



YOUTH LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
Use Your Voice

LISTENING SESSIONS: PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT



INTRODUCTION

Peer-to-peer support, connection, and belonging is an important social determinant of health in communities across California. Peer-to-peer support offers a type of social support that can motivate youth to utilize mental health resources in schools. At schools, youth are resources to each other and serve as supports to each other in many different ways. As a way to explore the impact of peer-to-peer support in school settings, The Children's Partnership(TCP) and Youth Leadership Institute (yli) are hosting and facilitating listening sessions to gather perspectives and experiences from California youth on peer-to-peer support. At yli, we deeply believe that youth are the experts in their communities and have lived experiences that can offer innovative solutions to pressing societal issues. Through the listening sessions, we hope to learn more about how mental health programs like peer-to-peer support resonate with youth and how youth perspectives can shape future funding decisions.

METHODOLOGY

yli facilitated six 90 minute virtual listening sessions. A total of 54 youth from Northern, Southern, and Central Valley California were engaged.

Youth were asked the following questions based on four different buckets of topics:

- *Individual Support*
 - When you feel stressed out or anxious at school what makes you feel better?
 - What resources are available for you to utilize when you are stressed? What works, what doesn't?
 - Have you ever gone to a peer before to talk about your feelings or problems you are having? What was that experience like for you?



METHODOLOGY, CONTINUED

- *Peer Support*
 - Has a peer as ever come to you to talk about a problem they were having? What was that like for you? What would have been helpful for you in that situation.
 - What does peer support mean to you? How could a peer support you at school to feel less anxious or stressed out?
 - If peer support was available at school, what would make it helpful for you? What would motivate you to use the service?
- *Benefits of Peer-to-Peer Support*
 - What do you see as potential benefits to [your] school if there was a peer support program? How do you see a peer support program benefiting students at your school?
- *Barriers to Peer-to-Peer Support*
 - In your opinion, what could get in the way or prevent a beneficial peer support program at school?
 - Do you feel as if school admin/staff are supportive of mental health programs at school? Or would be supportive of new mental health programs?
 - Do you have any fears or concerns about a peer support program? If so, can you tell us about those?

Youth were also presented this scenario to identify skills they have or would need when engaging in peer-to-peer support:

Friend A: I've been feeling really sad lately.

Friend B: Forreal? I get like that too. What's making you sad?

Friend A: I'm not really sure, tbh. Sometimes I don't see the reason to go to school to learn stuff that won't help me. I have a lot of stuff going on at home. I want to get a job so I can do my own thing.

Questions to consider:

- What would you do if you were friend B?
- What could friend B do for friend A after the conversation?
- What kinds of supports at school could friend B point friend A to?

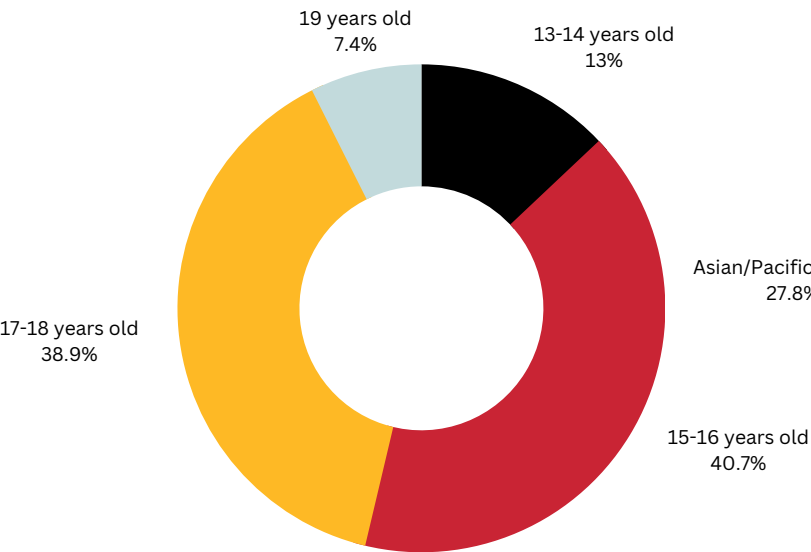
Youth were asked to envision the following utilizing a Jamboard exercise:

In your opinion, what would the ideal peer support program look like at your school? What would be happening? What would it feel like? Where would it be on campus?

