

IMPACT REPORT

2024

Together for Thriving Youth.

2024 Impact Report

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Letter from the CEO

At Search Institute, we believe thriving youth are the foundation of thriving communities. In 2024, we deepened our commitment to this belief by strengthening how we collaborate with educators, youth workers, families, and partners to build more connected, supportive ecosystems ensuring every young person can access the relationships and resources they need to grow, contribute, and thrive.

This year, our research, tools, and partnerships reached farther and deeper. We launched and expanded initiatives that elevate youth voice, equipped adults with practical, strengths-based strategies, and supported organizations in creating more inclusive, equitable environments. From urban classrooms to rural communities, from national networks to local leaders, we saw the ripple effects of relational work done well. Young people flourish when they feel seen, supported, and empowered, and so do the communities around them.

To reflect and support this work, we also refreshed our brand. While our look may be new, our commitment remains steadfast: to create the conditions where each and every young person can thrive. This brand evolution isn't about aesthetics. It's about clarity, relevance, and momentum. It helps us show up with greater coherence and purpose; that we are more approachable, more attuned, and more aligned with the transformational work happening every day across our networks.



As the challenges facing young people grow more complex, our response must grow more connected. In 2024, we built new bridges between research and practice, youth and adults, partners and communities. And through it all, we held firm to what makes our work different: we don't just identify problems, we co-create solutions. We don't just talk about youth, we design with and for them.

Thank you to the partners, supporters, and changemakers who make this work possible. Your shared commitment to young people is the engine behind every breakthrough and every story of growth.

The journey continues. And together, we will keep showing up with our work rooted in research, powered by partnership, and united in the belief that all young people deserve the opportunity to thrive.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Ben Houltberg".

Ben Houltberg, Ph.D.
President & CEO

Year at a Glance

Search Institute continues to play a transformative role in the field of positive youth development (PYD) nationally and globally. Search Institute’s commitment to youth thriving is evident through strong, mission-centered investment. Of our \$5.36 million in programmatic investment, over 98% has been dedicated to advance the field of positive youth development, drive transformation through collaboration with schools and youth serving organizations, and elevate youth voice across communities.



These youth-focused, partner-centered efforts reflect Search Institute’s enduring pledge: to partner with communities, researchers, leaders, educators and youth workers to create a world where all young people are equipped and supported to thrive. Through innovation, collaboration, and a strengths-based approach, Search Institute continues to lead the way in catalyzing positive outcomes so youth and communities thrive together.

350+ youth-serving orgs

Supporting and equipping schools and organizations that serve young people is foundational to Search Institute’s mission. In 2024, more than 350 youth-serving organizations have implemented Search Institute’s evidence-based solutions, strengthening programs, and deepening their developmental impact.

17,800 hours invested

Through a **commitment to rigorous, practice-based research**, Search Institute has invested over 17,800 hours to uncover what young people need most to thrive—and to translate those discoveries into practical knowledge and tools for programs and organizations.

101,000+ youth surveyed

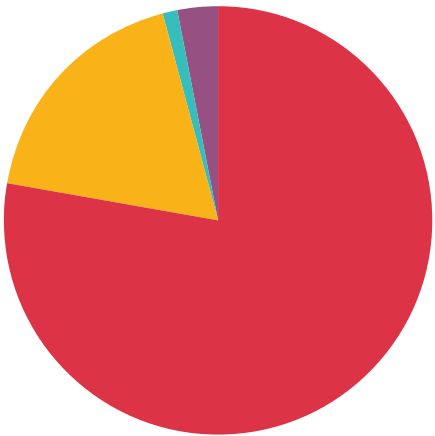
We **amplify youth voice on an unprecedented scale**, surveying over 101,000 young people to understand their lived experiences, strengths, and challenges. This direct engagement ensures that youth perspectives drive innovations across the field.

