solving techniques. They were all conducted in person at various locations, including urban and suburban schools, community schools, community centers, career fairs, and nonprofit youth organizations. This diverse range of settings ensured the inclusion of voices from different socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic areas, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the unique needs and experiences of teens in Western New York. Of note, community leaders were defined as youth-facing adults, such as educators and those who work in youth development organizations.

Working in groups, participants engaged with a series of targeted questions on defining mental wellbeing and their experiences, barriers, and desired takeaways from programs that would support teen mental wellbeing. Further, participants were asked to propose an ideal program to support mental wellbeing. The data collected during these focus groups has been analyzed to identify common themes, trends, and recommendations that emerged from the participants' responses. All of the proposed programs ideated by the participants are included in the supplemental information.

 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 1991-2021 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data. Available at http://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/.

Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory [Internet]. Washington (DC): US
 Department of Health and Human Services; 2021. PMID: 34982518. Available at

https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf 3. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. High School Benchmarks. October 27, 2022. Available at

https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022_HSBenchmarksReport.pdf
4. World Economic Forum. May 2023. Future of Jobs Report Insight Report. Available at

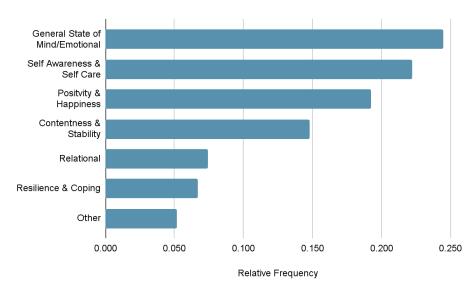
 World Economic Forum. May 2023. Future of Jobs Report Insight Report. Available at https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF Future of Jobs 2023.pdf



Focus Group Results

What is Mental Wellbeing?

(135 responses)



Of note to the facilitators was the frequency of tautologies in the responses and the limited vocabulary around emotional expressions, particularly in responses around general state of mind. This implies a need for further developing and emphasizing emotional intelligence. Further, while most responses were internally focused on a sense of being, a subset of them were more relational in how outer input connected with inner agency and action.

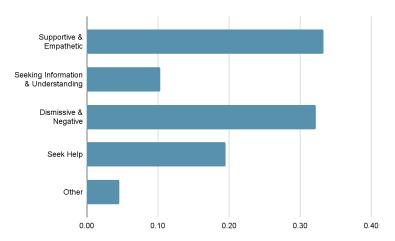
Mental wellbeing, to the focus group participants, is an understanding of your emotions and feelings, and how to nurture, support, and foster positive responses.



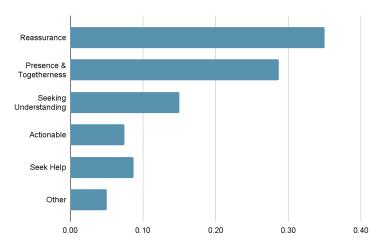
Reaching Out For Help

Given the scenario: "I'm a teen and I am super concerned about a friend of mine. I'm worried. They are really struggling and just not themselves."

What do you hear when you reach out for help? (87 responses)



What do you want to hear when you reach out for help? (80 responses)



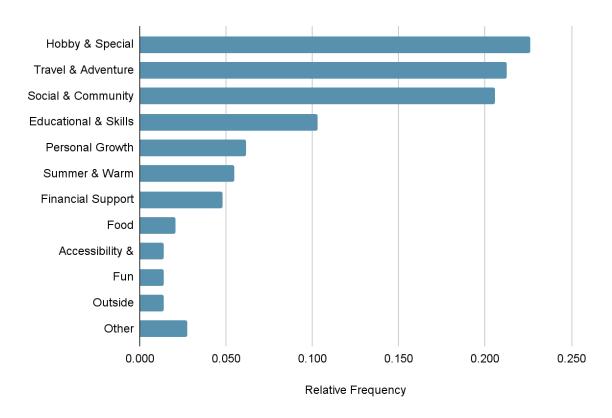
Of note to the facilitators was the contrast of the messaging that teens do receive - they receive both reassuring messages and messages that devalue their emotions and/or their existence. This was true across demographics and socio-economic status. Also notable is that the responses for seeking help were primarily placing the agency on the teen to seek help and were void of the sense of togetherness that teens seek.

