

**Youth, Families, Human Service Providers,  
Communities and Schools**

**Working Toward Youth Engagement:**

**A Discussion Paper**

Prepared for the Strengthening Educational Capacity (SEC) Forum

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***April 26, 2005***

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## Introduction

In Spring 2004 the Strengthening Educational Capacity (SEC) Forum began a process intended to facilitate discussion in improving the attendance of children and youth and alleviating truancy in Saskatchewan schools and other learning programs. The inquiry process focused on the topic of engaging youth as critical to the issue of attendance and program completion.

At the meetings of the SEC held in Saskatoon on April 27 and 28, 2004 and on June 17 and 18, 2004, Dr. Keith Walker, Dr. Larry Sackney, and doctoral student, Susan Bens as part of the Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit at the University of Saskatchewan facilitated the group's consideration of the issues regarding attendance in Saskatchewan schools and approaches for its improvement.

The facilitators drew on the philosophy and techniques of a group process called *Appreciative Inquiry* in designing and delivering the sessions. This approach differs from more traditional approaches that focus on problems and solutions. In contrast, appreciative processes focus human energy on uncovering and appreciating what is – what works and what is known about when things work. The process draws on that knowledge and uses it to fuel participants' imagination of what might be.

This discussion paper provides a summary of the SEC Forum's progress on this topic. It also includes a definition and model for youth engagement in the Saskatchewan context, and proposes some next steps.

The discussion paper is intended to inform and, as the name implies, promote discussion and actions that support youth engagement. The discussion paper will also serve as a resource to support the important work taking place around truancy and youth engagement provincially, and to support future actions of the SEC Forum.

### **Question for Reflection:**

- ❖ As you read the discussion paper and discuss its contents, think about other ways in which the paper could be used.

## Youth Engagement

Forum members identified the following definition of youth engagement:

Forum member L. Knowles identified youth engagement (as defined by the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement in *Peer Support: A Practical Guide to Implementing a Program that Engages and Empowers Young People in a High School Setting*) (2002) as “something that occurs when a young person is given the opportunity to participate in a meaningful activity that has a focus outside him or herself. This person grows in behavioral, affective and cognitive ways through meaningful interaction with others toward a common goal. This leads to empowerment” (p. 7).

### Questions to Reflect on:

- ❖ What does youth engagement mean to you?
- ❖ What phrases in the Youth Engagement definition capture your attention? How and why?
- ❖ Stoney McCart head of the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement defined youth engagement as “participation with passion”. Reflecting on your own experience(s), when did you feel that you were “participating with passion”? What did this activity or project mean to you?

## Background

The SEC Forum recognizes that youth engagement is dependent on multiple factors. These include: economic determinants, health determinants, behavioural determinants, the physical environment, cultural determinants, social determinants, and educational determinants (Gold, as cited in Baxter). As Levin (2004) stated, “If one believes that vulnerability is largely influenced by factors outside the classroom then it will be important to take steps to broaden people’s view of what is possible and desirable” (p. 31). Consequently, the concept of youth engagement is understood within the broad framework of School<sup>PLUS</sup>. With respect to youth engagement, the forum believes that:

1. The School<sup>PLUS</sup> philosophy guides the work of the forum. The model proposed in this discussion paper relies upon the philosophical framework implicit in the School<sup>PLUS</sup> model, inclusive of the Effective Practices Framework (Refer to Appendix

1). This model is predicated upon a relevant and responsive learning program and community engagement.

**Question to Reflect on:**

- ❖ Given your understanding of the Effective Practices Framework, are there other aspects of a relevant and responsive learning program and of community engagement that are important to you that do not appear in the Framework? What are these?

School<sup>PLUS</sup> is a concept that envisions schools as fulfilling two primary roles:

- a. to educate children and youth through a responsive learning program that enhances student outcomes; and,
- b. to serve as centres for social, health, recreation, culture, justice and other services for children, youth and their families.

**Questions to Reflect on:**

- ❖ In what ways are schools fulfilling these two primary roles?
- ❖ In what ways can we support schools in further fulfilling these two primary roles?

2. School<sup>PLUS</sup> is about communities adopting a community education philosophy.

The Government of Saskatchewan (2004) stated “schools actively engage young people, family and community members as partners in program planning and problem solving. School facilities and expertise are key community resources and, in turn, community resources support the well-being and learning needs of children and youth” (p. 2). School<sup>PLUS</sup> is about:

- being **responsive** to the needs of all Saskatchewan students, families and communities;
- providing a learning program that is **relevant** to the needs of children and youth. This is critical to ensure a smooth path for all children to make successful transitions beyond Grade 12 as responsible citizens; and,

- being **results-oriented**, focusing on successful student results and outcomes to guide our future actions.

