Mesabi Behavioral
HEALTH NETWORK

SOCIAL CONNECTION SURVEY

Understanding Teen Connection, Belonging, and Opportunities to Improve Programming

WHY SOCIAL CONNECTION MATTERS

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Social connection is one of the strongest protective factors for youth wellbeing. Young peaople who feel connected to friends, schools, families, and communities experience better mental health, stronger resilience, improved academic outcomes, and a greater sense of belonging.

Research consistently shows that positive social relationships help protect against loneliness, anxiety, depression, and other challenges youth face. Social connection also supports healthy identity, self-worth, self-esteem, and emotional wellbeing.

About The Survey

The Youth Social Connection Survey was conducted in two phases to better understand how teens connect with peers, what barriers they face, and what opportunities they would like to see in their communities.

236 students
Attending the Youth In Action Make A Difference Conference completed the initial survey

222 students
Completed a revised survey distributed through participating schools in northern St. Louis County.

Who Participated

Youth In Action Conference

Students represented grades 6-12 with the largest group being 10th graders (25%). Sixteen schools were represented, with the highest participation coming from Northwoods, Duluth, and Mesabi East

School Based Survey

Students in the second survey were also primarily 10th graders (42.8%). The largest groups of respondants came from Mesabi East (43.7%) and South Ridge (26.6%), with additional participation from other regional schools.

May 2026

HOW CONNECTED ARE OUR YOUTH?

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Where Youth Currently Connect

Students most frequently reported spending time with friends at someone's house, while driving around, online, at resturants, in stores, and in outdoor spaces. Nearly half of youth identified "driving around" as a common way to spend time with friends, while more than 40% reported connecting through online gaming and social media

These findings suggest that youth are actively seeking opportunities to connect but rely on informal spaces that were not intentionally designed for yourth engagement. The popularity of driving around, gathering in parking lots, and spending time in commercial spaces reflects a shortage of dedicated, youth centered places to meet, socialize, and participate in activities.

Students were provided the opportunity to write-in additional places they spend time with friends, 54 youth provided responses.

OTHER OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

Where Else Youth Spend Time with Friends (Open-Ended Responses)

Where Youth Spend Time with Friends (Open-Ended Responses)	N	Example
Games	1	Trivia
House / Someone's house	1	Relatives house
Walk around / Walking around town	1	Walking around town
Work	2	At the work lol
Beach	2	Beach
Movies	2	Movies
Other / Places	3	Places
School	7	School
Sports / Activities	14	Bowling alley, sports camp, biking, basketball, dance, horse riding, weight lifting
Outdoors / Nature	6	At the lake, woods, cabin, on a farm, middle of know where, Giants ridge
Recreation / Hobbies	5	Guitar, gym, practices, school games, the gym, gym hockey
Sports Related	4	Sports, sports practices/weight room, gym in biwabik and sports
Other Locations	3	Food Place
TOTAL RESPONSES	54	

HOW CONNECTED ARE OUR YOUTH?

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Time Spent With Friends

Youth were asked "During a typical week, how much time do you spend with friends in person, outside of school and structured activities (sports, organized clubs)?". The findings show that most youth are spending time with friends regularly, but a substantial portion have limited opportunities for in-person connection. About 71% of youth reported spending time with friends at least several times a week, including 36.2% who connect every day or almost every day.

