YOUTHRIVE
WE ALL SUCCEED WHEN YOUTH SUCCEED
wake county, nc

Community Stakeholder Conversations
Summary and Recommendations Report
April 2014

I.   Introduction

Youth Thrive was established in January 2010 when key individuals and organizations convened in a cooperative effort to erase gaps in services; share resources and information; build capacity to improve programs; and engage young people, their families and communities in creating a positive future. Increasing needs and dwindling resources require organizations serving school-age youth to embrace a shared community agenda, engage in system-wide planning, and commit to sharing information and leveraging resources toward collective impact. The shared vision of Youth Thrive and its partners is to ensure all young people in Wake County are safe; physically and mentally healthy; cared for; successful in school and in life; and prepared to become productive adults.

Youth Thrive serves all of Wake County, which includes the cities, towns and municipalities of Raleigh, Cary, Apex, Wake Forest, Garner, Holly Springs, Morrisville, Fuquay-Varina, Knightdale, Wendell, Zebulon and Rolesville. It also includes a large number of unincorporated communities and several townships. It was the intent of Youth Thrive to ensure that the geographic spread of Wake County was represented in the five community stakeholder conversations, as they are all very different, yet share commonalities upon which Youth Thrive should maximize its efforts.

II.   Purpose of Community Stakeholder Conversations

The purpose of the Community Stakeholder Conversations was to engage specific stakeholders, share highlights of Youth Thrive's accomplishments thus far, and solicit insights regarding critical gaps that can guide Youth Thrive moving forward. To ensure the Community Stakeholder Conversations were executed with high-quality, Youth Thrive entered into a contract with the Forum for Youth Investment (Forum). The Forum is one of the country's leading training and technical assistance providers in the field of collective impact for children and youth. As a member of the Collective Impact Forum, a national partner of United Way Worldwide, the American Association of School Administrators, the manager of the Ready by 21 Leader Network and the State Children's Cabinet Network, the Forum is widely recognized for its expertise in the emerging science and practice of community collaboration and impact.

The Forum provided a facilitator, Shannon Weatherly, who assisted the Planning Team of Youth Thrive in developing questions and a format for the Community Stakeholder Conversations. Through a group effort, four questions (with sub-questions) were agreed upon for developing a conversation and establishing an environment where stakeholder opinions and knowledge could be maximized. There was an intentional focus on the positive aspects, which aligns with Youth Thrive's focus on positive youth development.

1. What are the most positive things about living in Wake County for young people?

2. Youth Thrive has adopted four major areas of focus. Knowing that these four focus areas have been identified, what do you believe are the top two most important things youth need to be successful in the following four areas:

    A. Educational Success
    B. Health and Wellness
    C. Workforce Readiness
    D. Civic Engagement

3. What are the biggest issues young people are faced with that prevent them from being successful?

4. Of the issues we have identified, which do you see as the three most critical to address for the youth in our county?
    A. Where can we make the most difference or make the most impact?

To complement youth and parent focus groups held in the fall of 2013, Youth Thrive extended its efforts to include community stakeholders in five locations throughout Wake County. Forums were held in the following locations:

1. Western Region: Held in Morrisville; including Morrisville, Cary and Apex
2. Central Region: Held in downtown Raleigh; including the City of Raleigh
3. Southern Region: Held in Fuquay-Varina; including Fuquay-Varina, Holly Springs, Garner
4. Northern Region: Held in Wake Forest; including Wake Forest and Rolesville
5. Eastern Region: Held in Zebulon; including Zebulon, Wendell and Knightdale

III.   Summary of the Five Regions of Wake County

It was the goal of the facilitator and Planning Committee to have the same questions asked in all five regions to ensure consistent collection of data and easily identify differences and common causes. While each session focused on a specific region, conversation was able to move freely to include all of Wake County, as many of the professionals in each session served, lived in, or worked outside of the targeted area.

Through these community stakeholder conversations, Youth Thrive will collate the information and use it to inform future planning efforts, which is set to take place in the spring of 2014. Below is a summary of the community stakeholder conversations.

a. Western Region: Cary, Apex and Morrisville.

When asked to describe the Western Region, participants gave the following responses: *"Common mindset," "High standards," "Education," "Need for affordable housing," "Transplants," "Affluent," "Growth," "Amenities," "Minimal diversity to International diversity," and "A gap between the Haves and Have Nots."*

The group assembled for the Western Region community stakeholder conversation included law enforcement; educators; parks and recreation; faith-based leaders; and community- and youth-serving organization leaders. This meeting was held at the United Way of the Greater Triangle in Morrisville. The Western Region of Wake County is home to SAS, a world leader in business analytics, large corporations engaged in pharmaceutical development and many other high-tech firms. The area is fast-growing and experiencing urban sprawl. What used to be wide open space is now being taken over by townhouse developments, subdivisions with large custom-built homes and shopping centers.

