

# Valuing Youth Matters

## Oregon's Action Research Project

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**A**licia Lillie, a 17-year-old high school student, has just finished her final group presentation on the findings from surveying high school students about sex. Alicia and her fellow researchers devoted four months of weekly meetings, two days of spring break, and countless additional hours sitting through trainings, developing surveys, and analyzing data.

Their research project (Action Research) was a result of a pilot partnership between Oregon State and county health departments and high school students. The purpose was twofold: to gather valuable youth input into Oregon's new state plan on adolescent sexuality, and to encourage youth to gain additional skills in conducting research and advocating for themselves based on the research results.

In bringing together youth and adults as shared participants in a project, and promoting

youth as experts on their own opinions and attitudes, Action Research serves as an example of positive youth development in the world of public health. It gives youth first-hand experience that they actually are important and their opinions and knowledge do matter. As

Alicia said, "When the state says, 'Come tell me what you think...,'" she pauses. "They want to know what *I* think? I feel important, valued."

### What is positive youth development?

Positive youth development (PYD) is a term used to describe empowering and promoting youths' confidence, competence, and resilience in ways that benefit both youth and the larger society. PYD theory recognizes that *all* youth have a vital stake in their own future and a pivotal role to play in working alongside adults to shape policies that affect them. Supporting PYD often requires a shift from viewing adolescents as troublemakers who

exhibit risky behavior to seeing youth as positive change agents, willing and able to contribute to society. PYD focuses on viewing youth as partners with providers, policy makers, and researchers and on developing their skills for meaningful participation. Ideally, organizations that serve youth should incorporate youth as decision-makers and equal participants, giving them the support necessary to succeed in those roles.

In Oregon, providers and policy makers in teen pregnancy prevention and adolescent sexual health are putting positive youth development principles into practice with high school students across the state through the Action Research project. Students from three geographic areas (Bend, Medford, and Portland) were trained as action researchers to answer a research question of their choosing related to adolescent sexual health. The goal was for these students to participate in the research and present their findings at public, community-wide forums in order to influence school officials, policy makers, and ultimately, the development of Oregon's Teen Pregnancy Prevention/Sexual Health State Plan.

The seed for Action Research was planted in 2005 when Oregon State Adolescent Health coordinator Robert Nystrom heard a conference presentation by the precocious Sarah Schulman, founder of Youth Infusion ([www.youthinfusion.com](http://www.youthinfusion.com)), a youth-run organization that supported youth as participants and decision-makers in policy development. Nystrom contracted with Schulman to help Oregon figure out how to involve youth in a meaningful way in the development of its statewide adolescent sexual health plan. Schulman and Nystrom eventually selected the Action Research methodology and training curriculum to use with Oregon youth.

All three Oregon sites used a modified version of this curriculum to take their youth through the research process. Students learned about different research options (surveys, focus groups, etc.) and were trained to develop their own research question, carry out the research, and make recommendations based on the results.

### PYD in action

In Gresham, a large suburban city just east of the Portland metropolitan area, Alicia was one of eight high school seniors who designed and administered almost 900 surveys to students from four area high schools to find out what they knew



Oregon Department of Human Services

Action Research students work on their survey on sexuality.

about sex and sexuality, what they thought they should know, what they had learned in their health education classes, and what they thought was missing from sex education in the classroom. After finding that their peers had some misconceptions about STDs and pregnancy prevention methods, the Portland-based action researchers went on to brainstorm how sex education in the classroom should change.

Alicia and her research partners presented their survey findings to a standing-room-only crowd of parents, health educators, school administrators, and state policy makers. Adults in the audience listened attentively as the students made three recommendations for enhancing Oregon's curriculum and its teachers' ability to connect with students on what can be an awkward subject.

- Health educators should provide more in-class games and activities that are engaging and fun.
- The topic of sex should be taught as a personal conversation, rather than an abstract issue.
- Health educators need to make "the uncomfortable, comfortable" in class.

To address this last issue, the team suggested sending health teachers to a professional development workshop where they work on learning more effective teaching techniques, successfully connecting with youth, and developing engaging hands-on activities that deal with sex and sexuality. The youth expressed their need for an open, comfortable environment that allows questions and discussion, and is not "parental."

After presenting their findings, students led or participated with adults in small group discussions. Adults were asked to connect the Action Researchers' findings with lessons from their own work to identify ways in which the state can promote positive sexual health for adolescents. This process has been repeated at community forums in all three Action Research sites.

## Statewide planning and PYD

At the state level, Oregon is working to incorporate positive youth development into all relevant state policies and programs. The Oregon PYD Advisory Council was formed in 1999 based on a federal Health and Human Services grant awarded to the Oregon Commission on Children and Families in 1998 (renewed in 2003). It comprises state and local human services, public health and mental health staff, and employees of private youth-serving organizations. The council meets regularly with other state partners and has recommended that the state align all state policies to support positive youth development, expand K-12 policies that support service learning and community involvement, and provide PYD professional development opportunities to those who work with youth.

This past year, Oregon also became the first state to establish a positive youth development benchmark that measures PYD through the use of several questions on a statewide health risk behavior survey (the Oregon Healthy Teens survey) administered annually to 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Preliminary results from the first year confirm the importance of promoting PYD among youth. Youth that scored higher on a series of PYD questions (which measured five PYD elements of confidence, competence, and health status) were far less likely to report involvement in a wide variety of risk areas such as substance use, school failure, suicidal ideation, and violence.

Oregon is not the only Northwest state that is encouraging policy makers to use PYD

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principles. In Alaska, State Adolescent Health coordinator Becky Judd, on a one-year fellowship at the Forum for Youth Investment, developed a guidebook entitled "Incorporating Youth Development Principles into Adolescent Health Programs: A Guide for State-Level Practitioners and Policy Makers" ([www.forumfyi.org/Files/AdolescentHealth.pdf](http://www.forumfyi.org/Files/AdolescentHealth.pdf)). Judd provides specific suggestions and examples from other states for how PYD can be incorporated into five areas that most state adolescent health staff have influence over: commitment to adolescents, partnerships, programs/services, education/technical assistance, and data collection/surveillance.

All this work and energy at the state level aims to encourage adults to support, empower, and value youth in their work and to involve them more effectively in programs or interventions that serve them. It is becoming clear that incorporating positive youth development in public health practice can greatly improve public health initiatives for the adolescent population. Many types of research, curricula, and materials support such work, but in the end, success in working with youth may all boil down to one thing, according to Alicia Lillie, "Treat them with respect." ■

### Authors

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### Resources

Oregon Positive Youth Development program. [www.oregon.gov/OCCF/Mission/Progs/progpy/miprogy.shtml](http://www.oregon.gov/OCCF/Mission/Progs/progpy/miprogy.shtml).