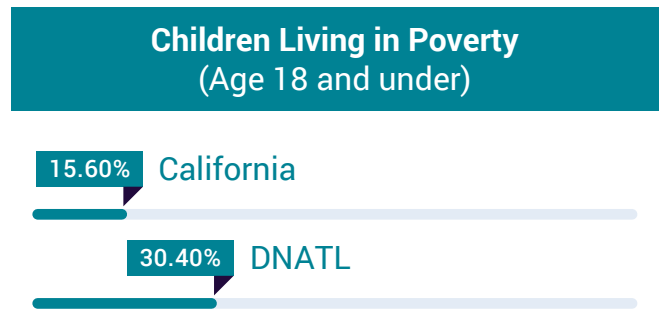


Case Study Brief

# Empowering Youth Leadership on Health and Well Being

When the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) Initiative launched in Del Norte and Tribal Lands (DNATL) in 2010, listening sessions were held with the community. Young people at these sessions highlighted limited opportunities for educational and career development, few enrichment and support activities beyond sports and recreation, and a generally pessimistic attitude amongst adults in DNATL with respect to their abilities. Stakeholders worried that toxic messaging in the community was self fulfilling, and well-being indicators reflected the validity of these concerns. Perhaps most disheartening— in a comprehensive survey of high school students in DNATL (BHC Youth Survey 2011 - n = 1,145), a majority expressed a desire to go to college, but only a minority reported that they expected that to become a reality. These and other findings (see table below) galvanized the community to change the script when it came to engaging its young people. The overarching goal of the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative was to ensure that all (100%) of DNATL’s youth

are empowered to learn, build skills, and make positive changes in their community, while being connected to meaningful relationships and a resilient network of support by 2023. (Table source Kids-data.org)



Source: Kids-data.org

## Risk Factors for DNATL Youth vs. State Averages

| Indicator  | DNATL                 | State of CA          | Year        |
|--|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Alcohol/Drug Use Among 11 Graders                      | 39.1%                 | 28.9%                | 2017-2018   |
| Rate of Domestic Violence Calls for Assistance         | 43.9 per 1,000 adults | 6.3 per 1,000 adults | 2018        |
| Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect                     | 132.7 per 1,000       | 52.9 per 1,000       | 2018        |
| 11th Graders Reporting Suicidal Ideation               | 20.9%                 | 16.4%                | 2017 - 2019 |
| Teen Birth Rate  | 29.6 per 1,000        | 15.7 per 1,000       | 2016        |
| 7th Graders Experiencing Bullying/ Harassment          | 55.8%                 | 33.6%                | 2015 - 2017 |
| 11th Graders Involved in Gangs                         | 12%                   | 4.7%                 | 2015 - 2017 |
| High School Graduates Completing College Prep Course   | 15.4 per 1,000        | 29.6 per 1,000       | 2016        |
| 11th Graders Reported Binge Drinking in the Past Month | 7.7%                  | 4.2%                 | 2015 - 2017 |