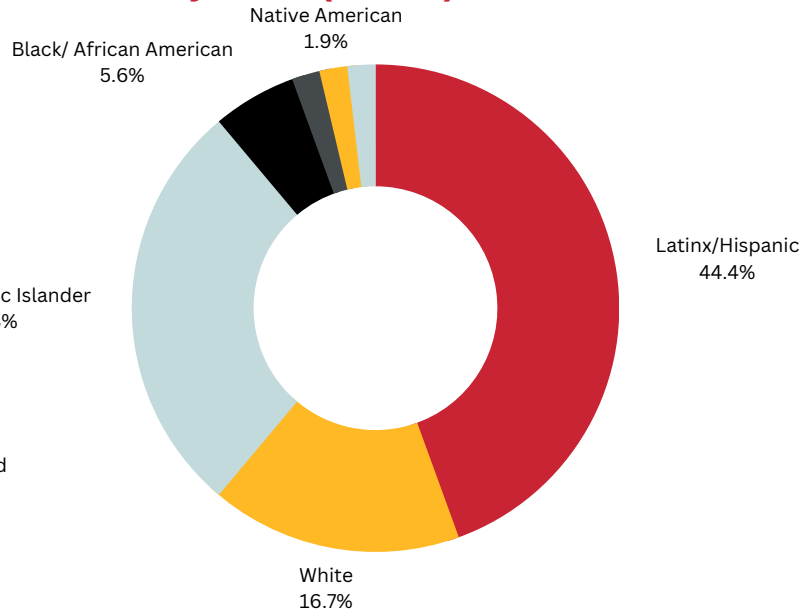
DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 54 youth across California participated in the Listening Sessions. Age, ethnicity/race, gender, and sexual orientation were captured in our post-listening session survey.

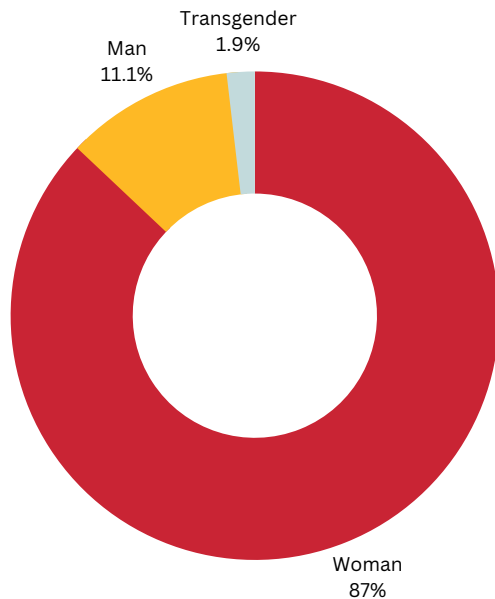
Age (N = 54)



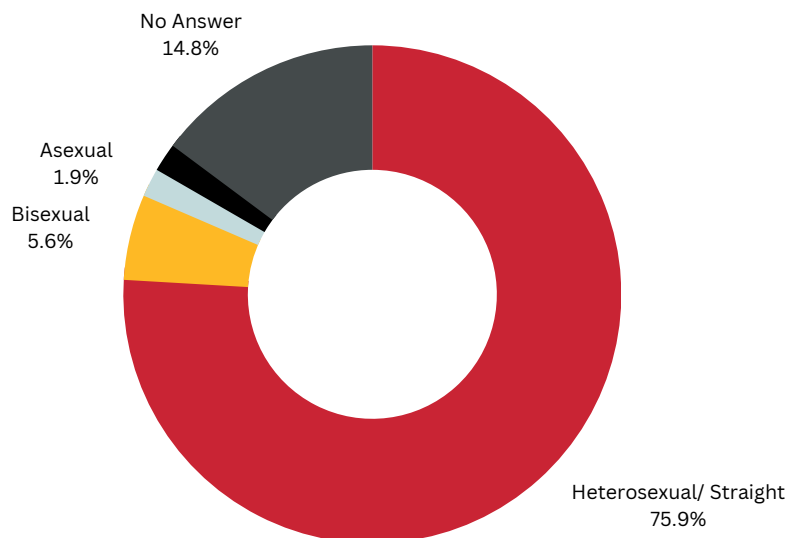
Ethnicity/Race (N = 54)



Gender (N = 54)



Sexual Orientation (N = 54)



THEMES AND FINDINGS: ACROSS CALIFORNIA

Peer-to-peer support happens in an informal and safe space at school

Youth rely on each other for support. Youth would like to have a safe space at school where they can formally engage in social and emotional support to better endure stressors at school. Listening sessions demonstrate that youth support and feel the need for peer-to-peer support programs.