14 peer-reviewed articles

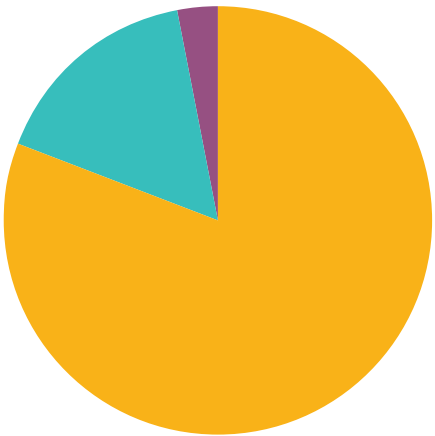
Search Institute’s **research contributions in the field of positive youth development** are equally robust, with new 14 peer-reviewed articles published—informing and shaping best practices and knowledge-sharing, impacting leaders and practitioners, as well as policymakers, and scholars worldwide.

8,300 practitioners and leaders

Expanding the capacity of the youth-serving ecosystem is another vital focus. Over 8,300 youth-serving leaders, educators and practitioners have been trained in Search Institute’s research-informed frameworks, tools and best practices, with a focus on building stronger relationships, supportive environments, and opportunities for youth voice and agency.



Revenue		
Grants & Contracts	\$4,833,421	78%
Solutions	\$1,078,330	18%
Contributions	\$45,415	1%
Other	\$199,574	3%
Total	\$6,156,740	



Expenses		
Program Services	\$5,359,472	81%
Management & General	\$1,022,159	16%
Fundraising	\$216,480	3%
Total	\$6,598,111	

We are extremely grateful to the funders—Altria Group, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Bezos Family Foundation, Gates Foundation, John Templeton Foundation, Learning Commons, Lilly Endowment Inc., Oak Foundation, I.A. O’Shaughnessy Foundation, and the estate of Vernon and Barbara B. Varenhorst—who, through their investment, have supported our applied research efforts resulting in actionable insights, practical tools and strategies to co-create partner-centered, youth-focused solutions to support adults across the youth ecosystem. Together, we will build a future where each and every young person can thrive. *We acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report do not necessarily reflect the opinions of those listed above.*

Generate Knowledge

Our work lives in the dynamic intersection of scientific research, practitioner wisdom and youth voice, with the commitment to expand and share the collective knowledge of what youth need to thrive.

Developmental Relationships in Education

Strengthening Student-Teacher Relationships

Search Institute recently partnered with three middle schools across rural and metropolitan districts in the greater Midwest to help strengthen the foundational relationships between teachers and students. Each school joined this multi-year, applied research project with a commitment to foster a relationship-rich culture and to receive guidance on implementing Search Institute's [Developmental Relationships Framework](#)—a research-based approach aimed at building strong, supportive connections between young people and the adults in their lives.

The Cultural Adaptation of Developmental Relationships in Education (CADRE) project brought together school-based teams composed of teachers, staff, parents, administrators, and Search Institute researchers. Recognizing that each school brings unique assets and challenges, teams worked to design relationally-focused improvement plans tailored to their specific contexts. Search Institute provided ongoing support through professional development, comprehensive data gathering, and resources specifically created for educators, including implementation of the [Developmental Relationships Survey](#). Partner schools were supported in using both quantitative and qualitative data—collected through surveys and interviews with students and educators—to inform their strategies and track progress.

Meeting Schools Where They Are

Search Institute took a flexible and adaptive approach, meeting the partner schools where they are, honoring the unique strengths of each school, and ensuring that their application of the Developmental Relationships Framework was relevant to their contexts. Each school prioritized areas most relevant to their school community. For example, one school wanted to cultivate a more culturally responsive climate by strengthening relationships with families, another focused on expanding students' possibilities, while a third prioritized student recognition and staff-to-staff connections.

A shared goal of all school partners was ensuring each student had access to strong developmental relationships—and the time and effort they invested in growing a strong relational climate paid off! Across the three schools, only 69% of students said they had a strong, positive relationship with an adult at their school in the fall. By the end of the year, nearly 80% of students reported having strong relationships with school staff.