In following the question path for the meeting, the first question *"What are the most positive things about living in Wake County for young people?"* the group responded with the following categories of answers:

- Educational opportunity
  - Varied opportunities
- Access to recreation
  - Green space
  - Activities for young people and families
- Community concern for others
- Large number of youth
  - Awareness of youth
- Access to retail amenities
- Access to technology
- Known for being safe

The Western Region elicited the following responses for the second question: *"Youth Thrive has adopted four major areas of focus. Knowing that these four focus areas have been identified, what do you believe are the top two most important things youth need to be successful in the following four areas?"*

A. Educational Success

- Education must be a priority
  - Part of the culture in the community

- o Secondary education is seen as a must
- Parent involvement
- Positive school attachment
  - o Good teachers and counselors
  - o Effective curriculum
  - o Strategic approach to curriculum delivery/development
  - o Positive school culture
  - o Emphasis on academics; not just athletics
  - o Small class size

B.   *Health and Wellness*

- Must have positive social and physical outlets
- Need access to care
- Increase mental health services
  - o Reduction of stigma for seeking help
- Health/wellness curriculum in school
- Awareness efforts related to health/wellness services
- Positive role models
  - o Adults who model positive self-care
- Accountability

C.   *Workforce Readiness*

- Self-confidence
- Accountability
  - o Work ethic developed at home
  - o Responsibility/Expectations at home
- Skill Development
  - o Communication skills
  - o Problem-solving and critical thinking skills
  - o Soft skills
- Exposure to opportunities and resources to practice skills
- Business partners willing to serve as mentors
- Appropriate parent involvement
  - o Balance of parent involvement

D.   *Civic Engagement*

- Awareness of opportunities
  - o Start awareness at a younger age
- Access to opportunities
- Role Models
- Understand the value of civic engagement
  - o Increase the belief that youth matter

- - Create intentional connection to "giving back"
  - Community places emphasis on "giving back"
- Programs to match skills with available opportunity

After naming positive aspects of the Western Region and what is important for youth success in Youth Thrive's areas of emphasis, the question "*What are the biggest issues young people are faced with that prevent them from being successful?*" was asked. The following responses were provided by the participants:

- Lack of awareness regarding available opportunities
- Parental involvement
  - Too much or too little
  - Lack of positive role models
- Home environment
  - Socio-economic status (affluence is also an issue)
- Negative peer influence
- Lack of believing in their [youth] own personal abilities
- Transition points
  - Changing from elementary to middle school
  - Changing from middle to high school
  - Other life events
- Lack of health and wellness
- Lack of positive self-image/awareness of own body
- Resources often allocated to older adult services/programs

The final question, which often posed some of the toughest thinking on the part of participants, *"Of the issues we have identified, which do you see as the three most critical to address for the youth in our county?" with the sub-question, "Where can we make the most difference or make the most impact?"* In order to solidify and come to some level of group consensus, the facilitator asked the group to rank the top three items listed in each area of emphasis. For the Western Region, the following priorities were named in the four areas.   (Items mentioned more than once or that complemented each other were combined):

A. *Educational Success:*
1. Parent involvement (appropriate for student success)
2. Small class size
3. Good teachers and counselors

B. *Health and Wellness:*
1. Need access to care
2. Increase mental health services
3. Increase awareness and school-based curriculum around health and wellness

C. *Civic engagement:*
1. Make it a priority in the community
2. Access to opportunities through appropriate awareness

3. Increase self-confidence of youth and thinking they can make a difference

D. Workforce readiness:
1. Increased availability of opportunities to practice skills
2. Increase problem-solving skills
3. Accountability for actions

Each region was asked to rank the four areas of emphasis in order of the community's ability to make the most impact quickly. Specific to the Western Region, the participants ranked the four areas of emphasis in the following way:

1. Education: specifically addressing parent involvement
2. Health and Wellness: specifically increasing awareness of health and wellness
3. Workforce Readiness: specifically increasing the number of opportunities to practice skills
4. Civic Engagement: specifically increasing information around the subject itself

b. Central Region: Downtown Raleigh.

When asked to describe the Central Region, participants gave the following responses: *"Perceived and real neglect," "High poverty," "Needs a lot of help," "Concerned citizens," "History," "Opportunities," "Generous people," "Resilient youth," "Higher education," "Division," "Challenges," "Multicultural," "Resource rich," "Increased risk factors," and "Urban."*

The group assembled for the Central Region forum included an elected official; multiple educators; parks and recreation; school counselors; community-organization staff; interns from various organizations and law enforcement.

In following the question path for the meeting, the first question *"What are the most positive things about living in Wake County for young people?"* the group responded with the following categories of answers:

- Young people here are resilient, creative and confident.
- Grounding and history in the foundation of the city
- Generous and concerned citizens
    o Sense of community
- Great schools, including colleges and universities
    o Increase in Magnet and STEM schools
- Urbanicity leading to more opportunities
- Schools in central region don't have issues that other schools have.
- Stratified and divided
- Diversity and multi-cultural opportunities
    o Access to arts/culture activities
- Resource rich

- Access to public transportation
- Quality and affordability of parks and recreational programs
- Strong faith-based community
- Citizens are financially and socially self-sufficient
- Access to technology (free Wi-Fi)
- Access to employment
- The existence of Youth Thrive

The Central Region elicited the following responses for the second question: *"Youth Thrive has adopted four major areas of focus. Knowing that these four focus areas have been identified, what do you believe are the top two most important things youth need to be successful in the following four areas?"*

A. *Educational Success*

- High expectations
  - Focusing on strengths of youth
- Parental Involvement
  - A caring adult
- Collaborative process for education and services (youth is involved)
  - Holistic approach to education
  - Options for alternative education
  - More on-line learning opportunities
  - Giving respect to determine personal direction with minimal pressure for a specific direction
  - Value creativity in education
- Nurturing and loving environment
- Reward and appreciate teachers
- Safe schools
- High student attendance
- Meet basic needs for all youth (to ensure focus can be on education)

