

Building Healthy Communities



Empowering Youth Developing Leaders



Introduction

The overarching goal of the Del Norte and Tribal Land (DNATL) Building Healthy Communities (BHC) Youth Initiative was to ensure that 100% of local youth have access to educational opportunities, and can build skills and make positive changes in their community.

The initiative also sought to connect youth to meaningful relationships and a resilient network of support by 2023.

To achieve these goals, the Initiative used four dynamic approaches:

Youth Organizing

Build a movement of young people around health equity in relationship with the community, creating a platform for their voices to be heard.

Trauma-Informed Healing

Cities, Counties, and Tribes recognize the toxic effect of trauma and prioritize youth development and resilience. Shift the balance of public investment from punishment and incarceration to health and prevention.

Youth Media

Use storytelling to build empathy and share community successes to spread hope and share community concerns through young people's voices.

Youth Workforce and Leadership

Develop workforce leadership training, and career pathways for youth.

Empathy Interviews with community members surfaced these findings:

Finding 1

Negative perceptions of youth and the community were self-realizing prophecies.

Finding 2

Empowerment is the journey, not the destination.

Finding 3

Youth work requires a trauma-informed approach, and the impact of trauma had been under-emphasized in previous work.

Finding 4

The importance of designing from a place of empathy and engagement with youth issues.

Finding 5

Empowering youth means challenging negative attitudes about DNATL.

Finding 6

Increased collaboration grew youth opportunities exponentially—leveraging public funding and resources led to increased capital, opportunities for youth in the community.

Empathy Interviews with community members surfaced these findings:

Finding 7

Providing a platform for youth to own their narratives and raise their voices was a powerful catalyst for change across other facets of the Initiative.

Finding 8

Shifting the focus to health equity and prevention, and recognizing that youth are legitimate participants in community matters and care about the issues in the community, supported the success of the program. Youth are the foremost experts on youth issues.

Finding 9

When youth are given the support and opportunities they need, they can make a community change.

Finding 10

The result of the ten-year initiative is hope for many DNATL youth. The transition in the participant's outlook on their community was not solely due to the training opportunities and resources; it also included how Youth Initiative staff interacted with youth.

Finding 11

The groundwork being done by the Initiative to support youth was a source of resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

Living in a remote rural area such as DNATL has challenges, and can exacerbate mental health crises among American youth due to a lack of access to basic amenities such as:



Broadband



Recreation centers



Transportation



Libraries



Economic opportunities



Mental health support services



Parks

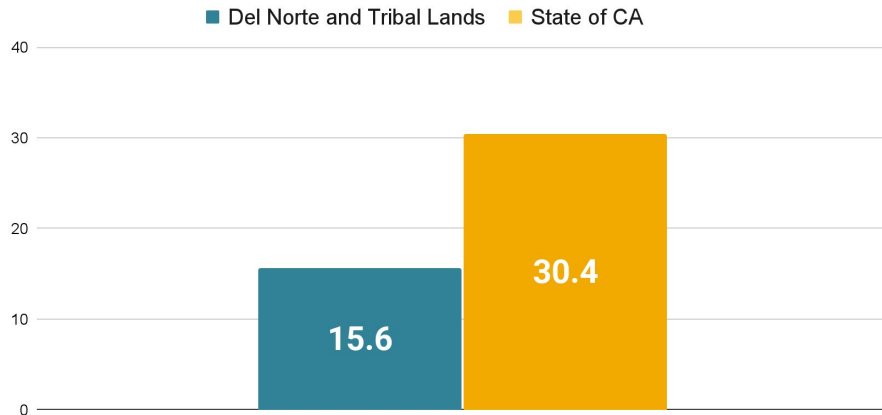
To conduct health work in a county like DNATL, it is important to recognize the disproportionate burden felt by its young people, and engage them as problem solvers in the space.

Background

Childhood poverty is a significant crisis in rural counties like DNATL. There is a link between poverty and failure to thrive during childhood and adulthood, resulting in negative economic, educational, health, and behavioral outcomes.

In DNATL, the percentage of youth living in poverty is disproportionately higher than in the state of California.