I could talk to some of my counselors... But they were more focused on how my grades were looking. Most people seeing my grades and they thought I was fine. But mentally I was not. That is a big issue with school, and I think that is something that needs to really be changed because school is focused on percentages than my mental wellbeing."

CENTRAL VALLEY CALIFORNIA YOUTH

How can this be reflected in an RFP?

- Schools can demonstrate why and how a peer-to-peer support program would be beneficial to its student population and identify potential implementation barriers and how anticipated barriers will be addressed.
- Schools will demonstrate need and support for a peer-to-peer support program.

Peer-to-peer support is built on trust

Youth generally find it easier to connect with a peer than an adult because of relatability, empathy, and shared cultural experiences.

"I've gone to a peer before to talk about some of the problems I've had when I'm stressed and I found that the best part about it is that they really connect with you. And sometimes when there's cultural problems, people of the same culture can really understand and connect..."

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA YOUTH

How can this be reflected in an RFP?

- Schools can outline how they will support peer-to-peer programming - through funding, staffing, training for peer specialists, providing a physical space for peer-to-peer engagement, etc.

Peer-to-peer support can shift negative narratives about accessing mental health services in schools

Seeking mental health support is stigmatized in a school setting. Peer-to-peer support can help normalize and motivate students to utilize mental health services at schools.

"[Peer-to-peer support] would lead to students improving their school working habits and more students would also reach out and be influenced by other peers to use these programs."

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA YOUTH

How can this be reflected in an RFP?

- Schools can reflect their current narratives and norms around accessing mental health resources and services at schools and identify if a cultural shift can happen as a result of implementing a peer-to-peer support program.

THEMES AND FINDINGS: ACROSS CALIFORNIA

Peer-to-peer support programs require strong youth and adult partnerships

Trusting, equitable, and consistent youth and adult partnerships are required for youth and adults to successfully navigate a peer-to-peer support program. Currently, participants were unsure about that the role of adult allies should be in a peer-to-peer support program.

How can this be reflected in an RFP?

- Schools can detail the role that adults (teachers, counselors, administration) and youth leaders (peer specialists) will have in designing, implementing, and evaluating a peer-to-peer support program at the school.
- Selected schools can commit to building staff and youth capacity in creating equitable youth and adult partnerships.

Peer-to-peer support skills are needed for peer specialists

When participants were asked how they would support a friend who was feeling discouraged and needed support, they responded that the skills outlined below would be essential in providing successful peer-to-peer support.

- **Before providing peer-to-peer support**
 - Practicing empathy and encouraging vulnerability
 - Offering individual coping strategies
- **During a peer-to-peer support engagement**
 - Knowing when to bring in an adult for support
 - Normalizing and affirming reaching out for help
 - Being a connector to resources for their peers
 - Identifying severity of issue being shared
- **After providing peer-to-peer support**
 - Self-care after a peer-to-peer interaction
 - Confidentially documenting an interaction



How can this be reflected in an RFP?

- Schools can outline how their peer-to-peer support program will equip/train their peer specialists and identify additional capacity building efforts to support the growth and learning of peer specialists.

THEMES AND FINDINGS: ACROSS CALIFORNIA

Peer-to-peer support programs face specific barriers to implementation

- Funding available to start or sustain peer-to-peer support programs or other mental health resources in schools
- There is a gap in knowledge between what students think is their role and what the role of adult allies should be
- Training available and support that will be provided to peer-to-peer specialists that will support other students

"I feel like something that could get in the way of a peer support program is funding . Many schools are on a tight budget and may not consider it a priority."

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA YOUTH

How can this be reflected in an RFP?

- Schools can outline specific challenges that they anticipate facing when implementing a peer-to-peer program and how they plan to address these challenges

PEER-TO-PEER PROGRAMS LOOK LIKE THIS...

- **Physical Space**
 - Comfortable, inviting chairs, and pillows
 - Dim lights for relaxation
 - Walls painted green
 - Located somewhere quiet on campus
 - Snacks available
 - Board games and fidget toys
 - Plants

VISIONING EXERCISE

In your opinion, what would the ideal peer support program look like at your school? What would be happening? What would it feel like? Where would it be on campus?

Free stuff animals :)))

Support dog or cats

Group 1

Pillows Comfy chairs

Color green

Dim lights for relaxation

A talking circle

Library or a quiet space

The board features several images: a candy store aisle, a person playing a drum set with musical notes, and a stylized sun in the background.

