

# Designing a “Youth Voice” Strategy for the Quad Cities

*Prepared by Terri Sullivan, Ed.D., Director Qualitative Research;  
and Jenna Sethi, Ph.D., Research Associate*



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## INTRODUCTION

A strong body of past research tells us that youth voice is good for youth and good for the communities in which they live.\* When young people have opportunities to voice their ideas about the programs in which they participate, decisions that affect them and issues about which they are passionate, they do better. Specifically, they: learn problem solving, communication and advocacy skills; do better academically; develop a sense of efficacy and agency; and are more likely to act on behalf of a greater good beyond their direct self-interest. They help create programs in which they and other youth like them are more likely to participate. They help align the public agenda with the interests and concerns of a broader citizenry. And they enhance the likelihood that youth oriented policies will achieve their intended outcomes, because they are based on an understanding of the interests, values and motivations of those they are intended to serve. Many in the youth development field, including those supporting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, assert that youth have a fundamental right to a voice in policies, programs and practices that affect them and their communities.

Quad Cities youth know this. They told us so. And they know what it will take to create a culture of youth voice in the region. Most haven't read the research. They intuitively know this because they live it. And that's what this project is all about.

The 2013 Community Foundation of the Great River Bend Youth Voices report highlighted the desire and need for youth voice. In early 2015, the Foundation brought Search Institute on board to take a next step, to move from desire to action. Search conducted focus groups with youth from ten youth serving organizations in the Quad Cities.† Afterward, youth and adult leaders from these same organizations gathered for a Youth Voices Retreat, where we presented themes from the focus groups to inform facilitated action planning within each participating organization, and across organizations to create a regional youth voice strategy. A detailed description of methods used to collect and analyze the data can be found in Appendix A.

What follows is summary of learning from this latest phase of the Youth Voices work in the Quad Cities.

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*“We have to grow up and make decisions ourselves, so having to do it now is going to be better...like you can't be so controlling because do you want us to live with you for the rest of our lives!?”*

—Quad Cities Youth

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\* See Sullivan, 2011. Youth Engagement: More than a method, University of Minnesota Center for Youth Development, [file:///C:/Users/terris/Downloads/Youth-Engagement-More-than-a-method%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/terris/Downloads/Youth-Engagement-More-than-a-method%20(1).pdf)

† We also conducted interviews with adult leaders in each of these programs. An analysis from the adult conversations will be the subject of a separate report.

## A SUMMARY OF LEARNING

In focus groups, youth shared their ideas about current opportunities for youth voice; why it's important; what they want to have a voice about; what's needed if the Quad Cities is to create a culture of youth voice; and what gets in the way of that happening.

### *Current Opportunities for youth voice*

Youth in the focus groups noted a variety of opportunities for youth voice in the Quad Cities area. Some were within programs in which they participate. Others they knew about within their schools and/or communities, but had not participated. They talked about opportunities in student councils; church youth groups; after-school arts-based, academic, skills-based and broader community-based programs. And yet,

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*“Education is our way to go somewhere. And if it's not working for us, we need to be able to say this is not how I learn.”*

—Quad Cities Youth

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the extent to which these youth felt there were opportunities for them to voice their ideas varied greatly. Some youth felt truly heard, and others didn't. For example, one young person said, “you know they're here for you and they hear you.” A young person in a different program said, “they don't really care what you gotta say.”

When asked for examples of places where their voices are heard, church youth groups came to mind for several youth. For example, one participant was one of four youth who were “part of like staff” at the church and “got to plan a bunch of things.” S/he added, “that's the only [program] I've been a part of where kids got to, like, be in charge.” Another youth said of a different church youth group, “Everything is really run by the kids . . . .

Certain days we would have our own service and have an all kid band.” Another talked of a youth pastor who takes youth on mission trips each year, where youth are regularly “just really talking about our opinions. We get treated like adults as long as we act like adults.”

One focus group participant is Youth President for her church. As Youth President, she said, “I kind of have a lot of say on what happens . . . We have really strong and supportive youth group leaders . . . [and] quite a few adults who are willing to work with us . . . They always hear what we have to say.” For example, this youth said, “We kind of like started our own little youth group to help us with everyday problems that we were going through.”

One particular urban after-school program was mentioned by several participants as providing authentic opportunities for youth voice. One youth described it very simply, “They hear what you gotta say.”

When asked what the program does to create a culture where youth voice their ideas, their responses suggest that youth voice was built upon a strong foundation of care, support and trust. Youth described an environment in which adult leaders help them set goals, build on strengths, while also providing instrumental support. For example, youth said the program helps them find jobs and learn to save money. One youth said, “[The program leader] took me to the Burlington and got me a jacket.”

