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## CHAPTER 2

# Administration of the Teen Assessment Project

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This report is the result of a joint effort between the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension; the Pittsfield, Nashua, Exeter Cooperative, Dover and Pemi-Baker School Districts; and many locally concerned citizens from each area. After the projects were approved in each community, local steering committees were formed which included youth, parents, school personnel, business and spiritual communities, health professionals, law enforcement, youth and family serving agencies and organizations, policy makers and community leaders as well as others who work with and care about youth. The Teen Assessment Project involves six phases:

- 1) community coalition development
- 2) survey development and implementation
- 3) analyzing, interpreting and sharing survey results
- 4) youth, parent, school and community educational efforts
- 5) community strategies and action planning
- 6) project impact evaluation

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. This question bank has been expanded with questions created by New Hampshire communities who have completed TAP. The question bank was used to create the 160 item survey. A common core of questions was required of each community<sup>1</sup>. The other questions were either chosen from the question bank or locally developed to reflect community concerns. The final surveys were reviewed by the Teen Assessment Project Director and approved for use by the UNH Institutional Review Board. This report is based on the required core questions. Optional questions chosen by most communities are also included.

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<sup>1</sup> The number of required core questions changed over the 1998-1999 time period from approximately 90 to 105, therefore, communities who surveyed earlier (e.g. Pittsfield and Nashua) may not have asked some of the core questions that later communities were required to ask. Lower numbers responding on certain graphs may be a reflection of this (ie. Figure 3-3: Parents Divorced or Separated: Number responding: 4546).

Communities were generally informed about the project through articles written in school and community newspapers. In each community, a passive consent notification letter was sent to all parents of 7th to 12th graders (parents of 9th to 12th graders in Pemi-Baker) explaining the project. Parents had the option of not having their teen participate in the survey by contacting the school. Students could also choose not to participate. Prior to the youth survey date, parents were able to review the survey at several times and locations.

Teachers and volunteers were trained in survey administration procedures. Wherever possible, volunteers were used for administration of the survey. Teachers remained in the classroom to maintain a positive classroom climate. A script with specific instructions was read by the survey administrators to maintain consistency among classrooms. In order to ensure accurate and honest responses a number of steps were taken. The anonymity of youth was protected. Names were not placed on survey booklets or answer sheets. Teachers and volunteers were instructed to not walk around the classroom during the survey. Each student placed her/his own response form into a special envelope for the classroom. In the report, responses are aggregated to protect identification of individual answers.

The surveys were administered in the five school districts between April of 1998 and December of 1999. Some students were absent or tardy and did not participate in the survey. Others chose not to participate or were not allowed by their parents. Answer sheets were examined for obvious patterns and scribbles; unusable answer forms were removed. A total of 9,105 surveys (3,153 middle school; 5,952 high school) were usable and analyzed to produce this research report. This number represents 85% of the total school enrollments of participating schools and 9% of all New Hampshire teens grades 7 through 12.

A strong case can be made that these results are indicative of the behaviors, opinions, attitudes and beliefs of New Hampshire teens. These data represent over nine thousand teens from five different counties around the state – Merrimack, Hillsborough, Rockingham, Strafford and Grafton. Geographically, these counties cover much of the state, excluding the northern tip. New Hampshire is a demographically homogeneous state particularly in terms of racial and ethnic make-up, and the school districts consist of students from both rural and urban communities. Due to the nature of this project, however, the survey process is not random. Therefore, results cannot be generalized to the population of New Hampshire teens.

This report speaks for youth collectively to provide a picture of the status of many New Hampshire teens. It is our hope it will be useful in educational and community planning, aid in stimulating program and policy review and modifications, help in securing funding and resources, and lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors that strengthen protective/assets factors in New Hampshire youth, families, schools and communities.