Parent/caregiver responses (*see supplemental*, n=15) tended to focus more on reassurance and gathering information, while community leader responses (*see supplemental*, n=23) tended to focus more on presence and offering resources.



The Perfect Program

Why are you so excited about it?



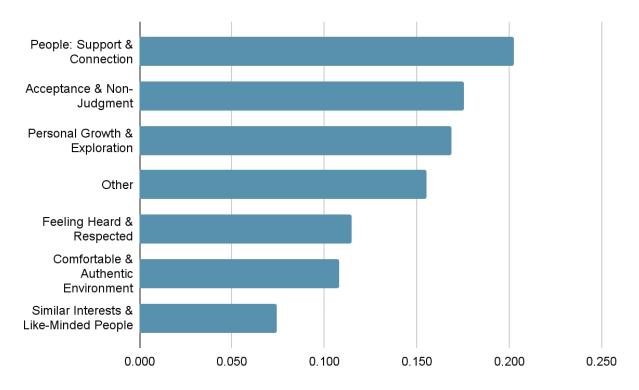
Community engagement, socialization, and the importance of connection are emphasized by teens, parents/caregivers, and community leaders, and there was a focus on providing opportunities for personal growth, self-expression, and building emotional intelligence.

The teen responses (n=146) overwhelmingly emphasized a desire to travel both near and far, to be with and help others, and to expand on specific special interests, while parent/caregiver responses (see supplemental, n=34) focused more on broad social-emotional development and mental wellness. Community leaders (see supplemental, n=37) mentioned dialogue across generations and engaging with diverse perspectives, and had an added focus on equal access in terms of accessibility, availability, and transportation.

Of note, parents/caregivers specifically expressed concerns about mental health matters and challenges related to social media issues and bullying, while these topics were not mentioned by the teens.



What makes you feel like you can be your authentic self? (148 responses)

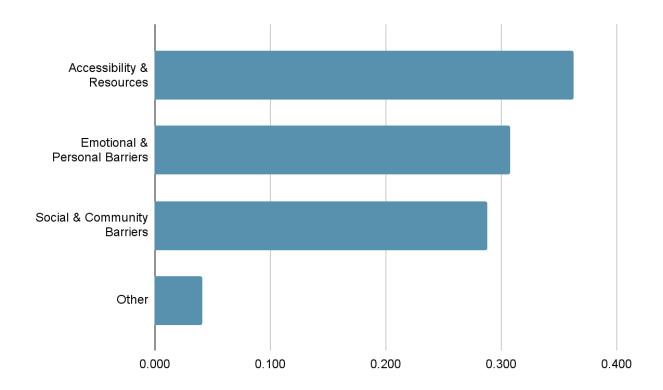


Overwhelmingly, responses from teens, parents/caregivers (see supplemental, n=33), and community leaders (see supplemental, n=38) emphasized the importance of supportive relationships and an accepting, non-judgmental environment. Parents/caregivers also highlighted trust, belonging, and youth empowerment, while community leaders focused on creating safe and inclusive environments, being supportive role models, and facilitating connections and support for teens.

Further, teens specifically requested that their voice be heard, they can safely share their opinion, and that they are supported when they fail or make a mistake. On peer interactions, they mention friendship, being surrounded by people their age, having a close connection to the people there (adults and peers), and being with peers who share similar interests and want to explore something new. Interestingly, the teens also openly discussed, without prompting, how a 'no phone' environment would be less distracting and less judgmental.



