

SAMPLE ASSESSMENT

YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

Newtown, USA*

Introduction

Early in Newtown's work, we conducted phone interviews for the purpose of initial assessment and information gathering. From these interviews, initial observations were included in the team report submitted by Craig Schroeder to Newtown leaders in October. This initial assessment resulted in four proposed outcomes for the assessment. One of these was the recommendation to conduct youth surveys and focus groups with youth, young adults, and youth program leaders to determine perspectives and youth engagement goals.

In January, the Teen Survey was administered at Newtown Junior and Senior High Schools. The purpose of the Teen Survey is to gather initial data on youth perspectives and priorities around entrepreneurship, community involvement, and interest in staying/returning to their hometown. To follow up on the survey results, in March we conducted four focus groups: two youth focus groups with high school students, a group of adult youth program leaders, and a group of Newtown Community College students. The purpose of these focus groups was to better clarify the current reality of how Newtown youth and young adults are engaged in the community and what opportunities there are to provide deeper engagement of and commitment to young people in the community.

The Process

A teen survey was administered to students of Newtown Junior and Senior High schools. Students from these schools were asked to provide feedback on the survey questions prior to the administration of the survey. With the youth feedback and input on the survey questions, the online survey was made available to all students. 271 junior high surveys were completed and 349 high school surveys were completed.

To follow up on the survey results and to gather additional information on the youth opportunities in Newtown, four focus groups were organized. Each focus group included a sample of individuals that were asked to participate in the focus group. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The four focus groups were:

1. High school students (Student Council and Yearbook)
2. High school students (entrepreneurial youth)
3. Youth program leaders (adults)
4. Newtown Community College (NCC) students

* Due to the sensitivity with which we regard information gathered from youth assessments, Newtown is a fictional name, but the data is from an actual community youth assessment.

Twelve students participated in the first student focus group, and 16 in the second. Six adults participated in the youth program leader focus group, and 7 students from YTCC participated. All participants voluntarily participated and could end their participation at any time. Overall the objectives of the focus groups were:

1. Determine youth perspectives on community opportunities for young people.
2. Clarification of what youth want and opportunities for making the community a place of opportunity for them.
3. Opportunities for strengthening youth/community and youth/adult partnerships.
4. List of community members, groups, etc. that could/should be involved as we move forward with the youth pillar of HomeTown Competitiveness® (HTC) in the community.

Facilitator questions and engagement activities were used to guide the focus groups and to seek answers to the primary objectives. To capture the dialogue of the focus groups, participant feedback and responses were captured on tearsheets, and participants captured their ideas on handouts, which were collected after the focus group meeting.

Using the data from the teen survey and dialogue from the interviews and focus groups, a master set of notes was created and reviewed to find emerging data and themes. These data and themes are reported in the following sections.

The Findings

Data and themes emerged from the survey and focus group interviews that offer insight into the perspectives and opportunities regarding youth and young adult engagement in the Newtown community. This information is presented in three primary sections: 1) Survey results, 2) questionnaire results, 3) focus group themes. From these results, conclusions and recommendations are made later in this report.

Teen Survey

The results of the teen survey administered to Newtown junior and senior high students provided valuable information on youth perspectives and interests in the community. This section will highlight some of the most interesting results.

When asked to rank their community on a scale of 1-10, the high school students gave an average response of 5.3, with 67% ranking Newtown average or above average. The junior high students had an average response of 5.8, with 75% ranking their community average or above average.

Regarding returning to Newtown and interest in entrepreneurship, the results were as follows (all percentages are JH and HS students respectfully):

- 21% and 25% prefer to stay in Newtown
- 31% and 34% prefer to return to Newtown after college and starting a career
- 56% and 48% picture themselves living in Newtown in the future

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- 38% and 41% are interested in owning their own business in the future
- 19% and 9% currently own a business
- 42% and 44% are interested in taking an entrepreneurship class

Top reasons the youth identified for wanting to stay in the area included:

- Good place to raise a family
- Family ties in the community
- Cost of living is less

Top reasons youth identified as keeping them from moving back were:

- Career opportunities elsewhere
- Make more money elsewhere
- Lack of entertainment

Focus Groups

The survey results and using a questionnaire as a conversation starter, several themes emerged from the focus groups:

- Value community and heritage
- Intergenerational relationships
- Entrepreneurship interest
- Leadership, decision making, youth as peers
- Community college opportunity

Each of these data and themes are explored in more detail in the following narrative.