B. *Health and Wellness*

- Access to services
  - All forms of health (mental, physical, sexual, etc.)
  - All forms of wellness (nutrition, food sources, safety, etc.)
- Access to information
  - All forms of health (mental, physical, sexual etc.)
  - All forms of wellness (nutrition, food sources, safety, etc.)
- Remove stigma of asking for help
- Need safe places for physical activity
  - Need safe/productive ways to reduce stress
  - Need outlets for expression
- Conflict resolution skills

- Need to understand the concept of self-care
- Need stronger/more health curriculum in schools
  - Comprehensive sexual health programs
- Need honest/accessible programs/services/conversation about youth and risky behaviors
- Parent education
  - Need to encourage parents to engage in open/involved discussions with youth around risky behaviors
- Funding

C. *Workforce Readiness*

- Strong educational foundation
  - Training opportunities
  - Literacy skills (reading, writing, math)
- Opportunities to explore careers
  - Self-awareness related to skills/interests
  - Understanding the landscape of career opportunities
- Workplace skills
  - Social/Communication skills
  - Critical thinking skills
  - Appropriate self-confidence
  - Soft skills (ability to understand constructive criticism, personal responsibility, self-presentation, self-discipline, etc.)
- Cultural awareness and competence
- Persistent resourcefulness (ability to overcome challenges and failures)

D. *Civic Engagement*

- Increased awareness about the concept of "civic engagement"
  - Awareness of the value of civic engagement
  - Awareness of the concept of "giving back"
  - Awareness of the self-motivation for being involved
- Need appropriate opportunities for civic engagement
  - Appropriate role models/mentors who can teach
- Need to understand civic process and engage in them
  - Voting
  - Increase opportunities for youth voices to be heard (e.g., youth boards, etc.)
- Increase Leadership and Soft skills
  - Increase confidence
  - Sense of responsibility

After naming positive aspects of the Central Region and what is important for youth success in Youth Thrive's areas of emphasis, the question *"What are the biggest issues young people are faced with that prevent them from being successful?"* was asked. The following responses were provided by the participants:

- Apathy
    - Not having a "spark"
    - Lack of inspiration and hope
- Lack of education
- High poverty
- Home instability
- Poor self-image
    - Lack of self-identity
- Fear
- Poor literacy
    - Cognitive deficits
- Low/no access and availability to services, activities, etc.

The final question, which often posed some of the toughest thinking on the part of participants, *"Of the issues we have identified, which do you see as the three most critical to address for the youth in our county?" with the sub-question, "Where can we make the most difference or make the most impact?".* In order to solidify and come to some level of group consensus, the facilitator asked the group to rank the top three items listed in each area of emphasis. For the Central Region, the following priorities were named in the four areas. (There was a large amount of combining items named more than once or that were closely related):

A. *Educational Success:*
1. Caring adults
2. High expectations
3. Holistic approach
4. Value creativity
5. Safe schools
6. Parent engagement

B. *Health and Wellness:*
1. Need accessible resources/services
2. Accessibility to services
3. Understanding self-care
4. Removing stigma of asking for help

C. *Civic Engagement:*
1. Self-motivation
2. Increase sense of community
3. Role models/mentors
4. Increase knowledge of available opportunities
5. Increase youth voice

D. *Workforce Readiness:*
1. Increase skill building (specifically social and critical thinking)
2. Persistent resourcefulness
3. Opportunities to explore career opportunities

Each region was asked to rank the four areas of emphasis in order of the community's ability to make the most impact quickly. Specific to the Central Region, the participants ranked the four areas of emphasis in the following way:

1. Health and Wellness: Increase understanding of self-care (i.e., how to take care of yourself appropriately) and removing stigma of asking for help
2. Education: Parent involvement
3. Workforce Readiness: Persistent resourcefulness
4. Civic Engagement: Increase youth voice/Increase leadership skills

c.   **Northern Region: Wake Forest and Rolesville**

When asked to describe the Northern region, participants gave the following responses: *"Leadership and action," "Growth," "Diverse population," Access to transportation," "People are connected to the community," "In need of housing programs for homeless," "Give donations and scholarships," "Local philanthropy," "Very engaged," "Suburban," "Many schools," "Focus on education," and "Commuter community."*

On the day this community stakeholder conversation as held, Wake County was under general warnings for impending inclement weather. Due to this unexpected circumstance, attendance at this particular stakeholder conversation was low, with only four individuals present. Most participants were representative of the Wake Forest community, thus information from other areas in this region should be collected through additional conversations or in ways that Youth Thrive feels are best suited.

The group assembled for the Northern region forum included an elected official; a local news reporter, the Director of the Wake County Northern Regional Center, and the executive director of a non-profit focused on youth.

In following the question path for the meeting, the first question *"What are the most positive things about living in Wake County for young people?"* the group responded with the following categories of answers:

- Good schools
  - Local educational scholarship opportunities
- Access to transportation
- High community engagement
  - Action-oriented community
  - Existence of local advisory committee with local citizen involvement
- Low crime rate
- Citizens/community feel self-sufficient
  - Citizens are generous in supporting others
- Variety of non-profits that help with resources (i.e., energy, food, etc.)