“Over the last two years, as Skyview has collaborated with Search Institute, chronically absent students declined by 6%, reading achievement improved by 5%, and math achievement improved by 10%,” says Jeff Cavett, Principal of Skyview Middle School in Oakdale, MN. “I absolutely believe that our implementation of the DR framework into classroom rituals and routines contributed significantly to each of those numbers. Another fun fact? On last year’s state reading test, for students who attended 90% or more school days, there was no gap in achievement between white and black students. Attendance was a larger predictor of reading success, rather than race. Unreal!”

Only **69%** of students said they had a strong, positive relationship with an adult at their school in the fall.

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Developmental relationships really matter. Overall, students who experienced strong developmental relationships with staff reported higher levels of self-esteem, purpose, and social-emotional competence. They felt a great sense of community and belonging, and a more positive and equitable relational climate.

The Collaborative Approach

Central to this partnership was the belief that meaningful and sustainable relational change requires identifying and addressing both systemic barriers and existing strengths. Grounded on the Developmental Relationships Framework and guided by improvement science principles, school teams reflected deeply on their contexts, collaborated on action plans, and used data to chart a path forward. Prioritizing intentional, inclusive, and equitable strategies, each team worked to ensure efforts were responsive to the lived experiences within their communities.

This project demonstrates how genuine partnership—built on trust, shared learning, and localized expertise—can equip schools to foster supportive, relationship-rich environments where every student can thrive. This collaborative experience is grounded on co-designed systems to strengthen student-to-adult, educator-to-educator and community relationships, is a proven approach to cultivate relationship-rich environments where each and every student has the opportunity to thrive. This research-informed, system-level, and classroom experience approach offered multiple entry points, a phased-approach and data-informed progress, all while leveraging the strengths of each school, the supporting district and school improvement plans.

Learn more about [Relationship-Ready Schools](#).



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— Jeff Cavett, Principal of Skyview Middle School in Oakdale, MN

Cultivating Connection

How Developmental Relationships Transformed Youth Work and Empowered San Antonio’s OST Community

When youth workers from San Antonio’s nonprofit out-of-school time (OST) programs joined UP Partnership’s Excel Academy, many participants expected tools, tips, or strategies. What they discovered went deeper: they found the transformative power of relationships—not just with youth, but with one another.

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of professionals who come together regularly, united by a shared commitment to their work and a desire to learn, grow, and improve their practices. At San Antonio’s Excel Academy, the CoP centers on equipping youth workers with the skills and support they need to build trusting, inclusive, and intentional relationships with every young person they serve. Participants represent a diverse mix of youth development organizations, from well-known national groups like Big Brothers Big Sisters to grassroots initiatives such as The Empower House. In the isolating, demanding world of OST work, this community offered a rare refuge. As one participant shared, “my double consciousness softened”—here, vulnerability was honored, not hidden.

Each Excel Academy cohort includes up to 30 youth workers, who can participate for up to three years. During the first year, participants focus on building their relationship skills using Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Framework. In the second year, they apply what they’ve learned by analyzing youth survey data and developing implementation plans to strengthen relationships in their programs. By the third year, these experienced youth workers take on leadership roles, serving as mentors and coaches to support new members of the cohort.

“You created space together where you could be seen, heard, challenged, and celebrated. You brought your full, authentic selves. You made room

for others to do the same,” remarked liz moseley, UP Partnership’s Senior Manager of Community Learning, at the 2025 graduation.

That communal openness sparked transformation. Through storytelling, inquiry, and courageous conversations, participants re-examined their approaches to youth empowerment, equity, and organizational practice. The Excel Academy leadership summed up their mission: “We’re not trying to fix the plant. We’re changing the soil.” Their focus on developmental relationships became the strategy for growth.