#### Questions to Reflect on:

- ❖ What do you see as key to successful transition beyond Grade 12 as a responsible citizen to lifelong learning and the world of work?
- ❖ In addition to the “three R’s” identified, are there other R’s that are important to consider? (i.e. respect? reciprocity?)

3. School<sup>PLUS</sup> is progressing in all regions of the province. Families, human service providers, communities and schools are engaged, in varying degrees, in developing and sustaining exemplary learning environments that engage youth and communities.

#### Questions to Reflect on:

- ❖ How is your organization/sector engaged in the community to support School<sup>PLUS</sup>?
- ❖ What could be done to further support the School<sup>PLUS</sup> concept?

## Appreciative Inquiry Findings

The following section provides a summary of the Appreciative Inquiry findings:

### i. Provocative Statement

The Forum members proposed a provocative statement intended to articulate a vision for youth engagement in Saskatchewan.

*School, family, community and human service providers are involved in engaging all children and youth in a responsive learning program that meets their needs. This is accomplished through a network of formal and informal systems that examine the multiple factors impacting on engagement, foster collective engagement and provide support for high quality teaching and learning.*

**Question to Reflect on:**

- ❖ What do you see as elements that foster collective engagement?

## ii. Principles/Themes for Youth Engagement

The following principles/themes were identified to guide forum work on advancing the concept of youth engagement:

- ❖ All youth can experience **success** in learning and in becoming responsible and participative citizens. There is a need for a holistic approach to schooling—one that has a different vision of ‘school’ and that provides every student with an opportunity to learn and experience success.
- ❖ Families, community and human service agencies **need to engage** in working with schools to ensure appropriate learning opportunities for all youth - create a climate of learning for success by engaging youth and ensuring active learning.

**Question to Reflect on:**

- ❖ What do you see as important for “ensuring” active learning?

- ❖ A **relevant** learning program that can accommodate **all learners** and respects and values differences, learning styles and ways of knowing. Different vision/models for learning may be required.
- ❖ **Reflect and honor** the histories of our youth – past, present and future, recognizing our inter-dependence individually and collectively.
- ❖ **Building relationships** that are affirming, warm, accepting, empathetic and responsive.

## iii. Pathways to Action for Youth Engagement

Pathways to action for youth engagement were developed from the identified principles. These include potential actions pertaining to:

- student voice
- mobilizing families, community, and human service providers
- collaborative responsive learning environments
- supportive structures

## Student Voice

Future action must authentically engage youth in the planning and delivery of the learning opportunities in schools and communities. Student voice is critical in three main areas: individualized and flexible learning and assessment, redefining success and leadership development.

### Questions to Reflect on:

- ❖ Are there other areas where student voice is critical?
- ❖ What conditions within a school setting foster authentic student voice?
- ❖ How might a greater percentage of youth in schools and communities have opportunity for leadership roles, voice?

## Mobilizing Families, Community and Human Service Providers

It is important to build on the School<sup>PLUS</sup> initiatives already in place that engage community support and encourage further partnerships and involvement of other stakeholders. In the School<sup>PLUS</sup> environment, everyone is regarded as a stakeholder in the education of youth. Advancing youth engagement requires adequate interagency support and cooperation for the learning program, community development initiatives, dedicated and accessible interagency information, supports, services and resources, and the collective ability to examine and assess needs. Authentic family and community engagement is necessary and processes must be open, transparent and encourage “outside-the-box” thinking.

### Question to Reflect on:

- ❖ How do we support “outside the box” thinking within current structures?

## Collaborative Responsive Learning Environments

This pathway relates to alternatives and options for learners (e.g., competency-based and specialized programs), philosophies (e.g., learning environments where everyone is regarded as a learner and everyone is regarded as a teacher), and the relevance of learning as well as reasons for attendance.



**Questions to Reflect on:**

- ❖ How do we support relevant learning activities within relevant learning environments?
- ❖ What approaches in the classroom captivate student engagement and sustain their love of learning?

## Supportive Structures

This pathway identifies the need for the development of interagency partnerships, and the creation of new mechanisms by all agencies for shared power that includes students, families, aboriginal community members, human service providers, other community members and school personnel at the local level. There is a need for a cultural transformation on the part of all schools and partners that would reflect distributive leadership, youth engagement, and respect for diversity. A student tracking system is also required to enable the engagement and re-engagement of youth.