Another said, “If I haven’t made it to school yet, they’ll call you and even see if you need a ride . . . You know they’re there for you. . . They are not just trying to tell you ‘just go to school.’ At the same time [they’re] making sure you can get that done.”

“They were like a backbone for kids,” a youth participant added. “They help somebody... They build you up to be someone . . . If you do something bad or something with the law, they don’t treat you bad, like underneath, you can be better.”

Youth participants also mentioned opportunities to make their voice heard outside of programs, like public protests, social media and playing music in a band. Many youth noted that, while a broad array of opportunities are out there, you have to “take your own initiative” to “go out and find them.”

When we asked focus group participants to let us know on a scale of 0 to 5 if opportunities for youth voice in the Quad Cities were “all they could be,” the responses were consistently in the “1” to “3” range. Overall, most of these young people said there are positive opportunities for youth voice in the Quad Cities. And, they want to see more of them. They also want existing programs to be accessible for more youth and more diverse youth to participate.

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*“If you have zero motivation, like nobody’s encouraging you, nobody’s showing you that you need to go to school, like, if you have none of that, then like, what’s the point of staying?”*

—Quad Cities Youth

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### ***Why Youth Voice is Important***

Search Institute staff analyzed the focus group data to identify themes across the groups about why youth voice is important. A Quad Cities youth then joined the team to identify within the themes seven core ideas. We created posters with these themes and hung them on the walls during the Youth Voice Retreat. After reviewing these seven core ideas, each retreat participant was given three orange stickers and three green stickers. They were asked to place orange stickers next to the three ideas they believed would be most persuasive to adults; and green stickers next to the three ideas they thought would be most persuasive for youth. What emerged was new data that can inform targeted messages for a communications/outreach campaign to youth and adults, which is one of the strategies the group recommended for creating a culture of youth voice in the Quad Cities region. What follows is a summary of the seven core ideas; the “votes” they received as being persuasive for youth and adults; and a bit more detail about what youth in the focus groups had to say about each of these ideas.

#### **We deserve to have a voice in decisions that affect us (20 Youth; and 4 Adult Votes)**

Retreat participants thought this idea would resonate more with youth than adults, giving it five times as many “youth” than “adult” stickers. In the focus groups, young people explained that they were concerned that many decisions, from laws to school policy, are made without youth “being consulted.” And yet they “affect us,” they said.

### **We have a right to be heard as members of this community**

(13 Youth; and 2 Adult Votes)

Participant votes suggest they believe youth having a right to be heard would appeal much more to youth than adults. In the focus groups, one young person said, “Everybody wants equal rights, so that’s like voicing your opinion and if you’re not doing that, then you have no rights.” This was not just limited to “youth policy.” Youth said if they are part of the community, then they should be part of all decisions that affect the community. One said, “We live here too, it’s just as much our community as it is anybody else’s community.”

### **We bring a unique perspective**

(11 Youth; and 6 Adult Votes)

Retreat participants, overall, said that youth, more so than adults, would find this message compelling. And yet six believed this idea would appeal to adults as well. Youth participants talked in focus groups about

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*“I feel like some of the laws . . . are based upon what adults think and . . . they do affect youth too . . . If they would have had our perspective, we could have saved some of those issues from happening.”*

—Quad Cities Youth

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having a “unique” and “fresh” perspective to offer, “knowing something totally different” than what adults might know. One young person said that it is important for youth to “have a voice in our education because we know how we learn.” Another said youth should have a voice in youth programs because “We have a better understanding of what young people like.” Yet another participant said, “When they get our perspective they will be able to see what things maybe they don’t realize that could be important. And it can . . . be helpful or useful.”

Technology and social media were brought up by a number of participants as subjects young people know more about. Some participants felt adults don’t have the full picture of young people’s relationship with technology. For example, one mentioned that young people “can multi-task more than what adults think.” Another said, “iPhones and tablets are great, but not to some because it’s taking us

away from things we love,” demonstrating that young people’s perspectives on subjects like technology may be more complex than adults may think.

Young people said youth voice can help encourage adults to get beyond seeing things just “in terms of their own experience.”

### **Including our perspective and ideas will make the community better**

(6 Youth; and 9 Adult Votes)

Participants' votes suggest that this statement may resonate for both youth and adults. In the focus groups, one youth said, "communities and governments are spending a bunch of money on things that youth aren't interested in. That money could be used for opportunities that kids are excited about." At the same time, youth participants said that when youth perspectives are not included "people commit acts that are negative because they're not being heard, so people get louder and louder and start doing more extreme things."