The Northern region elicited the following responses for the second question: *"Youth Thrive has adopted four major areas of focus. Knowing that these four focus areas have been identified, what do you believe are the top two most important things youth need to be successful in the following four areas?"*

A. *Educational Success*

- Increase school's ability to serve each child
    - Consistent and available vocational track
    - Access to affordable early childhood education
    - Opportunities for healthy competition
- Value teachers/educators
    - Increase teacher pay
- Parent involvement
    - Advocate to help with school
    - Youth voice in education/ability to express concerns
- Ensure basic needs met
- Ensure safe schools
    - Quality school building
    - Equal access to technology
- Strong school leadership

B. *Health and Wellness*

- Safe place to live
    - Home
    - Community
- Basic needs met
- Understanding of basic health needs
- Opportunities for physical activity
- Accessible mental health services
- Stigma reduction
- Family engagement
- Positive community norms around mental health (e.g., diagnosis and accessing services)

C. *Workforce Readiness*
- Exposure to career opportunities
    - Increase in exposure in school environment to careers
- Role models/mentors
- Understanding of entrepreneurship
- Skill development
    - Soft skills
    - Problem-solving skills

D.   *Civic Engagement*
- Opportunities for meaningful and relevant civic engagement
- Increased civic awareness/education
  - Importance of following local and national news
  - Awareness of the concept of civic engagement
  - Awareness of civic activities (e.g., voting, community voice)
- Create bridge between education system and civic engagement opportunities
- Adult mentors for skill building opportunities

After naming positive aspects of the Northern region and what is important for youth success in Youth Thrive's areas of emphasis, the question *"What are the biggest issues young people are faced with that prevent them from being successful?"* was asked. The following responses were provided by the participants:

- Large number of students are bussed to schools outside of home area
- Poor community-school connectedness (that is, specific to Wake Forest; not other areas)
- Ruralness of some parts creates disparities in services, economic development, education/vocational opportunities

The final question, which often posed some of the toughest thinking on the part of participants, *"Of the issues we have identified, which do you see as the three most critical to address for the youth in our county?" with the sub-question, "Where can we make the most difference or make the most impact?"*. In order to solidify and come to some level of group consensus, the facilitator asked the group to rank the top three items listed in each area of emphasis. For the Northern region, the following priorities were named in the four areas. (There was a large amount of combining items named more than once or that were closely related):

A. Educational Success:
1. Low school-community connectedness (this was specific to Wake Forest; and related to high number of students who are bussed outside of the area)
2. Parental involvement
3. Safe schools (good facilities) with basic needs met

B. Health and Wellness:
1. Safe, permanent home and community
2. Change community norms around nutrition/food options
3. Access and availability of services

C. Civic Engagement:
1. Awareness of the concept of civic engagement
2. Helping youth find relevant opportunities to get them hooked
3. Adults to teach and guide them

D. Workforce Readiness:
1. Increase availability multiple education tracks that include vocational exposure
2. Increase skill building (soft skills, critical thinking and problem solving)

3. Increase exposure to careers through school and community

Each region was asked to rank the four areas of emphasis in order of the community's ability to make the most impact quickly. Specific to the Northern region, the participants ranked the four areas of emphasis in the following way:

1. Civic Engagement: Awareness of the concept
2. Health and Wellness: Safe, permanent home with basic needs met
3. Educational Success: Low school-community connectedness
4. Workforce Development: Increase availability of multiple education tracks that include vocational exposure

During this stakeholder conversation, the group voiced that without Civic Engagement—understanding attachment to your community—the other areas, their services and program—are not understood within context and not accessed.

d.   Southern Region: Holly Springs, Fuquay-Varina and Garner, Angier.

When asked to describe the Southern Region, participants gave the following responses: *"Magic towns," "Rural, but growing," "Becoming," "Developing," Growth potential," "Needy," "Complacent," "Busy and competitive," "Low parent involvement," "Kids are bored," "Kids are disengaged from the community," and "Kids have a lack of exposure to services."*

This particular community stakeholder conversation was peppered with repeated comments about the lack of communication and awareness of programs and services that are available. There appears to be a wealth of community-based services, but communication is disjointed and access is hindered due to the rural nature of the area. This region has an overwhelming amount of cultural and arts-related activities that are underutilized and underpublicized. While the area is booming with growth, this community will need to figure out effective ways to communicate with its population in order to serve youth, families and other citizens as well.

The group assembled for the Southern Region Community Stakeholder Conversation included an elected official; a retired (but not active) teacher, business owners, multiple individuals from community arts, law enforcement, social service providers and Director of the Southern Regional Center for Wake County and the Mayor of Holly Springs, youth pastor and youth development professionals from non-profits, and a health professional.

In following the question path for the meeting, the first question *"What are the most positive things about living in Wake County for young people?"* the group responded with the following categories of answers:

- Mayor's (Holly Springs) Youth Advisory has 60 youth members
- Facilities like "Stars Theatre" (noted as underutilized)
- Coordinated faith-based services

- Parks and Recreation (noted as underutilized)
- Partnering with the schools is working for Garner PAAL

The Southern Region elicited the following responses for the second question: *"Youth Thrive has adopted four major areas of focus. Knowing that these four focus areas have been identified, what do you believe are the top two most important things youth need to be successful in the following four areas?"*

A.   *Educational Success*

- Good, caring teachers
- Parental involvement
    - More parents volunteering in schools
- Smaller class sizes
- Afterschool programs
- Lower dropout rate (due to family farming needs)
- Early intervention for struggling students
    - Assess suspension/expulsion use (especially with students of color)
- Alcohol and other drug education and programs
- Holistic education approach which includes whole child/whole family
- Increased school/community attachment
- Critical thinking skills
- Increased community involvement in the schools
- Accessible positive environments

B.   *Health and Wellness*

- Awareness of services
- Access to services
    - Transportation
    - Increased mental health services (especially for those without private insurance)
- Healthy and engaged families
- Accessible physical activities
- Nutrition information
    - Healthy food sources
- Health curriculum in school
    - Information on sexual health
- Community connection
- Alcohol and other drug education/information
- Efficient communication about available services
- Solid coordination of services to reach many