The ripple effect was clear. As youth workers practiced new ways of relating—with empathy, respect, and intentionality—they reported that youth began to notice. During the 2023–2024 year, youth in programs engaged with the CoP indicated they experienced strong levels of respect, perseverance, and teamwork. Across all youth participants, the average rating of program quality was “strong.” Staff noticed shifts, too: deeper conversations, more intentional listening, youth stepping up as leaders, and adults forging heartfelt bonds with families.

These relationships didn’t just foster character—they inspired action. Youth reported high levels of political awareness, social responsibility, and civic skills. Staff and youth alike took greater ownership, echoing the program’s ethos: “Relationships aren’t the ‘soft stuff’—they’re the strategy.”

When rooted in relationships, the CoP didn’t just teach techniques—it cultivated a beloved community and a mindset shift, bringing Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Framework, measurement solutions and resources to life, driving impact across the youth support ecosystem. Youth workers realized that relationship-building is, in fact, “the work.” It’s from this rooted space that new partnerships, programs, and innovations are growing—proof that when we invest in relationships, we don’t just grow programs; we grow people and communities. The future, now more than ever, is rooted in relationships.

[Learn how to start a Community of Practice that is Rooted in Relationships.](#)

Advancing the Field of
Positive Youth Development

A New Generation of Scholars

Since its launch in 2022, Search Institute’s Summer Scholars Fellowship offers an invaluable collaboration between Search Institute and new and emerging scholars in the field of positive youth development. Pairing scholars with a mentor from Search Institute’s research team, with each scholar developing new insights around their topics of interest, the Fellowship places a strong emphasis on generating actionable knowledge that can inform best practices around relationship building and positive youth development.

“Our Summer Scholars Program continues to be a highlight for Search Institute—each fellow brings fresh perspectives, energy, and expertise that enrich our work,” says Joanna Williams, Search Institute’s Senior Director of Research. “In turn, they gain hands-on experience in applied research and contribute meaningfully to advancing positive youth development. The close mentoring relationships allow us to live into our model of developmental relationships, from support and care, to growth, shared power, and expanded opportunities. It’s a powerful exchange of learning and impact.”

Through these mentoring relationships, scholars learn new analytical techniques, receive career development support, and gain an understanding of how large, practitioner-oriented projects are structured.

“The Summer [Scholars] Fellowship ended up being the ideal opportunity for me. I was partnered with an amazing mentor that helped me refine my ideas and created a supportive environment for me to enhance my ability to conduct qualitative research,” says Bryan Lightfoot, Summer Scholar Alumna. “Moreover, other Search Institute scholars and my mentor truly invested in my research and provided me support even after the fellowship ended. I also built strong relationships with other Summer Scholars which have continued to be a resource since the end of the fellowship.”

In addition to developing knowledge and skills in data analysis, applied research partnerships, and dissemination to practitioner audiences, the Fellowship supports Scholars’ career development, including topics like finding the right fit when making career decisions, work-life balance, building a mentoring network, and navigating the funding landscape.

“My tenure as a Search Institute summer research doctoral scholar was instrumental in honing my research skills and amplifying my commitment to fostering resilience and empowerment within marginalized communities,” says Robyn Douglas, Summer Scholar Alumna. “It propelled me closer to my goal of leveraging research to inform culturally responsive interventions and support systems for youth grappling with multifaceted challenges.”

Although summer eventually comes to an end, several scholars continue the research initiated during their time at Search Institute after they return to their graduate training program. In many cases, their research impacts other scholars in the field of PYD, through published, peer-reviewed articles, conference presentations, and other academic and research collaborations.

Learn more about the Summer Scholars Fellowship, uncover insights and fellows’ stories.

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— Robyn Douglas, Summer Scholar Alumna

Co-Creating Solutions

We partner with other organizations to transform youth development systems by co-creating, testing, and refining strategies that are responsive, sustainable, and aligned with community goals. Through strong partnerships we help scale and sustain effective practices so young people—and the adults and the community who support them—flourish together.