Value community and heritage

It quickly became apparent that youth and adults in the community of Newtown have a positive perspective of their community. The youth appreciate the safety, opportunities, and family connections of the small town atmosphere. The youth are interested in their hometown and appreciate what it offers. They are interested in other experiences, and many will leave for those, but if presented the opportunity, several would also like to return and create a life for themselves in Newtown.

Intergenerational relationships

Several times it was brought up that Newtown has an older population. This provides a unique opportunity for youth to interact with and build relationships with older residents, whom they can learn from and can serve as mentors to the youth. Whether looking at entrepreneurship, community leadership, or just knowing more about the community, the intergenerational opportunities in Newtown can be a strong foundation for youth engagement in the community. Youth and adults alike in the focus groups sited this as a strong point for their community, including intergenerational events and mentoring.

Both youth and adults gave the school bond as an example of an intergenerational challenge. The bond was passed, thus supporting the school, but it was with a lot of struggle and work. Young people expressed that the older generation seems to not immediately see the value of supporting youth programming, since they no longer have their own children there.

Entrepreneurship interest

Entrepreneurship education, experience and opportunities emerged as an important theme in all four focus groups. The youth expressed a desire to have more entrepreneurship opportunities, the adults felt this was a priority, and the college students saw this as a way to attract more young professionals to the area. This interest in entrepreneurship could serve as an avenue to tap into the creative and innovative skills of the youth, and show them pathways to create futures in their hometown.

Leadership, decision-making, youth as peers

Opportunities to improve youth leadership in the community, their role in decision making, and developing strong youth/adults partnerships emerged as ways Newtown could best tap into the skills and interests of community youth. The youth expressed a desire to have more opportunities to be civically engaged. Using this interest, the community could work with the youth on creating these opportunities that would allow the youth to work with adults on projects and in roles they can commit to.

Community college opportunity

Having a community college in the community provides opportunities for alternative education, outreach, and a pool of young adults that will soon be making career and lifestyle choices. However, NCC students in the focus group felt fairly strongly that the community needs to be more open and accepting of newcomers and “outsiders”.

Supporting the young people at Newtown Community College and building strong relationships with them could allow the community to tap into the interests and motivations of this group; connecting them to the community and giving them a reason to take an interest in Newtown as a place for them to build their future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the data and themes that emerged from the surveys and focus groups, some common conclusions can be made that lead to recommendations for Newtown. These conclusions are:

- **Building on what you have** – Newtown can build on current youth/adult partnerships, intergenerational relationships, and existing youth-focused groups to work with youth on future engagement and involvement opportunities. With willingness from both the youth and adults, Newtown can enhance community involvement opportunities and build a strong foundation of youth engagement in the community.

- **Youth leadership** – Newtown youth are interested and motivated to participate in leadership development and decision-making in the community. By providing chances to work with adults as peers, the interests and motivations of these youth can be tapped to help jump start a long-term vision of youth engagement activities and roles in the community.
- **Career choices** – A common theme in the surveys and in all four focus groups was the perceived lack of career opportunities in the Newtown area for current and new residents. Awareness and strategy-building consideration need to be given to this opportunity. Also, the opportunity for entrepreneurship education and support could be a valuable asset in this area.

These conclusions are intended to contribute to the work of Newtown leaders and serve as a starting point for the opportunities in Newtown for youth and young adult engagement in the community. The following recommendations are provided as examples of what Newtown could do to capitalize on youth and young adult opportunities.

- **Work with youth to establish priorities** – Finding a core group of youth interested in creating leadership opportunities and enhancing decision-making opportunities for youth in the community is the place to start in meeting this need. By working with the youth from the beginning, valuable youth perspectives will be included in all parts of planning for these opportunities. Starting with a core group of youth and a kick-off event will allow the group to expand to additional youth involvement, and serve as a launching pad for more long-term priorities.
- **Entrepreneurship** – With the desire to increase awareness of and create job opportunities in the area, entrepreneurship education could play a key role. With 4-H presence in Newtown, the community is identified as a pilot site for the new 4-H entrepreneurship curriculum. Additionally, hearing from an experienced entrepreneurship teacher could open new opportunities for entrepreneurship education within current school programs. Engaging youth and adults in a Young Entrepreneurs and Inventors Club could provide an informal networking opportunity for youth interested in entrepreneurship.
- **Newtown Community College** – Many of the students at Newtown Community College have plans to continue their education after their two-year programs. However, engaging them in the community while they are here, and demonstrating community support of the college and its students will help foster relationships that may allow these students to see Newtown as a place to consider in their future. Learning more about the motivations of this group of young adults and creating opportunities, such as mentoring and internships programs with local businesses, would be a starting point for developing this opportunity.

Questions & More Information

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