Source: Kids-Data.org

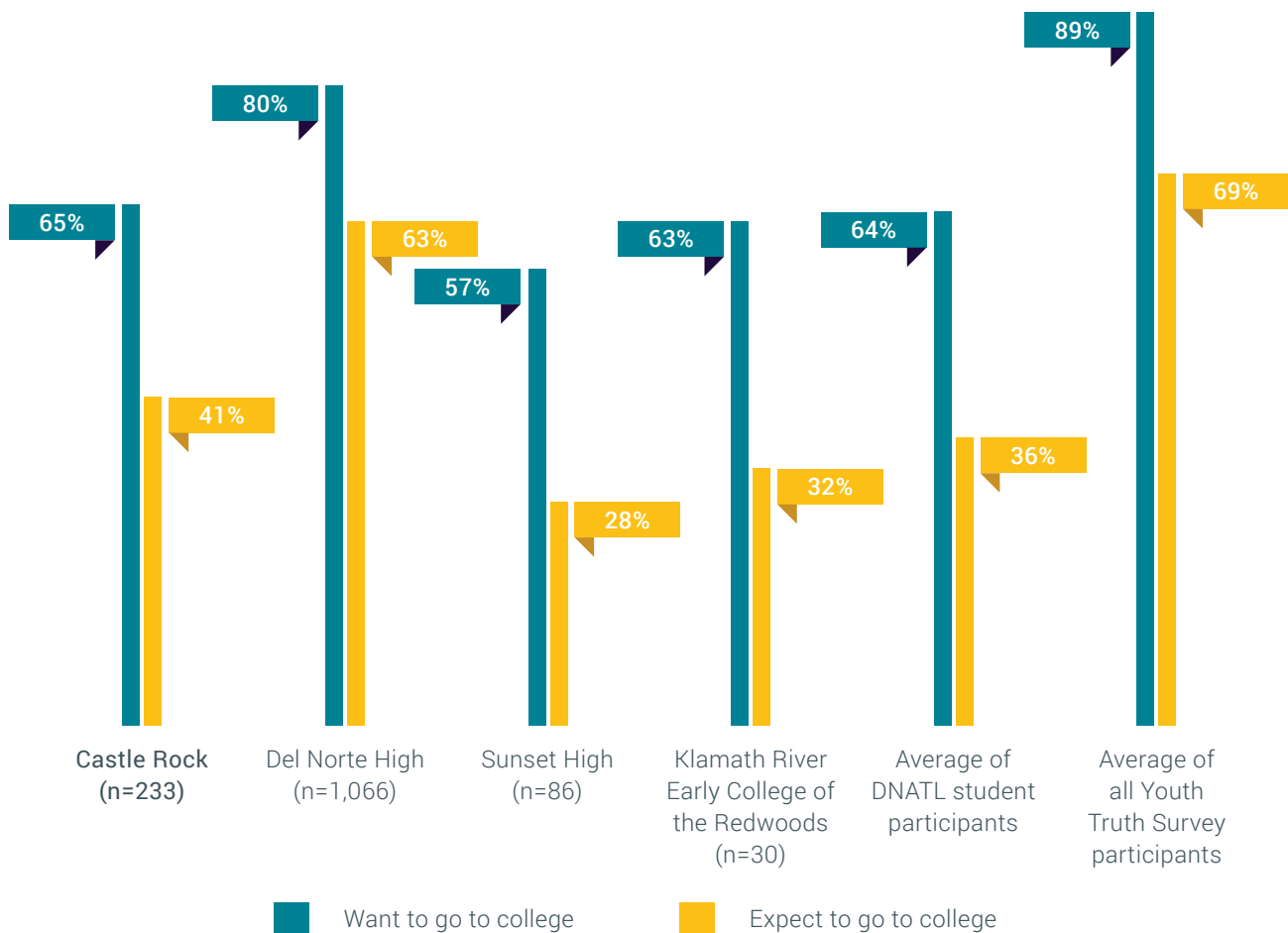
Research on the initiative generated the following main findings:

- ▶ Adults in the community had a very top-down approach and low expectations for what young people could accomplish. The disconnect between adults and youth was not only discouraging, but also prevented youth from achieving their potential academically and in the workforce.
- ▶ Programs designed to help at-risk youth need social workers' involvement. To effectively support a program that includes at-risk youth, staff should come from the community and be embedded in a social work network.

- ▶ Providing a platform for youth to tell their (often marginalized) stories was crucial in changing attitudes and narratives about youth in DNATL.

**When youth are given the support and opportunities they need, they can be powerful agents of change in the community.**

### DNATL Students Who Want to Go to College



Source: The California Center for Rural Policy and The Del Norte and Adjacent Tribal Lands Building Healthy Communities Learning and Evaluation Advisory Committee. Community Wellness Vital Signs: Core Community Wellness Indicators for Del Norte and Adjacent Tribal Lands. Version 1.2, May, 2012

## Youth Leadership, Development and Organization

One of the pillars the Initiative centered was building a movement of young people, and a platform for their voices to be heard. The work of building youth capacity and equipping youth with the skills and experiences necessary to influence policies and systems happened via three campaigns: Health Happens in Our Schools, Our Neighborhoods, and in Prevention. Through these efforts, youth learned to identify, design, and ultimately launch successful interventions with wide-reaching health impacts. These included:

- ▶ in 2013, hydration stations were installed at three schools and a healthy food service program with salad bars, scratch cooking and farm-to-school strategies were implemented in all schools;
- ▶ in 2015, Sunset High School students organized to improve their weight room and create a safe place for youth to work out; and
- ▶ in 2014, youth leaders received assistance from the True North Organizing Network to organize the first non-partisan Del Norte School Board candidate forum. Additionally, youth spearheaded initiatives and developed relationships in the community to carry out campaigns against underage drinking and raise awareness about other crucial issues youth face in DNATL.