Children Living in Poverty (Age 18 and under)



Finding 1

Negative perceptions of youth and the community were self-realizing prophecies.

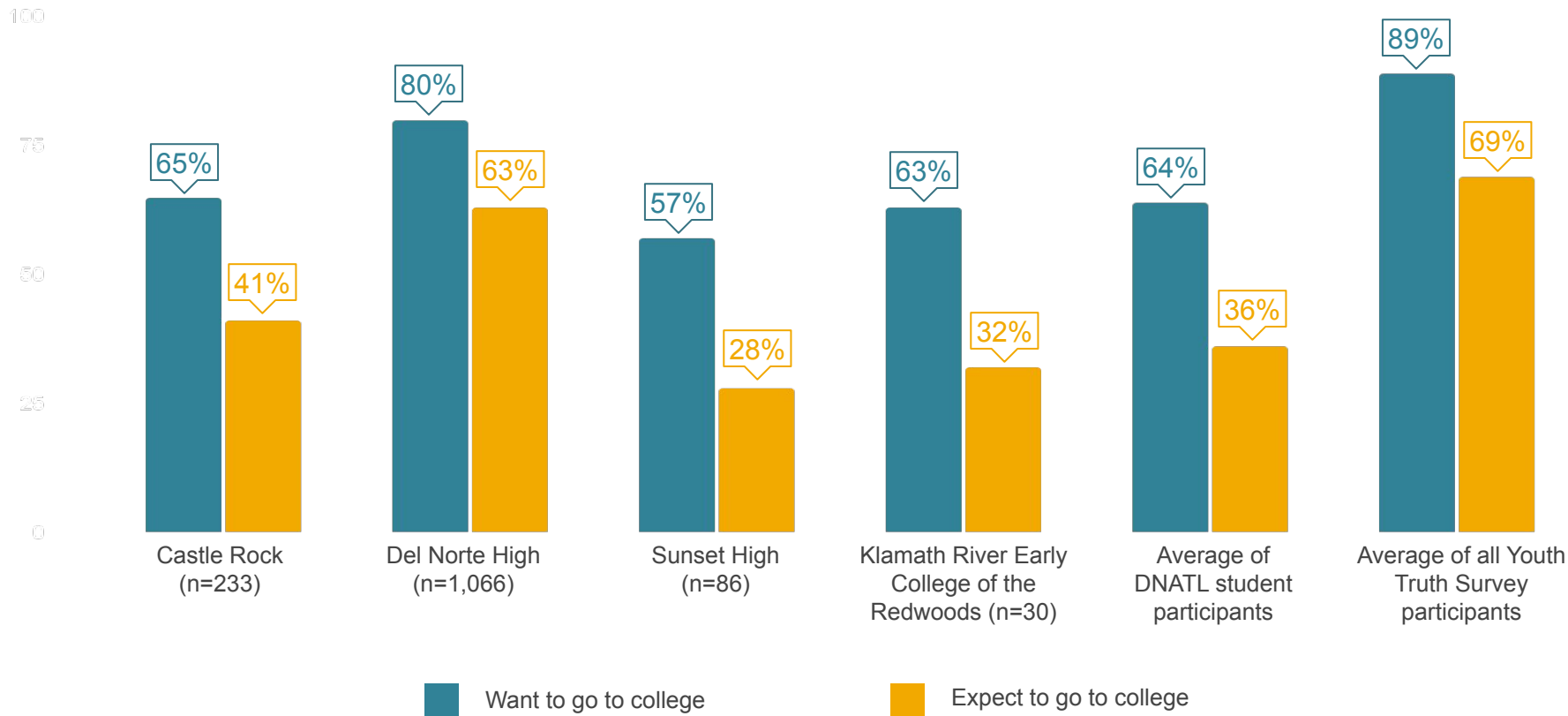
In 2011, The California Endowment (BHC funders) surveyed 1,415 students from all four high schools in the DNATL region to provide a baseline on the challenges and opportunities that young people in the community were facing.

The survey revealed some surprises that got people's attention:

Of students who responded to the survey, 64% mentioned that they wanted to go to college after high school, but only 36% reported that they expected to go to college.

“Youth mentioned that they did not feel supported or have a plan for their future...the number of students indicating that they did not have a plan increased as they got older.”
-Community Leader

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.

Surveys and community interviews revealed a disconnect between what adults felt youth needed or were provided, and what their actual desires were. The community needed better understanding of effective strategies to create opportunity for young people.

The status quo emphasized providing recreational activities as the predominant way of engaging youth. The Initiative was bucking conventional wisdom when it argued that:

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“Though recreation activities like theater or sports are good, it is not youth leadership or civic engagement.”

”

Finding 2

Empowerment is the journey, not the destination.

Opening spaces for youth to show leadership in solving community problems helped shift perspectives about those generations, and break cycles of negative self image and poor outcomes.

To meet the goals of the grant, it was necessary to create leadership positions for youth to exercise real decision making power in. At this nascent stage, the community lacked a shared vision for what power-sharing with youth would look like.

To better communicate the gap between current services and those needed to manifest a positive vision for DNATL's youth, the Initiative created an archetype of the 'DNATL Girl', illustrating the real needs of DNATL youth.

Her toolbox of knowledge and skills including public speaking, research, writing, advocacy, policy, and media.

She is standing on a platform built with the experiences she needs to succeed.



Map showing her pathway to a successful career in her home region.

Real work experiences.

Experiences making healthy choices.

Experiences building leadership skills.

Connection & real relationships with healthy adult mentors.

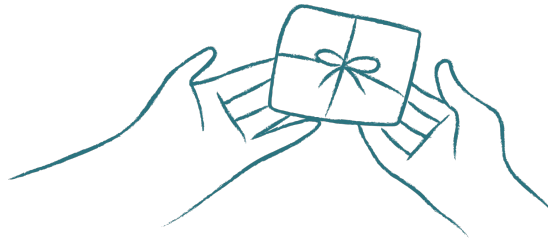
Experiences turning a problem into a positive change in the community.

Experiences interacting in the public arena to make a real community change.

AmeriCorps VISTA Program

In 2012 the Rural Human Services launched a work program that ended up illustrating the importance of acknowledging diverse backgrounds and experiences to overall success of youth work.

The program had the good intention of providing meaningful summer work opportunities to local youth. However, it only accepted 30 out of 60 applicants that represented the “best and brightest”. At the behest of the Initiative, the program was expanded to include any young people who showed interest in participation.



The Youth Training Academy (YTA) Program

During the six-week program youth were trained in:

Leadership
development

Advocacy

Soft skills

Problem
solving

Conflict
resolution

How to
conduct
surveys

The program emphasized the disconnect that youth felt with various organizations. As an example, the youth did not feel comfortable entering the CR college campus, even though it is right next to the high school.

At the beginning, the youth used self-destructive language because this reflected how they saw themselves and how they experienced the way adults viewed them. As the program progressed, the narrative of how the youth saw themselves transformed—youth described how proud they were of being seen as an employee, an intern, or a person working hard to create positive change in their community.

Finding 3

Youth work requires a trauma-informed approach, and the impact of trauma had been under-emphasized in previous work.

Drug and alcohol use, teen pregnancy, and mental health issues are disproportionately present amongst DNATL youth.

Indicator	DNATL	State of CA	Year
Alcohol/Drug Use Among 11th 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	12.0%	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

Interviews with young people reported that in several cases, the trauma was so severe that they became singularly focused on getting through each day, and maintaining basic needs like food and shelter. A significant number of youth participating in the YTA had experienced, or were experiencing, **high levels of trauma that impacted their ability to participate in the program**, and required a higher level of social-emotional support than program staff were trained to handle. The youth advocacy research program had a positive impact on many participants' lives, but **it was difficult to teach youth organizing without aligning the program to social services**. The fundamental challenge was that there was no social worker involved with the summer youth program.

Local entities and organizations began collaborating to establish a **structure of social support** for the YTA. By using empowerment and relationship building combined with trauma informed social work approaches, students and their allies found opportunities to turn traumatizing experiences into positive community change.



Finding 4

The importance of designing from a place of empathy and engagement with youth issues.

Program design should be driven from the experiences, stories, and voices of opportunity youth, their families, and youth serving providers. Understanding what youth in the community were experiencing in their daily lives and how systems and policies were impacting them became the model of change.

Initiative leaders began equipping themselves with human-centered design tools to develop knowledge and design strategies for youth leadership in food access, early childhood literacy, resiliency/community organizing, and health career pathways.

The Initiative recognized the necessity of learning and empathizing with youth who are feeling alienated from work and educational opportunities (“Opportunity Youth”). Interviews with 18 Opportunity Youth and 11 adult allies resulted in the following four goals:

1

Understand why a young person disengages from school and work.

2

Understand the barriers Opportunity Youth experience.

3

Understand the opportunities to prevent future young people from becoming disconnected.

4

Understand the opportunities to assist Opportunity Youth in school or the workforce.

Finding 5

Empowering youth means challenging negative attitudes about DNATL.

In order for youth to be able to thrive in the moment, adults must enforce positive messages for Del Norte's future and that it is a community capable of delivering healthy young people on to successful adult lives. Negative messages about the Del Norte community have only enforced a sense of hopelessness and lack of motivation amongst young people.

Youth spoke about the need to have people in their lives that care about them as individuals. Being respected and treated like they have worth is paramount. The youth expressed that when they are valued and validated, they are better motivated as students and employees. If youth feel they aren't seen or valued, they feel invisible—which can lead to low self esteem and negative self talk.

“We’re being held back by Del Norte and Tribal Lands’ poor self image, which is also becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy for us.”
-DNATL youth

The Initiative learned that people working with youth often feel overwhelmed and unsupported. Often roles working with youth are not valued, or are entry level roles that are not paid well, which can result in high turnover. Without enough time or staff available, the important work of building strong relationships with youth was not being accomplished.

The Initiative conducted empathy interviews with mental health service providers and families which led to identifying important gaps in the system of care. Youth-serving providers learned that trauma is complex and youth have diverse needs. This collaboration led to the expansion of Sources of Strength (SOS)—a suicide prevention and mental health well-being promotion program for students. The SOS program was successful in creating critical and meaningful relationships between teachers, school staff, and students.

“I remember hearing a student say that her grandmother had died and she was in a dark place and couldn't understand how to get out of it. She said she remembered lessons from SOS...and it was the only reason she got out of it.”

-Educator

Finding 6

Increased collaboration grew youth opportunities exponentially— leveraging public funding and resources led to increased capital, opportunities for youth in the community.



Resource leveraging refers to systematically assessing the use of existing resources (ensuring there is no duplication of resources or unused funds for example), identifying additional needs, or creating new resources in the community.



It is successful when there is a way to identify mutual goals and establish a shared vision amongst community partners, and most importantly a collaboration between project leads, Initiative members, employers, government officials, Tribal governments, educators, youth workers, business owners, non-profit directors, etc.



The project's backbone team—The Wild Rivers Community Foundation (WRCF) provided a place where all of the BHC DNATL projects could interact and create that mutual vision of community change.

Employment, Experience, Education (E3) Summer Workforce Program

At the end of every Youth Training Academy, evaluations were performed to understand what youth participants valued the most and the least and what challenges and opportunities local employers experienced when working with youth.

Many employers expressed that youth did not have the basic skills required for entry-level positions, leading to the formation of the Employment, Experience, Education (E3) Summer Workforce program—a collaboration between local business owners, the Del Norte County Office of Education, Sunset High School, Del Norte County Workforce Center, and the BHC Initiative.

Through the E3 program, youth received a week of classroom training on a variety of soft skills, interviewing techniques, and public speaking before moving on to work with local businesses for four weeks of hand-on job experience.

Finding 7

Providing a platform for youth to own their narratives and raise their voices was a powerful catalyst for change across other facets of the Initiative.

The Initiative recognized that youth had an interest in creating media pieces using accessible technology like their smartphones and tablets. The Initiative also recognized the power of storytelling to create change.

These tools, connections, and resources enabled the creation of a youth-led media organization, “Redwood Voice”.

