

# Halton Youth Initiative Report

*An Important Canadian Model of  
Authentic Youth Engagement*



Published by Our Kids Network.

*Halton Youth Initiative Report: An Important Canadian Model of Authentic Youth Engagement* shares the journey of the HYI and creates awareness of how a municipal initiative can successfully provide a platform for youth voice and action.

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# Acknowledgements

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## Our Kids Network Champions

OKN Champions work together with a common vision and mission to ensure that all children and youth thrive. Our Halton-wide partnership of agencies and organizations mobilizes knowledge and maximizes resources to support Halton professionals in their work towards the [Halton 7 population results](#).

OKN Champions include: Halton Region: Commissioner of Social and Community Services and Chief Medical Officer of Health; Halton Children's Aid Society, Executive Director; Halton Regional Police Service: Chief of Police; Halton Catholic Board of Education, Director of Education; Halton Public Board of Education, Director of Education; Halton Multicultural Council, Executive Director; ROCK, Reach Out Centre for Kids, CEO; ErinoakKids, Centre for Treatment and Development, President and CEO.

## OKN Community Planning Table

The OKN Community Planning Table consists of a senior staff member representing each of the seven protocol partners, OKN staff, 2 parents/caregivers, and 2 youth. The scope of their work is to advance the vision of "All Children and Youth Thrive" in Halton through intentional collective action and to implement the Vision, Mission and Strategic Directions of the Our Kids Network as approved by the Champions Group.

## Our Kids Network Team

Christine Hartley, Executive Director; Elena DiBattista, Former Executive Director; Lily Viggiano, Project Coordinator Halton Youth Initiative; Siobhan Laverdiere, Former Project Coordinator Halton Youth Initiative; Shelley Lothian, Ph.D., Research Consultant, Lothian & Associates; Angela Bellegarde, Indigenous Lead Our Kids Network; Elisabeth Wells, Ph.D., Research and Knowledge Mobilization Manager Our Kids Network; Beth Williams, Communications Manager Our Kids Network; Randa Bassil, Communications Coordinator Our Kids Network; Mary Tabak, Former Our Kids Network Developmental Assets Manager; Allison Hilborn, Acton Hub Coordinator; Vanessa Box-Jones, Acton Our Kids Network Hub.

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\* Every effort has been made to include all youth volunteers. We apologize for any participant that has not been included in this list.

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\* Every effort has been made to include all participants. We apologize for any participant that has not been included in this list.

# **Halton Youth Initiative Report**

***An Important Canadian Model of  
Authentic Youth Engagement***

# Contents

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## **Foreword - An Important Canadian Model of Authentic Youth Engagement - 9**

### **Preparing the Ground: The Need - 12**

- An Evidence-Based Approach - 12
  - The Philosophy - 12
  - The Data - 14
- The North Oakville Youth Development Council - 14

### **Planting the Seeds: The Communities - 16**

- Why were these communities chosen? - 16
  - Acton - 17
  - Aldershot - 18
  - Milton - 19
  - North Oakville - 20
- How did the Halton Youth Initiative operate? - 21
- How were the Halton Youth Initiative councils structured? - 21

### **Nurturing the Crop: The Transition to Virtual - 25**

- Creating Virtual Teams - 25
- The Virtual Teams - 26
- Utilizing Virtual Tools - 33
- Thriving as an Initiative in the Face of the Pandemic - 33

### **Bearing Fruit: Recruit, Retain, Recognize, Relationships, and Resources (The 5Rs) - 36**

- The Transfer of Knowledge - 36
- Making the Case for Investing in Relationships - 36
- Using Technology When Working With Youth - 38
- Recruiting, Working With and Recognizing Youth Volunteers - 39

### **Why was the experience of the Halton Youth Initiative an important model of authentic youth engagement in Canada? - 40**

- The Evaluation and Research - 40
- Shelley's Research Observations - 41
- Data Collection Methods - 42
- Evaluation Results - 48
- The Legacy – 50
- Call to Action – 51
- Final Summary - 51



## Foreword

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### An Important Canadian Model of Authentic Youth Engagement

Hello,

In 2018, Our Kids Network (OKN) received a generous grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) to fund the Halton Youth Initiative, an evidence-based, youth-led initiative that engaged and empowered local young people as never before. The project will be completed on December 31, 2021, having influenced and empowered an astounding 57,420 young people!

Over the course of 3 years, project coordinators Siobhan Laverdiere and Lily Viggiano established an important model of authentic youth engagement in Halton. As the initiative took shape, we saw that when communities intentionally build and support youth-focused initiatives, they exceed goals. They provide safe spaces for youth to develop and express themselves, and they can maximize positive progress on issues that really matter to young people. Especially through 2020/21, this local initiative was a catalyst for community youth engagement during a very challenging time. Communities across Canada can learn from the Halton Youth Initiative model.

OKN's role is to build community capacity to support the work of Halton professionals and we will be going forward focused on assisting our community partners to achieve their objectives. As this outstanding initiative draws to a close, we hope that it will inspire communities to continue to plan and implement these powerful local youth-lead projects locally and across Halton.



*Christine Hartley*

Christine Hartley  
Our Kids Network Executive Director



## Fast Facts

The impact of the Halton Youth Initiative between 2015-2021.

**57420**  
YOUTH REACHED BY  
THE WORK OF THE  
HALTON YOUTH  
INITIATIVE



**300+**  
VOLUNTEERS  
CONTRIBUTING

**5000+**  
VOLUNTEER HOURS  
CONTRIBUTED



**50+**  
COMMUNITY  
PARTNERS



**30+**  
PROJECTS AND  
CAMPAIGNS



**30+**  
SPECIAL  
EVENTS



**30+**  
INDIVIDUAL AND  
GROUP AWARDS



**100+**  
YOUTH INVOLVED  
IN THE  
EVALUATION OF  
THE INITIATIVE



**70+**  
VIDEOS HOSTED ON  
THE HALTON YOUTH  
INITIATIVE  
YOUTUBE CHANNEL



**\$3,000+**  
RAISED IN  
6 CRAFTING FOR A  
CAUSE FUNDRAISING  
CAMPAIGNS FOR 6  
DIFFERENT  
COMMUNITY  
AGENCIES



**\$571,800+**  
INVESTED  
IN  
HALTON  
YOUTH



Funding for the Our Kids Network Halton Youth Initiative is provided by the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

For the full Halton Youth Initiative Report  
visit [haltoneyouth.com](http://haltoneyouth.com)



# Halton Youth Initiative Report

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## ***An Important Canadian Model of Authentic Youth Engagement***

The goal of the Halton Youth Initiative was to elevate youth voice and empower volunteers aged 12-17 to have a positive impact in the communities of North Oakville, Acton, Aldershot, and Milton. The project was youth-led, with young volunteers identifying local issues and implementing strategies leading to possible solutions. An evidence-based approach focused on relationship building was taken in all interactions and activities.

The Halton Youth Initiative Report highlights the activities, benchmarks and impact of the Halton Youth Initiative between 2015 and 2021.

[The Halton Youth Initiative Report – Executive Summary](#) provides a brief overview of the report.



Look for this icon throughout the document for links to supporting resources.



## ***Preparing the Ground: The Need***

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The conversations that formed the foundation of the Halton Youth Initiative began at the Our Kids Network Youth Collective Impact meeting in July of 2015. Building on the planning done in 2015, an Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) Seed Grant was awarded to North Oakville in the spring of 2016. A committee of regional professionals identified the neighbourhood as a vulnerable neighbourhood with great opportunities. Concerns about the community included high social risk index, high bullying and low social cohesion, high interaction between youth and police, high number of CAS calls, and high referrals for mental health. Youth focus groups were conducted in the summer of 2016 by Our Kids Network, YMCA of Oakville and Community Action for Youth.

The themes that emerged shaped the goals of the work funded by OTF:

- increase awareness of local resources to a youth audience,
- increase awareness of topics that matter to youth, and
- collaborate with community partners to increase positive youth hangout space.

### **○ An Evidence-based Approach**

#### **The Philosophy**

The Developmental Asset Framework and Developmental Relationships Framework were developed by the Search Institute and guided the proposal writing process for both the original Seed Grant in 2016 and Grow Grant in 2018. These frameworks were foundational tools used by the Our Kids Network in the work of the Halton Youth Initiative.

Developmental Assets were identified by Search Institute. They are “40 positive supports and strengths that young people need to succeed. Half of the assets focus on the relationships and opportunities they need in their families, schools, and communities (external assets). The remaining assets focus on the social-emotional strengths, values, and commitments that are nurtured within young people (internal assets).”<sup>1</sup>

Developmental Relationships were identified by Search Institute as “five elements—expressed in 20 specific actions—that make relationships powerful in young people’s lives.”<sup>2</sup> The five elements include:

- Express Care – show me that I matter to you
- Challenge Growth – push me to keep getting better
- Provide Support – help me complete tasks and achieve goals
- Share Power – treat me with respect and give me a say
- Expand Possibilities – connect me with people and places that broaden my world

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/development-assets/developmental-assets-framework/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/>

Every structure needs a strong foundation and the professionals in the Our Kids Network have been utilizing the concept of building Developmental Assets and forming Developmental Relationships for over a decade. The Our Kids Network created an on-line Asset Building Toolkit filled with valuable resources for professionals.

Meaningful relationships are the foundation of asset-building in Halton. They are the key ingredient to OKN's work with kids, families, communities – and each other. Developmental Assets and Family Assets can be achieved more efficiently, effectively and authentically through intentionally building relationships.

According to the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (CEYE), authentic youth engagement happens when “Young people from all backgrounds, working in partnership with supportive adults hone their skills by getting involved with any of the multiple projects and programs that we as an organization and all of our partners are working on.” The CEYE also believes that, “all young people have endless potential and encourages them to use it to the best of their abilities, by engaging them on issues that concern them, no matter where they are coming from. It is the belief of this organization (CEYE) that engaging young people in an effective and meaningful way creates resiliency, in turn building community and citizenship.”<sup>3</sup>

The Our Kids Network identified youth engagement on a continuum. “Youth engagement happens on a continuum, from youth as passive recipients of services to engaging activities that recognize youth as equal partners in their care (development).”<sup>4</sup> This project will focus on working **with** youth. The project is grounded on key principles of:

- leadership
- involvement that inspires youth
- inclusiveness
- an open environment
- respectful relationships
- supportive connections through adult mentors and peers

The project was also aligned with the guidelines outlined in the Ontario Stepping Up strategic framework including:

- A Positive, Asset-Based View of Youth
- Targeted Support for Those Who Need It
- Collaboration and Partnership
- Meaningful Youth Engagement and Leadership
- Diversity
- Evidence-Informed Choices
- Transparency

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.studentscommission.ca/en/resources/public>

<sup>4</sup> Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (March 2021). Quality standard for youth engagement. Ottawa, ON.

