YOUTH CONFIDENCE IN SCHOOL, COMMUNITY AND THE FUTURE
HAMILTON FINDINGS

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation and civic engagement are key aspects in community planning and development. In encouraging participation and engagement, we remain aware that there is a reciprocal relationship between people and their environments. A lack of a positive relationship between people and their environments may result in reduced community involvement, reduced efficacy and lack of self confidence. It remains essential in planning for the future of our communities that we involve youth to participate in this process. This involves engaging youth to express their expectations, aspirations and opinions.

Despite an ever changing world, young people remain hopeful and optimistic about their futures. While optimistic about personal goals and aspirations, youth have demonstrated less confidence in their ability to participate in positive change within their schools, communities and country. This lack of confidence reduces the level of youth engagement, resulting in uncertainty regarding the future of our communities.

In order to create and sustain a society that values participation and inclusion, we need to develop a better understanding of what young people are thinking about their current situations and their futures. Youth must be encouraged to not only dream for their future, but to believe in their ability to make those dreams come true.

In the City of Hamilton, 319 students participated in the Youth Confidence in Learning and the Future Project survey. Of the students surveyed, 53% identified as female, while 47% identified as male. The largest response by grade was 53% from grade 10. Another 18% surveyed were in grade 12, 13% were from grade 11, 53% were from grade 10 and 16% from grade 9.

Youth today face increasingly complex challenges within their environments. Students in Hamilton expressed a disconnect between what they are learning in school and what they are learning in their lives outside of school. While interest and engagement in courses taken at school are high, interest and application of this information outside of school is low. This has resulted in a lack of a positive fit between students and their environments.

Students surveyed in Hamilton had a high response when asked if they had dreams for the future, however that high rate of response dropped when asked if they believed in their ability to make those dreams come true. Personal confidence and confidence in one’s community must remain interconnected in order to foster a supportive environment that promotes youth engagement and efficacy. In order to plan for the future, we must engage youth in our communities today to walk with both feet; in both thinking globally and acting locally.

This report focuses on the City of Hamilton and looks at youth confidence in learning, in and outside of school and confidence in their futures. It also looks at the level of impact youth feel they can have on their communities and in the world.
2.0 BACKGROUND

Engagement and participation are very important aspects of developing communities. For citizens to feel encouraged to participate actively within their communities, environments must be responsive to the needs of individuals. To continue to emphasize inclusion and citizen participation in our society, we must recognize that as future leaders, youth will have a large impact on shaping our social structures. With this awareness, youth must be directly involved in the conversations around how to plan for the futures of our communities.

In recognition of the importance of engaged youth in communities, the Youth Confidence in Learning and the Future Project was developed. As a resource to explore the confidence of youth, both in and outside of school, the project looked at how youth view their present situation, as well as their futures. Within this project, a major goal was to engage youth to express their expectations, aspirations and opinions while identifying perceptions and attitudes to document trends and challenge assumptions.

The Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO) and the Canadian Education Association (CEA) partnered with five social planning councils in Ontario. The partnering councils were Community Development Halton, Peterborough Social Planning Council, Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton, Social Planning Council of Sudbury, and Social Planning Toronto. The primary tool to gather responses was an on-line survey.

The research focused on three main areas related to youth confidence;

- Confidence in School
- Confidence in Communities
- Confidence in the Future

In total, 1018 students were surveyed in Ontario, with 319 surveyed in Hamilton. The survey consisted of 72 questions, looking at the following dimensions of youth confidence;

- Sense of Trust
- Level of Engagement
- Feelings of Efficacy or Empowerment
- Confidence in Personal Future
- Aspirations for Self and Society
3.0 FINDINGS

The results presented are from both Ontario, as well as Hamilton surveys. The findings are presented alongside one another for comparison to demonstrate provincial and local trends, similarities or differences in results.

3.1 Connection Between In and Out of School

Do Ontario students believe there is a good “fit” or connection between what they are learning in school and their lives outside of school?

Provincial Results (the aggregated results of the five communities):

Students’ sense of connection or “fit” between their in-school and out-of-school learning is low. An average of only 53% of students (58% for girls; 48% for boys) responded positively to questions about “fit”, one of the dimensions of youth confidence. For example:

- Only 58% of students can see connections between their courses and their lives outside of school.
- Only 44% think that their teachers are interested in what they are learning or doing outside of school.
- