

The Student Stressors and Assets Survey: An Assessment of the Developmental Assets™ of Students in the Bernards Township School District

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Executive Summary

The results of a survey to examine the Developmental Assets of 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students in Bernards Township, NJ School District (School District) are presented in this report. The survey was similar to surveys conducted in 2005 and 2012. Developmental Assets are factors, that if present, may help prevent or protect against high-risk or problem behavior such as drug abuse or delinquency. The eight Developmental Asset categories that were examined included:¹

1. **Support**—support from family, school, and community;
2. **Boundaries and expectation**—clear expectations and limits;
3. **Constructive use of time**—enriching activities in which young people can participate;
4. **Commitment to learning**—lifelong commitment to learning and education;
5. **Positive identity**—Sense of purpose and worth;
6. **Social competencies**—Skills equipping young people to make effective choices;
7. **Positive values**—guiding values for choices; and
8. **Empowerment**—valuing of young people by the community.

Survey Design and Distribution

The initial design of the survey occurred in 2005 and was a collaborative effort involving staff of the Bernards Township Health Department, staff from the Bernards Township School District, and Kirk Harlow, Dr.P.H. The 2018 survey is based on the 2005 survey.

Survey items to assess the Developmental Assets and other content areas were developed in two ways. Twenty-five of the survey's questions were taken directly from the survey, Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors.² This instrument was designed by the Search Institute as a tool to examine Developmental Assets, and the items selected were identified by the design group as representative of the Developmental Asset areas to be assessed.

The remaining questions were designed specifically for this survey. These items were designed to capture information on a number of additional attributes and behaviors of students to help understand factors that may be associated with the Developmental Assets. Some of the other

¹ See the Search Institute, <https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/development-assets/developmental-assets-framework/>

² © Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN, 1996. The items were used by permission. For the current survey, see: <https://www.search-institute.org/surveys/choosing-a-survey/ab/>

information that was collected included student demographics, student cheating activities, bullying experiences, potential adult confidants, and participation in extra-curricular activities.

The target population for the survey included all 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in the School District. Parents were informed of the survey and asked to grant permission to complete the survey. The surveys were conducted using a computer-based platform. Access to the surveys was provided to students whose parents granted permission. Students were encouraged to complete all survey items, but were given the option to choose either “Don’t know” or “Not applicable” on questions they did not want to answer. Student responses to the survey were completely anonymous.

The response rates by gender and grade are presented in Table 1. There were 1314 completed surveys, resulting in an overall response rate of 70%. As Table 1 shows, there are some differences in response rates when looked at by gender and grade. The response rates were lowest among the 10th and 12th grades. In addition, the response rates for females were somewhat higher than males’ in the 10th and 12th grades.

Grade	Males	Females	Total
6th	81%	82%	82%
8th	86%	85%	85%
10th	59%	69%	64%
12th	60%	70%	65%
Total	67%	74%	70%

Results and Conclusions

Two tables designed to provide an overview of the survey results are presented below. These tables provide the results of selected survey items that represent each of the Developmental Asset categories. The mean scores for seven of the eight Developmental Asset categories are presented in Table 2. Because the Developmental Asset category, Constructive Use of Time, was measured in terms of participation in activities, the results are presented separately in Table 3.

The mean scores presented in Table 2 for the Developmental Asset categories all are above the midpoint score of 3; results consistent with the more detailed frequency scores noted in the full report. As Table 3 shows, about three-fourths of the students indicated participation in some athletic or intramural activity. The results of the survey also indicated that most students considered their participation athletic or intramural activities at least worthwhile.

These results indicate that most students surveyed reported high levels of Developmental Assets. This suggests that most students had in place factors that contribute to reducing risk or problem behaviors. While the summary tables do not include the results of all survey items, the general results presented are consistent with those discussed in detail in the full report.

Table 2. Mean Scores for Selected Developmental Asset Categories				
Asset Categories	Grade			
	6th	8th	10th	12th
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
Support				
Parent Support Summary	4.23	4.02	3.86	3.91
School Support Summary	3.72	3.34	3.10	3.47
Other Support Summary	3.90	3.68	3.53	3.65
Boundaries and Expectations				
Family/School Rules Summary	3.85	3.86	3.71	3.60
Commitment to Learning				
Commitment to School Summary	4.20	4.10	4.09	4.18
Positive Identity				
Emotional Wellbeing Summary	4.18	3.97	3.97	3.94
Social Competencies				
Resistance Summary	4.04	3.73	3.47	3.47
People Relationships Summary	3.98	3.87	3.92	3.96
Positive Values				
Work Ethic/Responsibility Summary	3.55	3.33	3.40	3.37
Empowerment				
Empowerment and Safety Summary	3.41	3.06	3.12	3.28

Table 3. Percent of Students Participating in Athletics/Intramural Sports	
Grade	% Yes
6th	89.5%
8th	82.4%
10th	82.8%
12th	80.1%

The Developmental Asset categories are very broad constructs. The summary tables do not fully reflect some of the variations within the Developmental Asset categories. Even though the overall scores are positive, several areas merit further comment. A brief list summarizing these findings follows.