## The Data

The Our Kids Network (OKN) Data Portal was utilized to collect the data to identify the communities to take part in the project. Since 2014 Halton professionals have used the OKN Data Portal to better understand and use data in their work with children, youth and families. OKN has invested in a significant amount of research focused on identifying the key components of healthy growth and development for all children and youth. This quality, local data was based on the Halton 7 population results, which represent ideal living conditions for children and youth in Halton. Users will find community and neighbourhood-level information, demographics, OKN research data on health, safety, education, Census data and more.



[Developmental Assets Framework](#)

[Who is an Asset-Builder?](#)

[Why the Developmental Assets Framework?](#)

[Developmental Relationships Framework](#)

[OKN Asset Building Toolkit](#)

[Asset-Building in Halton Illustration](#)

[The Centre for Excellence in Youth Engagement](#)

[Quality Standard for Youth Engagement \(Ontario Centre for Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health\)](#)

[Ontario Stepping Up Strategic Framework](#)

[OKN Data Portal](#)

[Halton 7 Link](#)

## ○ The North Oakville Youth Development Council

In the spring of 2015, the North Oakville neighbourhood (defined by the neighbourhood south of Dundas, north of QEW, west of Trafalgar Rd. and east of Neyagawa Blvd.) was identified by a committee of regional professionals as a vulnerable neighbourhood with great opportunities. This committee included the Our Kids Network, Halton Region, Halton Police, Reach Out Centre for Kids (ROCK), Halton District School Board, Halton Catholic District School Board, Halton Children's Aid Society and youth. Once North Oakville was identified, the Town of Oakville, Oakville YMCA, Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre and Community Youth Action Network joined.

Some concerns about the community included high social risk index, high bullying and low social cohesion, high interaction between youth and police, high number of CAS calls, and high referrals for mental health.

The project was based on research that emphasized that meaningful relationships between youth and adults and youth and their peers were the key to promoting child and youth positive development, fostering assets and well-being, as well as protecting from at-risk behaviours like bullying.

The goal in North Oakville was to increase mental well-being and decrease at-risk behaviour in youth (Gr. 7 – 10) by increasing meaningful relationship assets by 10% in their North Oakville neighbourhood by June 2020.

North Oakville had a number of conditions in place which made it a good choice including:

- being identified by both the Oakville YMCA and Halton Region as a neighbourhood with high needs
- hosting a number of development opportunities by the Town of Oakville
- professionals are community minded
- the neighbourhood has representation by both school boards
- the neighbourhood had the ability to access youth
- part of this neighbourhood was selected by a separate OKN work group to target Early Years development

In the summer of 2016, youth focus groups were conducted by Our Kids Network, Oakville YMCA and Community Action for Youth to elicit their voice about the neighbourhood. Approximately, 75 youth were engaged in the focus groups. Three themes emerged:

1. Need space for unstructured hangout time
2. Value meaningful relationships with adults but don't feel valued by community
3. Need help connecting to community and to resources

An Ontario Trillium Grow Grant was awarded in 2016 to fund a project coordinator for one year to collaborate with community stakeholders in the development of an action plan. Key areas of work also included a fulsome youth engagement strategy and an evaluation plan.



[NOYDC Infographic](#)

[Youth Voices Matter in North Oakville \(Article\)](#)

[What would make a caring neighbourhood Infographic](#)

[Youth Voices Matter OKN Survey – North Oakville](#)

[NOYDC Terms of Reference](#)

[Youth Action Framework – North Oakville](#)



## ***Planting the Seeds: The Communities***

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The Halton Youth Initiative built on the success of the Ontario Trillium Foundation Seed Grant awarded in 2016 for North Oakville. This work prepared the way for an OTF Grow Grant in 2018 to expand the reach of Halton adult-youth councils at the OKN Community Hub locations. OTF funding was used for staffing, youth support and program costs.

The Our Kids Network Community Hubs were located in Acton, Milton and Aldershot and brought people and organizations together from across Halton Region to improve the lives of children, youth and families. Each Hub was located at a school, was managed by a coordinator, and made services more accessible to neighbourhoods. They all had classroom-sized space for community programs, provided by Our Kids Network members and other community partners.

Each Hub responded to the unique needs of the community, and worked with local partners and groups to provide programming such as drop-ins, social skills programs, parent support, food security and more.

### **○ Why were these communities chosen?**

The project focused on scaling up the work that was being done in North Oakville. In addition, the project framework was replicated in the three established Our Kids Network Community Hub neighbourhoods. These neighbourhood hubs identified youth as a priority. According to the 2016 census there were 8,280 youth aged 11 - 18 in the four communities of North Oakville, Acton, Aldershot and Milton.

The early work in North Oakville provided a proven model of enhanced intentional youth engagement for community change. This work supported the positive development of children and youth. This initiative brought adults from across sectors to work with youth in their neighbourhood or community. The initiative was grounded in building and enhancing relationships with youth. Service providers, educators, community members, police, faith leaders, and others worked with youth to collectively identify issues and gaps and to implement strategies that met the unique needs of youth. The work was based on the premise that it takes a community or a whole system to best support youth, build strong healthy relationships, and to ensure youth have a voice in their communities and community programs and supports.

The broad goal of this project was to elevate youth voice and empower youth to have a positive impact in their community. The project was youth-led

, with youth identifying local issues and identifying strategies for possible solutions. Activities were grounded in an asset-based approach and focused on relationship building. Goals and an action plan were developed. The scaled up work in North Oakville focused on three key areas:

- relationships with mentors and adults
- access to information about supports and programs for youth
- unstructured and safe "hang out" space for youth

The Halton Youth Initiative also brought the learnings and framework developed in North Oakville to the 3 Halton hub neighbourhoods (Aldershot, Acton and Milton) for engagement, initiative development and implementation.



## Acton: The Seven Somebodies



The Acton committee was called the Seven Somebodies and they met at the OKN Community Hub at Mackenzie-Smith Bennett School. The membership was more than seven youth, but the young members thought the name was cool and decided to keep it as their numbers grew. The Seven Somebodies wanted adults to know that their tone and style of behaviour counts when working with young volunteers and how they felt adults did or did not express care.

Young leaders shared how they tune in to adults who acknowledge their presence, seem happy to see them, and have a good sense of humour – especially in moments of stress. They noted that a smile and warm welcome goes a long way to effect the overall tone of groups. They said that adults must find creative and upbeat ways of shutting down undesirable group behaviour, such as disruptions and staying on topic. These youth felt that they want adults to be in charge, but also be aware of their power to set the tone for the group.

*“I can tell when adults go the extra mile, and it means a lot to me.”*

Jenna, Seven Somebodies committee member



[The Seven Somebodies](#)

[2019 07 Youth Voice: Town of Halton Hills Planning](#)

[2019 06 Exploring Our Community](#)

[2019 The Seven Somebodies Events](#)

## Aldershot: The Aldershot Youth Crew



The Aldershot Youth Crew was established in April 2019 and met at the OKN Community Hub location at Holy Rosary School. One of the first projects that they worked on was to pose the question “What do youth want adults to know?” to the larger community of youth at Alderfest, an annual neighbourhood-building event. The team members took up their clipboards and interviewed 56 local youth. The results reflected two of the Developmental Relationship dimensions.

### Provide Support:

- Youth need their voices heard in their households, classrooms, and community.
- Kids are awesome!

### Expand Possibilities:

- Give youth more freedom to explore their community and interests.
- Tune into how we feel and take action.

*“My older cousin takes me to Halton Conservation parks and  
always points out the signs and information.  
She tries to teach me new things even though she doesn’t have to.  
That’s how I know she cares.”*

Chase M., Aldershot Youth Crew member



[The Aldershot Youth Crew](#)

## Milton: Milton Youth Action Team



The Milton Youth Action Team met at the OKN Community Hub located in Our Lady of Victory School. Members discussed what they wished adults (in particular program coordinators and volunteer managers) knew about young people. The results reflected two of the Developmental Relationship dimensions.

### Provide Support:

- This team wants adults to see the best in them.

### Share Power:

- For adults to see the ability of youth to take advantage of opportunities and to leverage adults' wisdom and experience to help young people.

*"In terms of ideas, youth are good at coming up with ideas and need some authority to make it happen. Adults and youth are a powerful combination – youth power the ideas and adults can make it happen"*  
Rayyan, Milton Youth Action Team committee member



### [Milton Youth Action Team](#)

[2019 07 Developmental Relationships in Action – Milton](#)

[2019 09 Milton Fair Battle of the Bands](#)

[2019 11 Milton Pitch Competition](#)

[2020 01 Town of Milton: Youth Voice](#)

## North Oakville: North Oakville Youth Development Council



The North Oakville Youth Development Council (NOYDC) started in June 2017 and paved the way for the developing youth councils in the other communities. The NOYDC met at the Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre.

In discussions about support and guidance, Daniella a NOYDC member, explained that young people want adults to show that they care about youth and are there to support them. Youth welcome support and guidance but also want personal space to figure out for themselves what they want to do.

Expressing Care and Expanding Possibilities are reflected here. In the discussions with young people at the North Oakville Youth Development Council, they said that expressing care could also be about providing youth with the space they need to think things through in order to form their own identities and perspectives.

*“As a youth, I would like adults to know that youth value their community and want to help assist in its proceedings. They like participating in political discussions and love being able to share their opinions, especially if people are willing to listen.”*

Hargun, North Oakville Youth Development Council member



[North Oakville Youth Development Council](#)

[2017 05 North Oakville Community Stakeholders Forum & Youth Action Framework](#)

[2018 03 Youth Talks: Hear Us Out!](#)

[2018 05 North Oakville YDC National Youth Week Barbeque](#)

[2018 11 Family Skate Night](#)

[2019 03 Piece Our Neighbourhood Together](#)

[2019 05 NOYDC National Youth Week Barbeque](#)

[2019 08 Holy Trinity Grade 9 Student Orientation](#)

[2019 08 25 Community Conversations](#)



## ○ How did the Halton Youth Initiative operate?

The HYI Project followed the Developmental Relationships framework.

