



Wilson, North Carolina

Youth and Adult Leaders Team Up to Map Youth Supports

Partnership overcomes old data dilemma to create a community's first comprehensive database of services.

It seemed like a simple request: As part of a community-wide mission to get all young people ready by 21, leaders in Wilson County asked for a list of supports available for youth and families.

What they found was a hodgepodge of lists that were out of date, incomplete and overlapping. A crucial plan to build a map of local services for young people was headed for a plodding start because of a database nightmare.

Then someone pointed to the kids in the room. This week several local teens started turning the mess of files into a single database, working in partnership with adult leaders who know how to get things moving.

The result will be something every community wants: "I am told that this is the first time that an up-to-date, accurate and complete listing of service providers for the county will be available to all agencies," says Thomas Curran, executive director of Wilson 20/20 Community Vision, Inc., the organization behind the survey project.

Wilson 20/20 is a partnership of businesses, government, education and nonprofits whose goals include ensuring that all local young people are prepared for careers. The group's Education Workforce Council realized that to do that, it needed a comprehensive picture of the supports available to youth and families throughout the county. The council asked the Forum for Youth Investment to help create and carry out a customized survey of supports and to analyze the results, which the Forum does through its Ready by 21 services.

Building a New Database

The process got underway last week, when leaders from Wilson 20/20 and other community organizations, along with young people from the Wilson Youth Council and the local Boys & Girls Club, gathered to design the survey. They discussed the survey's goals, questions and processes, and what steps they might take based on the findings. They wanted to know such things as which programs served which groups of youth, with what services, when and where.

The group realized that it needed a comprehensive picture of supports available to youth and families

When the survey design team sat down to identify programs to target, they saw that the county didn't have a comprehensive list of existing programs. Instead, they found numerous lists that were old, full of gaps, overlapping and in different formats. Others remained hard to find.

The team shuddered at the labor-intensive prospect of finding and aligning all the lists, and verifying the information about (and even the existence of) each program on those lists.

Wilson County Schools Superintendent Sean Bulson, who co-chairs the Education Workforce Council established by Wilson 20/20, conferred with other leaders and proposed an idea: The school district would hire several members of the Youth Council to go through the lists and create a database of organizations to survey.

The youths started this week. They divided their tasks based on the skills of each member. Some youths call organizations on the existing lists to get up-to-date information; others conduct online searches



for services and supports that are not on the lists; someone else enters and formats the data on a spreadsheet.

While school staffers supervise the project, Curran stresses that the youths “are making the decisions on how best to get this project completed. They use us as a sounding board, not decision makers.

Not only are the youths getting paid, but they are getting the experience of working in a workplace environment. The Upper Coastal Plains Council of Governments provided space as well as telephone and Internet access in its Business Development Center. “We are trying to provide a real life work experience for them,” Curran says.

In addition, Barton College provides in-kind support for Wilson 20/20 and the Youth Council, while the Wilson Times provides coverage of the project.

The project demonstrates the value of youth/adult partnerships to drive community change. Curran observes that the Forum staff “was right on target” in suggesting that youth participate in the survey process from the beginning. “Little did we know that they would be the major reason for getting this important project underway.”

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For more information, visit www.readyby21.org