**Questions to Reflect on:**

- ❖ What actions are necessary to follow-up with, and support youth who are not engaged in a learning program?
- ❖ What strategies are being practiced to engage the disengaged youth?

## A Model of Youth Engagement: A Holistic & Balanced Perspective

Based on the findings from the Appreciative Inquiry, including the definition of youth engagement identified earlier in this paper, a model for youth engagement was developed that acknowledges the combined roles of youth, family, school, human service providers, and community.

### A Model for Youth Engagement

This model for youth engagement (see Figure 1) is predicated on a fundamental belief in four essential components of human development: (1) the **spiritual**, (2) **emotional**, (3) **mental**, and (4) **physical**. Engaged youth are healthy and well-developed in all four components, and schools, families, human service providers and communities must be supportive of the growth of youth in spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical development.

One of the main motivators of youth is a desire to do things for personal reasons. They have a need to pursue their own goals and not goals controlled by others. “It is assumed that the need for autonomy is most likely to be met in contexts where students have choice, shared decision making, and relative freedom from external controls” (Fredericks et al., 2004, p. 81).

Youth have the capacity to be engaged when they (1) have the **autonomy** to act, (2) the **voice** to give input to decisions, and (3) have **opportunities to participate**. These are fundamental conditions of youth that empower youth to contribute as equal participants in their families, schools, and communities.

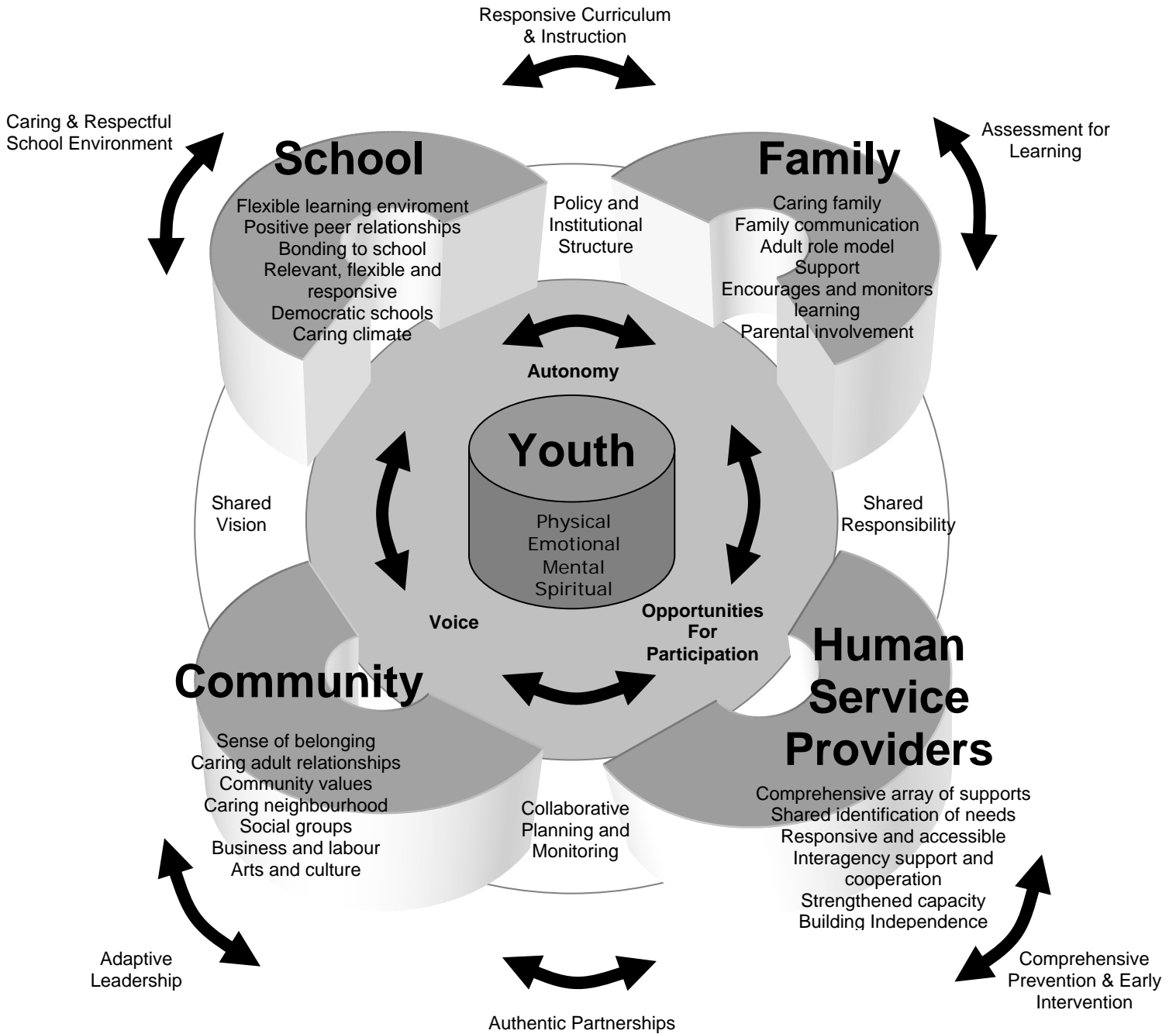
### The Roles of Family, Community, School and Human Service Providers

