

OMHNSS Information Brief

The Importance and Benefit of Positive Youth Development in Schools

This information brief was developed for the Ohio Mental Health Network for School Success (OMHNSS), by the Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs (CSBMHP) graduate research assistance Jen Elfstrom. A copy of the brief and an expanded report of all OMHNSS information briefs are available at www.omnhss.org

Schools today are tasked with promoting academic achievement for a student body with diverse needs and abilities, while also addressing mental health and high-risk behaviors. To accomplish all this, a public health promotion approach to service delivery in schools is recommended.

Our nation's schools are under pressure to accomplish more than they ever have in the past, as they play an increasingly active role in supporting families in nurturing the development of children so that they will be prepared for adulthood.

To promote positive academic, psychological, and behavioral outcomes, for all students, leaders in the field of school-based mental health advocate for a public health promotion approach to service delivery. This tiered approach entails that all students receive school-wide programming aimed at enhancing student assets, while a select group of at-risk students receives prevention and early intervention services, and an even smaller group requires treatment of severe and chronic problems.

Unfortunately, this model is not yet a reality in our schools—currently, school often concentrate on addressing severe and chronic problems, leading to a reduction or lack of resources allocated for promotion and prevention efforts.

The Youth and Community Program's webpage (www.ssw.umich.edu/public/current/Projects/youthAndCommunity)

An innovative and promising approach to PYD is youth participation in the process of planning, implementing, and evaluating school-based programs and practices

- Research has demonstrated that youth, even elementary school students, can be productive members of teams tasked with decision-making and taking action for change. Furthermore, the principles for best practice in school mental health emphasize student involvement in all program development, oversight, and improvement efforts.
- More than “token or passive presence”, this approach entails students’ “active participation and real influence” in decisions that affect their school.
- School committees tasked with decision-making regarding programs and practices may benefit from students’ intimate familiarity with their school culture and ability to identify site-specific and student approved solutions.

The Search Institute (www.search-institute.org) has online resources that discuss the 40 developmental assets, how they are related to healthy development, and strategies to build assets.

PYD can occur through a variety of programs and activities that share the common aim of promoting assets and use PYD core strategies

- The aim of PYD is to enhance students’ “five Cs”:
- **Competence:** Positive view of one’s actions in academic, social, and vocational domains
- **Confidence:** Global sense of positive self-regard
- **Connections:** Positive bonds to school, community, family, and peers
- **Character:** Sense of morality and integrity
- **Caring/Compassion:** Sympathy and empathy for others
- PYD occurs as a result of engaging students in sustained and structured activities that enhance healthy community engagement.
- An important feature of PYD is a sustained relationship with at least one caring adult.
- PYD activities often build skills and challenge participants to use those skills to achieve goals, thus increasing self-efficacy.
- Examples of PYD activities include participation in sports teams and extracurricular clubs, but PYD can also occur in the context of school-based activities typically reserved for adult participation only.

• In addition to increasing assets, PYD decreases high-risk behaviors (such as alcohol and drug use, sexual activity, and violence) and increases academic achievement.

• Students who are engaged in PYD activities are more likely to make meaningful contributions to their own continued positive development, as well as to their family, community, and ultimately, society.

• PYD programs also have been shown to successfully improve school climate by creating more positive, caring, and engaging environments.