- **Shared power** by holding in-person meetings hosted at the hub locations and the Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre.
- **Challenged growth in youth leaders** by recruiting through outreach in the school systems, Volunteer Halton and through the hub connections.
- **Provided support** by helping young leaders to identify issues that mattered to them and ways to take action to address the issues.
- **Expressed care** by connecting with Adult Allies identified from the hub supporters and who acted as supports through role modelling, giving feedback, mentoring, and providing guidance related to youth leadership tasks, both in and outside of meetings.
- **Expanded possibilities** by connecting with Community Partners and other stakeholders who shared their expertise on specific project elements and invited volunteers to participate in community events/campaigns.

## ○ How were the Halton Youth Initiative councils structured?

The HYI Project Coordinator and Youth Asset Builder were contract staff hired to guide the project by the Our Kids Network and funded by the OTF grant. The Project Coordinator and Youth Asset Builder worked with the following members in each council to carry out the projects and activities.

**Youth Council Member** - The councils did their best to ensure the inclusiveness and diversity of youth perspectives. Youth council members ranged from 12-17 years old. Members primarily consisted of youth from the community served by the council. Certain exceptions applied based on the number of council positions available. There was a maximum of 15 youth council member positions available at any given time based on funding. Youth council members were nominated by adult allies or other community partners. Council members were required to report their hours of involvement to the Project Coordinator or Youth Asset Builder and they received an honorarium in return for their service. It is important to note that many of the youth participants were very committed to the HYI and far exceeded their original commitment of time to the project.

Tasks of youth council members included:

- Shared leadership at council meetings by chairing, minute taking, leading activities (as required) and voting on council decisions
- Providing ideas and feedback on all council related activities, both at meetings and outside of meetings
- Engaging with peers to promote the initiative so they can get involved in volunteer opportunities
- Community engagement to spread awareness about the initiative and build relationships with adults
- Attendance at most council monthly meetings
- Preparation for meetings by reading previous minutes and other related communications
- Completion of Our Kids Network and Ontario Trillium Foundation evaluation surveys

**Youth Volunteer** - Youth volunteers were any youth in Halton, or neighbouring areas, who wished to get involved in the project by participating in subcommittees, workgroups, peer engagement activities, community events, etc. The youth received volunteer hours for their participation.

Tasks of youth volunteers included:

- Attendance at most meetings
- Active participation at meetings including providing consistent feedback and contributing to group ideas
- A fair share of the tasks and projects taken on by the team
- Ongoing communication with the coordinator, adult allies and other volunteers

**Adult Ally** - Adult allies acted as supports to youth council members through role modelling, giving feedback, mentoring, and providing guidance related to youth leadership tasks, both in and outside of meetings. The concept of being an ally was viewed as a process rather than an identity and there were many lessons learned along the way. Adult allies were determined by youth council members by vote. Adult allies were not to exceed the number of youth council members. The ideal number was a 1:2 ratio of adults to youth per meeting. Adult allies often took part in the HYI because it supported their personal or professional belief in supporting youth engagement in the community.

Tasks of adult allies included:

- Finding ways to build relationships with and increase assets of youth council members both in and outside of meetings
- Adherence to youth council group guidelines (available from Project Coordinators)
- Assistance with coordination of separate youth workgroups/sub-committees as required
- General support, feedback and guidance in breakout rooms
- Sharing their experience and knowledge with volunteers to support the success of activities
- Provision of agreed upon in-kind services if applicable
- Promoting youth council project objectives throughout the community (e.g. building youth assets, advocating for youth mentorship opportunities, finding ways to embed youth voice and engagement strategies within organizations)
- Promotion of youth council activities to youth and the community
- Ongoing communication with the Project Coordinator (e.g. attendance, community updates for youth, bringing guests to meetings)
- Attendance at most youth council monthly meetings (e.g. at least 60% attendance or roughly 7/12 meetings per year)
- Completion of Our Kids Network and Ontario Trillium Foundation evaluation surveys

**Community Partner** - Community partners were other stakeholders and adults in the community who wished to get involved in the project but are not adult ally committee members. For this project, partners and other organizations worked with youth to develop and implement action plans. In addition, partners looked for ways to support the work of this initiative in their organizations and they worked together to identify and strengthen service linkages and partnerships. Grant funds were not allocated to support the involvement of the Community Partners, but rather partners made in-kind contributions including staff time for planning and implementation, meeting space, meeting resources, event resources, etc. Many of the Community Partners were able to contribute to their own organizational goals related to youth engagement through their involvement with the Halton Youth Initiative.

Community partners provided support to the youth council by:

- Building connections between the council and their organizations (e.g. spreading awareness about the youth council and related activities, advocating for possible youth mentorship opportunities and ways to increase youth assets)
- Spreading awareness about the initiative throughout the community and distributing promotional materials
- Encouraging youth in the community to get involved
- Participating in agreed-upon subcommittees or workgroups
- Being a liaison between the youth council and other stakeholders if required
- Sharing community updates with the youth council that are relevant to youth
- Attending as a guest at occasional meetings if required by youth council members



[Youth Council Member Role](#)

[Youth Volunteer Role](#)

[Adult Ally Role](#)

[Adult Engagers Tip Sheet](#)

[Youth Engagement Policy Template](#)

[Community Partner Role](#)

## Five Points to Practice for Professionals and Volunteers Who Work with Youth

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### 1. Positive Attitude

Youth remember how you make them feel. Positive attitude, smiles, asking specific questions, remembering birthdays, are small but very meaningful actions that add up to a big memory. And those memories encourage youth to come back again and again.

### 2. Share Responsibility

Some youth said that while they like to be helpful, too much responsibility might not be helpful to them. Be mindful that while it's important to give youth a voice, often they are learning and looking to adults for guidance and practical support in order to accomplish tasks and build skills.

### 3. Avoid Stereotypes and Appreciate Individuality

Each young person is an individual so make time to understand and respect their personality, likes and dislikes, and hopes and dreams. Taking extra time to acknowledge the individuality of youth as they arrive and throughout the program or event is key.

### 4. Provide Personal Space

One way to show youth that we care is by giving them the space to reflect on their own feelings, opinions and perspectives. This can go a long way to building a meaningful relationship, and send the message that we respect their privacy and autonomy.

### 5. Give Youth a Say

Provide spaces and experiences where youth can get actively involved in expressing their thoughts and opinions and take action in their community, especially when the topic has an impact on them.

***How can you and your organization reflect what youth are telling us?***

**Source: The Halton Youth Initiative**





## ***Nurturing the Crop: The Transition to Virtual***

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The COVID-19 Pandemic required the Halton Youth Initiative to dissolve the geographic barriers and quickly develop a model for the virtual world that would continue to tackle the goals of the OTF Grow Grant. A strengths-based approach that nurtured the existing relationships with youth members and engaged community partners kept the initiative operating, growing and building momentum. Remarkably, youth participation increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic with 300 youth engaged year-over-year.

### ○ **Creating Virtual Teams**

At the end of March 2020, when the reality of the COVID-9 Pandemic was taking hold, the Project Coordinator and Youth Asset Builder quickly realized that in-person meetings and projects were no longer going to be possible. The HYI staff developed a model to make the transition into the virtual world while continuing to address the goals of the OTF Grant, to work with youth using a strengths-based approach, and to engage the community partners in activities that build relationships with the young volunteers.

Five virtual teams were created and were supported by either the HYI staff Program Coordinator or Youth Asset Builder. The virtual teams were comprised of young volunteers and supportive adult allies. The virtual teams focused on the goals for the OTF Grant and included a learning component called the “Deep Dive” to ensure all youth were on the same page and understanding foundational information about how the HYI would function going forward. Each virtual team focused on one or two of the OTF Grant goals, understanding that the each group would evolve and likely contribute to all the goals at some point:

- **OTF Goal One:** 3000 youth have increased knowledge about local resources in their community
- **OTF Goal Two:** 1550 youth, parents and/or stakeholders gain knowledge and awareness about key areas concerning youth, building relationships and how to support youth through presentations and resources
- **OTF Goal Three:** 128 youth involved in continuing to build partnerships in 4 communities around increasing positive youth hangout space

Each team followed a similar structure:

- Youth chose what team(s) they were on (virtual volunteering doesn’t have geographical borders)
- Weekly meetings on ZOOM
- Google drive collaboration
- Volunteer hours and leadership honourariums
- Community partner support

## ○ The Virtual Teams



As the HYI continued to grapple with the virtual transition, it became clear that in order to move the needle on big topics, there needed to be a learning component to ensure all youth were on the same page and understanding foundational information.

**The Deeper Dive Goal:** The Deeper Dive series were designed to be agile and in-line with what young people needed to succeed in the Halton Youth Initiative projects and in life. In addition to learning sessions, youth were tasked with assignments and collaborative volunteering to deepen their knowledge. Community partners and various adult allies were integral in making these Monday meetings a success.

### The Deeper Dive iterations:

- **COVID-19 Virtual Response Team** – April through mid-May 2020 – a 6-week series about creating a safe virtual space to discuss COVID-19, youth mental health and community volunteerism, using the Developmental Relationships pillars as the weekly framework
- **Expressing Care Sessions** – End of May 2020 - 2 events – positive hangout time with adult allies and youth, played Kahoot! and Houseparty, and chatted on ZOOM
- **Expanding Possibilities** – June - 2 Career Panel events – Panels of six adults coming from careers that the youth indicated wanting to learn more about. Adults were able to ZOOM in from all over Ontario to share their journey and connect with youth.
  - **June 1** – Business and Charitable Sector Careers
  - **June 8** – Creative Careers
- **Your ReconciliACTION challenges** – Month of June 2020 - 4 weeks of learning and challenges on social media and Google Classroom on the topic of Truth and Reconciliation. As HYI began to actively learn and act on Truth and Reconciliation we recognized the importance of creating a base level understanding of key topics such as whose land we are on.
- **Your ReconciliACTION Journey** – July through mid-August 2020 - 6-week series – In 2020 Our Kids Network began an Indigenous Reconciliation Initiative to empower individuals and organizations in Halton Region. Your ReconciliACTION Journey was a weekly volunteer program which included meetings along with tasks that supported our journey in the Truth and Reconciliation process. The final week included a Community Dialogue with several community leaders to discuss personal/professional pledges to Truth and Reconciliation, as well as calls to action designed by the youth participants.
- **The Time is NOW** – November through mid-December 2020 – 4 week series - A four-week series provided youth with the knowledge needed to understand, educate, and take meaningful action in addressing climate change. Weekly lessons with individual tasks submitted via Google Classroom each week ended in a Community Dialogue to share our pledges.
- **Youth Organizing for the Greater Good** - Over the course of 6 weeks, youth volunteers learned from experts in how to research, design messages, and communicate with various audiences. This knowledge was mobilized by tackling opportunity statements presented by community partners who supported youth on their journey.