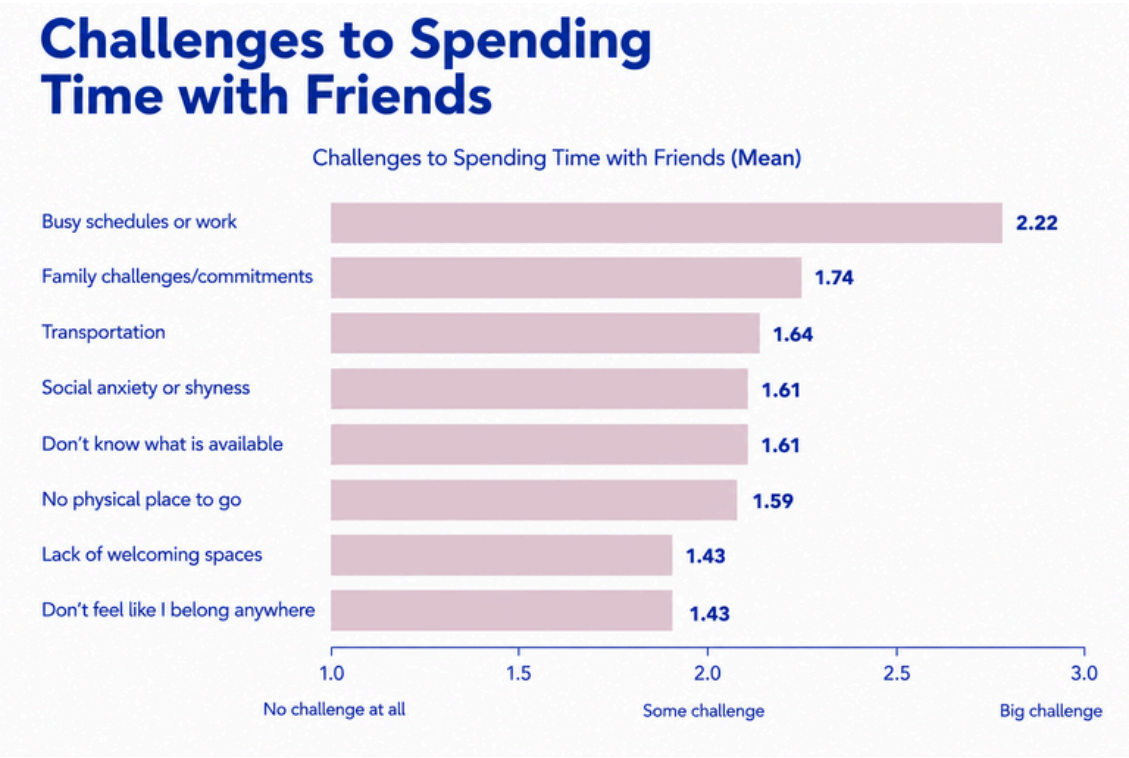
Time spent with Friends (n = 453)

Time Spent with Friends	Frequency	Percent
Every day or almost every day	164	36.2%
Several times a week	157	34.7%
Not often	132	29.1%
Total	**453**	**100%**

However, nearly 3 in 10 youth (29.1%) reported that they do not often spend time with friends outside of school or structured activities. This suggests an opportunity to strengthen accessible, welcoming ways for youth to connect formally and informally with their peers.

Challenges To Spending Time With Friends

The most common challenges to spending time with friends, indicated by a 1 for "no challenge at all" to 3, "big challenge", were "busy schedules or work" and "family challenges/commitments". The least common challenges were "lack of welcoming spaces" and "don't feel like I belong anywhere."