**We need to have practice having our own thoughts and expressing them**

(7 Youth; and 14 Adult Votes)

Participants' votes demonstrated that they thought this strategy may appeal more to adults than youth. And yet, this idea emerged from the youth focus groups, suggesting that some youth are aware of this as an important benefit of youth voice. Youth said they need to practice formulating and articulating their ideas "right now," because

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*"If you don't voice your opinion, we wouldn't have the civil rights movement. We wouldn't have had the women's rights movement. We wouldn't have so many protests trying to get gay marriage legalized . . . It would just be a straight, white man's world. And it would be just completely natural [to] have somebody overpowering you. Everybody [has] equal rights, so . . . if you are aren't [voicing your opinion], then you have no rights."*

—Quad Cities Youth

they want to have an impact now and because they will need those skills to be effective adult leaders. One youth participant said, "we have to grow up and make decisions ourselves, so having to do it now is going to

be better...like you can't be so controlling because do you want us to live with you for the rest of our lives!?" They said practicing youth voice can help them "get an education on how to act professionally" so they will have more influence with other professionals.

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*"We're going to be the voice, a bigger voice eventually when we grow up, so we need to practice having our own thoughts and expressing them."*

—Quad Cities Youth

**It builds better youth/adult relationships . . .**

(2 Youth; and 19 Adult Votes)

Participant votes clearly show they believe that building better youth/adult relationships will appeal more to adults than to youth. And yet, again, this idea emerged from the youth focus groups. One young person said, "The whole kid/adult barrier needs to be broken." Another noted that youth having a voice in school "establishes a positive relationship between the administrators and students." And yet another said, "If I got along with my teachers, I'd be more inclined to approach them for help."

**. . . and together we get done what needs to get done.**

(4 Youth; and 9 Adult Votes)

Again, retreat participants indicated, overall, a belief that this idea would be more compelling to adults as well. Young people in the focus groups talked about the importance of youth and adults working together if they are going to make things better for all youth. One young person noted, “When adults and kids work together, I think that means people want to listen more.” And another said, “when an adult is listening, it builds a stronger relationship, you actually get stuff done quicker.”

### ***What do youth want to have a voice about?***

We compiled a list of issues youth said they want to have a voice about from both focus groups. We posted that list on the wall during the Youth Voice Retreat, and asked participants to add to it. While the list covers a wide range of topics, a particularly strong theme of wanting a voice in education emerged. Youth participants said they want to voice their ideas about: ways they learn; school programs; requirements; what gets funded; school structure, including classes and schedules; and teacher performance. One participant said that youth need a voice in education because “that’s where we spend half our life.” Another said, “Education is our way to go somewhere, and if it’s not working for us, we need to be able to say, ‘this is not how I learn.’”

Other issues about which youth participants want a voice are: bullying, corporate America, the environment, LGBT rights, youth jobs, public transportation, refugee/immigration issues, mental/behavioral health, gang activity, poverty, drugs, reproductive health, trafficking, and stopping violence.

In the following section, young people explain what works well for creating spaces where youth voice can be authentically heard as well as what can hinder this process.

### ***What’s Needed to Create a Culture of Youth Voice in the Quad Cities***

Similar to the process used to organize themes about why youth voice is important, we worked with a Quad Cities youth to organize themes from the youth focus groups into five core statements about what’s needed to create a culture of youth voice in the Quad Cities. Below, we elaborate on what youth told us is needed to bring this vision to life. The five core statements are:

- LISTEN, recognize we have GOOD IDEAS and actually CONSIDER THEM.
- GET TO KNOW US and HELP US through our struggles.
- I’M here, YOU’RE here, WE’RE EQUAL.
- Youth taking INITIATIVE and the LEAD.
- More OPPORTUNITIES for youth voice involvement and more DIVERSE youth need to be heard.

LISTEN, recognize we have GOOD IDEAS and actually CONSIDER THEM.

*“Be willing to listen...we actually do have a voice.”*

Youth participants told us that adults truly listening to what they have to say is critical for youth voice to be authentic. Youth participants said that some adults “never even think about teens having opinions” because they believe “your voice isn’t worthy.” Another young person added, “Adults should know that we have good ideas and that we might be a little smarter than they think.”

Youth said adults “think they are smarter than us.” They want adults to recognize that their ideas are informed by a unique set of experiences. Youth know things adults can’t know, because their knowledge is informed by a different set of experiences. Youth said adults seem to forget “how hard it is to grow up.” At the same time, they need to “understand that it’s the not the same as when they were kids.”

How do youth know when adults are listening? One youth noted that it helps when an adult “gives you eye contact and talks to you like how they would talk to another adult.” Central to authentic listening, according to these youth, is not just hearing what young people have to say, but also reflecting upon their ideas and earnestly considering them. Youth talked about wanting adults to “process” their ideas and not “ignore” them. Others said they would like to share their experience without feeling like it might be “hyperbolized.”

