

AHL Youth Focus Groups



Lessons Learned from Discussions with High School Youth

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What are the
AHL youth
focus
groups?





Background

- Focus groups with Lynnfield High School students conducted in February 2021
- Two one-hour sessions held at the school
 - 9/10th graders – 7 total; 3 freshmen, 3 sophomores; all female; 4 on-site, 2 remote
 - 11/12th graders – 7 total; 0 juniors, 7 seniors; 3 males, 4 females; all on-site
- Voluntary and confidential participation, parental consent required, gift cards for participation
- Facilitated by AHL
- Data analyzed by external evaluators at SSRE
- Topics
 - Life in Lynnfield
 - Health and well-being of youth
 - Substance use among youth
 - Factors that promote substance use or help youth to not use
 - What is being done and can be done to prevent substance use among youth

What main
themes
emerged?





Benefits & Challenges to Living Here

9th & 10th Graders

Benefits

- Community (tight knit, welcoming, friendly, supportive)
- Schools (good school system, nice people)
- Variety of activities (music, theater, arts, sports)

Challenges

- Drawbacks to small community (lack of exposure in "bubble," word travels quickly, negative perception from the outside looking in, fewer options and experiences)
- Drawbacks to small school (cliques, stress)
- Pressure (to excel, to fit in)
- Not knowing where to get help for selves or friends

11th & 12th Graders

Benefits

- Sense of community (supportive, respectful, everyone knows each other)

Challenges

- Living in a "bubble" (lack of exposure, lack of diversity)
- Challenging to establish and maintain close personal relationships



Impacts on Youth Health

9th & 10th Graders

- Stress (general, COVID-related)
- School workload (time devoted to schoolwork, tiring nature of online classes and homework, lack of free time)
- Time spent on the computer both during school and for homework
- Lack of adequate and quality sleep (sleep deprivation, trouble falling asleep, trying to have "own time" after school means staying up later)

11th & 12th Graders

- Lack of social interaction due to COVID (no extracurriculars, nothing to look forward to after school or on weekends)
- School workload and structure (time devoted to schoolwork, tiring nature of online classes, difficult learning online)
- Anxiety caused by online interactions (online classes, social media)
- More time to sleep now (more regular schedule due to COVID)



Substance Use among LHS Students

9th & 10th Graders

- Risks involved (overdose, DUI)
- Stress-related use (general, COVID-related)
- Less exposure due to COVID (not hanging out with friends so less opportunity to use or hear about others using)
- Exposure increasing with age (limited exposure so far but anticipating more)
- Specific substances
 - Alcohol (seltzer and other sweetened alcohol drinks, advertised drinks)
 - Vaping (normalized, nicotine, in school bathrooms)
 - Marijuana (not much personal exposure yet, exposure in the broader community)

11th & 12th Graders

- Vaping
- Use as a coping mechanism
- Seasonality (more prevalent in the summer)
- Alcohol
- Adderall



How Youth Use (Groups vs. Alone)

9th & 10th Graders

- Most use starts in groups (*social*)
- Using alone is associated with *addiction*

11th & 12th Graders

- Use in group settings is considered *social*
- Using alone is considered *troubling*



How Youth Get Substances

9th & 10th Graders

- Home (alcohol) - parents providing it to kids, kids taking it from home
- Other sources – older friends (alcohol), third-party sales (alcohol), local stores (vapes), online (vapes)

11th & 12th Graders

- From parents (mostly alcohol, some nicotine)
- On social media (often from college students)
- Using fake IDs (alcohol)



Where Youth Use Substances

9th & 10th Graders

- Homes (house parties, including those where parents supply alcohol; less common during COVID because kids aren't going out and parents aren't going away as much)
- Open areas (more common in outside spaces like parking lots during COVID, particularly alcohol use)
- School bathrooms (vaping)

11th & 12th Graders

- Homes (house parties, including those where parents know use is occurring)
- Private and/or open spaces (school bathrooms, the woods, cars)



Why Youth Use & Things that Promote Use

9th & 10th Graders

- Stress and stressful situations (dealing with stress, coping and self-medication for anxiety and depression)
- Social influences (seeing others use, wanting to fit in, wanting to be social)
- Parental influences

11th & 12th Graders

Why youth use

- Social influences (seeing others use [upper classmen, team captains, college kids, older siblings], wanting to fit in, wanting to be social, insecurity)
- Entertainment and stimulation
- Stress relief

Things that promote youth use

- Lack of repercussions (from authorities, from parents)
- Social media (seeing other people post about use, influencers)
- Other media (use on TV, in movies)
- Lack of health messaging after middle school



What It's Like for Youth Who Don't Use

9th & 10th Graders

- Youth who choose not to use aren't treated differently
- Pressures begin during the transition years for freshmen and sophomores (exposure, friend group changes)

11th & 12th Graders

Why it's like for youth who don't use

- Not treated differently, but not "in the know"
- Sometimes feel like you're missing out
- You end up being responsible for others who use (the designated driver)

Things that make use less likely

- Surrounding yourself with positive influences
- Getting through impressionable periods (freshman and sophomore years) and creating your own foundation
- Respect for other people and their decisions
- Positive parental influences



Messaging & Messengers

9th & 10th Graders

- Social media
- Influencers (famous people followed on social media)
- Older siblings
- TV (news, commercials)

11th & 12th Graders

- Lynnfield youth use Snapchat (private stories) and Instagram
- Not impressed by posts showing use



Things That Need to Change

9th & 10th Graders

- More emphasis on mental health
 - Really listen to youth
 - Understand compounding stress (including COVID)
 - Teach about mental health in school
 - Enhance school-based health education

11th & 12th Graders

- Lack of high school health education
- Older students serving as negative influences on younger students, especially on sports teams
- Prevalence of social media

Positive Things Lynnfield Is Doing & What Else Should Be Done



9th & 10th Graders

Positive things Lynnfield is doing

- Messaging related to substance use (speakers, commercials, targeted website messaging)

What else should be done

- Encourage strong relationships between youth and adults (teachers, parents)
- Use messaging that doesn't stigmatize
- Screening and assessment (anonymous check-ins)
- Make students aware of available resources (counselors, helplines)
- More guest speakers

11th & 12th Graders

Positive things Lynnfield is doing

- Community awareness nights

What else should be done

- Help students access support for mental health concerns
- More relatable prevention efforts
- Target the transition years (freshman and sophomore years)
- Promote positive decision-making among youth and parents