[Reconcili-ACTION](#)

[Community Dialogue](#)

[Climate Crusaders – Project Snapshot](#)

[Youth Organizing for the Greater Good – Project Snapshot](#)

[Community Showcase](#)

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#### VIRTUAL



**Goal:** OTF Goals One and Two

**How:** The Communications Crew focused on creating informative and engaging content for social media, the HYI website (blogs/vlogs) and traditional media. Content created was also featured on other media streams run by community partners and school boards. This team also focused on developing resources about lessons learned from HYI to share with community partners as a way of addressing sustainability.

### Focus areas:

- **Indigenous Truth and Reconciliation**

**Self-directed research to create content** – Topics included: Indigenous authors read their work, boil water advisories, whose land are we on, the importance of National Indigenous Peoples month, Calls to Action, and more.

**Truth** – Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2-Spirit folks campaign creating vlogs, Instagram slides posts and a Kahoot! Quiz.

**Reconciliation** – Amplifying Indigenous Creatives and Businesses through Instagram slide posts and hour-long interviews called the Amp Series.

Indigenous creatives featured: Elsa Jayne, Raven Sutherland, Talitha Tolles, Mangeshig, Nish Tees, Luke Swinson, and Miigizi. Indigenous businesses featured included I&S Crafts, Raven Song Soap, Birch Bark Coffee, and Sequoia Beauty.

- **Community Partner resources**

**Volunteering for community partners** – Community partners had several types of short-term projects for youth such as focus group support, creating DIY videos, Instagram takeovers, event development, and created book recommendation lists.

**Community Partner spotlight series** – A showcase of local charities using a youth lens. Each spotlight included creating a slide post for Instagram and a 10-minute recorded interview with staff. Community partners featured included the Town of Milton, Town of Oakville, Town of Halton Hills, Milton Public Library, Oakville Public Library, and the Positive Space Network.

- **Youth Mental Health** – Created positive and empowering Instagram content and blogs.

**Minds Matter Project:** Two breakout rooms worked in tandem to run successful social media campaigns designed to raise awareness of local mental health resources and participated in a nine week wellness challenge series. They came together to host a Wellness Event with five panelists from local mental health organizations.

- **Climate Change** - Climate Crusaders were a small but mighty team dedicated to raising awareness on topics relating to climate change. They also hosted a Climate Justice event with panelists from local environment agencies or departments.

## Knowledge Mobilizers

On January 20th, 2021, representatives from thirteen Halton community organizations participated in an Adult Ally Focus Group to identify topics that would be the most helpful to them in terms of effective youth engagement. The idea was to use these topics as a way to organize HYI lessons learned and content so that the most useful information could be shared with the community for better sustainability. A list of organizations that participated is below. In addition, the Knowledge Mobilizers Breakout team was formed so that youth could have an active part of creating some of these resources for community partners.

- Oakville YMCA
- Oakville Public Library
- Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre
- ROCK
- Town of Milton
- Milton Public Library
- Town of Halton Hills
- Oakville Public Library
- The Tanner
- Art House (x2)
- City of Burlington
- Josh (volunteer)
- Town of Oakville (not present but provided feedback)

## Youth Knowledge Transfer Team

This group of volunteers planned a social media campaign on Instagram to share information about other mental health resources that may not have been covered in the first installment of Communications Crew.



[Communications Crew Your Tasks](#)

[Amp Series - Elsa Jayne](#)

[Amp Series - Raven Sutherland](#)

[Amp Series - Talitha Tolles](#)

[Amp Series – Mangeshig](#)

[Reconcili-ACTION Snapshot including Luke Swinson and Miigizi](#)

[Community Partner Spotlight – Positive Space Network](#)

[Minds Matter – Wellness Event – View Playlist](#)

[Minds Matter – Project Snapshot](#)

[Climate Justice Panel](#)

[Climate Crusaders – Project Snapshot](#)



**Goal:** Support OTF Goals Two and Three

**How:** Community Builders focused on reaching out to various members and groups in the community. A fundamental goal of this virtual team was to express care and provide support to the community while providing opportunities for youth to elevate their voices.

### Focus areas:

- **Youth Mental Health** - Youth developed video clips providing encouraging messages to the community during COVID-19.
- **Indigenous Truth and Reconciliation**
  - Podcast Crew: Halton Youth Share the Truth** –A podcast was developed that provided youth volunteers with a platform to raise their voice about this topic, to learn from guests, and to connect with the Indigenous community. Volunteers focused on the Indigenous Truth & Reconciliation topic and interviewed a range of guests, including Pam Damoff, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indigenous Services. They also had the chance to work closely with adult ally, Stephen Hurley, who is the Founder of voicEd Radio.
  - Calls to Action** – Various topics related to National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation’s publication, including learning about residential schools and reaching out and highlighting the accomplishments of Indigenous athletes
  - Indigenous Artists** – Meaningful connection and relationship building with Indigenous artists in support of their work and offering the community a chance to learn from the artist and find out the meaning behind the artwork.
  - Indigenous Truth & Reconciliation: Land Acknowledgement Project** - Volunteers worked with the Our Kids Network Indigenous Lead to develop video for the community about how to do Land Acknowledgements and why we do them.



[Podcast episodes: Halton Youth Share the Truth | voicEd](#)  
[HYI - Calls to Action - All About Land Acknowledgements](#)  
[YouTube - HYI Calls to Action - Land Acknowledgement Examples](#)  
[YouTube - HYI - Calls to Action – Métis](#)  
[YouTube - HYI - Calls to Action – Anishinaabe](#)  
[YouTube - HYI Calls to Action - Haudenosaunee](#)

- **Creative Outreach Team: ASL Learning and Project**

Volunteers expressed interest in learning about American Sign Language (ASL) and the Deaf Community. After connecting with the organization, Silent Voice, volunteers had the opportunity to learn about ASL, some ASL, and more about Deaf culture first before proceeding to outreach activities. Volunteers also did an Instagram campaign about what they were learning.

- **Connection Series**

**Addressing racial injustice in schools:** Through a panel event, this team focused on amplifying the voices of Black youth in Halton. They also created a campaign to highlight Black-owned businesses and Black artist folks. This led to a series of small events at the Halton District School Board focusing more broadly on the experiences of racialized youth at schools and having their voices heard by school faculty.

**Menstruation Equity:** Volunteers were passionate about providing free menstrual products to youth in Halton. They followed up with both school boards to uncover the status of various promises made to improve access to menstrual products at schools. They also ran a fundraiser with the donation going to Bridging the Gap, Halton Children’s Aid Society program for youth who are facing housing insecurity.

**Crafting for a Cause:** This ongoing series of crafting fundraisers was a hit both in person and online. Kits were dropped out to the houses of the volunteers, or made together at parks and community centres to raise money for organizations that matter to young people.

**Halton Pride Collective:** In June 2021, the HYI Equity Team supported the brave efforts of folks in Halton advocating for better education on gender and sexuality, as well as being more intentional during Pride month – avoiding “rainbow washing” in schools. Rainbow washing means when a business or organization uses the rainbow Pride colours to suggest to people that they support the LGBTQI+ community, without having put in any actual effort or producing a tangible outcome for queer folk.

**Halton Youth Equity Team:** The youth of HYI were passionate that social justice and equity needed to be learned about and acted upon in Halton. They learned, they trained and most importantly they listened to the experiences of team mates and others. The team developed an “How to Build an Equity Team 101” Toolkit with the help of many community partners and hosted the Halton Youth Equity Summit to provide students an opportunity to develop community action project ideas with the help of our team mates and toolkit.



[Addressing racial injustice in schools](#)

[Crafting for a Cause](#)



**Goal:** OTF Goals One, Two and Three

**How:** Creative Spaces did just that—it created positive youth spaces virtually while promoting the youth hangout spaces of other organizations in the community. This team was also responsible for Goal 3 advocacy work for positive youth spaces. Advocacy work changed during the pandemic as participants tried to redefine what a positive youth hangout space can be virtually.

### Focus areas:

- **Youth Mental Health**
  - Back to School** - COVID Conversation hosted by youth volunteers and open to the community
  - Motivation Mondays** - Positive posts were made by youth volunteers on social media to encourage and support wellbeing and positive thinking
- **Indigenous Truth and Reconciliation (all hosted by youth volunteers)**
  - Indigenous Knowledge Keeper Event** was held in collaboration with Knowledge Keeper from the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation
  - Indigenous Storytelling** - participants learned about Indigenous stories and talking about the importance of our stories
  - Indigenous Scavenger Hunt** - space was created by the OKN Indigenous Lead to support youth and adult ally learning around Indigenous topics in an interactive way
- **Youth Leading Youth** - In September 2020 this group transitioned to providing youth volunteers with even more leadership opportunities by having them take on active leadership roles in overseeing breakout rooms with their peers. This act in itself seemed to provide a positive youth hangout space by providing youth members the opportunity to hang out with their peers and to come up with their own ideas without adult supervision or initial input.
- **Youth Handout Survey** – The Snow Foxes Group created a Youth Hangout Survey for their peers about what a positive youth space means to them post-COVID in order to share with the community partners ways to advocate for meaningful youth spaces. 58 youth participated in this survey and an infographic was created as a result.
- **National Youth Week Kindness Bingo** - Volunteers created this activity to inspire youth in the community to do acts of kindness and express care.
- **Indigenous Knowledge Keeper Event** - Was held in November 2020 to provide a space for youth and the community to learn about Indigenous ways of healing, especially with regard to mental health.
- **Name It Don't Numb It Campaign** - Volunteers in this breakout team focused on youth mental health and worked closely with Shine Out! Shout Out! They helped out with a campaign called Name It Don't Numb It, and partnered with the organization during Mental Health Week 2021 to create a positive youth space all about mental health.
- **Amplifying Muslim Figures** - In the wake of the tragedy in London, ON where the Afzaal family were victims of domestic terrorism, one of our Muslim volunteers stepped forward to ask how we would address this. In addition to a blog from the youth who

stepped forward, a team came together to amplify positive Muslim figures via a social media campaign.