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*“Adults should know that we have good ideas and that we might be a little bit smarter than they think; and not to underestimate us or what we can do; and treat us as equals because, in the end, I mean we all live in the same place.”*

—Quad Cities Youth

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Many youth shared experiences, particularly in schools, where “adults ask kids about their opinions, but they never follow up” or do anything tangible with the information. “They’ll just blow it off,” another youth said. For young people to feel heard and acknowledged, they need to see their ideas reflected in the decisions adults make and the actions they take.

One youth participant noted that, when adults spend time around young people who use their voice, it can “push them to be more open-minded” and make them “want to listen more.” Another youth participant said that if adults work with us, they might “realize our generation is not so bad.”

GET TO KNOW US and HELP US through our struggles.

*“Any adult who is willing to help out in a situation with kids that aren’t their own and that they don’t have to be involved with, that’s showing something.”*

Youth participants said that authentic youth voice is built on a foundation in which adults get to know them and are willing to help if they needed it. Some said it was helpful when adults “ask questions about how

you're feeling," "give you their undivided attention" or, in the case of a teacher, "ask what we like to do outside of school." They appreciate it when adults take time to help them see "positive things in the community" and "figure out life goals." Sometimes young people's needs were material. As mentioned earlier, one young person said a caring adult "took me to Burlington and got me a jacket."

### I'M here, YOU'RE here, WE'RE EQUAL.

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*"[Youth voice] gives us a sense of responsibility and makes us rise to the occasion and really start leading. I've also seen situations where adults take too much power . . . and then we just turn into the followers and we don't really do anything."*

—Quad Cities Youth

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*"Adults think that teenagers think they know everything, but they don't. But neither do adults. So you should take what each of you know, combine it, and you will know more."*

Youth focus group participants talked about being treated as equals by adults as an important component to youth voice even if they don't agree on everything. Youth said one way for adults to show they respect youth is to be willing to have a debate with them. One young person noted that "if you give respect, you get respect." Another added, "teenagers, too, need to make that two way street of listening."

Beyond equal youth/adult relationships, youth participants also said the Quad Cities needs more equal representation of youth and adults on advisory and governing boards. One young person said everyone "should be sitting at the same table making the decisions" that affect us all.

### Youth taking INITIATIVE and the LEAD.

*"In a club that is peer led, I feel more inclined to share opinions."*

Youth participants said that the onus for youth voice is not just on adults. They want to see more youth taking the initiative to voice their ideas and to lead. They said that some of their peers reinforce stereotypes that adults have of youth. One participant said a lot of youth don't "really care enough" or aren't willing to forgo other activities, like hanging out informally with friends, to participate in youth voice opportunities. Some participants noted frustration with what they perceive to be a lack of initiative in their friends or other youth. Some talked about young people they know as "being lazy." One participant who wanted others to join her on a school initiative said, "If we came up with a plan and got enough sponsors we could make something happen. I just think a lot of people nowadays are . . . I think just lazy and not really wanting to do anything for themselves and just kind of going with the flow and, well, they are not really happy with where they are *now*, but they don't really want to take the steps necessary to get where they want to *be*."

Beyond having a voice, youth want opportunities to lead in programs in which they participate and share in making decisions that affect them. For example, young people in one program appreciated that youth "have their own leadership and each person has a specific role that they are supposed to fill . . . There is an adult

kind of in charge, but not really. [The adults] don't really give a lot of input. They just kind of guide and are there for more organization stuff." Another young person said adults in the group help pave the way for youth to build relationships with people in the community who can help them accomplish their goals. Then they pass the leadership back to the youth. "They are . . . the link between the society that's not really listening . . . They can provide a pathway . . . and then once it's established, you can do more, but they have to kind of instigate it."

Another focus group participant talked about a group of girls who "started their own company knitting scarves and hats and stuff and selling them." She said she thought this group was taking initiative and was a good example of youth voice "because they're being heard and they're saying like, 'this is something that we like, this is something that we want to do and we're just going to do it' so I think that's kind of cool."

More OPPORTUNITIES for youth voice involvement and more DIVERSE youth need to be heard.

*"If you have reputation of being uneducated or maybe like a delinquent, you could still have good ideas but I think, in a lot of cases, they'd be disregarded and the people with the reputations as good students would be heard and taken more seriously."*

As noted earlier, Quad Cities youth in this project wanted more opportunities for their voices, and the voices of other youth, to be heard. One young person said, "People who care should be given the opportunity to change things." It was common for youth participants to describe a dichotomy of youth who typically are and are not heard. They said a more concerted effort is needed to reach out to those who are underrepresented.

