

Alexandria Youth Speak Up: Learning from the Pandemic to Build a Better Future Lessons Learned from Alexandria's' Youth

- **Relationships – youth panelists mentioned...**
 - The importance of everyday connection and the ability to maintain relationships with their peer and supportive adults in their lives.
 - Teachers and school staff play an important role in their lives; they want these individuals to express interest in their lives, check in on them and be reliable.
 - Youth need supportive adults, other than parents, that will offer their undivided attention; give them a safe, non-judgmental space to talk; let youth lead the conversation; and help them set their own expectations.
 - Youth want mentors to support them with academics, personal issues, and college applications; they need someone to push them forward and challenge their growth.
 - Adults need to set a good example and model the positive behavior they expect from youth.

- **Mental Health – youth panelists mentioned...**
 - Mental health resources are hard to find – youth need help seeking out these services and learning how to navigate them.
 - They wish that adults in their lives would be more intentional about offering mental health resources in all settings – “bring these resources to us, don’t make us seek them out.”
 - They want to build stronger relationships with their school counselors and discuss topics beyond academics – they want them to talk about mental health too.
 - Like adults, youth experience burnout – heavy workloads and school/home pressures cause a lot of stress – and they need a place to deal with these stressors or they will be unable to focus at school.
 - They wish adults would be more mindful about the impacts of the pandemic – specifically, the trauma of transitioning from one way of learning to another and how these shifts have impacted their behavior and the way they interact with peers and adults around them.

- **Skills/supports – youth panelists mentioned...**
 - Youth want to learn more about topics beyond what is taught in the classroom – managing finances; time management; creating and maintaining boundaries; understanding and responding to stressors and societal pressure; mental health; sex education; systemic issues of race; and other topics that concern their present day-to-day lives and their future.
 - As youth continue to transition into new routines, they need flexible schedules, individualized attention and care; tutoring; opportunities to cultivate new interests and friendships; and services to support everyday needs, such as rental assistance and food insecurity.

- Youth want help understanding changing safety guidelines, setting and maintaining boundaries around in-person contact, and identifying safe ways to connect with friends.
- While some conflict is inevitable, youth believe that more opportunities for their peers to talk through disagreements, with the support of counselors and other school staff, could prevent conflict from escalating. Conflict management is especially important as youth transition from virtual communication – where conflict may not always be resolved – to in-person interactions that provide more opportunities to respond to conflict.
- **Voice and Choice – youth panelists mentioned...**
 - They want to have a seat at the table, a voice in the decisions that impact them, and the freedom to make choices that are best for their own lives – “nothing about us, without us.”
 - They want to have spaces where they can share openly, be heard, and lead the conversation – community forums, listening sessions, and surveys are great ways to elevate their voices and inspire other youth to do the same.
 - They want to be involved in the design and development of youth programs and activities from the beginning – they are experts at determining what is “fun and interesting” to their peers. When given the full picture – the context and parameters of what is feasible and the overall goal – youth excel at creating and leading youth engagement efforts.
 - Youth need flexibility to manage schoolwork, activities, friendships, family, jobs, self-care, and other aspects of their lives – Lunch and Learns provide youth with freedom to problem solve and delegate tasks and deadlines. Youth use this time to meet with teachers, complete schoolwork, work on college applications and essays, see counselors, visit the Teen Wellness Center, socialize with friends, and practice self-care. This unstructured time allows youth to connect with the many youth and adults that support them.
 - Providing youth with opportunities to build and apply leadership skills opens the door to future possibilities to showcase these skills – “Once you see what you can do, you can take it somewhere else.”
- **Communication – youth panelists mentioned...**
 - The primary methods of communication for them are digital/web-based platforms (social media, Canvas, texting) – this is how they want to receive important information.
 - They are listening in class, so bring information directly to their classrooms or have teachers communicate it to them.
 - Youth trust their peers as messengers and will go to them for information and advice; peer to peer communication strategies are effective tools to share information with youth.
 - Communication about resources should include what services exist; how and where to find them; what they need to know ahead of time; and what they can expect when they go to access the service.

Actions to consider

To support youth in navigating life after the pandemic, you can:

- Share lessons learned from this event with your organization and lead a discussion about how to use this information in your work with youth.
- Commit to identifying specific opportunities for youth to have a voice in your organization's decision-making including serving on your organization's Board of Directors and youth advisory boards.
- Promote activities and services through channels most accessed by youth and include information about what is offered and how to access it.
- Explore ways to incorporate topics youth want to learn about into your programming through partnerships with other local organizations. Learn about the [Developmental Assets](#) and consider ways to incorporate this framework into your programming. Consider hosting a training for your staff about this topic – contact Lisette Torres at Lisette.torres@alexandriava.gov to learn more.
- Partner with CYFCC, ACAP, and SAPCA to host a forum for youth to share their voice – contact Lisette Torres at Lisette.torres@alexandriava.gov to learn more.