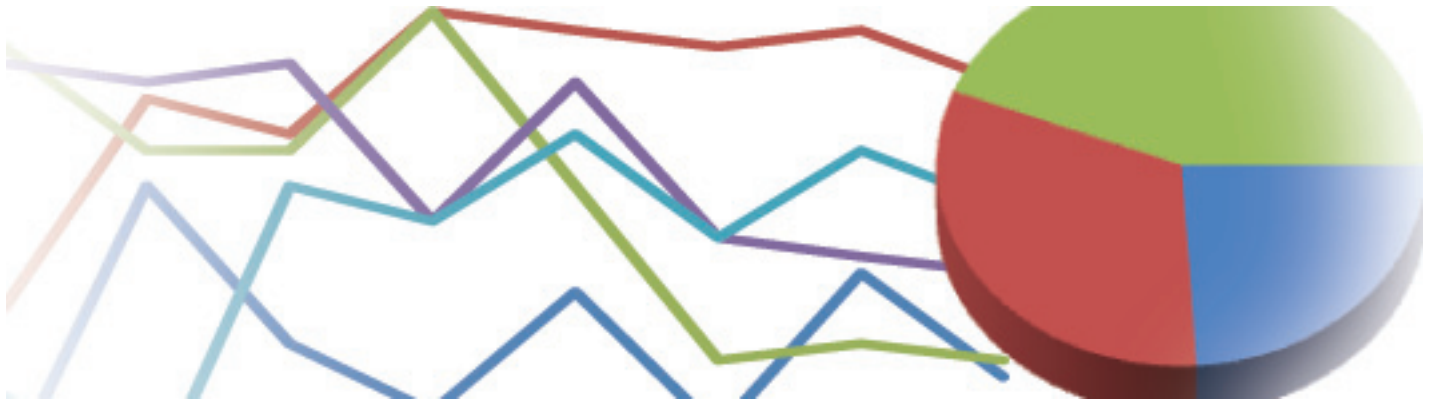




Indianola, Mississippi

Youth Voices Spur Community Action

New data about young people surprise leaders in a Mississippi city.



While community leaders have lots of statistics about young people as students – such as test scores and graduation rates – they typically have little data to answer the bigger question: “How are young people doing overall?” In this small city, that’s changing.

Indianola leaders are using data in new ways to get a more complete picture of their young people, to listen to their concerns and to take action. That data – including feedback from a student poll – have spurred a series of community conversations among government leaders, educators, business people, parents and youth.

Now those leaders and citizens are working with schools like never before to identify and fill gaps in services and supports for children and youth. Changes are beginning to show, through new mentoring programs, staff training to boost youth engagement and strategies to curtail violence.

“It’s causing us all to become more enlightened about what children need,” says Dr. Earl Watkins, conservator of the Indianola School District. “Now we have children speaking about their own issues.”

Indianola is just getting started on its path to

community-wide change for young people. Here is an early look at the city’s first steps.

New Data

Indianola (pop.: 10,683) is an old blues town. Sitting in the Mississippi Delta near the state’s western edge, it is home to such institutions as the B.B. King Museum (the blues great lived here as a child) and Club Ebony, which an historic marker out front calls “one of the best known juke joints in the state.”

Indianola was one of six communities chosen last year to join the pilot of the Ready Youth Learning Cohort, led by the Forum for Youth Investment and Ready by 21’s signature partners: AASA and United Way Worldwide. The other communities were the greater Atlanta, St. Louis and Richmond, Va., areas; San Marcos, Texas; and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Ready Youth gives communities tools and technical assistance to collect and utilize new data about youth. The initiative builds on the Gallup Student Poll, which each year measures the hope, engagement and well-being of youth in schools around the country. Ready Youth communities use those findings as a catalyst to carry out community conversations about the needs of young people – conversations that drive solutions.

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The Gallup Student Poll was carried out last fall, with almost half a million youth (from grades five through 12) taking part around the country. In Indianola, about 1,500 youth participated in three schools: an elementary, middle and high school. Thanks to a partnership between the Forum and Gallup, the communities in the Ready Youth initiative received a data table with results by students' zip code, gender, age, race/ethnicity and living arrangement to help more precisely interpret the poll results and identify differences in student perceptions. This additional information can help leaders better address issues and fill the gaps that impede success for young people.