The model is situated within the school, family, human service providers, and community, as each brings various supports to youth. Family, community, human service providers and school all have critical roles to play in meaningfully engaging youth. Working together they create the environment of support and empowerment that enable youth to develop and flourish as independent and productive citizens. Youth, in turn, require autonomy, voice, and opportunity to participate to be engaged and to develop physically, emotionally, mentally (intellectually), and spiritually. Youth engagement can be facilitated across family, school, human service agencies and community through the establishment of shared vision and responsibility, policy and institutional structure, and collaborative planning and monitoring.

#### Questions to Reflect on:

- ❖ Think about someone who is effective in engaging and re-engaging children and youth. What qualities does this person have that makes them effective?
- ❖ What do you see as the (university) research capacity and strength in issues pertaining to children and youth engagement?

Figure 1. A Model for Youth Engagement



## Family

Family factors have a direct impact on establishing the conditions for engaging youth and encouraging positive learning outcomes. A caring family, family communication, adult family members as positive role models, family support, parental involvement in schooling and high parental expectations have all been identified as important in the development of engaged resilient youth (Resiliency Canada, 2003). Similar factors are also equated with producing positive learning outcomes for youth (The Learning Partnership, 2004, p.4).

### Questions to Reflect on:

- ❖ What are ways that we can effectively involve families as a partner with the school in the education of children and youth?
- ❖ How does my organization/sector involve families in a meaningful way to promote youth engagement?

## Community

There are many factors with respect to youth engagement that are beyond the control of the school. In particular, the influence of community support is particularly important in mediating risk factors for youth (The Learning Partnership, 2004). The following are elements that influence youth engagement:

- a. sense of belonging to a community,
- b. caring adult relationships,
- c. community values,
- d. caring neighborhood,
- e. social groups,
- f. business and labour; and
- g. arts and culture

### Questions to Reflect on:

- ❖ What do you see as the connection between truancy and youth involvement in career-based work and/or volunteer activities?
- ❖ How can we ensure that the business and labour community are partners to youth engagement?

- ❖ What connections does your business/company/labour organization have to support youth engagement? How can these connections be strengthened?

## School

There are many school level factors that can influence youth engagement.

Among the most significant school level factors are:

- a. flexible learning environments,
- b. positive peer relationships,
- c. bonding to school,
- d. relevant, responsive, and flexible school work,
- e. democratic schools, and
- f. caring school climate.

### Questions to Reflect on:

- ❖ In what ways are schools successfully promoting youth engagement?
- ❖ In what ways can we support schools in further promoting youth engagement?
- ❖ In what ways can flexible learning environments be supported?

## Human Service Providers

Human Service Providers work together to provide supports and services within schools or linked to them. Schools serve as hubs for delivery of an array of services and supports to achieve learning excellence and well-being. The following are elements that influence youth engagement:

- a. comprehensive array of supports,
- b. shared identification of needs,
- c. responsive and accessible array of services,
- d. interagency support and cooperation,
- e. strengthened capacity to provide an array of service and supports, and
- f. ability to build independence.

**Questions to Reflect on:**

- ❖ How can meaningful partnerships with communities such as human justice, social work, nursing, and Aboriginal be developed?
- ❖ What are the elements of youth engagement specific to the work of your organization/sector that you would add, or that require further development?

***Provincial and local capacity to provide for youth engagement can be enhanced through:***

- ❖ Collaborative Planning & Monitoring: Engaging youth, family, human service providers, school and community in educational, health and recreational planning, problem solving, and service delivery, and by a shared understanding of institutional and community strengths, needs, concerns, and outcomes.
- ❖ Family Support: collaboratively identify/develop programs and initiatives to support families.
- ❖ Community Support: Engaging communities in meaningful and purposeful partnerships.
- ❖ School Level Support: Exploring ways of increasing youth voice in decision-making, providing flexibility in the educational program, and providing youth ownership over authentic learning opportunities.
- ❖ Human Service Provider Support: by working together human service partners can develop the capacity to provide the comprehensive array of supports children and youth need to achieve learning excellence and well-being.