Thriving Through Developmental Relationships

A Capacity Building Experience Created with Partners for Partners

As we continue to work closely with youth-serving organization partners, we are seeing a need for more long-term learning experiences and support, with a continued focus on mindset shifts and practices that strengthen relationships and advance equity, while also preparing others to lead training opportunities within their own organizations—creating relational capacity to advance their work and mission—bringing Developmental Relationships to their communities.

The result is Thriving Through Developmental Relationships (TTDR), a multi-year partnership that blends a train-the-trainer model and communities of practice, while providing ongoing support focused on:

- Catalyzing the effective use of Developmental Relationships across the organization
- Building capacity and aligning staff with common language and relationship-building practices to strengthen developmental relationships and become a relationship-rich organization
- Support to more effectively achieve goals of promoting youth thriving

Throughout the creation of TTDR, we worked with three national partner organizations, representing an additional 33 local organizations, on scope, application, objectives, and other needs to support youth-serving organizations.

“In Missouri, we believe in lifting up the strengths of young people. Our decade-long history with Search Institute has been an incredibly important part of that journey. Search doesn’t just teach about relationships, they live them. Their commitment to connection and growth mirrors our own, and it’s been a truly rewarding journey working together.

Missouri is a big state, and we need a lot of passionate people out there spreading the message. That’s why we’re focused on building sustainable capacity across the state, and the TTDR’s Train-the-Trainer (ToT) approach is exactly what we needed. It gives us the flexibility to keep the momentum going, and helps us expand the reach of developmental relationships into every corner of Missouri.

After completing the Train-the-Trainer (ToT) two-day training—which is core to the TTDR experience—the energy was incredible! Participants felt empowered, excited, and ready to bring these tools into their own communities. It’s been a joy to see this work take root—and we can’t wait to see where it grows next!”

Susan Depue Bradford, Ph.D.
Missouri Institute of Mental Health
University of Missouri - St. Louis

Search Institute has a long history of working with partners and combining research findings with the lived experiences of individuals and organizations that support youth thriving. The opportunity to collaborate with partners like the [Missouri Institute of Mental Health](#), a state-based research and technical support agency assisting prevention coalitions, on this learning experience offered a greater sense of what is needed in the field. We weren’t creating this learning experience for them, but rather *with* them, providing a long-term professional development opportunity that is not only shaped by research, but also the experiences facing young people and those who work together to ensure they thrive, with relationships wired into the organizations’ DNA.

Youth Opportunity Navigator

Partnering to Activate the Power of Supportive Relationships

With the aim of equipping youth—particularly those navigating barriers to opportunity—with the relationships and support they need to thrive in education, careers and beyond, a collaborative, youth-centered project was launched to develop effective solutions for the transition from high school to education and career goals. Drawing on years of research into [social capital](#), the development process engaged 12 youth-serving organizations in a comprehensive study to identify the tools, resources, and measurement strategies necessary to help young people build a strong network of support. This effort intentionally focused on the lived experiences of both partners and youth.

Over the past two years, six organizations—YouthBuild Philly, Genesys Works, iCouldBe, NAF, InsideTrack, and Summer Search—have partnered in the co-design, pilot testing, and ongoing refinement of what has become the Youth Opportunity Navigator.

Youth Opportunity Navigator is an exciting new tool that provides timely, data-driven insights and practical solutions needed to elevate youth voice, enhance social capital, and foster an improvement mindset. It offers users a four-step Improvement Journey (Prepare, Implement, Reflect, Act) to track and understand young people’s perceptions, evaluate organizational effectiveness and understand what’s working, and where there are opportunities for growth.

“The iCouldBe virtual mentoring program supports building social capital skills and self-efficacy for the young people who participate,” says Wendy Siegelman, Chief Operating Officer of iCouldBe. “Thanks to being able to leverage Search Institute’s survey, we’re now able to measure the things that our program and our mission are focused on, and whether or not we’re achieving several important social capital outcomes for the mentees.”