What barriers have been removed? (146 responses)



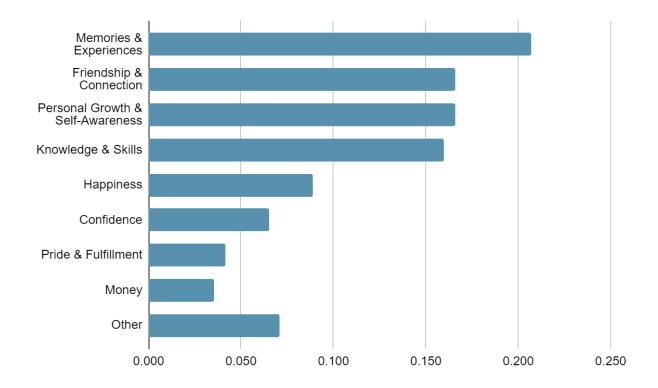
In accessibility and resources, teens primarily emphasized the monetary barriers that when probed further they described as both the cost of attending a program and the need to work for income. On a smaller scale, they also mentioned language barriers and transportation, particularly related to traveling to a variety of different places. Parent/Caregiver responses (see supplemental, n=32) viewed accessibility primarily through a transportation access lens and were thinking more of local 'home to site' or 'school to site' transportation, while community leader responses (see supplemental, n=32) gave equal weight to the need for transportation and financial support.

Of note was the abundance of the word 'fear' in the teen responses, such as fear of failure, fear of being yourself, fear of embarrassment, fear of talking to people, and fear of judgment. Further, they expressed concerns about communication skills, nervousness, lack of confidence, and anxiety.

All groups highlighted the significance of creating a supportive and accepting environment. They mentioned the importance of inclusive spaces, supportive adults, gaining trust, and having a support system.



What do you gain? (169 responses)



The responses from teens, parents/caregivers (see supplemental, n=35), and community leaders (see supplemental, n=37) all mentioned confidence and the teens' belief in themselves. Social skills and relationships also stand out as a shared takeaway, with an emphasis on forming new friendships, connections, and building relationships and networks. Further, all groups acknowledge the opportunity for teens to gain knowledge, learn new things, and develop important skills for their future.

While the importance of positive mindset and a sense of fulfillment is also recognized across the board with all three groups emphasizing social emotional growth, teens view this more as a result of a new experience. Of note in the teen responses is that across categories, the word "new" appeared in nearly every teen group - new experiences, new memories, new people, new friendships, etc. Neither the parents/caregivers nor the community leaders placed emphasis on more immediate outcomes such as experiences and memories as takeaways or vehicles for personal growth. Also of note was that neither the parent/caregiver groups nor the community leader groups specifically mentioned 'happiness', another more immediate outcome, while it appeared in multiple teen groups.



Conclusions

In analyzing all of the responses to the focus group questions, as well as the programs ideated by the groups (see supplemental), we believe that teens want a deep seeded sense of purpose and belonging, both as individuals and as a community, to support their mental wellbeing. They seek opportunities to explore the world, make a positive impact, develop inter- and intra-personal skills, express themselves, and engage in meaningful experiences. The following are trends in their desired programs:

- 1. Experiential Learning: Teens are interested in educational components and expanding their knowledge and skill sets, particularly in special interest areas. The way in which teens express this desire, however, is that the knowledge and skills are developed through authentic and place-based learning experiences where they are actively engaged in the learning. Further, these experiences engage and embed them in new places where they build connections with new people.
- 2. Travel and Exploration: Travel is a prominent theme in the teens' responses and program suggestions. They express a desire to explore different parts of the country and the world for both educational and social reasons. Travel is a means to deepen their existing friendships while building new ones, gain autonomy, learn about new cultures, and gain global perspectives.
- 3. Community Service and Social Impact: Teens demonstrate a strong interest in community service and making a positive impact on society. Many programs involve volunteering and helping people, animals, and the environment. Giving back to their communities and addressing social issues are not stand alone initiatives, rather, they provide a framework for their desired experiences.
- 4. Personal Growth and Self-Expression: Responses and programs that focus on personal growth, self-expression, and skill development are prevalent. Teens express interest in gaining confidence, resilience and coping skills, and ability to take risks.
- 5. Socializing and Bonding: Teens seek opportunities that foster connection and bonding among participants. In both structured and unstructured ways, connecting with others in a meaningful way is important. While they simultaneously would like to engage in experiences with current friends and expand their personal and professional networks.