A key part of awareness raising was developing a platform for youth. Over the course of ten years, the community developed youth opportunities to engage in media production beginning in middle school, continuing through high school, and beyond. Media training requires students to build an extensive range of technical skills and learn the art of storytelling and all its components. The tools, connections, and resources provided enabled the creation of a youth-led media organization, the “Redwood Voice.” It has served as an important platform for youth to bring awareness to the barriers and trauma they experience, to engage with their community, and critically explore issues that matter to them.

For example in 2014, after hearing about sightings of salmon beginning to die again on the Klamath River (upriver), a group of Yurok youth took part in a digital storytelling workshop hosted by the Initiative, the Seventh Generation Fund Media Department, and the Yurok Social Services Youth Program. For the Yurok Tribe, “salmon is life” - a crucial part of the local Native American tribes’ diet and spirituality. Drought and the diversion of water from the Klamath River to industrial farms in Central California led to the largest fish kill in the U.S and Yurok history in 2002. The fish kill continues to be a community issue. The youth workshop participants decided to document their

community response to the ongoing fish kill and explore the 2002 fish kill history. Their goal was to seek answers to prevent another disaster on their river. They started by making a video of interviews with tribal elders, other youth, community leaders, and residents. The video production gave the youth, and the communities they interviewed a vehicle to remember the fish kill, educate the public about its cultural significance and the harm caused.

## Leveraging Partnerships & Resources

The Youth Training Academy (YTA) is an example of what is possible when communities shift from a competitive mindset to collaborating to leverage funding and resources and increase opportunities. The YTA is an annual summer program formed through a collaboration between the California Center for Rural Policy at Cal Poly Humboldt, College of the Redwoods, Wild Rivers Community Foundation and the BHC. Through the YTA, youth starting in 10th grade through age 24 can participate in hands-on career exploration in one of seven local career pathways, including early childhood education, healthcare, food access, media, ecotourism, and organizing and leadership. YTA youth participants are paid for their time. The YTA began by working with local businesses and educators, renting space at College of the Redwoods. The program is harmonized with the workforce development needs of the community and creates accessible pathways for student employment. For example, the Health Careers Pathway addresses an industry in DNATL that is critically understaffed. As part of this, partners<sup>1</sup> created E3 (Education, Experience and Employment) focusing their youth employment program on the healthcare industry. The education-based work program began in 2017 and has already been recognized by the California Workforce Association for its innovation and lauded as a model for other communities across the state. Other partnership-driven opportunities include the Food Pathway—which seeks to increase food security and strengthen the DNATL food economy—and the Ecotourism Pathway, in which youth learn how small businesses work with Redwood National and State Parks, U.S. Forest Service and other public land managers to offer kayak, bike and hiking tours. Additionally, True North organizing network offers a pathway for youth organizing.

In support of YTA goals, the College of the Redwoods also created youth leadership and career development community education courses. This generates \$20,000 in state funding to sustain the leadership and career pathway courses, including youth organizing. Stakeholders express that what the Initiative was able to accomplish with the YTA would have been unheard of in 2009. At that time, if someone would inquire about offering non-credit college courses as youth training pathways to local career opportunities, they would’ve been told that “there is just no way we could fund that”.

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<sup>1</sup> A partnership between Del Norte Unified School District, BHC, Del Norte Workforce Center and local employers

## Changing the Narrative

*“The first step in changing the narrative of our community is to tell the untold stories and raise the voices that are not heard through traditional communication outlets.”* - Redwood Voice Adult Leader

To truly transform the landscape to better support students, it was necessary for adults to change the predominant narratives they employed when speaking of youth, for youth to change their narratives about themselves, and to find a perspective on the community that emphasized it as a place of opportunity. In the beginning when youth were introducing themselves to YTA program staff, they often described themselves as delinquents, troublemakers, outcasts, mischievous and criminals. These narratives reflected how they viewed themselves, what they believed, and how they experienced the way adults viewed them. One program administrator expressed shock that “they competed with each other for a bad girl, bad boy status.” Over time, the program proved transformative. For example, when youth participants were seen as employees by their community, they changed their self-narratives. Every summer, youth were asked to provide feedback via focus groups and surveys.

**Participants often mentioned how proud they were of being seen as an employee, an intern, or a person working hard to create positive change in their community.**

Working with youth leadership in DNATL emphasized to stakeholders the importance of recognizing the toxic effect of trauma, and prioritizing youth development and resilience. Accompanying the work highlighted above, the Del Norte Unified School District launched initiatives to prevent bullying, help LGBTQ youth, and recognize the generational trauma and marginalization of Native American students. These actions helped further sensitize the community to trauma and created a more supportive and inclusive environment for DNATL’s diverse student population.