This collaborative approach is foundational to Search Institute’s work and ensures the resources we develop are truly relevant and useful for youth-serving organizations. At each stage of the Improvement Journey, we invited our learning partners not only to use the tools but also to participate in feedback sessions where they could share candid insights about the utility, simplicity, and value of the content. When our partners identified gaps or unmet needs, we created dedicated spaces for collaborative problem-solving and co-design. Revisions were not made in isolation; instead, we circled back to our partners to ensure new or adjusted resources reflected their real-world experience and expectations. For example, we learned our partners would benefit from elevating the [Social Capital Framework](#) and including an opportunity to align the Framework with their own program models. This iterative, co-creative approach is vital for developing effective resources that reflect the realities and strengths of youth-serving organizations.

While improvement efforts can be challenging, the Youth Opportunity Navigator is helping organizations ensure that every young person has access to the relationships and resources they need to achieve their goals.

Learn more about [Youth Opportunity Navigator](#).

Co-Creating the Path to Success

BBBSTC Theory of Action

Big Brothers Big Sisters Twin Cities (BBBSTC) is dedicated to empowering young people by connecting them to supportive mentors, enriching experiences, and a broader network of caring adults. As the organization serves youth in a continually shifting social landscape, BBBSTC recognized the need to revisit and clarify its foundational program logic—its theory of action. The goal is to establish a common language for BBBSTC’s positive youth development efforts, providing the foundation for building a cohesive, aligned measurement strategy. Understanding the needs and motivations of participants is key: funders seek clear proof of program impact, volunteers want guidance on how best to support mentee relationships, and youth look for programs that respect and reflect their identities. Meeting these needs requires a unified approach that connects everyone involved to the mission and outcomes. This operational guide articulates how programs are designed, what activities are undertaken, and the impact those actions are intended to have on youth participants. To ensure this theory truly reflected both contemporary research and on-the-ground experience, BBBSTC entered a collaborative partnership with Search Institute, with a focus on improving the quality of mentoring relationships and strengthening program impact.

The process began with a shared vision: equipping BBBSTC staff at all levels with a clear, actionable roadmap for program delivery and youth outcomes. Search Institute brought methodological expertise and a proven focus on developmental relationships—the critical connections between young people and adults that foster growth, resilience, and opportunity.

Together, with Search institute’s guidance and coaching, BBBSTC staff worked to co-create a renewed theory of action with two core components: Activities and Outcomes. “Activities” represent the building blocks of programming—the interactions, tools, events, and systems that BBBSTC intentionally implements. These activities range from structured mentorship sessions to enrichment events, each purposefully designed to nurture meaningful relationships and engage young people in their own development. The “Outcomes” component articulates the intended effects of these activities: positive changes in behavior, knowledge, skills, and well-being for youth.

“The partnership with Search Institute has offered us an important opportunity to pause and reflect deeply on who we are as an organization—our values, our commitments, and our responsibility to the youth and families we serve,” says Jennifer Bartels, BBBSTC Vice President of People & Impact and Princess Awa-Ada Kisob, Vice President of Programs. “This process reminds us that our work extends beyond programs; it’s about living our identity with purposeful action at every level of the organization.”

A cornerstone of the new theory of action is the understanding that relationship-building is not accidental. True developmental relationships result from deliberate, thoughtful, and regular practices. BBBSTC’s theory of action now explicitly calls for staff and mentors to approach every interaction with intention—thinking ahead, being fully present in the moment, and continuously reflecting to strengthen connections.

The co-design process itself is a model for collaboration and inclusion. Search Institute led a series of activities including document reviews, an in-depth theory of action workshop, focus groups, and a staff survey, to ensure insights came from every corner of the BBBSTC team. Staff from executive leadership, program operations, advancement, data and impact, and more contributed their perspectives, leading to a theory that is both research-based and deeply grounded in day-to-day practice.

The theory of action allows BBBSTC staff to focus on further understanding how activities and outcomes are incorporated into programs and measurements. We are continuing to work together to define a set of measures tailored to BBBSTC’s needs and build staff capacity through training on developmental relationships. Going forward, our collaborative partnership aims to support BBBSTC as they cultivate an asset- and relationship-focused culture through programs, experiences, continued training, and structures. The result is a revitalized theory of action that guides, inspires, and grows with BBBSTC’s mission—ensuring every young person has the relationships and support they need to thrive.