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*"There was this weird filter I see in the schools. If you are not an athlete and you're not in theatre or drama or any type of musical art program . . . you're forgotten . . . The more you're in these school activities the more you seem to have the say or voice."*

—Quad Cities Youth

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The youth described as more likely to have a voice were "kids who are actively involved," the youth who are in sports, drama and on student council; or "those who care about school." Some said that young people who are not athletes or in drama are forgotten. They said international students, girls, minorities, youth with low socioeconomic status, drop-outs and young people "with radical ideas" are not heard enough. One youth participant observed, "there's like some weird filter and if you just didn't make the cut and you're just at the bottom...it does suck."

### **Adult Roles**

Youth focus group participants talked about some of the ways they saw adults promoting youth voice in their organizations. Some commented adults can "provide structure," "give you tools," and "set examples in doing things they expect from you." Youth said they appreciate "guidance," if there is an option to ask for it, but do not want adults to assume that they are always the ones in the best position to guide. Youth talked

about a powerful role for adults as being “the link” between youth and a wider society that doesn’t listen to young people and their ideas.

### ***Barriers to a Culture of Youth Voice***

Again, our youth/adult team organized

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*“I think there might be like a lower instance of delinquency if [youth] were actually heard because I think often when people commit acts that are negative it’s because they’re not being heard, so people get louder and louder and start doing more extreme things, because they want to be seen, they want attention.”*

—Quad Cities Youth

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adults’ distrust of youth. One young person said, “Adults don’t really trust us that much.” And that lack of trust makes it less likely that adults will share power, and work in true collaboration with youth.

Youth participants said adults “have power and control issues.” “They want it their own way,” one participant said. Another added, “They, like, run us and own us.” One young person noted there is an adult in his life who regularly tells him, “If I wanted your opinion, I’d give it to you.” This unwillingness to share power is in direct opposition to one of the things youth said is critical to creating a culture of youth voice, which is a sense of equality. Youth want, at the very least, to be heard and taken seriously.

themes from the youth focus groups about what gets in the way of creating a culture of youth voice in the Quad Cities. Many of the barriers were embedded within ideas about what’s needed to bring that vision to life. And yet three additional barriers emerged: stereotyping, keeping the power, and a lack of trust. Youth said these barriers sometimes make it difficult for them to speak up about issues that are important to them and take action.

Youth participants said they feel unfairly “judged” by adults. They said adults tend to stereotype them as “lazy,” “immature,” “not trustworthy,” “ignorant” or “stubborn.” And they said that adults think young people generally “don’t care” about anything. As noted above, youth recognize that some youth reinforce these stereotypes. They regret that some youth don’t take opportunities for youth voice seriously. They sometimes treat adults disrespectfully when sharing their ideas. Or they fail to follow through in their commitments. Youth know these things make it more difficult for other youth who want to have a voice. And yet, as one youth said, if an adult “sees one young person do something they don’t like, they judge all of us.” They want adults to see beyond the stereotypes and recognize youth for who they are, what they have to offer and what they *want* to contribute. Youth said these stereotypes play into

## STRATEGIES FOR CREATING A YOUTH VOICE CULTURE

Youth and adult participants in the Youth Voices Retreat worked together to co-create strategies for instilling a culture of Youth Voice across the Quad Cities region, using the process described in Appendix A. The following six core strategies emerged from that process.

### OUTREACH

Youth and adults agreed that getting the word out about the benefits of youth voice and opportunities for youth voice is important to creating an area-wide culture that supports youth voice. They recommended developing a “power of youth voice” media campaign to build awareness of ways in which teens are already changing communities to the benefit of both youth and adults. This can help to debunk stereotypes, and inspire youth and adults around what is possible.

### GET INVOLVED

Youth and adults agreed that inviting, welcoming and including *all* youth is critical, with a focus on reaching and motivating those who don’t commonly participate in these opportunities.

### MORE ACTIVITIES

Retreat participants want to see a variety of diverse activities funded and accessible to all, including youth voice opportunities in the community and in schools. They want to find ways to create greater youth representation on community-wide boards and committees. And they want opportunities to be part of event planning.

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*“Someone in this room could be President in the future, so [I’m] pretty sure right now our voice kind of matters.”*

—Quad Cities Youth

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### TWO WAY STREET

Youth and adults agreed for youth voice to become part of the culture will require modeling “high quality youth voice.” This includes youth and adults being open to each other’s ideas, building trust with one another and sharing decision making power. Training for youth/adult partnerships was suggested as well as working to foster ally relationships on a variety of levels.

### BACK SCRATCHIN’

Aptly named, “Back Scratchin’” describes the group’s desire to create a regional network of relationships in which they can work together, and count on each other to “scratch each other’s backs.” Some suggestions included creating a Greater Quad Cities Youth Voice Initiative that would include: a regional youth committee for young people to share ideas and move a regional Youth Voice agenda forward; a website to share youth voice opportunities (a one-stop shop approach); and support for other kinds of networking among existing youth groups. These strategies align with the Regional Opportunities Council and Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce’s regional vision to work across organizations, businesses and communities to grow a prosperous Quad Cities.