Importantly, we would like to note that the teens were less interested in any one of these trends in a silo, but rather it was the interconnectedness of the trends within a singular experience that was appealing to them.

Contact Information

We invite the opportunity to engage in dialogue to further the conversation on programming to support youth mental wellbeing, as well as the intersection of youth development and experiential education. Please visit our website at collaborativecenterforsocialinnovation.org or reach out to Apryle Schneeberger, Founder and Executive Director of The Collaborative Center for Social Innovation at connect@collaborativecenterforsocialinnovation.org.



Meet the Facilitators

Apryle Schneeberger serves as the Founder and Executive Director of CCSI. With dynamic experience in the education system, Apryle specializes in building cultures that foster curiosity and creativity to nurture community while providing an intellectually rigorous and psychologically safe environment for all to bring their authentic selves to engage in shared learning experiences.

After earning a Master of Science degree in synthetic organic chemistry from the University of Notre Dame, she began her career as a high school chemistry teacher by designing and implementing innovative transdisciplinary learning experiences to engage students and prepare them for careers in the medical sciences. Understanding the importance of a whole-child approach to educating youth, she continually integrated social-emotional and place-based learning into her classroom, and additionally designed opportunities for students to showcase and articulate their knowledge and ideas to the community.



In 2020, Apryle coordinated a school's PreK-12 COVID-19 reopening plan and engaged the faculty and students for a safe and successful year of in-person learning. During this time, she also became the Director of Marketing, employing human-centric and data-driven approaches to branding, curriculum design, and community engagement. After co-facilitating a school's PreK-12 comprehensive strategic plan from 2021 to 2022, Apryle founded The Collaborative Center for Social Innovation to reimagine education and create educational opportunities for youth that instill a sense of belonging and purpose by connecting their learning to real and relevant sustainability issues in their communities.



Dr. Brianna Cornelius, Founder and Primary Researcher of Evolve Initiative Consulting, serves as the Cultural Strategist for CCSI. She advises on systemic equity and curriculum development, and also facilitates lessons on identity, community impact, and the iterative process.

Brianna is an Educator, Linguist, and Cultural Strategist. Raised in Memphis, Tennessee, she was driven by the pursuit of justice and a love for language and education from an early age. Brianna is a graduate of Bowdoin College (2009) where she obtained a B.A. in Romance Languages in hopes of pursuing equity on a global scale. After living abroad for two years in France, she returned to the United States to pursue an M.A. in Linguistics at the University at Buffalo. It was there that her interests in language, culture, and social justice coalesced through the study of sociolinguistics. Brianna continued on to the University of South Carolina where she earned her doctorate in the field.

Her doctoral research centered around the interface of language and socially constructed realities (notably identity as intersectional and multiplex). In addition to teaching humanities and serving as an Associate Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging, her current work expands on her doctoral research as it examines the ways in which language creates social realities as an applied method of social justice and cultural reform. This academic work directly informs and shapes her practice as a DEI practitioner and has built the foundation of her strategic approach to equity and inclusion as an independent consultant.



Caitlin Littlefield serves as the Curriculum Strategist for CCSI. She advises on transdisciplinary curriculum development, and also facilitates lessons on evidence-based design, ideation, and the iterative process.