“

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— Jennifer Bartels, BBBSTC Vice President of People & Impact and Princess Awa-Ada Kisob, Vice President of Program

Empower Action

Our work identifies and promotes best practices and innovation, including dismantling silos and fostering collaboration within and across sectors. As a catalyst for change, we work alongside our partners to create a more cohesive, supportive ecosystem that prioritizes the wellbeing of young people.

Youth and Communities Thriving Together

YMCA Project Cornerstone's Community Impact

Founded in 1999 as a community movement of [YMCA of Silicon Valley](#), Project Cornerstone's mission is to equip young people with critical social and emotional skills and empower adults to nurture caring, supportive environments. Over the course of a 25-year partnership with Search Institute, Project Cornerstone has championed Developmental Asset® building across the Bay Area and beyond.

In fall 2024, through the generous sponsorship of the Santa Clara County Office of Education, Project Cornerstone and Search Institute partnered to conduct a survey in Santa Clara County schools to assess the current state of Developmental Relationships between students and educators. A total of 16,435 students in grades 4-12 and 878 educators across 92 schools in nine Santa Clara County districts participated in the survey.



“After decades of being deeply immersed with Developmental Assets in our work with young people, we have begun to merge Assets and Developmental Relationships, which makes total sense,” says Ziem Nguyen Neubert, M.Ed., Executive Director of Project Cornerstone. “We’ve prioritized Assets with regard to the supports and strengths that young people need to succeed and thrive, and we see Developmental Relationships as a way to further activate and grow Assets across the communities we serve.”

Project Cornerstone brought together county officials, district and school leaders, and educators to share the survey insights and together, with guidance provided by Search Institute, they created a common language and shared understanding, supporting shared reflection and exploration of the data, and identifying opportunities to drive action across Santa Clara County's school districts.

“We hope this increased understanding of how young people and adults perceive their relational experiences at their schools gives our community some insights, sparks meaningful conversations, and initiates collaborative and intentional actions. We have a lot to celebrate and still have room for improvement,” says Neubert. “Collectively, we can strengthen Developmental Relationships in and out of school and all of us have an integral part in helping all youth, regardless of our title or role. Most importantly, let's ensure that young people and their voices are included at the table in this collaborative work.”

Staff and volunteers collaborate closely with schools and community partners to boost Assets, build and strengthen Developmental Relationships with young people, and deliver transformative programming that advances youth mental health, well-being, and leadership. Project Cornerstone's signature programs include monthly, asset-based lesson plans for preschool through middle school classrooms; anti-bullying workshops; a high school leadership council that elevates youth voice; asset- and relationship-building professional development for educators and youth-focused staff; and educational opportunities for parents and adults who care for youth.

Using Search Institute's research-based Developmental Assets and Developmental Relationships frameworks as their foundation, Project Cornerstone's programs serve more than 185 schools and reach approximately 65,000 elementary and middle school students annually, with support from nearly 4,000 dedicated volunteers—a collective impact that is strengthening the foundation for youth thriving.

Learn more about [Project Cornerstone's work in bringing Developmental Assets and Developmental Relationships to life.](#)

Fostering Belonging through Developmental Relationship

What this Looks Like in Minnetonka Public Schools

In the 2020-21 school year, the Minnetonka Public Schools’ Board of Directors set a bold, long-term goal: fostering a greater sense of belonging for all students by focusing on their lived experiences. To support this vision, the district partnered with Search Institute to integrate the Developmental Relationships Framework into daily practices in classrooms and adult interactions across the district. Through different learning experiences and spaces created for staff, the first stage of this collaboration aimed to cultivate a shared language and a common understanding of the key elements and actions central to building strong relationships with students. In other words, what it truly takes to make a relationship developmental.