### DETERMINATION

Participants decided that making youth voice a part of the culture in the Quad Cities will not be easy. As such, it will require determination to succeed and to keep trying when the going gets tough. Some suggestions that emerged were to follow through with ideas; continually come up with new ideas; and have youth take action to improve the things about which they are most passionate. They also agreed that youth and adults meeting and conversing regularly will be important to maintaining momentum.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We learned a great deal from youth in the Quad Cities through this project. We learned: why they think youth voice is important: issues about which they want to voice their ideas; and what kind of support is needed to create a culture of youth voice in the region. We heard from young people who already have a strong voice in their programs, ones who had never been asked their thoughts, and many with experiences in between. Rich focus group data served as a catalyst for additional learning and planning at the Youth Voices Retreat. Participating organizations walked away from that day with internal action plans. And the group outlined a regional Youth Voice strategy.

A strand that was woven throughout this dialogue was the importance of creating a safe space in which youth feel valued and supported. This foundation is needed in order for them to feel comfortable sharing their ideas and ready to work with adults to change the culture of their organizations, schools and, ultimately, the Quad Cities region. New learning from other Search Institute studies echoes what we heard from Quad Cities youth who, in their own words, are telling adults they want what we have come to call “Developmental Relationships.”

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*“I can tell her, “No, this isn’t going to work” . . . If I told that to any of my other teachers . . . I would never do that.”*

—Quad Cities Youth

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### *Developmental Relationships*

Thirty-five years of Search Institute research on Developmental Assets (things youth need in and around them to succeed) points to relationships as a primary gateway through which youth experience these building blocks of development. We are currently engaged in studies to learn more about what we now refer to as Developmental Relationships, close connections through which young people develop the desire and the capacity to thrive in life. From this research, a framework has emerged outlining five

essential strategies for building developmental relationships. They include: Express CARE, CHALLENGE Growth, Provide SUPPORT, Share POWER, and Expand POSSIBILITIES. (See Appendix B.) For optimal development, we hypothesize that young people need to be embedded in a web of Developmental Relationships across the contexts of their lives, including families, school, out-of-school time programs, communities and beyond.

The five strategies for building Developmental Relationships align with what we heard Quad Cities youth say is needed if there is to be a culture of youth voice in the region.

In particular, we hear youth asking adults to Share POWER. This includes hearing what youth have to say, respecting and responding to their ideas, collaborating and, sometimes, letting them take the lead. This notion of Sharing POWER aligns with three of the core statements from youth in this study:

- LISTEN, recognize we have GOOD IDEAS and actually CONSIDER THEM.
- I'M here, YOU'RE here, WE'RE EQUAL.
- Youth take INITIATIVE and the LEAD.

Another core idea that youth participants described as necessary for youth voice to flourish in the Quad Cities is to create More OPPORTUNITIES for youth voice involvement; and more DIVERSE youth need to be heard. This aligns with the Developmental Relationships strategy Expand POSSIBILITIES. Youth are saying loud and clear that *all youth* need to be exposed to more programs, places and experiences that will expand opportunities for them to develop and share their ideas with others in their families, schools, communities and across the Quad Cities region.

A recent Search Institute study of more than 1,000 families funded by Walt Disney Parks and Resorts found that the strategies most associated with youth being “on track to thrive” were Share POWER and Expand POSSIBILITIES. And yet, these were the least commonly experienced in these families.

Search Institute recently presented to the Community Foundation of the Great River Bend a report called “Strengthening Family Relationships in the Quad Cities: A Network Conversation.” Findings in this report mirror what we saw in the Disney study. By and large, Quad Cities parents are giving their kids the basics of care, support, and challenge. But they are less likely to practice the strategies that matter most in terms of positive outcomes. Only 29% of Quad Cities families surveyed demonstrated a high level of Sharing POWER; and only 36% demonstrated high levels of Expanding POSSIBILITIES in their relationships. This compares with 82% Challenging GROWTH and 82% Providing SUPPORT.

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*“Our goal is kind of breaking those ideas that they have about us, that we’re not responsible that we can’t eloquently explain our point on something, or that we don’t really have valid opinions. So like by speaking out, we’re kind of breaking those.”*

—Quad Cities Youth

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This research does not, by any means, suggest that the other strategies for building developmental relationships are less important. They form a critical foundation upon which strategies for Sharing POWER and Expanding POSSIBILITIES are built. We heard this from Quad Cities youth, articulated in another core theme from the Youth Voice focus groups, GET TO KNOW US and HELP US through our struggles.