SOCIAL CONNECTION YOUTH FEEDBACK

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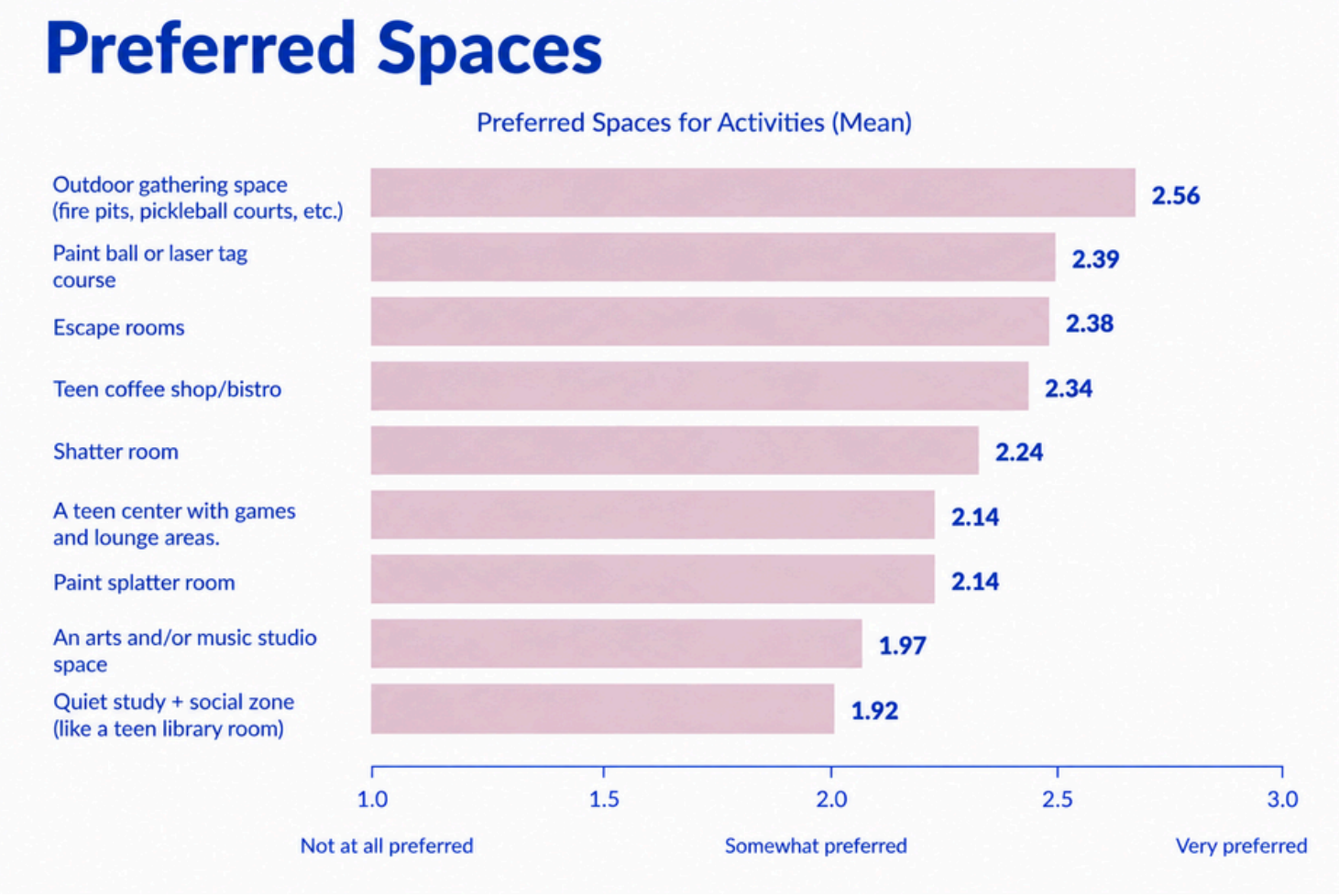
Preferred Spaces

Students were asked “What type of spaces would help you to get together with friends outside of school?” and were invited to rate their preferred spaces for activities; indicated by a 1 for “not at all” to 3, “a great deal”. Outdoor gathering spaces were the most preferred spaces for activities. The next three, in order of more to less preferred, were paint ball or laser tag course, Escape rooms, and Teen coffee shop/bistros.



When asked, “What other ideas do you suggest,” students offered lots of ideas! The winner, again, was sports. The next most common recommendation was a variety of types of “rooms”, ranging from coffee to a gym. The list is presented on the next page, because so many students took the time to comment.

Other Ideas

Category	Ideas
Accepting, Friendly	Somewhere where friendly, like-minded, accepting people hang out.
Art	Painting
Bible Study	YOUTH LED BIBLE STUDY
Clubs	Teen activities like clubs. Teen club
Food	Food
Food Cooking	Cooking together! Food brings thoughtfulness and peace
Games	Puzzles
Gardening	Something with gardening or plants.
Movie/Outdoors	Outdoor movie night
Movies	Movie nights
Museum	Museums
Music	Listening to music karaoke
Online	Online video games
Outdoors	Lake/ beach Outdoor activities and games Places for bon fires
Outdoors Park	Go to the Olcott park in Virginia MN. Olcott park Olcott Park
Rooms	Fidget room I LOVE ESCAPE ROOM Maybe a teen video game area with video games available to play for free including party games. There could be different video game consoles and there should probably be a computer available. People should be allowed to bring their own games too. Ping pong,
Rooms Music	A karaoke room Singing room
Rooms Relax	Just a relaxed atmosphere, lounge rooms or even a spa. Somewhere you don't need to be someone you're not, purely just being relaxed and content within yourself.
Rooms/Food & Drink	Starbucks room
Rooms/Gym	Gym room
Shopping	Mall
Sports	A sporting gather Less busy sports More team sports areas
Sports Bowling	A wood floor with gutters and lanes and bowling balls Bowling Bowling Room
Sports Indoors In Winter	Indoor sports facilities for in winter!
Sports Outdoors horse Riding/Rodeo	Riding arena for horses and rodeo
Sports Skiing	Skiing
Sports/Exercise	Ropes course track room Trampoline park (2) YMCA
Sports room Gym	gym room