A pivotal component of this effort was the use of Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Survey, which revealed both strengths and potential areas for growth across the district. The survey unearthed critical insights, including nuanced differences in how different demographic groups experience relationships within the school community. For example, early findings highlighted that one student group reported experiences distinct from their peers. Through focused outreach and intentional relationship-building over the following year, the district was able to significantly narrow this gap.

Minnetonka Public Schools also scrutinized the difference between adults’ perceptions and students’ experiences of relationships. While some perceptions were closely aligned—such as “expecting the best”—others showed substantial gaps. Notably, in one school during the 2022-23 year, only 62% of students reported experiencing warmth from adults, compared to 98% of adults who believed they demonstrated it.

“Adults feel so strongly that they are expressing a relational experience, but our youth are experiencing them at different levels,” says Sara White, Director of Teacher Development with Minnetonka Public Schools. “It can be challenging to accept so we really work hard with our adults to frame the results as formative feedback. One way that has been really helpful in overcoming skepticism has been elevating student voice because while we can speculate on what the survey results mean, really the best source of understanding are our kids.”

To bridge these gaps, the district focused on elevating youth voice with some buildings conducting student focus groups, while others asked students to describe their experience and shared direct recordings with teachers to help unpack students’ experiences of developmental relationship actions. Teachers reflected on these authentic student perspectives and developed targeted action plans. This intensive, student-centered approach resulted in a measurable 5% increase within a year in how students experienced a key aspect of developmental relationships.

Fast forward to today, the district continues rooting their work in the power of Developmental Relationships as one of the engines to ensure the well-being, connection and belonging of students, impacting not just student outcomes, but their families and community as a whole.

Only 62% of students reported experiencing warmth from adults, compared to 98% of adults who believed they demonstrated it.

Partnership4Success

How Sharing Power Brought Youth and Adults Together

Partnership4Success (P4S) is a community of youth-serving practitioners dedicated to enhancing the social, emotional, and academic outcomes of youth and young adults in Franklin County, Ohio. Recognizing the critical role of relationships in youth development, P4S has integrated Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Framework into their initiatives to foster meaningful connections and support among young people and the adults in their lives and across the community.

“The Developmental Relationships Framework is absolutely amazing,” says Kevin Gilmore, P4S Collective Impact Manager, Workforce Readiness. “And it aligns so well with the work we need to do when it comes to supporting our young people and really coaching and leaning into that space, and to be able to do that we have to have conversations—we have to have tough conversations—but you first have to have relationships.”

In his previous work as an agency leader working directly with young people, Kevin Gilmore made the decision to lean into Share Power, one of the five elements of the Developmental Relations Framework. Rather than making assumptions about the type of support young people need, he worked with community partners to engage and hear directly from youth in order to build relationships and more effectively support them. P4S, community partners and young people came together to form a youth advisory council. Since forming this group, they’ve focused on topics ranging from financial literacy and mental health, to how to communicate in work and professional settings.

Through curated resources and professional learning provided by Search Institute, P4S empowers educators and partners to understand both historical and current factors impacting youth. With the Developmental Relationships Framework as a road map, P4S aims to disrupt systemic barriers and ensure every young person has opportunities to thrive. By intentionally building environments of trust, respect, support, and challenge, Partnership4Success, through the power of collective impact, is advancing the holistic development of youth across Franklin County, setting the stage for stronger wellbeing and youth outcomes.

Learn more about Partnership4Success and their application of the Developmental Relationships Framework.



Together for Thriving Youth

For more than 60 years, Search Institute research, frameworks and tools have been used around the world to strengthen young people's relationships with the adults in their lives and empower change across the youth support ecosystem. Our work lives in the dynamic intersection of scientific research, practitioner wisdom, and youth voice, with a commitment to expand the collective knowledge of what all youth need to thrive. We depend on charitable gifts and grants to pursue the research that makes such a difference in the lives of young people worldwide. Join our effort to advance equity and help all young people thrive with your gift today.

searchinstitute.org/donate



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