In the Quad Cities “Strengthening Family Relationships” study, youth said it is more common for them to experience Shared POWER in relationships with their teachers and peers than with parents. And yet only

about two thirds reported experiencing this “often” or “very often” with peers (69%) and with teachers (62%).<sup>‡</sup>

This data supports what Quad Cities youth in the previous pages are saying they need. There is an opportunity to build on the relative strength of youth voice with peers and teachers to create a culture of youth voice in all the settings in which young people live their lives, including families, schools and out-of-school programs. The strategies they outlined at the Youth Voice Retreat can help the Greater Quad Cities Area move in this direction together.

### ***Recommendations***

Quad Cities youth and adult participants in the retreat together developed clear recommendations for next steps to create a culture of youth voice in the region. The onus is now on other leaders in the community to listen and consider their ideas. There are three key strategies that the data point to as ways the Community Foundation of the Great River Bend and/or other community leaders can help Retreat participants join with other youth and adults to bring their recommendations to life:

1. Provide technical assistance to youth and adults in participating organizations to work together to implement the strategies they developed at the retreat to enhance youth voice within their organizations.
2. Provide opportunities for youth and adults to further develop and implement ideas within their organizations.
3. Provide funding and other resources to help them continue to gather and collaborate across organizations to bring their regional vision to life.

It can be easy for groups like this one to fizzle at this point, never getting their strategies off paper and into action. To avoid this requires a process through which the group can carve big strategies into bite-sized pieces that they can digest and turn into energy for forward momentum. Search Institute has landed on what the Carnegie Foundation is calling “Improvement Science” as a promising strategy for moving forward complex initiatives like this one. The Community Foundation of the Great River Bend may consider this strategy which involves groups (youth and adults) working within and across organizations to develop small experiments that make incremental progress toward goals. These small experiments produce data about what worked and what didn’t, which informs ever-broadening next steps toward achieving a larger vision. The work includes facilitating processes to: develop specific goals, identify root causes of issues; craft experiments and harvest learning through “plan, do, study, act” (PDSA) cycles; and regularly step back to

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*“I love telling my opinions. Some of them I don’t really tell ‘cause I’m scared. I love when people hear my opinions, and when I think, ‘Oh, wait, that’s not a good one’ and people are like ‘Oh, it is,’ I feel, like, important, I feel good, I feel supported.”*

—Quad Cities Youth

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<sup>‡</sup> *These findings must be interpreted cautiously, since they are each based on a single item in the survey.*

revisit and refine big picture goals and strategies to reflect ongoing learning. We have come to believe in this approach enough to invest in hiring a Vice President of Improvement Science. We will have more to share soon about ways in which we are applying this approach to youth development efforts in schools, youth serving organizations and community coalitions.

## WHAT IT MEANT TO YOUTH TO PARTICIPATE

It seems fitting to end this report by giving youth participants the last word about their experience in this project. Some said they felt comfortable and optimistic talking about issues around youth voice, while others expressed skepticism that things might change. One young person said he was “confused because I never get to talk about this stuff, but...I’m learning from it.” And yet they expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their ideas and opinions through the focus groups and retreat, seeing them as examples of youth voice in action.

At the end of each focus group, we asked youth participants to use one word or short phrase to describe how they were feeling, having participated in this conversation about youth voice in the Quad Cities. Their answers offer a snapshot of the range of experiences for youth in this conversation, thinking about the future of youth voice and past experiences of trying to be heard. The snapshot suggests there is plenty of room to grow; and also a solid base of passion and strength upon which to build upon as youth and adult leaders work together facilitate that growth.

“hopeful but doubting,”  
“hoping for the best but expecting the worst,”  
“uncertain.” “cool definitely,”  
“happy,” “important,” “pissed,”  
“Comfortable,”  
“good,” “interesting,” “terrible,”  
“relieved,” “excited,” “hopeful,”  
“powerful,” “okay,” “fuzzy,”  
“motivated,” “optimistic,” “confused,”  
“inspired,” “helpful,”  
“it will make the world a better place,”  
“good and anxious,” “empowered,”  
“determined for changes,”

WordItOut

## **Appendix A**

### **Research Methods**

We conducted focus groups with youth participants in the following Quad Cities youth programs:

- YMCA – ACES (Academic Completion for Empowerment and Success)
- AMP (- Achieving Maximum Potential)
- Love Girls Magazine
- Teens for Tomorrow
- QC United
- Ecumenical Housing Development Group
- University of Illinois Extension 4-H
- Center for Youth and Family Services - Place2Be
- Project Renewal
- Davenport Central High School - IS3 (Iowa Safe and Supportive Schools)

We also conducted interviews with adult leaders in each of these programs. An analysis from the adult conversations will be the subject of a separate report. Two months after conducting youth focus groups, the Community Foundation of the Great River Bend (CFGRB) hosted a Youth Voice Retreat, where we presented themes from the focus groups, which informed facilitated action planning within each organization, and across organizations for a community wide proposal.