- **Let's Talk: Mental Health** – An intimate and frank discussion on youth mental health was had among peers. This extended discussion focused on the effects of toxic masculinity and how it stops boys and men from seeking help and sharing their feelings with loved ones.
- **Online spaces for positive youth hangouts** - For 18 months one of our teams hosted many online events for our HYI team and the public. These hangout spaces were casual, open minded and relaxing.



[Indigenous Knowledge Keeper Event](#)

[HYI Virtual Team Transition](#)

[Indigenous Knowledge Keeper Event](#)

[Youth Hangout Survey Results](#)

[We Rise by Lifting Others: HYI Acts of Kindness Bingo](#)

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#### VIRTUAL

**TEAM  
BUILDERS**

RELATIONSHIPS  
HELP US  
SINK OR SWIM

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**Goal:** Support OTF Goal Two

**How:** This virtual team focused on the development of an HYI Grad event and explored sustainability options around youth organizing for their own cause post-HYI.

**HYI Sustainability Team – Halton Youth Voices Council:** Throughout the course of the summer in 2021 this team brainstormed the possibility of creating their own smaller, youth-led council as a legacy and sustainability piece of the HYI. Youth on this team were typically strong volunteers (with some new additions willing to learn) that had lots of experience with leading activities in past HYI projects. Volunteers were able to develop a structure/Terms of Reference for youth council post-HYI called the Halton Youth Voices Council with the aim of continuing to find opportunities to give youth a voice in Halton around key topics. This team reached out to partnering organizations to find out if there is a way to work with them on key topics including: refugees, mental health, poverty, homelessness (etc.) as a way to sustain youth voices and leadership as a result of participating in the HYI.

**HYI Grad Planning Team:** This team developed a virtual Grad Event on October 22, 2021 to recognize the contributions of volunteers past and present, to celebrate our two valedictorians, and to play games with one another.



[Engaging Youth in Volunteerism: Halton Youth Voices Council](#)

[Terms of Reference North Oakville YDC](#)

[HYI Grad Event](#)



## ○ Utilizing Virtual Tools

Virtual tools including ZOOM, Google Classroom, Google Drive, Instagram and Canva were utilized to strengthen the communication in the community. The effective use of these platforms elevated the HYI community profile. Learning quickly from trial and error helped the project grow and gain momentum during this uncertain time.

### **Tips for Organizing Virtual Meetings**

- **Meet them where they are at** – Ask youth how they wish to communicate. Train volunteers (and yourself!) to use the platforms effectively. Create tip sheets for how to utilize programs like Canva or posting on Instagram to make it easier to remember.
- **Reminder messages** – Be sure to send meeting reminder messages. If you are needing a response to a message, put it in red and explain what and when you need it by.
- **Icebreakers** – Get to know your team each week!
- **Monitor group dynamics** – Give people enough time to respond. Be open to chat or voice responses. Make space for quieter youth to participate. If you have a lot of instructions, share your screen/add to the chat to improve comprehension.



### [HYI Best Practices](#)

## ○ Thriving as an Initiative in the Face of the Pandemic

At a time when it seemed like there were nothing but challenges, the Halton Youth Initiative actually grew its membership. How was this possible? The HYI capitalized on the benefits of meeting virtually. The leaders and youth embraced the challenges of virtual meetings. Projects, virtual events and campaigns responded to the catalysts in society to engage youth. Keeping the creation of safe spaces for youth to gather, be supported and pursue their community interests at the heart of the work contributed to the authenticity of the experience.

- **Benefits of virtual meetings:** Virtual programming provided many benefits to volunteer projects.
  - Transportation and location were no longer a barrier.
  - Youth had more choices for which teams they could join.
  - Meeting virtually offered more tools to increase the organization of the meetings including breakout rooms where groups could work on projects, and screen sharing which enabled participants to show each other examples and the progress made on projects.
  - Young volunteers were able to join virtual meetings with their camera off if they weren't feeling up to socializing.
  - Increased ability to connect with community partners and expert support.
- **Challenges of virtual meetings:**
  - Relationship building was harder.

- Virtual meetings required much more intentionality.
  - Sidebar conversations and chats at the snack table were no longer a point of connection for the teams.
  - Virtual meetings could feel more like a transactional volunteer role focused on getting things done as opposed to being a part of a social group.
  - The lack of accessible virtual tools and internet, as well as tech tool burnout, meant virtual projects turned off some youth.
- **Responding to catalysts in society to engage youth:**  
 The Halton Youth Initiative tried to remain ever-responsive to the needs of youth, social catalysts and online behaviours. Staying agile and comfortable in chaos was important. When approaching topics like climate change, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Calls to Action that engage with a person's identity, it was important to make every effort to educate the team. It was very important to take the time to pay attention to any emotional discomfort when asking people questions to deepen your understandings, and humbly accept feedback in the face of eventual missteps.
  - **Creating Safe Spaces (physically and virtually):** Adults and leaders set the tone for creating these spaces. From the start, every effort should be made for youth and adults to understand and accept a mutually developed team code of behaviour. It was important to bring youth along in the process of creating the space. Links and phone numbers to local mental health organizations were provided. Genuine connections with youth were created and it was very important to follow up with them. Frank discussions were had about relationships, spaces, belonging and more. It was important to have a plan in place if youth crossed boundaries.

## HYI Receives the YMCA Peace Medal

The Halton Youth Initiative (HYI) was honoured to receive a YMCA Peace Medal presented on Thursday November 19, 2020 when over 100 community members connected to take part in the Virtual Community Breakfast for Peace hosted by the YMCA of Oakville.

In her opening remarks Teresa Rinaldi, Manager Community Outreach and Special Events explained that, “The YMCA Peace Medals are presented in recognition of the YMCA’s commitment to Act for Peace. The medals are given to local individuals or groups who are working to strengthen our communities by promoting peaceful solutions to violence, conflict, discrimination, and justice. The actions of groups like the Halton Youth Initiative have a significant impact on the lives of others, either locally or elsewhere in the world.”

With over 70 youth volunteers and 15 adult allies from communities across Halton Region including Acton, Aldershot, Milton and Oakville, the Halton Youth Initiative has forged ahead despite the pandemic. The project continues to grow, becoming a leader in Halton Region in regard to youth leadership and active involvement in community building and advocacy in our 4 communities and our virtual community.

“Since meeting virtually the youth volunteers have contributed over 2000 hours to the community working on the topic of Indigenous Truth & Reconciliation embarking on what they call a ReconciliACTION journey; taking action about what they are learning through building relationships with various Indigenous groups, amplifying Indigenous voices, learning from creatives and business-owners while inspiring their peers to get involved and raising awareness about the importance of Truth & Reconciliation in our Halton community.” Project Manager Siobhan Laverdiere, Coordinator for the HYI shared.



Victoria Zeppieri accepted the award on behalf of the HYI and stated that, “Seeing relationships build not only amongst ourselves as a group, but within others in the neighbourhood as a result of our projects is really rewarding and motivating. When the HYI chooses which issues to educate ourselves on and take action with, we choose projects that will brighten the lives of those around us, because that is one of our primary inspirations. Whether it is promoting Indigenous Artists, finding safe spaces for youth where they can be themselves or hosting a neighbourhood barbeque, we strive to help children and youth thrive through learning, relaxing spaces to hang out and giving them resources for any support they require.”

The Halton Youth Initiative is a project of the Our Kids Network and is funded by a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. For more information visit [HaltonYouth.com](http://HaltonYouth.com).

Gabrielle Dymock, Amber Siddiqui and Siobhan Laverdiere.



## ***Bearing Fruit: Recruit, Retain, Recognize, Relationships, and Resources (The 5Rs)***

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### ○ **The Transfer of Knowledge**

The transfer of knowledge, content and key data gathered about authentic youth engagement occurred through the creation of useful resources and tools focusing on:

- making the case for investing in relationships
- using technology when working with youth
- recruiting, working with and recognizing youth volunteers

### ○ **Making the Case for Investing in Relationships**

#### **Why use a Developmental Relationships approach?**

It is an organized and intentional way to view relationships.

- **Organized** – The Developmental Relationship Framework provided a structure focused on relationships that anyone (youth, adult ally, community partner) can utilize. Relationships can feel like a messy component of community work, especially if you are engaging with large numbers of people. This structure makes focusing on relationship building more manageable in addition to making a strong case for the foundational value of relationships in connected to program success.
- **Intentional** – An equally large number of resources are available from the Search Institute and other sources to help you incorporate practices to intentionally build relationships with every interaction (icebreakers, question prompts, activities).
- **Organized** – The Developmental Relationship Framework is supported by a large body of research on the topic, complete with prompts and statistics on how youth feel about the core actions.

## Why Investing in Relationships Was Important to the Work of the HYI

### Observations from Lily Viggiano, Project Coordinator



**Strong relationships** - Building brand new teams while being brand new to the community myself meant relationships with youth and adults were paramount. I focused heavily on icebreakers and getting to know you sessions. I used tools with a DR framework to help in this process as well as books and files from the OKN Asset Building Toolkit.

**Intentionally focusing on particular pillars with certain groups – or individuals** – I am not afraid to take notes on people in order to follow up with them on tests/family updates/ how their pets are/ etc.

**Speak it into fruition** – I acknowledged strengths, complimented people in front of others, intentionally connected people together for the talents you see in them and called in “expert support” so adults could be part of the magic.

**Acknowledge, acknowledge, acknowledge** – Taking the time to acknowledge happy birthdays, small notes, video clips, tokens/trinkets, letters of references – all of these actions (must be genuine to you) show YOU CARE. People must know you care for the other 4 pillars to really be activated in a positive and relationship-first way.