“The first step in changing the narratives 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

Redwood Voice

Redwood Voice is a youth media where people of all ages can tune in, listen, and learn from young leaders in DNATL. It provides a platform to bring awareness to the barriers and trauma youth experience to create a better future for themselves and generations to come. The young local journalists bring attention to injustice in the community and the nation, in addition to providing recommendations for equitable action and for listeners to engage in activism. Some of the articles and podcasts include:

Elijah Brynson: A Talk of Division, Racism, and Ignored Issues

The American Rockwellian Devastation of Roger Gitlin:

The Accountability Corner

Black Lives STILL Matter: How to Support the Movement

Transgender Awareness Month: Transcending Ignorance

Native American Inclusion in Del Norte County Schools

In addition to having a significant presence in the local community, Redwood Voice is also available on several social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other popular social media networks.

“Journalism has the power to motivate. It can make people angry and it can inspire them to change. What I hope to do is to make people here who feel marginalized, who feel victimized, who feel the system and its status quo level of operation are not serving them; I want to give these people a voice and I want them to feel like someone out there is listening and that they are heard.”

-Redwood Voice Intern

AB 329: The California Healthy Youth Act

There is a dire need to provide support for LGBTQIA+ youth. California took a positive step to address this by amending Assembly Bill 329, also known as the California Healthy Youth Act. The bill expanded on an existing law to ensure that students will receive “comprehensive” sex education, including “affirmative” examples of same-sex relationships and education about gender identity.

Questions remained on how inclusive sex education would play out in DNATL classrooms. A young journalist at Del Norte High interviewed queer students on what they would like to see covered in their new “comprehensive” sex education classes, and compiled the insights into a guide titled “This is What Queer-Friendly Sex Ed Should Look Like”.

“

“Growing up queer in a remote Northern California town of just 7,500 people, I experienced firsthand how a rural school can fail to meet the needs of LGBTQ students. It’s a failure with dire consequences.”

- Redwood Voice Intern

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Finding 8

Shifting the focus to health equity and prevention, and recognizing that youth are legitimate participants in community matters and care about the issues in the community, supported the success of the program. Learning that youth are the foremost experts on youth issues.

Throughout the course of the Initiative, youth leaders demonstrated that they cared about issues that matter in their community by researching the problems and working with decision-makers to develop solutions for healthier environments in which they can thrive.

Addressing Underage Drinking

A powerful example of youth-led community change was when Redwood Voice participants tackled underage drinking. Youth produced a documentary about the issue, sharing their experiences, and how it was affecting them personally to see their classmates and friends be harmed and risk death from alcohol poisoning due to ease of access.

Law enforcement assumed students were accessing alcohol from their parent's liquor cabinets, but students knew that this wasn't the case. They knew that most problematic drinking was occurring because students could easily shoplift from local grocery stores.

A group of youth worked with law enforcement and local grocery store managers to consider and implement preventive measures to reduce alcohol theft and therefore, underage alcohol use. They demonstrated the ease in which someone could steal alcohol from non-secure shelving and conceal it using the store restroom. The resulting action was for the store manager to put keyed locks on the store restrooms, and to put "locking bottle caps" on alcohol. These steps reduced alcohol theft, which could be on the order of \$2,000 in stolen goods per week.

The youth leaders brought key-decision makers into the conversation, and were effective in creating a change strategy because they were able to demonstrate that they were the 'experts' on what youth are doing, and should be taken seriously.

Finding 9

When youth are given the support and opportunities they need, they can make a community change.