C.   *Workforce Readiness*

- Increased job opportunities in the local area

- Exposure to career opportunities
    - Opportunity to learn career focus and interest
    - Need local businesses to provide apprenticeships/internships
- Opportunities to practice skills with local business partners
    - Partnerships between local businesses/schools
    - Connect what vocational training schools provide to the actual local job market
- Skill building
    - Soft skills
    - Social skills
    - Professional development skills
    - Self-confidence

D.   Civic Engagement

- Leadership skill development for youth
- Opportunities for youth to be engaged
    - Engage/connect existing local school-based service clubs (e.g., Key Club, Honor Society, etc.)
    - Ensure what is available is offered on days
- Knowledge of available opportunities
    - Use of social media to spread the word
- Access to opportunities
    - Transportation
- Funding
- Cultivate local businesses as partners/mentors
- Optimization of what we already have

After naming positive aspects of the Southern Region and what is important for youth success in Youth Thrive's areas of emphasis, the question "What are the biggest issues young people are faced with that prevent them from being successful?" was asked. The following responses were provided by the participants:

- Lack of coordinated communication efforts
- Low awareness of community-based services/programs
- Underutilization of existing services
- Lack of transportation
- Low community attachment
- Low school attachment
- Food insecurity

The final question, which often posed some of the toughest thinking on the part of participants, *"Of the issues we have identified, which do you see as the three most critical to address for the youth in our county?" with the sub-question, "Where can we make the most difference or make the most impact?".* In order to solidify and come to some level of group consensus, the facilitator asked the group to rank the top three items listed in each area of emphasis. For the

Southern Region, the following priorities were named in the four areas.   (There was a large amount of combining items named more than once or that were closely related):

A. *Educational Success:*
1. Afterschool programs
2. Parental involvement
3. Access to positive environments for youth

B.   *Health and Wellness:*
1. Awareness of services
2. Healthy families (including nutrition and risky-behavior information
3. Access to care (transportation, more resources, youth-friendly)

C. *Civic Engagement:*
1.   Awareness and access to opportunities to practice skills/Increase civic engagement infrastructure
2. Funding
3. Willingness of businesses to include youth/provide volunteer opportunities

D. *Workforce Readiness:*
1. Businesses who are willing to offer opportunities to practice
2. Increase exposure to career opportunities/options
3. Skill development (social, soft and professional)

Each region was asked to rank the four areas of emphasis in order of the community's ability to make the most impact quickly. Specific to the Southern Region, the participants ranked the four areas of emphasis in the following way:

1. Health and Wellness: Awareness of services
2. Educational Success: Afterschool programs
3. Civic Engagement: Awareness and access to opportunities/Increase civic engagement infrastructure
4. Workforce Development: Increase the number of businesses willing to offer opportunities to practice skills

e.   **Eastern Region: Zebulon, Wendell and Knightdale.**

Due to inclement weather, Youth Thrive cancelled this region's community stakeholder conversation, which was scheduled for January 29. It was rescheduled and held on March 5.

When asked to describe the Eastern Region, participants gave the following responses:

"Poverty," "Last frontier of the count," "Underserved," "Far East, Middle Earth," "way out," "nowhere," "Limited resources, but also untapped resources," "Good location from downtown

Raleigh," "Limited resources and services for young people," "Transportation is limited," "Rural," "Family-oriented," "Large land wise but small town feel," "Feels like out of Triangle in a good way."

The group assembled for the Eastern Region Community Stakeholder Conversation included an elected official, a representative from the Wendell Chamber of Commerce, the Director of the Wake County Eastern Regional Center, a nonprofit leader, a representative from the NC Department of Commerce, and the Regional Consultant for the Office of Community Affairs with Wake County Human Services.

In following the question path for the meeting, the first question *"What are the most positive things about living in Eastern Wake County for young people?"* the group responded with the following categories of answers:

- Gateway to Down East
  - 64 bypass – transformative, Knightdale expressway, interstate quality road, huge asset; connected to city when you need to be, can drive 70mph
- Calm and quiet
- Family-oriented and community-oriented
  - Churches are a big part of community
  - More cohesive, youth should feel supported (maybe overly supported) because always people watching out for them
  - Everyone knows everyone
- Safety – crime rate is fairly low, probably because everyone knows everyone
- Schools – Not positive, "used to have really good schools in Wendell", but Magnets have changed, 11% poverty rate (huge) and impacted schools
  - Compared to Nash county, much stronger because part of WCPSS – not ideal, but better than some other counties
  - Largest school system in the State; has positives and negatives, lots of money in it

The Eastern Region elicited the following responses for the second question: *"Youth Thrive has adopted four major areas of focus. Knowing that these four focus areas have been identified, what do you believe are the top two most important things youth need to be successful in the following four areas?"*

A. *Educational Success*
- Need solid afterschool programs
- Need good schools
- Need good teachers and administrators that want to be here and stay here
- Need to review suspension and expulsion issues; youth out of school are not learning; disparities with this issue in certain populations
- Need more affordable Pre-K programs
- Need to increase education of parents and caregivers on how to prepare their students and support the student

- Teach kids, not a track for kids (reaching those who learn differently; are not necessarily college-bound)
- Need to decrease dropout rate

B. Health and Wellness
- Access to convenient services
- Access to recreational opportunities
- Financial support for recreational services
- Need more programs in this particular area
- Education on self-care and balancing life
- Need more mental health services; many have left the area due to low access by residents
- Need nutritional information (obesity is prevalent)
- Need information about available services and programs (services and programs exist, but are underutilized in some cases)
- Documented poor water quality due to well systems and undocumented, long-existing wells