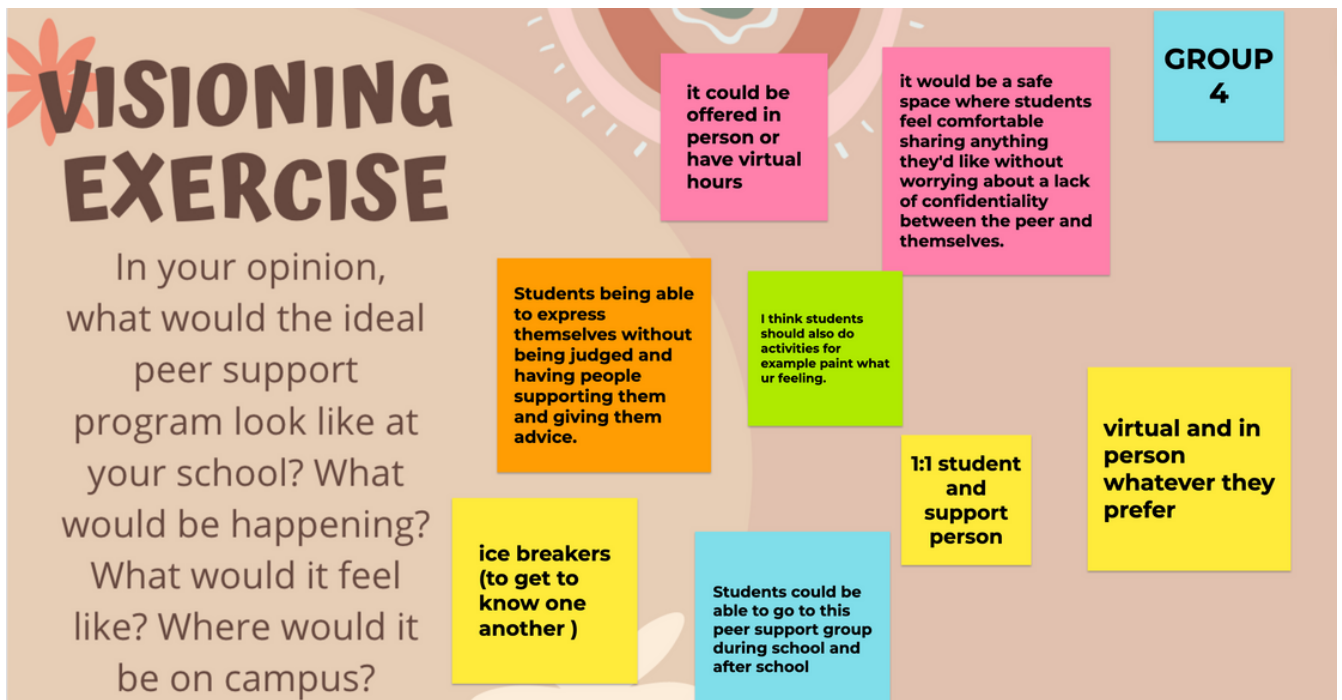
PEER-TO-PEER PROGRAMS LOOK LIKE THIS...

- **Emotionally Safe Space**

- A place for confidentiality, relatability, compassion, sense of belonging and community
- A place you can build and have trust; a place where students can open up and talk
- A place that is bully free

“Peer support sometimes just means having someone give me a hug or [someone] to put [their] hands on my shoulders and tell me that I don't need to freak out over something”

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA YOUTH



PEER-TO-PEER PROGRAMS LOOK LIKE THIS...

- **Services provided**

- Support animals - both live and stuffed animals
- Virtual and in-person appointments
- During school, after-school, and off-campus appointments
- One-on-one and groups appointments
- Intake process that helps match youth with a peer specialist that can connect with various identities youth hold

“If we had the resources to make a program where people can get specific help tailored to their needs, like having different groups of people tailored to their needs, helping them and then if something doesn't fit them, they can test them to figure out what would fit their needs.”

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA YOUTH

VISIONING EXERCISE

In your opinion, what would the ideal peer support program look like at your school? What would be happening? What would it feel like? Where would it be on campus?

- knowing you are not alone** (Image: Candy bags)
- Group 2**
- Opportunity to meet new friends** (Image: Musical notes)
- safe space to relax**
- library or classroom** (Image: Board games)
- everyone has the opportunity to speak**

Example of Jamboard Visioning Exercise

How can this be reflected in an RFP?

- Schools can demonstrate readiness in providing a physical and emotionally safe space that meets the needs that youth describe.
- Schools can detail the depth and breadth of services that their peer-to-peer support programs can offer.