



## TEEN SUMMIT 2008

What do the teens of our community think about the problems they face? How would they solve these problems? The Safe Community Coalition's Teen Summit provided a forum for high school students from Langley High School, McLean High School and Potomac Upper School to discuss and address issues, and for adults in the community to listen, question and add their voice to the solutions.

Over a hundred teens attended the Teen Summit on February 5, 2008 at Gannett/USA TODAY Headquarters in McLean. The topics they tackled included:

- Academic Pressure and College Stress
- Alcohol, Drugs and Smoking
- Values Clarification
- Safe Social Alternatives
- Mental and Physical Health

The students were charged with defining the problems and brainstorming solutions in the following framework: What can **I** do to help myself?, What can my **family** do to help me?, What can my **school** do to help me?, What can my **community** do to help me?

Concurrently, a roundtable forum took place among high school administrators and SCC Board members to discuss how best to utilize the findings of the Teen Summit. Later in the day a press conference was held at which the students read statements, and engaged in an open discussion with over 60 community members including parents, educators, politicians, members of the faith community, and the press.

Following the Teen Summit, the SCC is establishing Task Forces in each of the six topic areas to continue the work of addressing the issues facing our teens. The Task Forces will include SCC members, parents, teachers and school administrators, students, and community members. Each Task Force will respond to the needs and suggestions developed at the Teen Summit.

*If you are interested in helping to continue the work of the Teen Summit, please contact Laura Zoll ([laurazoll@hotmail.com](mailto:laurazoll@hotmail.com)).*



## **ACADEMIC PRESSURE AND COLLEGE STRESS**

### **Statement of the Problems**

Our discussion topic is Academic Pressure and College Stress. We spent a lot of our time discussing the sources of teen stress in high school, and came up with a general list as follows:

1. There is a big problem with inconsistency in grading and teachers' expectations. There are differences both among teachers in each school and grading scales across the country which frustrate students and add to stress unnecessarily.
2. There is a generation gap from when parents were in high school to now.
3. Competition is so high because of emphasis on "SUCCESS" – peers, colleges (getting into the best colleges and always having the best resume).
4. There are many disadvantages to having privilege in our area. The higher standards of our county pose extra pressures and stress, e.g. need to take AP, IB, SAT prep.
5. Students find it hard to grasp a balance in their schedules – from workload to extra-curricular activities = stress.
6. A lot of times judgments are made in terms of college preparations. Teachers and counselors create an image of which universities are the best, and force their opinions on teens. The "name brand" colleges scare kids, and they feel the need to aspire and get into certain colleges. This stresses teens when they should be focusing on their four years of high school which are supposed to be the best years.

### **Solutions**

#### **How can I help myself?**

- Be an individual, decisions should be your own
- Take time to organize work schedule; better time management, more efficient
- Try to balance work, extra-curriculars, fun; make sure not to focus on one though
- Appreciate importance of social aspect of school; learning how to act/deal with others

#### **How can my family help me?**

- Importance of communication; get problems off of your chest, but understand that things are different— please, no "when I was a kid..."
- Build up trust—work on relationships (responsibility)
- Encouragement, forgiveness; mistakes are better in the family setting; learn before moving on to college
- Responsibility as basis of trust



### **How can the school help me?**

- Send a better message—a different message of success in terms of morals/life lessons and not grades; there will be less cheating because of stress of need to get that A
- Emphasize success everywhere—all-around rather than just core academic classes, e.g. arts, sports
- Class choices—importance of student interest; limit forced courses
- Counselors—take the initiative to build a relationship; students don't always have the opportunity to do so; college meetings, help/listen to kids while they choose courses; A in easier class vs. B in accelerated came up
- Help get kids out, be active: events, carnival, park, etc.

## **ALCOHOL, DRUGS AND SMOKING**

### **Statement of the Problems**

- Peer pressure to be in the “in-crowd”
- Negative influences from the media, parents, and other students
- Lack of serious consequences

### **Solutions**

#### **How can I help myself?**

Establish a mutual trust with your parents

#### **How can parents help me?**

- Trust your kids more, be open about the topic, rather than denying it or being naive
- Have a straightforward conversation with your child about the issues
- Make sure not to yell
- Treat your kid as if you're talking to another adult (we don't like to be treated as children)
- Increased communication is best

#### **How can school help me?**

In our group we came to the conclusion that schools should not have authority outside of school situations. If someone comes on campus under the influence, or brings illegal substances onto campus then they should be punished according to school rules.

Otherwise, it is the parents' jurisdiction, so to speak.

Yes, the health classes do help, but it is much more powerful to have a young adult speak to the student body about a personal experience that affected him or herself, a friend, or a family member.