#### Event ideas it has spurred (literally named after the Developmental Relationship Framework):

- **COVID 19- Virtual Response Team** : 6 week volunteer project tying in Developmental Relationships to how we can connect virtually (completed early pandemic)
- **Expressing Care Sessions** – hanging out and ice breakers sessions were hosted at random to build connections with youth volunteers (completed early pandemic)
- **Expanding Possibilities Panels** – career panels. Youth asked for types of careers, introduced guests and asked questions.

#### Ways Developmental Relationships entered the HYI space:

- **Expressing Care** – mentioned above, highlighted successes, compliments, being proud
- **Provide Support** – provided tools for support such as a clear agenda, brainstorming prompts, links to resources in addition to telling the young volunteers that you were there to provide support each time you see them
- **Challenge Growth** – provided opportunities for youth to try out new skills or opportunities based on their feedback, held people accountable, edited their work and said WHY, was supportive through the challenges
- **Share Power** – decision making process that was democratic and equitable, youth-led teams, learned from youth, involved youth in budget decisions
- **Expand Possibilities** – brought in expert support, allowed youth to connect with adults through interviews, shared opportunities with students (extra points if the opportunity was sent individually and why you thought of them)



[Our Kids Network Asset-Building Toolkit](#)

## ○ Using Technology When Working With Youth

**Best Practices:** Modeling best practices for utilizing technology when working with young volunteers was the most effective way to build strong skills and provide valuable experience. One of the ways that the HYI modelled best practices with their digital and print communications was through the use of a consistent palette or brand colours, logos and including sources or acknowledgements when applicable. Young volunteers also followed a recommended format for preparing Instagram content.

**Social Media Promotion Worksheet:** Providing a worksheet that outlines the messages and information related to a specific project or event clearly outlined the expectations and content related to the social media campaign.

**Project Pitches:** When HYI volunteers were deciding on which projects to pursue one of the methods used was Project Pitches. Using a pitch “competition” was a great method to engage young people, build skills related to technology, hasten relationship building and allow for creativity to flourish - all while providing real-time coaching and support on event/project management.

It was also an opportunity to engage other adult ally/community partners to act as “judges” and provide deeper and rich insight on what works, what might not, and why.

**Website:** The HYI utilized their website extensively to promote their projects and share their experiences. Youth volunteers were heavily involved in creating content and providing input on the style and function of the platform. One of the areas where the volunteers contributed the most was in the HYI Blog. Over 50 volunteers submitted blogs over the course of the project and they felt more confident in preparing the content when they were given some direction in the form of a Blog Submission Tip Sheet.

### **In Virtual Meetings:**

Here are some tips for getting the most out of participants in a virtual meeting.

- Allow youth to contribute in various ways – speak, in the chat or send responses ahead of time
- Let youth know ahead of time if you want cameras on and for what purpose – it’s important not to strongly enforce cameras on because you don’t know their situation
- Asking all participants to use the raise hand feature is a nice way to include everyone – instead of just the faster or loudest voice
- Use the reactions/emojis to check in, heighten engagement and get easy questions answers
- Write down long presentations or multi-step instructions so that youth can read them, or drop a link to where they can view the material at their own pace – everyone doesn’t have the same learning style
- Keep the numbers in breakout rooms to a smaller number of participants to allow for deeper engagement. We found more youth put cameras on naturally in the small groups and do better with the brainstorming process. Seek youth leadership in those rooms + a note taker to drive youth-led work.

- When groups are comfortable and thriving, adult leaders can stay in the main room and encourage the use of the “Ask for Help” button so that you pop in when they need support
- Encourage participants to update their screen name to include their pronouns – creates comfort and encourages others to do the same
- Don’t record virtual meetings unless there is a public purpose for sharing afterwards – if you must record let youth know ahead of time, allow them to have camera off and remove name (that way identifiable markers are removed)
- Don’t forget the Icebreakers! Be sure to check the “share sound” checkbox in the settings screen to play music, games, and online activities. We really enjoyed activities and playing random games on Kahoot.it, Mentimeter.com or scribble.io

**Leaders Circle:** In 2021 HYI breakout room leaders came together to create an HYI Leaders Circle. The leaders circle was a chance for folks to come together, learn from one another's experience and to begin collaboration on a Best Practices resource. The Best Practices resource provides a living resource that contains tips, tricks and things to think about when leading youth volunteer teams. From how to use technology to your advantage, to team building, to hosting events for the public - the HYI Leaders created this resource together for the benefit of themselves, future breakout room leaders and for readers outside of the project.



[Communications Resource Sheet](#)  
[Social Media Promotion Worksheet](#)  
[Project Pitch Template](#)  
[HYI Website Blog Tip Sheet](#)  
[HYI Best Practices](#)

## ○ Recruiting, working with and recognizing youth volunteers

- **Recruit** - A key part of recruiting is having clear and streamlined processes in place as new members join. So for the purpose of the HYI, the “recruit” spoke to not only recruiting youth volunteers, but to the behind-the-scenes structures in place as they arrive.
- **Retain** - So they joined the team - now what? Relationships and clear purpose are key in retaining volunteers on committees. Retaining youth volunteers weaves together strategies and templates on how to keep folks engaged. The effective use of technology and project management for establishing effective and empowered teams.
- **Recognize** - An important part of committee work is to acknowledge the contributions of its members. Celebrating the big - and little - milestones. Do you want to know how to best acknowledge your team? Ask them!



[Halton Youth Initiative - 3Rs - Volunteer Recognition](#)  
[Halton Youth Initiative - 3Rs - Retaining Youth Volunteers](#)  
[Halton Youth Initiative - 3Rs-Youth Volunteer Recruitment](#)





## ***Why was the experience of the Halton Youth Initiative an important model of authentic youth engagement in Canada?***

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The Halton Youth Initiative illustrated that when you intentionally build and support youth-focused initiatives, communities can:

- exceed outreach goals,
- provide safe in-person and virtual spaces to gather, and
- maximize the positive impact on issues that matter to young people.

From the beginning, this project was not focused on a single program or activity, but on engaging and working with the community to plan, work differently. It maximized resources to implement strategies focused on better engaging youth and building relationships between youth and adults/mentors. The HYI employed a number of strategies and initiatives that spanned a continuum of activities - from broad messaging and media to enhance positive messaging around youth, to marketing, to youth engagement on a broad number of levels to community events and initiatives, etc. It was not a "one-off" project but instead it utilized broad community engagement and action to ensure sustainability beyond the life of the project.

### **○ The Evaluation and Research**

The purpose of the evaluation was to demonstrate the benefits and impacts of participating in the initiative, for youth and for community partners who support the initiative, and inform the sustainability of the initiative.

The key questions related to what could be learned and demonstrated by participants in the Halton Youth Initiative included:

- Do youth experience meaningful engagement?
- Do youth experience opportunities for leadership? In what ways?
- Do youth and community partners have increased confidence and beliefs that their community is a stronger, supportive place for youth? In what ways?
- Do youth report an increase in the number and quality of relationships with adults/mentors in their lives?



## Shelley's Research Observations

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“When the Halton Youth Initiative first began, I was asked to participate in the project by leading an evaluation of the project. The evaluation began when the project began which is unusual as evaluation is often left to the end. Evaluation was not a must-do or an after-thought on this project. It was embraced as a tool for understanding, wanting to make a difference and for making improvements along the way. I worked closely with the project team to understand what they were trying to accomplish. From there, we jointly constructed a set of outcomes along with a measurement plan that endured some changes as we got better at both understanding and articulating the nature of the work and how it was impacting on the youth. What resulted is a robust evaluation that details the process from start to finish.”



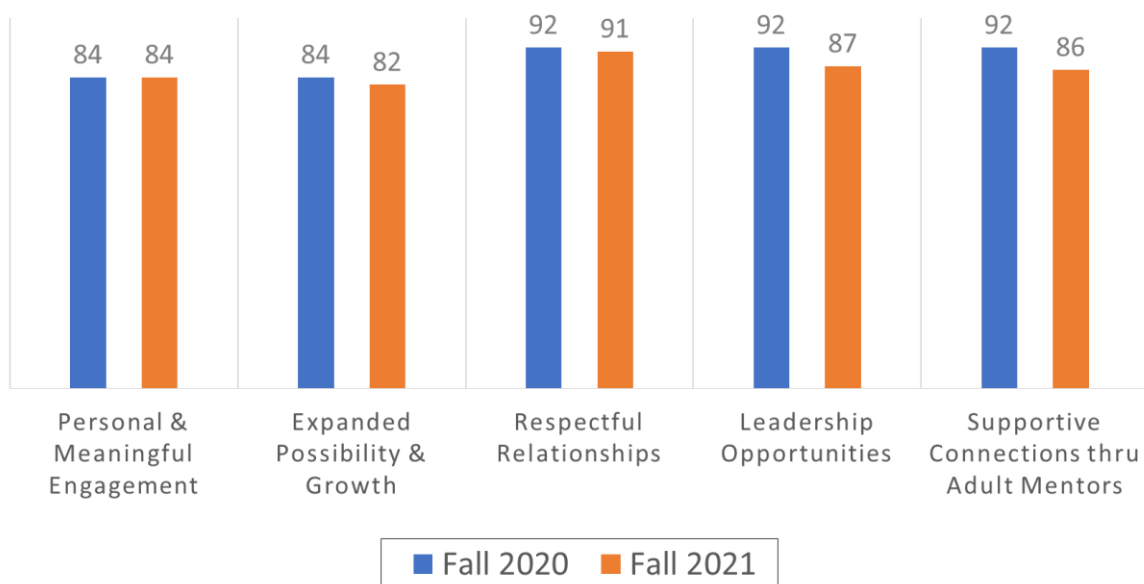
**Shelley Lothian, Ph.D., Research Lead**

1. This report is a form of process evaluation. The contents of this report validate that the format of the Halton Youth Initiative as a model of authentic youth engagement was implemented very well.
2. It is important to set out meaningful and intentional actions for engagement and to act on the plan to optimize youth engagement. The data collected for the HYI supported this strategy.
3. The evaluation results were sustained over a 2 year period. This is difficult to do when the participants are coming in and out of the projects undertaken by the initiative.
4. The level of honesty shown by the youth in their evaluation responses reflects the positive, inclusive environment/culture of the HYI. Making the effort to respect all participants by clearly communicating expectations, keeping interactions relevant, and developing the emotional constructs of trust paid off.
5. Consistency and commitment paired with the level of activity and engagement contributed to the tenure of youth volunteers in the HYI. There is strong evidence of volunteers recruiting new participants from their families and friends as a result of their own positive experiences with the HYI. Some young volunteers adopted their HYI roles beyond their direct involvement with the initiative in their social media presence by including their involvement in their bio information, posts, link information as well as in the creation of the Halton Youth Voices Council as a legacy of the work done by the HYI.