- While parental support was high, about one-fourth of all students indicated feeling too much pressure to do well from parents. Students who felt too much pressure from parents were more likely to indicate feeling they did not get the support they need from parents.
- About half of the students indicated getting support from teachers, but only about 40% of all students indicated feeling that teachers really cared about them. Most students identified a “Close relative or family friend” as their most likely confidant if they need support. About half of student indicated they would be at least “Somewhat likely” to consider a teacher or coach as a confidant.
- Students indicated feeling that school and family rules were clear. About 20% of 12th graders, however, indicated they would not get punished for breaking family rules.
- Most students indicated high levels of achievement motivation. They reported expecting to do well, that hard work would lead to positive results, and realistic expectations of success. There was, however, a small segment of students who did not expect to succeed with hard work.
- Most students indicated they felt good about themselves and did not experience frequent sadness or loneliness. About 25% of 10th and 12th graders, however, reported feeling sad a lot of the time. In addition, the results indicated feelings of sadness were associated with a variety of factors including feeling there is not someone to turn to, parents do not provide needed help and support, the school does not provide encouragement, and not expecting to succeed.
- Most students indicated they thought things through before acting, although about 25% students of indicated a tendency toward acting impulsively. The results also suggest that students who reported doing things they regret afterwards were more likely to respond that they did not think things through before acting.
- Copying another student’s homework was the most common form of cheating reported. By 10th grade, over half of the students reported copying two or more times in the past year. About one quarter of 10th and 12th graders reported copying an Internet document for a classroom assignment two or more times. The findings also indicated students who cheat in one way are more likely to cheat in other ways. In addition, there was a positive correlation between the belief that people who are willing to lie or break rules are more likely to succeed and cheat in school.
- Over 80% of the students had never been bullied in any way. Around 5% of students, however, reported experiencing some form of bullying once a week or more. In addition, those students who experienced bullying once a week or more were more likely to report feeling sad and lonely.

- About 12% of 12th graders reported riding with someone their own age who had been drinking. They indicated they believed 30% of the drivers were drunk. Over one-quarter of students responded they had ridden in a car with someone not their age who had been drinking. Further, they reported they thought 19% of those drivers were drunk.

Implications of the Results

The results of the survey indicated that most students possess high levels of the Development Assets. These results are consistent with the positive results from the surveys conducted in 2005 and 2012.³ This suggests that one of the most important steps for the School District and community is to continue to sustain the positive results into the future. While the overall results are positive, there are some findings that warrant additional comment.

First, there is a segment of about 25% of students who may be experiencing some form of emotional problems. The limited questions on the survey to identify that group are just broad indicators. It is not possible to determine the severity or even if these are temporary circumstances. These findings should be viewed as a signal that suggests additional attention to the emotional wellbeing of students may be worthwhile.

The findings also indicate that the students experiencing some form of emotional difficulty also are likely to experience other issues. The results suggest that students in this group are more likely to feel like they have no one to turn to, do not get the support they need from their parents, and feel they are not getting encouragement in school. Also, students reporting feeling sad a lot were less likely to reach out to a confidant than other students. In other words, students who are experiencing emotional difficulties not only feel they are not getting needed support, but may not reach out to someone. The challenge is to find approaches to engage students who may be experiencing emotional difficulties.

Second, the evidence that some students are riding in cars in which the driver is drunk suggests the need for increased efforts to prevent driving while drunk. It may not be possible to prevent drinking among young people, but communicating about designated drivers, approaches for taking the keys of a potential drunk driver, and arrangements with local taxi companies are among the possible responses to the issue.

Third, the results indicate that riding with someone who may be drunk is not just about peers riding together. It may be necessary to help students be able to address a situation in which a parent or other adult may be driving under the influence of alcohol.

Fourth, cheating in school is a national problem, and the survey's results reveal the problem is also present in these students. In addition, for some students there is the belief that it may be necessary to cheat to achieve success. It may be useful to explore approaches to reduce cheating such as software that identifies plagiarism in written work. A greater challenge will be to counter attitudes in which some cheating is viewed as an acceptable means to an end.

³ More information comparing the results of surveys is available in the report, *Annual Comparisons of Developmental Assets Results, Bernards Township School District, 2005, 2012, and 2018*.

Finally, about 25% of students responded they did not think things through before acting, and those students were more likely to do things they regret. It is important to see these results as an indication that this segment of students is aware that they act without thinking and regret it afterward. It is possible these students may be receptive to learning ways to strengthen their ability to “look before they leap.” Making resources available to students to aid them in this area may be a useful step.