Caitlin earned her B.A. from University of Toronto in Mathematics, and a M.S. from University Wis-Madison in Environmental Studies. While learning about climate change and sustainability, Caitlin realized that education was one of her best tools to make the world a better place, and as such, she pursued and earned her teaching certification with specialization in secondary mathematics and social studies instruction, from Old Dominion University, Norfolk VA. She also had the great opportunity to study opera for a year in France at the Conservatoire de Nimes.



Caitlin has extensive experience designing and implementing progressive curricula, having taught at Virginia Beach Friends School,

The Gardner School of Arts and Sciences in Vancouver, WA, and The Park School of Buffalo, where she designed engaging place-based curriculum centered on the Great Lakes Basin. She also served as Dean of Teaching and Learning, where she guided faculty in creating interdisciplinary curricula based in a strong understanding of metacognition and pedagogical research. With a passion for equitable learning and inspiring all students to become lifelong learners, her lessons are embedded in a classroom environment intentionally crafted to nurture learner agency, empathy, reflection and growth mindset.

Caitlin's mission in life is to shine a light on all the ways that everything is connected, and to foster a sense of wonder, curiosity and joy in the world. She loves to travel, learn, ask questions and build a better future.



Anisa Umugwanera, Founder and Wellness Consultant of Welcovery, served as a focus group co-facilitator for CCSI. Through mental health outreach and consultation, she has dedicated her career to making a positive impact on the lives of young people.

After completing her education in practical nursing and continuing education in psychology, Anisa began her career as a social emotional coordinator, working with high-risk youth in her community. She quickly realized that there was a significant need for mental health support and guidance among young people, particularly those from marginalized communities. This motivated her to start Welcovery, an organization that bridges the gap between scholars and mental health resources.

Through partnerships with local organizations, schools, and community groups, Anisa creates a comprehensive network of support for scholars by incorporating an understanding of the social determinants of health into providing a human-centric, solution-based strategy to empower scholars to take charge of their wellbeing and make informed decisions about their education.

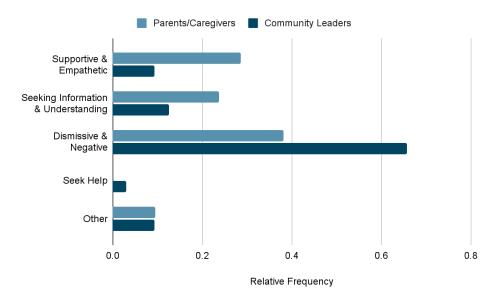


Supplemental Data

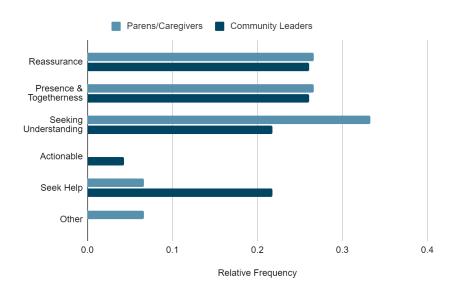
Focus Group Results: Parents/Caregivers and Community Leaders

Reaching out for Help: What do teens hear when they reach out for help?

Scenario: "I'm a teen and I am super concerned about a friend of mine. I'm worried. They are really struggling and just not themselves."

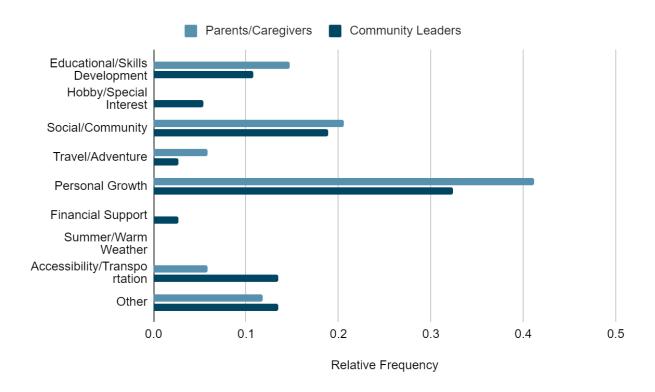


Reaching out for Help: What do teens want to hear when they reach out for help?