SOCIAL CONNECTION YOUTH FEEDBACK

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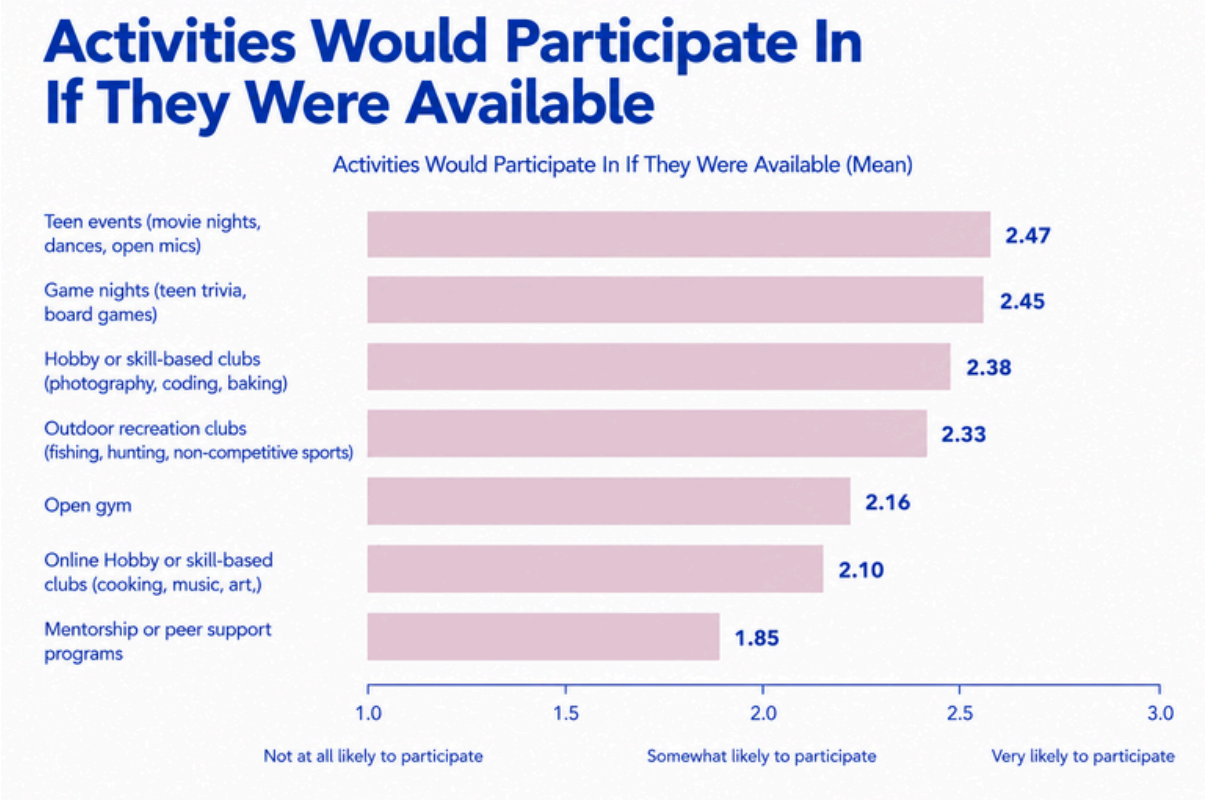
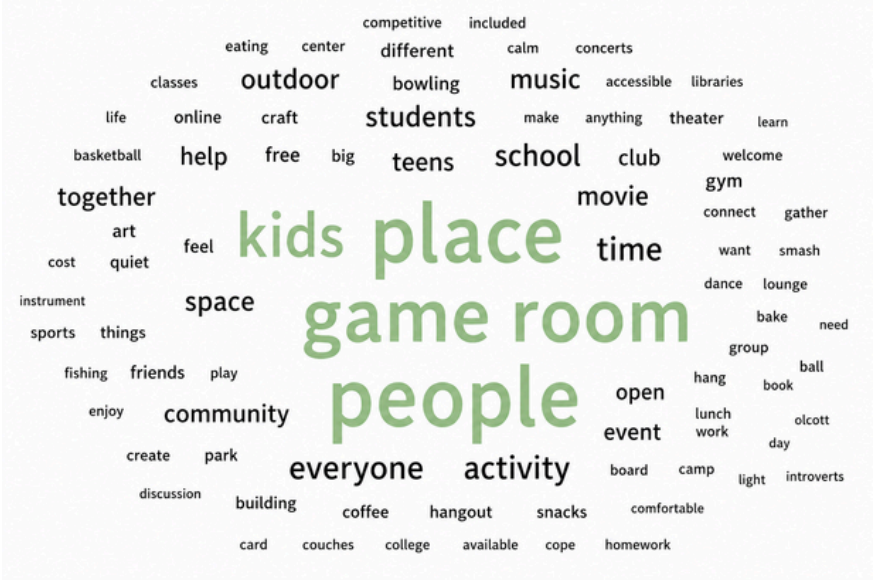
Activities