## ○ Data Collection Methods

### Halton Youth Initiative Survey

- Completed by youth actively involved.
- Online survey – October 2020 and September 2021.
- Length of survey: 5 minutes.
  - **October 2020**
    - 65 youth sent the survey
    - 53 completed surveys
    - Response rate - 82%
  - **Fall 2021**
    - 82 youth sent the survey
    - 48 completed surveys
    - Response rate – 59%
- The data collected in the surveys was focused on the key outcome measures and organized by the following themes. The themes also follow the Developmental Relationships Framework.
- These scales have been standardized to score out of 100.

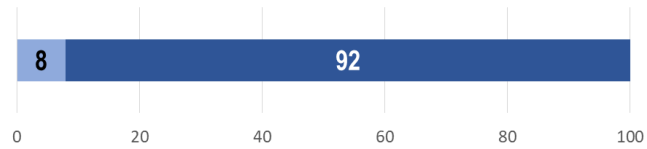




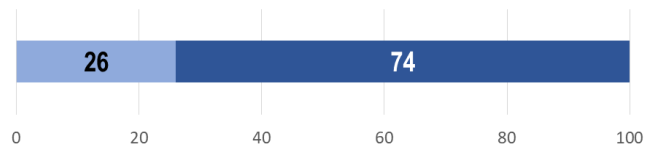
## Respectful Relationships (Expressing Care: Preparing the Ground)



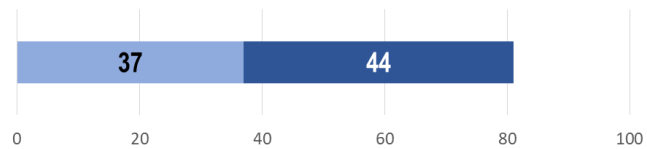
- I am treated with respect



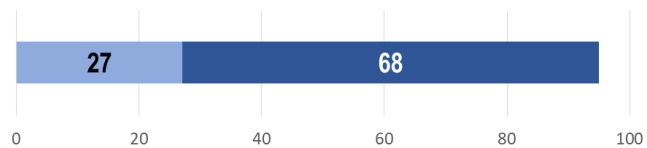
- Others value my ideas



- We joke around and have fun

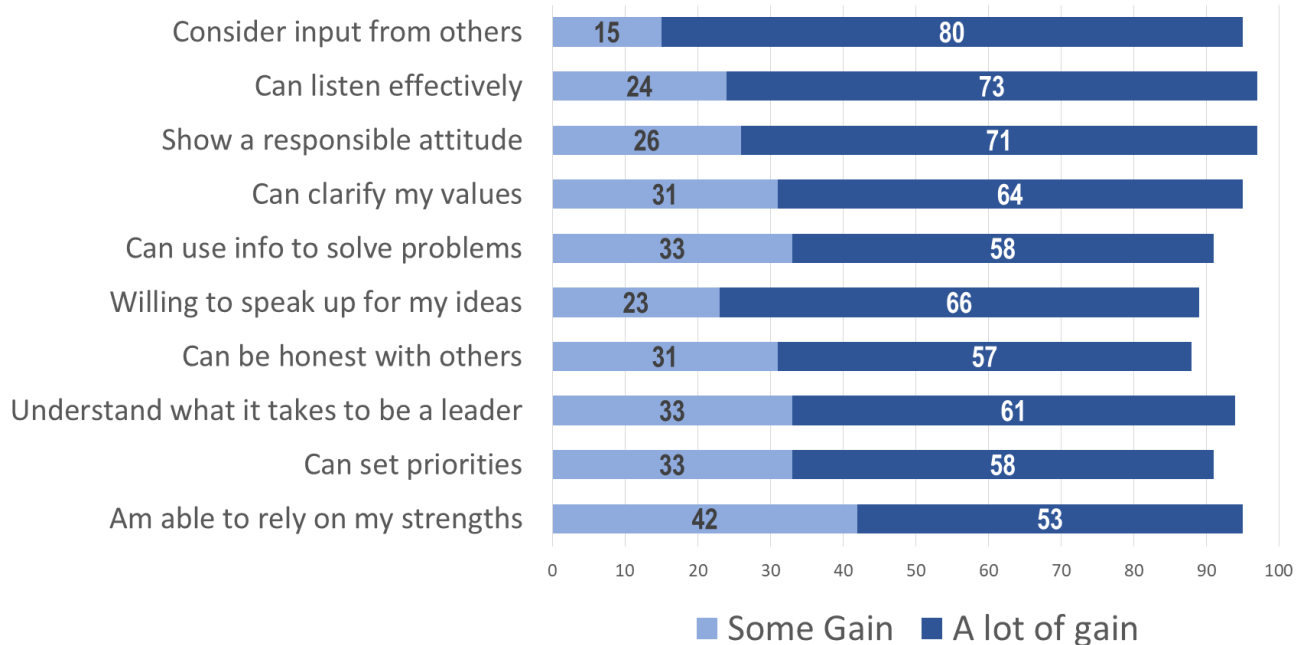


- I feel my work is appreciated





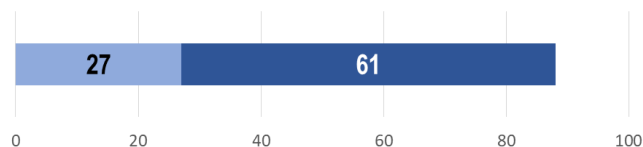
## Leadership Development (Challenging Growth – Planting the Seeds)



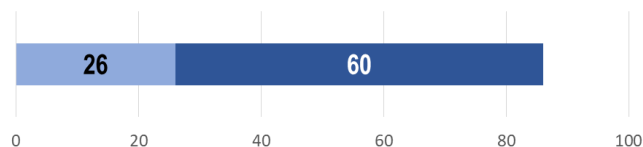
## Supportive Connections through Adult Mentors (Providing Support – Nurturing the Crop)



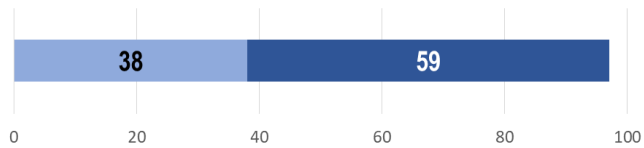
- Youth and adults trust each other



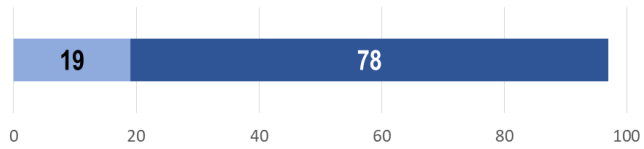
- There is a good balance of power between youth and the adults



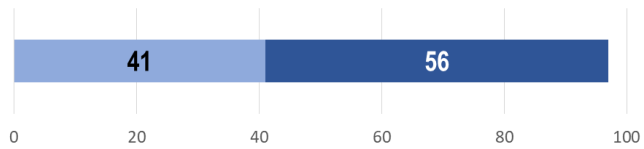
- Youth and adults learn a lot from working together



- It is clear that adults respect each other



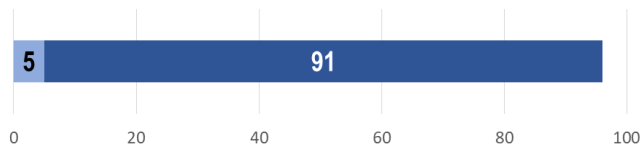
- Adults can learn a lot from youth



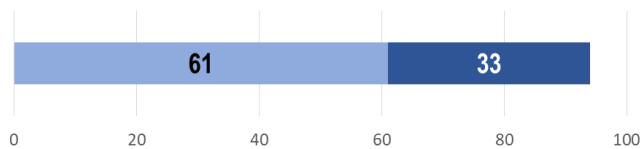
### Meaningful Engagement (Sharing Power – Bearing Fruit)



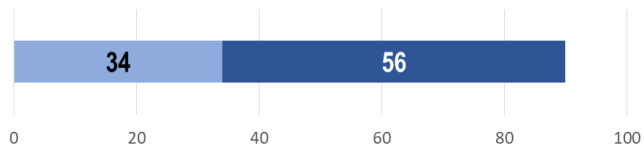
- I complete tasks that help the council/team reach its goals



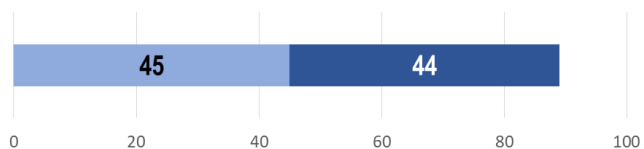
- I feel aware of what's going on in the council/team



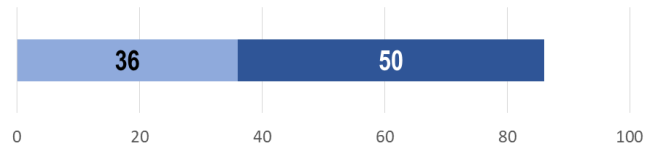
- During the council/team meetings, I feel comfortable being myself



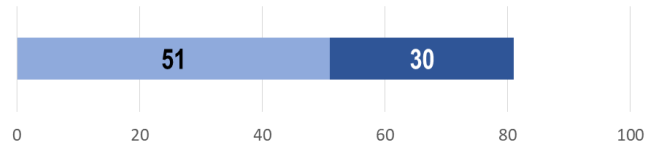
- The council/team activities we do give me a sense of accomplishment



- The council/team activities we do help other people



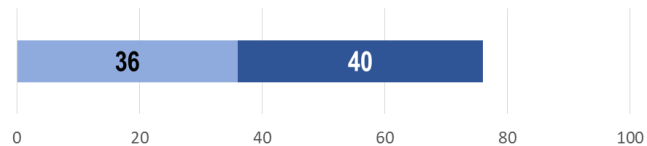
- The council/team activities we do give me just the right amount of challenge



