
CHAPTER 2

Administration of the Teen Assessment Project

This report is the result of a joint effort between the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, the Merrimack School District, and a team of locally concerned citizens. After the project was approved, the Teen Assessment Project Steering Committee was formed which included youth, parents, school staff, and community representatives from businesses, the hospital, youth center, clergy, recreation department, police, social services and others who work with and care about youth.

The Teen Assessment Project involves four distinct dimensions:

- survey development and implementation
- compiling and sharing research data from the youth surveys
- parent and community educational efforts
- community and school responses or actions resulting from the project

Dr. Stephen Small of the University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension, originator of the Teen Assessment Project, developed a question bank of 475 possible questions to assess teen attitudes and worries, future aspirations, alcohol and other drug abuse, sexuality, use of time, diversity and perceived discrimination, personal safety, violence and delinquency, health, interactions with peers, perceptions of parental behavior and monitoring, family relationships and values, perceptions of school and neighborhood monitoring and support. The Merrimack TAP steering committee used this question bank to select the 160 items included in the survey. Some questions were locally developed to reflect community concerns. The final survey was reviewed by the Teen Assessment Project director and approved for use by the UNH Institutional Review Board.

The community was informed about the project through articles written in school and community newspapers. A letter which included a passive consent notification was sent to all parents of 7th to 12th graders explaining the project. Parents had the option of not having their teen participate in the survey by contacting the school. Prior to the youth survey date, parents were able to review the survey at several locations.

In order to ensure accurate and honest responses, the survey process is designed to protect the anonymity of youth. No names were placed on survey booklets or answer forms. Each student placed their own computer answer form into a special envelope for each class

room. In the reports, youth responses are aggregated to protect identification of any individual response.

The survey was administered on January 12th, 2000 at the middle school (7th and 8th grades only) and January 13th, 2000 at the high school. Students were informed the survey was voluntary and that they did not have to participate. Some students were absent or tardy and did not participate in the surveys (129 at the high school and 34 at the middle school). The parents of 60 students (30 - high school; 30 - middle school) did not allow them to participate in the survey. Answer sheets were examined for obvious patterns, scribbles, etc and unusable answer forms were removed. A total of 1,940 surveys (1,230 - high school; 710 - middle school) were useable and analyzed to produce this research report and the series of six parent newsletters entitled, “Whose Kids?...Our Kids!” These 1,940 student surveys represent 86% of the student population in the 7th to 12th grades. Newsletter topics include: Parent-Teen Communication; Teenagers' Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs; Teen Sexuality; Teen Depression and Suicide; Parent-Teen Relationships; and Working Together: Youth, Families, Schools and Communities.

It is the hope of the TAP committee that this report will be a valuable resource to:

- parents as they strive to support the positive development of youth;
- schools and youth serving organizations as they target curriculum and programs to meet the expressed needs of youth;
- community members and organizations as they become more aware and supportive of youth voices;
- all who share in the vision of youth and adults working together to create healthier families, schools, and communities.

This report speaks for youth collectively to give us a picture of the status of Merrimack teens. It is our hope it will be useful in educational and community planning, stimulate program and policy review and modifications, help secure funding and resources, and lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors that strengthen assets/protective factors in Merrimack's youth, families and schools.