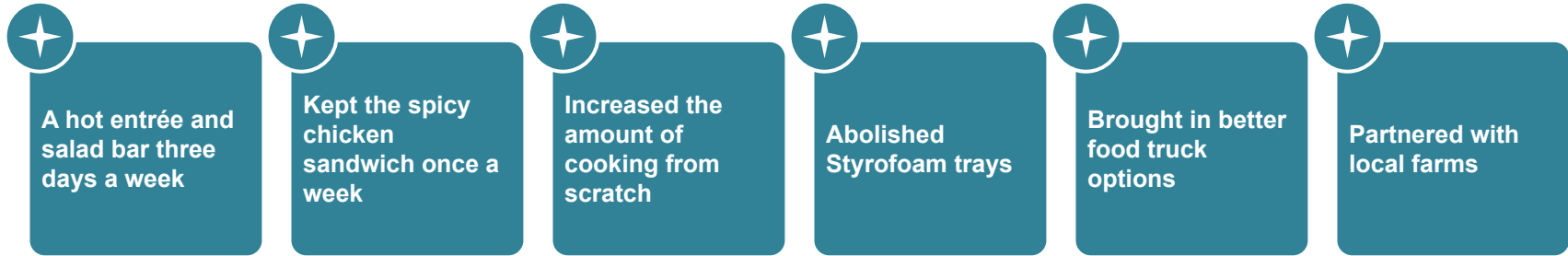
In one example, youth participants wanted to investigate the 2002 fish kill event on the Klamath River, and seek answers to prevent another disaster. The Initiative provided support to youth to lead the project.

Conducting video interviews with Tribal leaders and community members, youth created a piece educating the public about the cultural significance of salmon and the danger of fish kill events. It also brought awareness of the shortage of water in local rivers and the devastation that low and warm water can cause to a species. The video has been viewed over 11,000 times on YouTube, made all the local newspapers, was shown on various news outlets, and shared on Facebook.



The Student Organizing Committee

Another example of student power at play was the positive change in food at Sunset High School. Students joined together to form the Student Organizing Committee (SOC) and hosted a meeting at their school and invited teachers, parents, policymakers, community members, and other students. The SOC gave speeches and testimonies and figured out that if they gave up the unpopular frozen pizzas and hamburgers, they could add in fresh fruits and vegetables without breaking the budget. Their dedicated work led to:



Youth-driven projects led to policy changes, better amenities, and healthy and sustainable reforms.

Finding 10

The result of the ten-year initiative is hope for many DNATL youth. The transition in the participant's outlook on their community was not solely due to the training opportunities and resources; it also included how Youth Initiative staff interacted with youth.

Youth often described themselves as being equipped to succeed due to the education, training, and resources that the DNATL BHC Initiative created.

They mentioned the feeling of being supported, valued, respected, and taken seriously by the Initiative staff as one of the most positive impacts on their lives. When asked what their most significant achievements and transformative moments were with the Initiative, they described scenarios where they could dialogue and work with adult leaders in the community.

The feeling of being valued and supported by a community motivates youth to engage in social justice work for themselves, their peers, and the next generation. The youth participants indicated that the Initiative inspired them to succeed.

“Never did I ever feel alienated or left out of the conversation just because I was young.”

-DNATL Youth

Finding 11

The groundwork being done by the Initiative to support youth was a source of resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 created challenges for youth with all services, schools, and programs going online. The Initiative continued to invest in the well-being of youth by funding Gateway Education, a local non-profit organization providing a safe space for youth to socialize and participate in outdoor recreational activities while following COVID-19 safety guidelines. It focused on creating self-awareness and healthy relationships through educational, recreational, and artistic activities out in nature. It also offered a wide selection of summer and fall experiences that were focused on survival skills and uses Del Norte County's natural environment as a creative, and nurturing space to learn, explore, and have fun.

Parents reported that their children became more confident in themselves, and observed improvements in the way they communicate their emotions, stress, and anxiety.

Tangible Wins and Benefits

2011

- Del Norte Unified School District (DNUSD) receives grant funding to work on issues raised in ACLU lawsuit for racial discrimination against Native American students.

2012

- School district receives grant to support psychological counseling services in schools.
- The Smith River Gym at Smith River Elementary School is established through a community-led joint-use agreement involving the County Parks and Recreation Department and the Del Norte County Schools.

2013

- School environment improvements are implemented through adoption of Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS).
- Hydration stations are installed at three schools and a healthy food service program is implemented in all schools including salad bars, increased scratch cooking, local farm to school strategies (vendor contracts), and Harvest of the Month.
- DNUSD Board adopts the Del Norte Engaged Learning Model including Social Emotional Learning and restorative justice components.