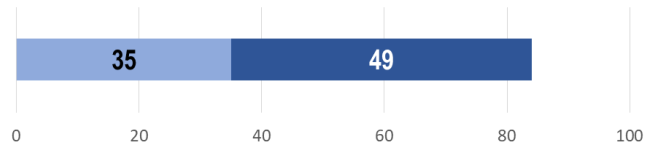
### Expanded Possibilities and Growth (Expanding Possibilities – The Legacy)



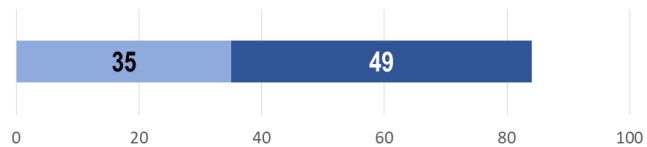
- My council/team connects me with people and places I didn't know about



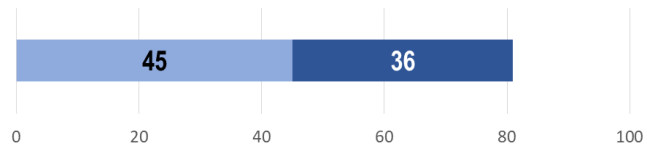
- I can participate in leadership roles on the council/team



- When possible, my ideas are used on the council/team



- The council/team provides me with training opportunities to improve my skills



## **Appreciative Inquiry Interviews:**

To gather qualitative data about the Halton Youth Initiative Appreciative Inquiry methodology was used. “Appreciative inquiry is a process that inquires into, identifies, and further develops the best of what is in organizations in order to create a better future.”<sup>5</sup>

Twenty-one interviews were held in 2020 and in 2021 with participating youth and adults. The 15-30 minutes interviews were completed by an outside consultant familiar with the project. The consultant utilized a thematic analysis approach to rev the feedback provided by the interview subjects. “Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that involves reading through a data set (such as transcripts from in depth interviews or focus groups), and identifying patterns in meaning across the data. Thematic analysis was widely used in the field of psychology.”<sup>6</sup>

## **Selected quotes from Halton Youth Initiative Appreciative Inquiry Interview Participants:**

### **Express Care “Show me that I matter”**

Respectful Relationships: *“I made a video for IGTV about how to help with Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls epidemic and I saw how someone can spread awareness can create change based on information that they learn. By using social media platforms I felt like I was really doing something in the community. Me, who is an average person, who can’t really do anything and have much power, I was able to create this video to help others. I felt really alive and I was like, “Yeah, I think that I can make change.” I wanted to inspire others to do the same.”*

### **Challenge Growth “Push me to keep getting better”**

Leadership Development: *“It was the first time in another country where I took the lead myself and I actually saw the good result of it. People really recognize what I’m doing and that is on the right track. That motivates me to do more things and apply what I am learning here to other youth-led organizations I’m involved in - our council has helped me move forward.”*

### **Provide Support - “Help me complete tasks and achieve goals”**

Meaningful Relationships: *“I really like having someone listen and take in the information so you can see them absorbing it. I’ve had many experiences when adults say, “you’re just a kid, you don’t know anything” when we are rather informed so actually having them (adults) take our opinion in and use our ideas makes us (young leaders) feel like we are a person.”*

### **Share Power - “Treat me with respect and give me a say.”**

Supportive Connections: *“I took a lead in this project with the Indigenous artist because I came up with the idea and then Siobhan picked up on the idea and took me on a journey that helped me make some*

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<sup>5</sup> An Overview of Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation December 2003 New Directions for Evaluation 2003(100):5 – 22 DOI: 10.1002/ev.96, Anne Coghlan, Hallie Preskil, ITessie Tzavaras Catsambas

<sup>6</sup> <https://delvetool.com/blog/thematicanalysis>

*changes and adjustments to slowly make this come true. I learned a lot from her and her way of organizing the whole thing that I believe will help me a lot in the future.”*

### **Expanding Possibilities “Connect me with people & places that broaden my worlds”**

*“I found the First Nations Knowledge Keeper interview really interesting about how First Nations view health and medicines. I’m a big fan of science and hearing someone else’s view on it made me want to do research on First Nations methods to see how they compare to and have shaped scientific methods.”*

## **○ Evaluation Results:**

**Youth Voices Matter Survey:** The Youth Voices Matter Survey measures developmental assets, relationships and youth experiences. Students in grades 7, 8, 9 and 10 in North Oakville were invited to voluntarily complete the survey online during school hours between February and May, 2017. Students in 10 schools from the Halton Catholic District School Board and Halton District School board participated.

### **Key Findings:**

- Most North Oakville students feel safe in their community.
- Just over half of students report that they live in a Caring Neighbourhood.
- Students are engaged in their schools
- The majority of students have friends with positive behaviours
- Students report that their family provides high levels of nurturing and support

**HYI Evaluation Story:** Youth voices told us that relationships matter. Mobilizing the knowledge available about Developmental Assets and Developmental Relationships by putting the focus on building the capacity of young volunteers, adult allies and community partners implemented the research and data into the work of the Halton Youth Initiative.

**Halton Youth Impact Survey:** Halton was invited to participate in the UNICEF Canada Child & Youth Wellbeing Survey (Halton Youth Impact Survey), supported by UNICEF Canada, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, Medivae Foundation, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Halton was one of four communities participating in this project, which contributed to the development of a national index of child and youth wellbeing. Halton faced a gap in comprehensive, local data about child and youth wellbeing. The Halton Youth Impact Survey provided an opportunity for Our Kids Network and Halton to collect and share new, quality, local data and evidence to support the delivery of programs, services, policies and initiatives that are critical to the wellbeing of children, youth and families in Halton. As part of the peer-to-peer engagement strategy was used where many of the young leaders from the HYI took part as Ambassadors for the Halton Youth Impact Survey. Through youth labs, community meetings and forming a team it was an opportunity for young leaders to experience how evaluation informs how communities support youth.



## Research Metrics from the OTF Grow Grant

- 57420 youth reached by the work of the Halton Youth Initiative
- 300+ volunteers contributed
- 5000+ volunteer hours contributed
- 50+ community partners engaged
- 30+ projects and campaigns completed
- 30+ special events hosted
- 30+ individual and group awards received
- 100+ youth involved in the evaluation of the Halton Youth Initiative
- 70+ videos hosted on the Halton Youth Initiative YouTube Channel
- \$3,000+ raised in 6 Crafting for a Cause fundraising campaigns for 6 different community agencies
- \$571,800+ invested in Halton youth



[HYI Evaluation Results Fall 2021 \(PowerPoint\)](#)

[Appreciative Inquiry Interview Guide](#)

[Youth Voices Matter Survey results](#)

[HYI Evaluation Story - Adult Allies Let's Talk PowerPoint \(AI Interviews and Survey\)](#)

[Halton needs comprehensive, local data about child and youth wellbeing](#)

[Fast Facts Infographic](#)

## ○ The Legacy

**Halton Youth Voices Council:** HYVC is a legacy team of the Halton Youth Initiative designed to “Unite our Community”. They believe that All Youth Voices matter in Halton Region. The objective of the Halton Youth Voices Council (HYVC) was to continue the work of the Halton Youth Initiative, focusing on ages 12-17 years old living in Halton to have an active voice in their community. This passionate group will have an impact in Halton in 2022 and beyond.

**The Equity Toolkit:** If ‘youth have a voice’, as youth are told all the time, then where are their microphones? Where is their platform to speak? How do they make people listen to us? Nearly 30 remarkable youth volunteers and several community partners from every corner of Halton contributed immensely to the construction of this resource and participated in the learning process together. This toolkit was created to serve as a starting point for current youth equity initiatives in Halton schools.

### **Building an Equity Team 101**

- Equity teams must spend time learning and unlearning in advance of taking action.
- Lean into your strengths and harness the power of listening.

### **Dismantling white-supremacy culture**

- White-supremacy culture seeks to disconnect and divide.
- To dismantle, we must connect and come together—creating a caring community and principled spaces helps us take action on our biggest gaps.

### **Best practices & protocol pages**

- There is a power dynamic involved with “supporting” and “helping” communities seeking equity. Our language and our approach must be thoughtful and respectful in order to minimize harm.



[Equity Team 101 Toolkit](#)  
[Introducing the Toolkit](#)

## Call to Action

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### *Helpful reminders for anyone working with youth volunteer committees.*

- **Be your authentic self** – We all have gifts to give. Be introspective, ask questions, and take online quizzes to see what your strengths are. Lean into that, that is your power.
- **Relationships first** – Regardless of the objective of your program, service, or team – without relationships your message will fall short. Understand the data around the power of positive relationships in a young person’s life. Use the data to make the case for allocating more time, budget and training to support your youth audience.
- **Education and action** – Take the time to ensure youth understand what you asking them. Instead of simple “do you understand?” ask them to summarize what they’ve been told. We can all be teachers. Take the time to share the strategy and nuance behind tasks, actions and brainstorming instead of just focusing on task completion.
- **Let others shine** – Create a culture of caring and supporting people. Offer genuine compliments to people in front of others. Notice growth and improvement. Be specific with your feedback. Express gratitude for effort and showing up. Don’t over-rely on the same youth to participate/lead.
- **Speak confidence into their strengths** – Take the time to send hand written notes, send nice texts, nominate participants for awards. There are so many ways that we can help young people recognize the talents and gifts within them.
- **Adapt and drive** – Show adaptability based on the capacity of your team and circumstances beyond your control. Reflect on what can be learned and verbalize the strategy you personally use to problem solve. Include youth in the problem solving process.
- **Lead with youth** – When appropriate for your structure, lead with youth. Take on tasks like a team mate would, rolls your sleeves up and ask probing questions to help guide brainstorming and project efforts. Remember, youth don’t know what they don’t know so sometimes you have to step in!
- **Celebrate!** Recognize when you see participants making an effort throughout the experience and take time to build in moments to reflect and celebrate. These casual moments often become the defining memory of the young participant’s experience.

Source: Lily Viggiano, Halton Youth Initiative, Project Coordinator.

## ○ Final Summary

What we know for sure is that the Halton Youth Initiative was a catalyst for community youth engagement during a very challenging time. Initiatives across Canada can learn from the Halton Youth Initiative experience. This work must continue and Halton Region has the knowledge and know-how to lead the way.