C. Workforce Readiness
- Education about workforce options with opportunities for exploration
- Knowledge of available opportunities to practice skills
- Need understanding of career planning vs. job hopping
- Need skill development: professional and soft skills
- Entrepreneurship can be a job, don't have to have a job/career in classic sense
- Knowledge of personal skills and sparks
- Encourage self-sufficiency
- Need an increase in employer and school partnerships
- Educational training for trade skills and for those not college-bound
- Internet connectivity, Wi-Fi not widely available

D. Civic Engagement

- Access to information about civic engagement and political processes
- Access to civic engagement and volunteer opportunities
- Need programs and activities that instill this sense of usefulness
- Strong family support and encouragement, role models
- Understanding importance of civic engagement
- Opportunities to assess interests and match with opportunities
- Need adult training on effective civic engagement of young people
- Need programs that increase or spark civic engagement motivation
- Encourage a culture of service

1. After naming positive aspects of the Eastern Region and what is important for youth success in Youth Thrive's areas of emphasis, the question "*What are the biggest issues*

young people are faced with that prevent them from being successful?" was asked. The following responses were provided by the participants:

- Access to information about available programs and services
- Access to services, in general
- Education
- Access to mentors/role models
- Lack of parent involvement and engagement
- Increasing youth understanding of their role in the world and that they can have an impact
- Funding

The final question, which often posed some of the toughest thinking on the part of participants, *"Of the issues we have identified, which do you see as the three most critical to address for the youth in our county?" with the sub-question, "Where can we make the most difference or make the most impact?"*. In order to solidify and come to some level of group consensus, the facilitator asked the group to rank the top three items listed in each area of emphasis. For the Eastern Region, the following priorities were named in the four areas. (There was a large amount of combining items named more than once or that were closely related):

Educational Success:
1. Increase Pre-K programs and access to those programs
2. Encourage/Increase student engagement both inside and outside of school
3. Increase out-of-school time programming

Civic Engagement:
1. Encourage adult mentors/role models including parents to increase the likelihood of a culture of service with youth
2. Access to information about civic engagement
3. Access to information about civic engagement and political processes

Health and Wellness:
1. Increase knowledge of health and wellness programs/services
2. Affordable/Access to programs/services
3. Balance of taking care of yourself

Workforce Readiness:
1. Partnerships between educations/businesses that increase the availability of opportunities for exploration of careers
2. Knowledge of personal skills and sparks
3. Soft skill development

Each region was asked to rank the four areas of emphasis in order of the community's ability to make the most impact quickly. Specific to the Eastern Region, the participants ranked the four areas of emphasis in the following way:

1. Health and Wellness: Increase knowledge of health and wellness programs/services
2. Educational Success: Increase Pre-K programs and access to those programs
3. Workforce Readiness: Partnerships between educations/businesses that increase the availability of opportunities for exploration of careers
4. Civic Engagement: Encourage caring adults including parents to increase the likelihood of a culture of service with youth

Summary of Differences among the Regions

Wake County, with nearly one million people, boasts multiple historic downtown areas, includes multiple colleges and universities, as well as large areas with minimal populations in the exterior parts of the county. The differences truly lie in the landscape of the area—crowded downtown streets filled with large office buildings and condos to the suburban sprawl inclusive of custom-built homes and townhouse communities stretching to long-term existing farms that are now vacant lands.

Wake County is home to a booming technology, research and development workforce, which has led to an increase in sprawl across Wake County and to some of the disparities of its population. It was clear that those reporting on the Western Region of the county understand that diversity was present, but in way unlike the rest of the county. It was stated that there is minimal diversity, while international populations encompass many of the individuals living in Morrisville, Cary and the Western Region where the Research Triangle Park and other businesses have placed themselves. It was made clear that there are amenities (green space, recreational activities, retail access, etc.) in the Western Region and that emphasis is placed on education—that it is a must—but that where disparities do exist, they are vast.

The stark contrast provided in the Southern, Northern and Eastern Regions is largely due to the rural nature of these areas. When driving from Cary to Fuquay-Varina, passing through Holly Springs and parts of Apex, one quickly realizes how the landscape changes. While the Southern Region is experiencing significant growth—most likely a result of further urban sprawl—it remains with a small town feel. The building of a new national hardware store is big news in town, but jobs remain open for many reasons. This area, while rich is some resources, suffers from a communications wall. There seems to be difficulty in spreading awareness about what is available within the community for youth, families and others. Many of the resources—whole buildings—go unmentioned and/or unused. There exists, though, a connected community, where everybody knows everybody else.

Wake Forest within the Northern Region stands alone in some ways from the areas that surround it. Again, home of a large seminary, its active mayor has supported the building of a transportation system that other rural communities in Wake County do not have. Wake Forest possesses a long history of taking care of itself and its people, but it too is subjected to rural areas where services and resources are not as varied and not as accessible.

Rolesville, while not specifically represented in the Northern Region's stakeholder conversation, was described as having significantly more community and school connectedness, but suffered from a lack of food options outside of fast food restaurants.

While Zebulon, Wendell and Knightdale, the most Eastern parts of Wake County, are minutes from downtown Raleigh via a well-connected highway system, they remain small in their community operations and experience an "out there" type of interaction. These smaller communities, while part of the Wake County Public School System, are largely disconnected with fewer services for its population.