**Questions to Reflect on:**

- ❖ Given what has been learned about youth engagement, what can we do differently?
- ❖ What is my sector's role in engaging youth?
  - What concrete actions do we currently undertake?
  - What additional actions can we undertake and within what timelines?
- ❖ How can Teacher Education Programs be strengthened to support future initiatives associated with youth engagement?
- ❖ How can field experiences and community-based learning be more fully integrated to initial teacher education?

## Next Steps

The Forum has begun the process of barrier identification, positive visioning, and conceptualization of the issues related to youth engagement. It is necessary that a consolidation of general understandings of the phenomenon and of the vision for youth engagement take place. To advance the youth engagement agenda future responses may include:

1. Presenting this paper to SEC Forum participating institutions, agencies and sectors.
2. Presenting this paper to the Government of Saskatchewan's Human Service Integration Forum, the School<sup>PLUS</sup> Interdepartmental Management Committee, School<sup>PLUS</sup> Interdepartmental Working Committee and other critical government structures.
3. Conducting a provincial symposium (Fall/Winter 2005-06) to increase awareness of youth engagement and showcase innovative approaches involving youth, family, community, human service providers, and school from across the province. This will require linkages to the work of SEC Forum organizational & institutional members. The Youth Engagement Model may serve as an organizer in structuring the symposium presentations and discussions.
4. Conducting further research pertaining to the establishment of indicators for youth engagement that agencies, schools, communities, and families can use to guide practice and monitor outcomes.
5. Conducting a study on the nature and extent of students of school age not enrolled in an educational program.
6. Conducting an examination of the current legislative context as it pertains to youth engagement and attendance and make recommendations to relevant government departments regarding future revisions to legislation.
7. Develop reflective/critical questions for inclusion in the discussion paper to support sector presentations.
8. Link SEC Forum work to new and existing related initiatives, i.e. Unconditional Commitment Framework; *Toward Schoolplus: Empowering High Schools as Communities of Learning and Support*.

## Glossary of Terms

**Community Education Philosophy** seeks to build authentic and respectful connections among the school, the family and the community to ensure success for all. Parents and communities are invited and empowered to fully and meaningfully participate in the education and well-being of children, youth and in the development of community.

**Human Service Provider/Sector** includes education, health, social, justice, recreation, culture and housing supports and others that contribute to the well-being of children, youth, adults and families.

**Provocative Statement** is used as part of the Appreciative Inquiry process. It is an overarching statement that attempts to identify a vision for the future or desired state which is trying to be reached.

**Spiritual Development** is one of the goals of education in Saskatchewan. The central aim of spiritual development is the cultivation of inner strength and the development of an outward focus on care, compassion, and respect. In public education in Saskatchewan a clear distinction is drawn between spiritual development and religious education. Religious education focuses upon the particular beliefs and practices of specific, institutionalized religions and is not part of the Common Essential Learnings of Personal and Social Values and Skills. Spiritual development refers to the exploration of a larger and more general framework of ideas, questions, and experiences related to the search for meaning and purposes – ones that recognize and nourish the human spirit in positive and respectful ways. Spiritual growth is supported rather than taught directly.

**Strengthening Educational Capacity (SEC) Forum** is a committee made up of representatives from numerous sectors including human service departments of government, learning partners, Francophone, parents, youth, Aboriginal, post-secondary, labour and business. A key purpose of the forum is to facilitate the capacity of school divisions and schools to fully implement School<sup>PLUS</sup> through a school and division improvement process.



## EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FRAMEWORK

### EFFECTIVE PRACTICES TOWARD SCHOOL<sup>PLUS</sup>: AN OVERVIEW

#### Development of the Whole Child and Youth

At the core of the Effective Practice Framework is the goal of developing the whole child and youth. This encompasses intellectual, personal, social, physical, and cultural/spiritual development. All educational activity must lead to positive outcomes in one or more of these developmental areas.

#### Learning Community

The learning community surrounds all children and youth. It is broader than the classroom and school and signals that meaningful learning occurs in all aspects of school and community life. Learning is not restricted to lessons in a school environment, but also takes place in family and community interactions on a daily basis. Schools and communities must seek opportunity to support and foster this larger learning community to broaden the range of programs and services that meet the needs of children and youth.