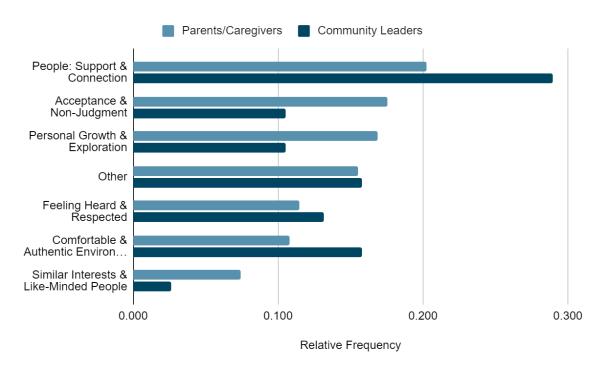




The Perfect Program (for teens): Why are you so excited about it?

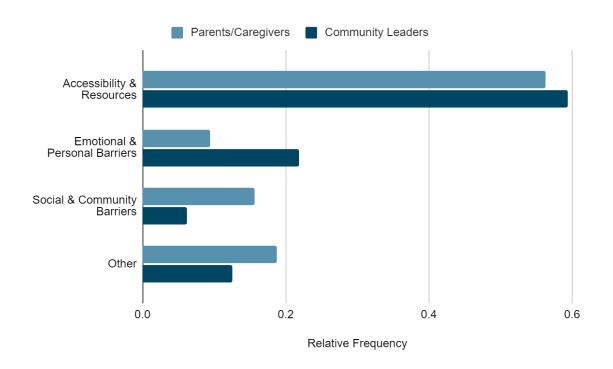


The Perfect Program (for teens): What makes them feel like they can be their authentic self?

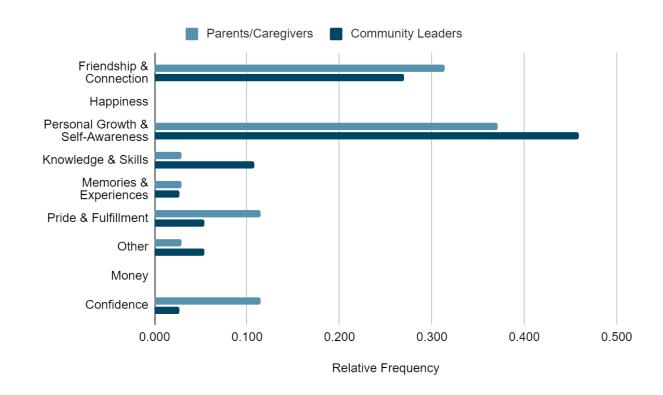




The Perfect Program (for teens): What barriers have been removed?



The Perfect Program (for teens): What do they gain?





Programs Ideated by Teens

	Teens						
	All Around the World	Il Around the World Digging the Past Nursing Around the World The Outdoors		The Outdoors	Global Learning		
What	Travel agency program for teens where it is free and affordable for ages 13-20.	Get to travel around the world and study artifacts	Study nursing	Weeklong hiking/camping trip Social skills, physical and mental health focus, life skills and survival	Backpacking across the world to help communities		
When	During the summertime or during school if possible. Travel for 2 weeks each month for 3 months	Summer and some during school	Summer	Spring and Summer	1-2 years Gap year/year abroad		
Where	All around the world for everyone to reach and enjoy Website allaroundtheworld.com to register and complete survey to learn more about you and what you love	and enjoy different countries com to lete survey		Europe, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Antarctica			
Fun Fact	Group chat to learn about each other Travel bus Scavenger Hunt in different places Focus on food and cooking Teach about money	Will go to Hawaii	You get to learn and help people You will build a sonogram machine	Can meet lots of new and different people	Save endangered species Build up new communities for under-developed countries "Live, laugh, love" We will see a blue spix macaw		