The Eastern Region is losing services due to low demand which is possibly affected by low understanding and awareness around the availability of services which is exacerbated by a transportation system that does not serve the entire community. Pre-Kindergarten Programs have been cut. Mental health services for young people are minimal and located well outside of reachable venues. In addition, these communities suffer from being the "bedrooms" of other parts of Wake County. Members of this particular region indicated that the data from the Eastern parts of Wake County indicate a population that is underserved, underrepresented and often forgotten. High rates of high school dropouts are seen in the Eastern Region, where there is a large influx of Latino youth and families. Additionally, there are serious health concerns, such as the availability of simple, clean water, thus ensuring that other health and wellness issues are only more insurmountable. Also, the group facilitator had to inquire specifically about nutritional and food issues, which then sparked a great deal of conversation around the fact that this area of Wake County has been deemed a "food desert". The intent behind this labeling is to express that there are minimal healthy food sources potentially leading to unhealthy eating habits. This particular region creates considerable concern due to its remoteness and the perception that it is poorer and less likely to have efforts to assist young people in their forward progression. While other parts of Wake County have an abundance of programs for youth, the Eastern Region has considerably less programs with a population with more complex needs.

Summary of Common Causes among the Regions

The Forum believes that ideas brought forth as "common causes" are where communities can obtain traction and begin to coalesce around issues. Within the areas of emphasis for Youth Thrive, below is a description of common causes across Educational Success; Health and Wellness; Civic Engagement; and Workforce Readiness.

Educational Success:

As previously stated, the differences in Wake County primarily stem from its vastness that is covered by both urban and rural populations. One thing that cannot be left unsaid about Wake County is the large number of students that are bussed to schools outside of their own neighborhood. It is common for youth in Wake County to have children on the same street attend multiple middle schools. This causes community-school disconnection and a situation where young people are not necessarily connected to each other through the school day and/or extra-curricular activities. This is a common occurrence and a common complaint across the county.

In terms of the public school system itself, nearly every community discussed the importance of "good teachers" and many commented on needing to pay them well. Most regions also indicated the need for safe schools that assisted in the meeting of basic needs (safety, nutrition, etc.) for youth. A common need within schools and the education arena was a sound health education program that was more comprehensive than what is currently offered, which some described as an hour a week for a single quarter of the school year.

There were also a large number of individuals that voiced concern about large class size throughout Wake County. Clearly, due to the availability of jobs in the area (particularly those in the technology and research fields), the public school system may be struggling to keep up with its population growth. Additionally, there was repeated concern about schools not providing the opportunities youth need. Specifically, schools in the more rural areas do not have vocational education options for students who may not be headed towards the science and technology fields that are concentrated within the county. There remains a large number of youth who desire education and training on trade and agricultural skills that can and would be utilized in the area's workforce. Finally, in every region, there was a desire and call to increase parental involvement. No matter the region, it was clear that parental involvement—both in a disabling and enabling manner—was of concern to many stakeholders.

Health and Wellness:

It was stated repeatedly that health and wellness services were deficient or, at least, not sufficient. While this did vary within regions, what was similar was that services needed to be youth-friendly, as well as accessible (via transportation or co-located within places where youth spend their time). There are concerns about whether or not youth even understand the importance of their how health and wellness and how the lack of can lead to deficiencies in the other areas where Youth Thrive and its partners have placed emphasis. Many stakeholders stated, "If you don't have your health, the rest doesn't matter." There also exists a long-held stigma around asking for help, particularly in the realm of mental health issues. It is a commonality for families to "take care of their own" and not necessarily seek professional assistance for those individuals who may experience mental illness, either chronic or acute.

While Wake County is rich in medical services due to the large hospital systems available locally, these services are not available and accessible to all. Transportation in some parts of the county remains an issue, thus people are not able to get to the available services set aside for them. In addition, many services are not seen as youth-friendly, especially as it relates to mental health services.

Considerable conversation was held related to nutrition and food sources. There is an abundance of fast food options throughout Wake County. As it is the case throughout the State and Nation, fast food is inexpensive and readily available, thus an easy option for many youth and their families. A lack of overall awareness around nutrition and better food options seems to be pervasive throughout the county.

Civic Engagement:

It was a common issue that civic engagement opportunities were simply lacking and what was available was dependent upon where a young person lives. Holly Springs has a large youth council supported by its mayor, as does Wake Forest. However, consistency across the county was not present.

Civic engagement is also not a shared concept and not always held in the light it should. The Northern Region placed significant emphasis on civic engagement and provided numerous examples of how the community actually served as a role model through philanthropy, scholarship awards and the like. Other parts of the county did not have consistent examples, but the consensus was that civic engagement was an area that needed infrastructure to support it.

The mandated community service in some high schools made the effort of civic engagement seem punitive and not a situation where you were taught the value of participating and "giving back". All regions expressed the need for an increase in awareness of the concept of civic engagement, opportunities to be involved and effort within the community to provide those opportunities.

Workforce Development:

Across all regions, skill development was paramount. Particular emphasis was places on "soft skills", which include many of the intangible attitudinal and behavioral attributes needed to be successful in the workplace. Additionally, youth are in need of communication skills, professional presentation skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills. It was also pervasive that business engagement needed to occur where owners would establish themselves as teachers providing an opportunity for a young person to be exposed to and/or practice job skills. Often these situations, when they do occur, are not the learning environment a young person needs where failure is used as a teaching opportunity and expectations are realistic.