Some of the findings were reassuring; others were troubling. Overall, 64 percent of Indianola youths described themselves as “thriving,” leaving 35 percent “struggling.” While most (53 percent) called themselves hopeful, the rest checked in as “discouraged” or “stuck.” Only 44 percent were engaged in their schools and community; about one-fourth were “actively disengaged.”

That last finding surprised adults, says Dr. Deborah Moore of Delta Health Alliance (a lead community partner in the project). Moore said that in subsequent conversations the youths lamented that “they don’t feel like they have a real school experience; they have more of a series of classroom experiences.” They want to be involved in more clubs and activities, but felt that the community and schools don’t offer enough opportunities.

Most important of all is what local leaders did with the data.

Another difference in perception between adults and students: In a 2011 needs assessment, 95 percent of parents said their children felt safe going to and from school. The student poll, however, found that safety was a concern for at least one-third of respondents. The percentage of youths agreeing that “I feel safe at school” dropped significantly after they entered high school. So did the belief that “my school is committed to building strengths.”

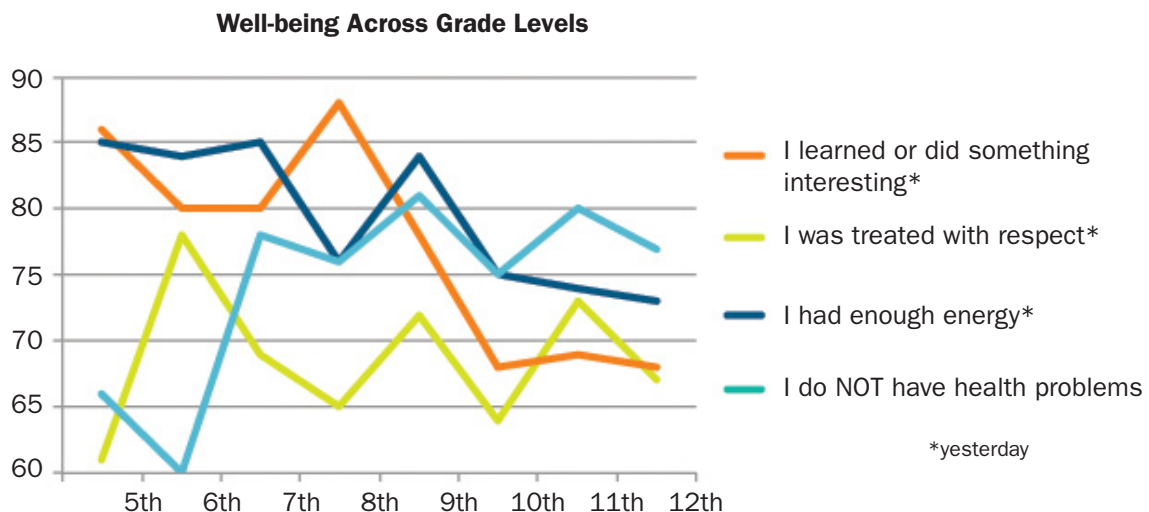
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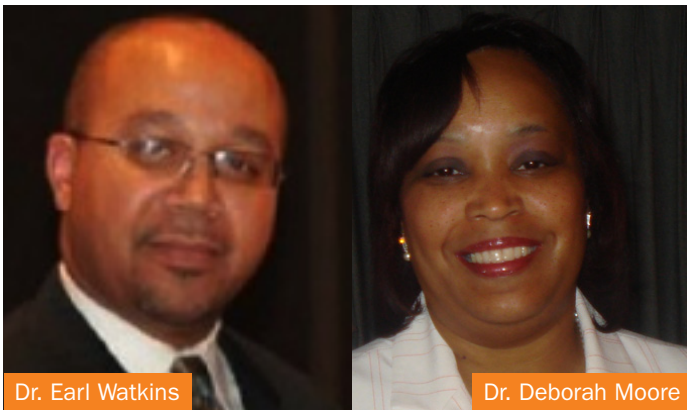
The Power of Discussions

The school district and its community partners shared the information through focus groups and presentations at meetings with (among others) the P-16 council, school faculty, parents, local government authorities and students. These conversations explored not only the new numbers, but also the issues that those numbers raised and how leaders should respond – thus allowing people to voice concerns *and* to offer solutions.