2014

- School district adopts new school discipline policy and eliminates willful defiance suspensions.
- School budget includes additional funding to support school gardens, local produce vendors, salad bars at all schools, and a higher percentage of from scratch meals.
- DNUSD enters into an agreement with Yurok Tribe to share Yurok student data so Tribal Court liaisons can provide an intervention with Tribal families when students are absent.
- Youth with True North Organizing Network organize first-ever, non-partisan Del Norte School Board candidate forum.

Tangible Wins and Benefits

2015

- School Wellness Policy is created and adopted.
- DNUSD adopts a budget that allocates Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) funding to support foster student well-being, which included implementing a prevention and whole-child focused collaboration model. During the first year of implementation foster student academic performance improves.
- Sunset High School students organize to improve their weight room and create a safe place for youth to increase their physical activity.
- The Dept. of Health & Human Services, NGOs, and youth-serving organizations partner to deliver Youth Training Academy summer 2015.

2016

- Crescent City Council votes to adopt a youth-driven policy to expand food trucks' service areas and hours as a result of the growing local, healthy food economy.
- True North Organizing Network youth lead Del Norte County Board of Supervisors non-partisan candidate forum.
- DNUSD commits to purchasing local, organic meat and produce for its school nutrition program.
- DNUSD adopts policy recognizing Native American students' absences from school to attend biannual Tribal ceremonies by offering an independent study option, rather than marking the students absent or truant.
- DNUSD designs and makes available a new course that focuses on Native American Studies to students at Del Norte High School.
- After Klamath residents raise concerns about low test scores at Margaret Keating Elementary School, the DNUSD votes to allocate funding for an additional full-time teacher at the school.
- As a result of youth organizing, DNUSD vote to replace Styrofoam with compostable cafeteria trays. The DNUSD allocates \$4,000 to support this effort.

Tangible Wins and Benefits

2017

- College of the Redwoods creates youth leadership and career development education courses that generates \$20,000 in state funding to sustain the leadership and career pathway courses, including youth organizing.
- DNUSD successfully implements a Student Information System that connects student wellness indicators and school climate goals to daily student assessment. The system can create early warning signs that provide daily data about how well students are meeting academic and social-emotional goals, including the school's Positive Behavior Interventions & Support (PBIS) goals.
- DNUSD changes its Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) process from a punishment to a restorative model. Partner agencies realign services to support preventative practices with students and families facing truancy charges.
- DNUSD wins state funding to implement educational equity as the center of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to better align initiatives and resources within the district to address the needs of all students.
- Del Norte County prevention program and DNUSD partner to deliver a leadership development class taught every day with middle school students at Crescent Elk in Crescent City.

2018

- DNUSD makes training on secondary trauma, restorative justice, and youth mental health first aid available to all staff.
- DNUSD in partnership with the "Whose Schools? Our Schools!" group expands its family and community engagement process for gathering input for the Local Control Accountability Plan by hosting a series of input sessions in Smith River, Klamath, Crescent City, and through student focus groups.
- Health career employees join the E3 initiative to offer youth paid jobs while they earn high school credits.
- Del Norte County recreation department partners with local community theater companies to offer performing arts camps as part of their summer prevention and youth leadership recreation initiatives.
- The Wautec Meeting Hall restoration project is helping to build hope and reestablish a shared community space in a very isolated, remote reservation village that has no electricity, telephones, or nearby markets. The project, conducted in partnership with the Yurok Tribe, is identified by residents as necessary after a state of emergency was declared when seven young Tribal members between 16-31 in this small upriver community of 150 people took their own lives in a span of 18 months.

Tangible Wins and Benefits

2019

- Redwood Coast Transit Authority changes bus route to accommodate youth participants in Youth Training Academy at College of the Redwoods Del Norte.
- Youth with True North Organizing Network successfully organizes and wins an improved Anti-Bullying policy focused on equity with the DNUSD Board.
- DNUSD, BHC DNATL, and True North Organizing Network conduct collaborative LCAP community engagement meetings, engaging with 200 families, students, and community members about what they see as the highest needs for their students. The results are presented back to the DNUSD Cabinet and School Board to be included as they draft the 2019-2021 LCAP.