In addition to skill development and opportunities in which to practice, youth are underexposed to potential careers. While there are abundant opportunities in Wake County for science and technology jobs, opportunities that are outside of those areas—arts and agriculture, for example-- need to be found and surfaced. The Northern Region has a regularly convening group, assembled through the local Chamber of Commerce, that is working to find workforce development opportunity for youth not on a typical track within school that leads to secondary education. These youth, often referred to as opportunity youth, simply need a multitude of opportunities to determine their own skills and interests so they may be developed early and fully. Incidentally, all youth can benefit from multiple opportunities of career exposure.

Common Causes Across Wake County Regions

	Common Causes	Western	Central	Northern	Southern	Eastern
Educational Success	Parent Involvement	X	X	X	X	X
	Small Class Size	X				
	Qualified teachers/counselors	X				
	Community/School Connectedness			X		
	Safe Schools		X	X		
	Afterschool Programs				X	X
	Access to positive environments				X	
	Caring Adults		X			
	Holistic Approach		X			
	Set high expectations		X			
	Increase Pre-K programs and access to those programs					X
	Increase student engagement both inside and outside of school					X
Health and Wellness	Access to care/services	X	X	X	X	X
	Increased availability of mental health services	X	X			
	Increased awareness of services	X			X	X
	Sound school-based health curriculum	X				
	Removal of stigma		X			
	Safe/permanent home/healthy home environment			X	X	
	Nutritional/Food information			X	X	
	Balance of taking care of yourself					X
Civic Engagement	Access to opportunities	X			X	X
	Skill-building for youth	X	X	X		
	Increase community emphasis	X				X
	Role models/mentors		X	X		
	Awareness of opportunities		X		X	
	Increase in number of opportunities for youth engagement (including the political process)				X	X
	Increase awareness of the concept of civic engagement		X	X		
	Funding				X	
Workforce Readiness	Increased opportunities to practice skills	X				X
	Skill-building for youth	X	X	X	X	X
	Accountability for actions	X				
	Persistent resourcefulness		X			
	Increased opportunities to explore career options		X	X	X	X
	Increase educational tracks to include vocational education			X		
	Increase in number of businesses willing to offer opportunities to youth				X	

IV.   Proposed Next Steps for Youth Thrive

Youth Thrive is at a critical point in its efforts to become a true convening organization that raises the bar for efforts throughout Wake County that affect youth. By going into the community and seeking information, Youth Thrive has set forth the understanding that no problem is solved without collaboration and coordination of efforts. Young people do not grow up in program and services. They grow up in families and communities, and this is where change must occur. It is the intent of Youth Thrive to learn about the entire environment of children and youth in Wake County so that future efforts are impactful in a holistic manner and throughout the lifespan of a child.

Upon collection of information through the parent, youth and community stakeholder conversations, Youth Thrive will begin to distill this data, along with the Secondary Data Report and Significant Issues Data Reports developed by the Youth Thrive Accountability Action Team, toward a collective logic modeling and strategic planning process. This process will, once again, call upon community members and the Action Teams to ensure voices are heard and that plans moving forward are inclusive and comprehensive.

The Forum recommends that Youth Thrive disseminate information from the community stakeholder conversations to those who participated, along with its active partners and the community at-large. This data will be the impetus for a logic modeling process, which begins with identifying issues affecting youth in Wake County. Upon doing so, Youth Thrive should move toward naming why these problems exist in general, as well as within local context and conditions.

Once a problem identification process is complete, Youth Thrive should move toward understanding what data supports the existence of identified issues, root causes and local conditions. This will help move toward identifying shared measures for Youth Thrive and its partnering organizations. Through appropriate use of local data, Youth Thrive should move its partners toward a long-term strategic planning process, inclusive of all youth in its targeted area and with a comprehensive lens that takes into account both the differences throughout Wake County, while focusing on how to leverage the commonalities.

The Forum provides tools, products and services that can assist Youth Thrive in completing the work of problem identification, logic modeling, developing shared measures and strategic planning for youth. The following course of action is recommended, based upon the services available from the Forum:

1. Disseminate community forum information to appropriate partners, participants and other stakeholders in a way that includes open forums, media and public awareness efforts.

2. Ensure that Youth Thrive has exhausted all efforts to collaborate with existing systems, organizations, partners and agencies. Clarify who is a part of Youth Thrive and how these entities interact with the organization to ensure success for all youth in Wake County. Youth Thrive needs to ensure that everyone in Wake County understands its

mission, vision and focus, as well as its intended structure and role within the community. Additionally, Youth Thrive needs to understand and ensure that all existing coalitions, task forces, and various regional efforts are included, as appropriate, and that youth-based efforts are being aligned. Recommended tools:
   a. Partnership Characteristics Poll
   b. Mapping Moving Trains

3. Identify a viable Backbone Organization that will support Youth Thrive in a public way moving forward. Youth Thrive should assess what organizations can provide the support necessary for long-term collaboration around youth issues. Recommended tool:
   a. Backbone Assessment Tool

4. Engage, plan and schedule logic modeling work sessions taking shared data and identifying issues affecting youth in Wake County, and the appropriate strategies and activities to address these issues. Recommended services:
   a. Distance Coaching
   b. On-site Facilitation

5. Develop a long-term strategic plan, specific to youth issues and efforts, which would establish the working agenda for Youth Thrive and its partnering organizations for the next three to five years. Because of the long timespan, Youth Thrive should also execute a 12-Month Implementation Plan for each year, as a means to prioritize the work and adjust in real time to emerging issues that inevitably arise in any community.
   a. Distance Coaching
   b. On-site Facilitation