Students were asked a similar question about activities, “What types of activities would you participate in with friends outside of school if they were available to you?”; indicated by a 1 for “not at all” to 3, “yes, definitely”. The highest rated activities were teen events, game nights, clubs, and outdoor recreation clubs. Examples of “other” responses were sewing, street dances, and competitive golf.



When asked, “If you could create one event or space to help students connect, what would it be,” 75% of the students responded (N of usable comments=151); their responses were creative and diverse. A Word Cloud was created to introduce the variety of ideas. Students’ comments fell into 11 areas.



Other Ideas

Category	Ideas
Mental health	An event to help people going through depression and anxiety Ideas and methods on how to cope with stress Motivational groups Mutual aid discussion places
Outdoor	Outdoors events A welcoming camp especially one where you can pick a camp name for kids who are queer or want a nickname or just for fun Fishing Fishing club A gathering around a fire late night A space big enough for paint ball or something. 5 day camping trip A festival in the Olcott Park in Virginia Minnesota A game or activity like laser tag Hike field trip or something with good food like a dinner Horse riding classes An early morning activity like a walk with snacks like coffee or a food bar waiting for when everyone gets back Summer rec for older kids it would be a park outside Olcott park
Space	A chill room at school where there's comfy chairs A public space where people can just hang out A space where you don't have to do anything or worry about anything no work no school or anything a space with games and nice couches for teens to hangout, study, or do any of the sorts an adult free space with comforting vibes. couches. dim lights. tv. An event where you can get to know people but also get to be active. Chill room with games and food Fun open area Hangout space Having something that works for most people that is easy to locate and at good times I would want to create a night of fun with multiple different activities such as star gazing, games, and art Something that everyone feels welcome to.
Dance	More dances, or clubs of some sort
Movie	A big movie Drive in movie Minecraft movie One movie for all students Movie and game night with food Outdoor movie night

Other Ideas

Category	Ideas
Music	A instrument thing and people can come play and try instruments Concerts Outdoor concerts Theater I guess One big movie theater for all students Some kind of theater program
Arts, Music, Drama EX Movies, concerts	A craft group A place to do art and fun crafts Craft/art nights would be enjoyed by a large variety of teenagers. Crafts I would want to create a night of fun with multiple different activities such as star gazing, games, and art Some more art events that are actually at the school so that they are accessible.
Academic/Study	a study zone Group study sessions Group study sessions Study hall for homework preferably during the school day Study hall for homework preferably during the school day Study room Study room Teen Bible study group A place where students aren't bothered by other distractions and have tutors to help them with work Help people with stuff like homework Help people with stuff like homework or like opening a door Tutoring room Tutoring room
Other	An event focused around college/future planning to make people feel more confident about where they're going Book club Book club! Having everyone come together to help the community
Places to Eat	Place with food and games A free event that don't cost so much for the low income students Fair A coffee shop A eating room. An event with food bake sale Baking or cooking event (teaching, learning, exploring). buffet Coffee meet up hot chocolate food I would make a soda bar place in the downtown mall. Or Frozen Yogurt! We need froyo Place were u can buy food and drinks and then can also all hangout like a restaurant but with ability to connect with others easily Snack bar