	Teens (continued)							
	College Tour	Professional Prep	Career Ready	Get Published	Entrepreneur Spirit			
What	Visit colleges and see the cities where they are	Train to be a doctor or lawyer	Career internships	Get to write and draw pictures for a children's book	Make items and sell them			
When	Different trips all year long	School semester	Summer	During school day or in summer	Summer, Everyday			
Where	All over	In Buffalo	Buffalo, NY Outside or in a park		City Parks, Street Fairs, Everywhere			
Fun Fact	Will also connect you to internships and scholarships to help you with the school you like	Get to shadow or work with them AND learn information to help you with college	Get to try new experiences	The book will be published and shared with kids	You can make money			



	Teens (continued)							
	What's Cookin'	You Are Beautiful	Hitting the Slopes	Go Team	Self-Care Days			
What	Cook and bake different kinds of foods	Get to learn how to do different make-up and hair and see beauty in yourself	Friend ski trip with 20 people, will eat dinner together every night,	Softball program for team bonding Skills and drills, make memories, get better	Relaxing days with comfortable clothes, good food, movies, music, emotional support dogs			
When	During school	Summer and some during school	7 days over Dec 25th	In High School	Last Friday of Every Month			
Where	At school Anywhere		Switzerland, Swiss Alps	At D1 colleges	In School			
Fun Fact	Can win a booth at a food	We will have dance parties Themed contests	We will eat cheese and you should like the holidays and the cold and not be afraid of heights Also, famous people will be there	We meet great players We can do activities to think about what we learned and got better at	Teachers are not allowed to give work			

			Teens (continued)		
	Friends Trip!	Make a Splash	Cleaning the Coast	Puppy Yoga	Furry Friends
What	Trip with close friends before graduating and going to different colleges Make lasting memories	Waterpark Road Trip	Learn and volunteer to clean the coast and rehab marine like (must take prerequisite course at Aquarium of Niagara Falls)	Hypoallergenic puppy yoga and meditation puppies=happiness	Kids get to help animals get good homes and invent tools to help them
When	Tomorrow, asap (before we leave for college)	Summer	April/ Spring Break	carnival	All year round every day
Where	Disney-Florida, Grand Floridian hotel Or Hilton Head Or Hawaii	Kalahari and other waterparks	Florida Gulf	Brazil, rainforest	Many locations (parks, states, florida) and in school
Fun Fact	Good Food, Can collect and donate food to a local charity	Will go to parks and arcades and people can have fun together	People across the country can come	Stay in a mansion in the rainforest, friends come with us, waterpark trip	We will have a room with animals in school that you can go to if you are stressed or need a break It is making the animals and kids feel safe and comforted You can also just go there for grooming or company



	Teens (continued)						
	Let's Lounge	Real Life Epcot	Abroad	3-2-1 Action	Bonding		
What	Relaxed room setting in school, socializing lounge for students with a teacher supervisor	International travel club	Studying abroad in Europe with people with the same major as you from all around the world.	A creative production program Film, writing, art	A trip with other schools, bonding experience		
When	Any free periods	June-August every year	Now, I year trip instead of school	After school Fridays and Saturday afternoons	Summer (June) 1-2 weeks		
Where	In school	All over the worldeurope, africa, asia, south america, etc.	Italy, France, Greece On the beach	In the music, art, and tech departments	Hawaii, the beach, little beach houses		
Fun Fact	Fun chairs, donated snacks & hygiene products for people who need, TV	You get to try food from every country It's like Epcotbut REAL! Free	Take classes on the beach Sunrise walk every morning Sunset walk every night	Submit the creations to relevant festivals, conventions, and contests! And explain the background of your piece	Amusement park, dance, live music, GOOD FOOD		