During focus groups, for example, the youths opened up about why they did not feel safe and what schools could do to help.

The community discussions served as “a wake-up call for us all,” Watkins says. “It was a very gut-wrenching realization of what was happening to and with children.”





Dr. Earl Watkins

Dr. Deborah Moore

Moore, associate vice president of the Health Alliance’s Indianola Promise Community project, believes the conversations with the community are the most powerful part of the process. “Everyone’s been involved in looking at these data and developing strategies and solutions to things our kids have identified as challenges,” she says.

The discussions were supplemented by a parent survey and by audits that looked at student engagement in classrooms. Derrick Johnson, executive director of One Voice Mississippi – which sponsored the audits and the district’s participation in the poll – notes that “communities want their children to succeed, but they need clear, diagnostic data to help identify the problems.”

Changes in Progress

Shifts in philosophy and practice are just getting started. Among the changes that have grown from this process:

- Community engagement teams were created for all three schools to provide feedback about areas of concern.
- Teachers get four days of mandatory professional development in designing engaging lessons.
- Mentoring programs were developed at two elementary schools.

- Changes are particularly noteworthy at Gentry High School:
 - The local alliance of ministers took charge as the engagement team there, and “the school immediately realized an improvement in school climate,” Watkins says, “because the ministers knew most of the parents.”
 - In response to student concerns, the high school created a safety strategy, which included testing students on the code of conduct and training staff on safety protocol. The school reported an immediate improvement in behavior and obedience.
 - A group of parents, teachers, students and community members are developing strategies to increase student engagement and volunteerism.
- Mayor Steve Rosenthal meets with local ministers one Saturday a month to discuss concerns about youth violence.
- Community members have written grant applications that pulled in \$900,000 over five years, which will create additional opportunities for afterschool programs and mentoring.
- The district cut down on the number of class periods each day, in hopes of reducing strain on teachers and leaving them open to offer afterschool supports and enrichment opportunities.

The community will repeat the Ready Youth process this fall. Watkins encourages “every school district who really wants to hear from children to do this survey. Getting the extra [Ready Youth] data file allows you to go deeper.”

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For more information, visit www.readyby21.org

Ready Youth

Leveraging the Power of the Gallup Student Poll

Imagine ... Your community has comprehensive data that shows if young people are on the path to success.

That means community leaders know about more than academics and safety. They know:

- Young people's ideas and energy for the future.
- Their involvement in and enthusiasm for school.
- How they think about and experience their lives.

Getting young people ready for success requires tackling all aspects of well-being – not just academics. Ready Youth combines new data with multi-level communications strategies to help leaders find and fill the readiness gaps.

The Tools

The Ready Youth suite of tools and technical assistance uses data to ignite conversations – conversations that drive solutions. The process:

- Starts with a powerful measure of youth voice: the Gallup Student Poll, which each year measures the hope, engagement and well-being of several hundred thousand young people.
- Combines those results with other community data on children and youth, such as delinquency, employment and poverty.
- Engages an array of community members in conversations to address areas of need.
- Provides strategies and recommendations for change.

The Partnership

The Forum for Youth Investment works with Ready Youth communities every step of the way, providing materials, training and consultations. It helps communities launch the poll, analyze the data, and facilitate solution-focused conversations through community gatherings and online communications.

The Forum is a nonprofit, nonpartisan action tank dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are ready by 21 – ready for college, work and life. www.forumfyi.org. The Forum created Ready Youth as part of Ready by 21, a set of innovative strategies to make a measurable difference in the lives of children and youth. www.readyby21.org

To find out more, contact Ian Faigley at (202) 207-3334 or ian@forumfyi.org.