SOCIAL CONNECTION YOUTH FEEDBACK

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Intervention

When students were asked if they would use a social connection app, 24% said they definitely would use it. Students also rated students' likelihood to use the app on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 100 (completely). More students rated the likelihood that they would use the APP between 50% and 100%.

Figure 2. Students Intent to use APP

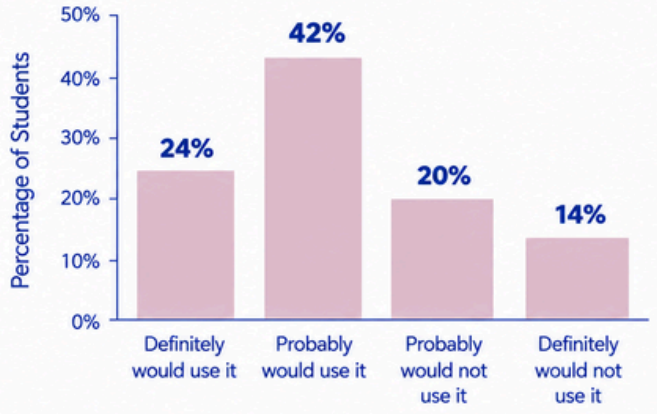
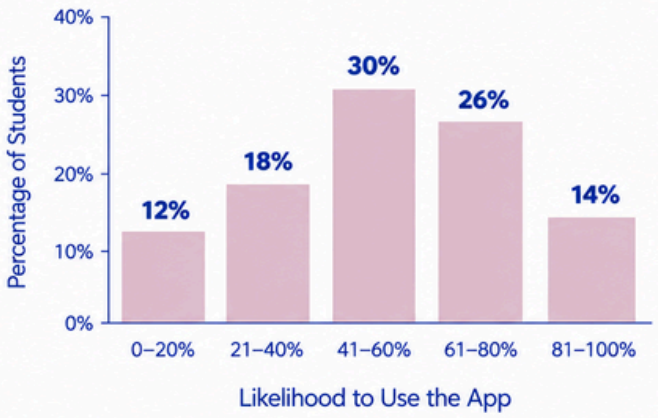
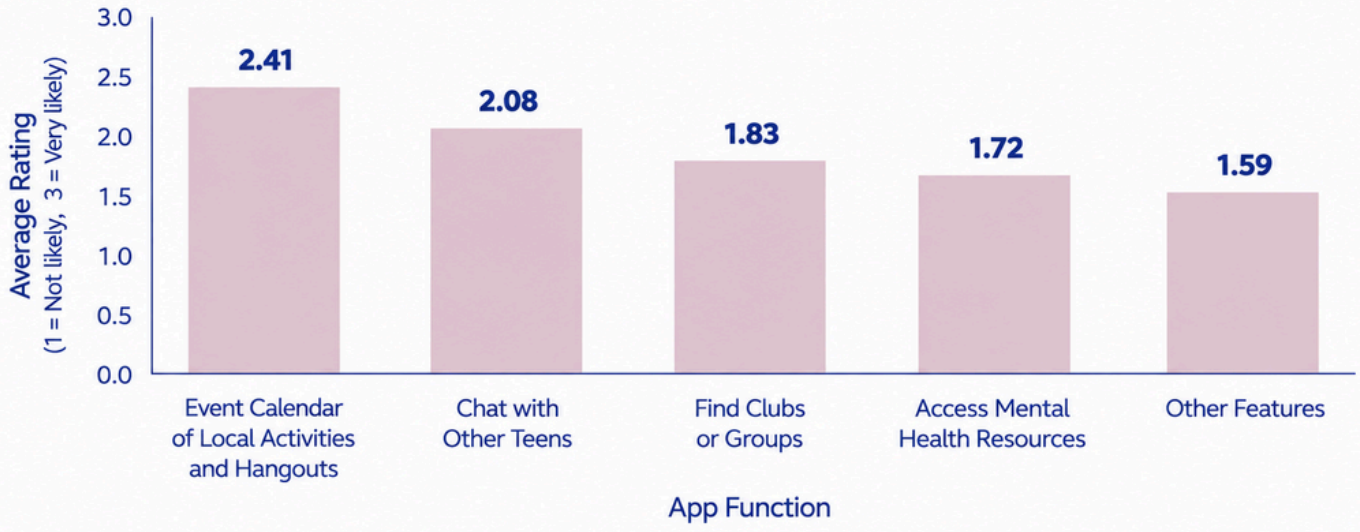