This appendix details the methods we used for collecting and analyzing this data.

Program leaders invited 5-10 youth from their programs to participate in the focus groups, which were facilitated by Search Institute. Most focus groups took place at the same location as the programming for that group. A few took place at CFGRB offices.

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Aided by NVivo qualitative data analysis software, we captured key statements in which participants articulated something about their experience with and/or ideas about youth voice. We started with a data-driven or “grounded theory” approach to stay rooted in participants’ own descriptions of their ideas, experiences and ways in which they were impacted by those experiences. We call this process “open coding.” We then identified patterns in the open codes, gathering similar ideas together and giving them a label, a “focused code,” describing the shared idea articulated in those statements. We organized the focused codes into “category codes,” gathering together those focused codes related to each other in some way, again, labeling the category based on what the codes within it had in common. Together, the category and focused codes represent themes we heard in statements from participants across the focus groups.

Prior to the Youth Voice Retreat, a young person from one of the participating youth organizations helped us identify and create statements representing core ideas from the data. Our plan was to have three youth on a team of five doing this part of the data analysis. However, only one of the three youth who had planned to

participate was able to make it to our meeting. Because that meeting was only two days before the Youth Voice Retreat, we were not able to reschedule and still have time to prepare presentation materials for the retreat. So we moved forward with a team of two adults and one youth. We created posters with the core idea statements for the large group to read, discuss and, in some cases, add to at the retreat.

During the retreat, we used a “Consensus Workshop” methodology to facilitate planning within and across the groups. First, participants met with others at the retreat from their same organization. A representative of the Foundation of the Great River Bend, which hosted the retreat, announced that each participating organization would have an opportunity to apply for \$1,000 in funding to implement the strategies they developed during the retreat. In their organization-based groups, individuals brainstormed their own action ideas, writing them on Post-It Notes. Each participant then shared his or her ideas with others in the group, posting each on the wall. The group then identified ideas that were similar, and placed them next to each other on the wall. Then they identified and labeled the core action idea embedded in each cluster. Those labels represented the shared action ideas for the group.

Participants then met in small groups with people from other organizations, sharing and discussing the ideas from their own groups. They then gathered again with participants from their own organization to revise their own strategies based on what they learned from others.

Later in the day, all participants gathered, using a similar process to develop action strategies to create a culture of youth voice across the Quad Cities area. Individuals brainstormed their own action ideas, writing each with a large marker on a half sheet of paper. They then met in small groups, again sharing their ideas one at a time, placing them on the floor or table in front of them. They then grouped similar ideas. Each group then chose five of their clearest and most important ideas and wrote them each on a half sheet of paper. A representative from each group shared and posted each of their five ideas on a “sticky wall” in the front of the room (fabric covered with a repositionable spray adhesive). The group identified and grouped ideas that were similar, naming the core idea embedded within each cluster. These core ideas represent the proposed strategies for creating a culture of youth voice in the Quad Cities area that are outlined in this report.

## Appendix B

### The Developmental Relationships Framework

#### Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework

This framework of developmental relationships identifies five strategies supported by a total of 20 actions that contribute to young people being on track to thrive. Each action is bidirectional, with each person being influenced by and influencing the other person. For the purpose of clarity, the framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person in a developmental relationship.

#### Express CARE: Show that you like me and want the best for me.

- **Listen**—Pay attention when you are with me.
- **Be Warm**—Let me know that you like being with me and express positive feelings toward me.
- **Invest**—Commit time and energy to doing things for and with me.
- **Show Interest**—Make it a priority to understand who I am and what I care about.
- **Be Dependable**—Be someone I can count on and trust.

#### CHALLENGE Growth: Insist that I try to continuously improve.

- **Inspire**—Help me see future possibilities for myself.
- **Expect**—Make it clear that you want me to live up to my potential.
- **Stretch**—Recognize my thoughts and abilities while also pushing me to go a bit further.
- **Limit**—Hold me accountable for appropriate boundaries and rules.

#### Provide SUPPORT: Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

- **Encourage**—Praise my efforts and achievements.
- **Guide**—Provide practical assistance and feedback to help me learn.
- **Model**—Be an example I can learn from and admire.
- **Advocate**—Stand up for me when I need it.

#### Share POWER: Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.

- **Respect**—Take me seriously and treat me fairly.
- **Negotiate**—Give me a voice in making decisions that affect me.
- **Respond**—Understand and adjust to my needs, interests, and abilities.
- **Collaborate**—Work with me to accomplish goals and solve problems.

#### Expand POSSIBILITIES: Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.

- **Explore**—Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.
- **Connect**—Introduce me to people who can help me grow.
- **Navigate**—Help me work through barriers that could stop me from achieving my goals.