	Teens (continued)						
	Animal & Planet LOVE Medical Missions		Kidding Around	Welcome Home	In Style		
What	Study plants and habitats and animal science and travel around the world to save animals See different ecosystems	Study healthcare and work with surgeons and people in the medical field on mission trips	Help kids that are struggling with mental health or a disability that they can come to anytime to learn and grow and do fun activities	Build shelters and homes to help the homeless	Make custom clothes and costumes for kids in need, help people with fashion design		
When	ASAP	summer	Summer	ASAP	All the time		
Where	We will fly a plane and go all over the world	Travel to lots of places to help anyone who needs it	Community center or gym	Across the US and in the city of buffalo	In shelters and informal meeting places		
Fun Fact		We will fly in a helicopter	Help kids learn in different ways about music and art but in their own way Place for children to go for fun and safe place when they don't want to be at home	We will include community gardens to educate children on the importance and fun of growing their own creations	During the winter would have a fashion show and donate all teh winter clothes to a shelter to provide warmth		



	Teens (continued)						
	Free Your Mind	Community Refresh	Go Pro	Making People Happy!			
What	Different ways to play and learn, music and dance and art and drawing	Remodel and modernize buildings to make them look better and clean up the community	You can be a commentator for a football or hockey game	Help people and talk about mental health, and those who are going through a lot			
When	Summer and after school	now	anytime	now			
Where		Buffalo	anywhere	anywhere			
Fun Fact	There can be math hopscotch and swimming and we can cook together	We can learn carpentry and how to be an electrician	Kids can meet NFL players	Help families who are going through custody battles and other struggles Help people and their environment through any means, art social, or otherwise			

Programs Ideated by Parents/Caregivers

		Parents/Caregivers	
	ABC OF HAPPINESS	Teen Summit	On the Go
What	Program for teens with: Storytelling Barriers and how to overcome Self-awareness DEI Buddy system for accountability Wheel of life: environmental, financial, physical, spiritual, mental/emotional, social, occupational	Teen Summit on lifelong lessons that they can apply to their lives for generations to come.	Academic enrichment program that has travel, experiential learning in other communities & from other cultures
When	Once a week	Weekly podcast after school Annual teen summit in Africa and Australia	Summer - travel and then built into the academic year
Where	Online training academy Touchpoints in person (social networking)	In school and online Traveling summit Apps, tv, website, youtube, magazine	Bus tour - several stops
Fun Fact		Will include famous guests	Families can go together



Programs Ideated by Community Leaders

			0	rganization Leade	ers		
	Peer to Peer	Journey of Self Discovery	Prepared for the Future	Counseling	Super Bowl	Pass the Bat	Camp Candy!
What	Peer to Peer Mentorship/Leader ship enrichment program	Developing your personal resume Student front and center to learn about themself (physical, mental, emotional)	Interactive program that will help prepare you for your future, active learning format so doesn't feel like "learning"	Drop-in counseling at the park	Teens get to travel to an international sporting event (olympics)	Pass the bat to share something that is going on or what you are thinking. It can be a success or a struggle that is shared	Summer program for teens and pre-teens Using the place to learn skills/content with a lot of reflection/peer input/connection and reflection w/ mental health counselor Be present in the place to engage fully as themselves
When	Summer months: Monday-Thursday half day 10am-1pm School year: Monthly weekend sessions	Saturdays 1pm-5pm	All year round, every Friday	?	Summer (school) vacation	Every week	Summer program
Where	Local community center	In the neighborhood indoor/outdoor space, community centers, parks	In the city of Buffalo	In the parks	Anywhere overseas	At a practice or group get together Needs to be ongoing over years to build closeness	Remote/ Ellicottville No wifi! No TV → be present
Fun Fact	Includes pre-teens and 13-14 year olds Weekly outing/activity (social function) Continued socializing and relationship building	Ice breaker: there will be dancing and music/games	Includes social media and how it can be harmful	You can bring a friend Incentives and gift cards	Teens get to meet with USA athletes at the olympic village They will have their own "teen uniform"	Pretend you are each others counselors especially if you have experienced the same	Camp candy!