### **How can the community help me?**

Create safe social alternatives.

## **VALUES CLARIFICATION**

### **Define the Topic**

Our group defines values as the basis of the decisions you make in life.

### **Problems:**

- Changing values when in different settings e.g. school vs. weekend, family vs. friends
- Media influence – the extremes shown in the media
- Hypocritical – being two different people
- Pressure from parents
- School administration being naïve
- Double standard for chronic abusers
- Judgment – separate the doer from the deed
- Undefined values
- Not thinking enough about values – need to spend more time thinking about values
- Not having enough experience to form our values
- Unsupportive friends – identifying your friends
- Group influences

### **Solutions:**

- Set values before you make decisions – being conscious and aware of your values
- Happy medium of the reality that goes on – seeing more positive role models
- Use peer mediation – talk about personal problems not just conflict
- Talking to parents about the way they approach situations. Can also talk to a friend of a parent
- Vocalize your values and behavior to your parents so they understand where you're coming from – ask for their input of your values
- Set limits for the night
- Stop categorizing students - just because they are active in school doesn't mean they are angels. Learn to treat equally and not judge
- Offer guidance instead of punishment – instead of immediate expulsion, etc. try to talk it out and find root of the problem
- Judgment – display and act out your values instead of just vocalizing them



- Make more time to decide your values and define them so you have something to base your choices around – this is a problem when you have nothing to go by
- Reflect on your values
- Parents give truthful accounts of their experiences – act upon your values to develop experiences you can pass down
- Identify with friends that share common values – lead by example – help your friends with their struggles. Don't just leave them out in the cold
- Defining values before put in a situation. Be strong, be smart

## **SAFE SOCIAL ALTERNATIVES**

### **Define the Problem**

After discussing the activities in which many students participate, our group determined that the main reason kids participate in dangerous activities is because there is a lack of sufficient social alternatives. Drinking, doing drugs, and smoking are only a few of the unsafe choices teens in the area are making today. Sadly, students make these poor decisions because they feel that these behaviors are socially acceptable and encouraged by their peers. Additionally, they deem the currently available school and community-sponsored events to be dull and overly supervised.

### **Solution Statement**

In order to solve this problem, there are several safe social alternatives our group has suggested:

- Dance club: “new” old firehouse
- Café: live music, dinner, more mature
- Bonfire: school sponsored/camp out
- Cross school events (public and private together): mixers, powder puffs

As students we can promote these events and actually participate in them. The parents and adults in our lives can provide transportation if needed and be less strict with their rules so we are able to attend. The community and schools can help sponsor events and build the facilities. In addition, they can promote the safe rather than telling us to stay away from the unsafe ones.

## **Mental and Physical Health**

In our group, Mental and Physical Health, we came up with three main points: sleep, academic stress, and body image. The main key to improving health in all of these points is increased parent-child communication.



### Sleep

Kids feel that the pressure to get good grades affects their sleeping patterns. Lack of sleep results in less focus at school leading to lower performance on tests and classwork. Our group suggested that high school have later start times and place restrictions on the amount of homework students are given.

In terms of what parents can do, the group suggests that they give their children a bedtime at an early age and make them stick to it. This will get kids in the habit of being on a schedule and encourage kids to make their tentative bedtimes in high school. In addition, parents should place restrictions on the amount of television they watch at an early age so when they get older they won't be used to watching large amounts of tv.

### Academic Pressure

Kids feel like their parents give them unattainable expectations that lead to stress and irritability. Communication between the parent and the child can solve this. In the beginning of high school the family should sit down and set REALISTIC goals for their children and make sure they are aware of them.

### Body Image

This was the biggest topic we discussed. Our group felt that students feel pressure from the media, their peers and even their parents to look a certain way. Insecurity about weight can result in unhealthy weight loss in both boys and girls. Our group suggested that elementary school FLE classes have a seminar informing children at a young age about eating disorders and the importance about healthy weight regulation. For those that are over-weight and unhealthy, our group encourages parents to keep unhealthy foods outside of the house, starting at a young age. Parents should encourage their kids to exercise early. Perhaps exercising together such as family hikes or skiing in their early years. If a child is active early in life, it is more likely to carry into adolescence and even adulthood. Friends can play a vital role in helping children overcome a weight problem, whether it be obesity or a disorder. For instance, a person could ask an overweight friend to come to the gym with them. Person A is not making Person B feel bad about themselves, but is still encouraging them to improve their well-being. Come to terms with your body and surround yourself with people that make you feel good about your self.

**Again, the connective thread that runs through all of our topics was an established communication at an early age.**