Figure 3. How Likely to Use the APP



When students were asked what function they would most likely use, the highest rated function was "Event Calendar of Local Activities and Hangouts" (2.41).

Figure 4. Rating of Likelihood of using Event Calendar



SOCIAL CONNECTION KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Based on what students shared in the youth social connection survey, the following recommendations can help increase opportunities for teens to connect, belong, and thrive

Expand accessible opportunities for connection

Invest in free or low cost, inclusive opportunities for teens to connect outside of school and school structured activities. Prioritize flexible, teen-informed options such as teen events, game nights, hobby-based activities, outdoor recreation, and informal gathering spaces.

- Teen events such as movie nights, dances, and open mic nights were the highest desired activities, followed by game nights, hobby or skill-based clubs, and outdoor recreation opportunities

Create teen-friendly spaces for connection

Explore opportunities to increase access to welcoming indoor and outdoor spaces where teens can gather without needing to participate in formal programs. Wherever possible, use or enhance existing community and school spaces.

- Students described lounges, teen centers, game areas, quiet areas, parks, and other informal gathering places in their open-ended responses,
- Students identified no physical places to go as one of the barriers to spending time with friends, while transportation was also a challenge.

Improve awareness opportunities already available

The Mesabi Behavioral Health Network partnered with Hello Range to create a event calendar geared specifically toward teens and healthy social connection spaces and activities.

- Recommend all community partners begin using Hello Range as a platform to share their activities, along with marketing Hello Range's teen event caladar through schools and teen serving agencies.

SURVEY LIMITATIONS

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Findings should be interpreted as a snapshot of the perspectives of participating students rather than as representative of all youth in Northern St. Louis County. Participation was voluntary and representation varied across schools and grade levels. Additionally, the survey was revised between the initial conference administration and subsequent school-based administration, limiting direct comparisons between the two groups. Responses reflect students' self-reported experiences, preferences, and anticipated behaviors and may not predict actual participation or app use. Open-ended responses provide important insight into youth perspectives but should be viewed as exploratory rather than representative of the prevalence of specific preferences.

Convenience sampling and self-selection

The first survey was completed by 236 students attending the Youth in Action Make a Difference Conference. These students may already be more engaged in school, leadership, or community activities than other youth, which could influence their views about social connection.

Uneven representation across schools and grades

Participation varied considerably by school. In the second administration, for example, 43.7% of respondents were from Mesabi East and 26.6% were from South Ridge, and 42.8% were 10th graders. As a result, findings should not be interpreted as equally representative of all schools or students across Northern St. Louis County.

Changes between survey administrations

The survey was revised after the initial conference administration to simplify completion and analysis before being distributed through schools. Because the instruments and collection settings were not identical, direct comparisons between the two groups should be made cautiously.

Self-reported data

Findings reflect students' perceptions, preferences, and anticipated behavior rather than observed behavior. For example, saying they would use an app or participate in an activity does not necessarily mean they would do so if it were offered.

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to the organizations and partners who contributed additional time, expertise, and support throughout this project. Their involvement in the development and refinement of the survey, administration of Phase 1 and Phase 2, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and development of this executive summary made this work possible.

We are especially grateful for the collaboration and commitment to ensuring that youth voice remained at the center of this work. These collective efforts have helped transform what young people shared into meaningful information that can guide future opportunities for connection, belonging, and well-being across our communities.

The Mesabi Behavioral Health Network extends its sincere appreciation to all participating schools, organizations, community partners, and youth who contributed to this project.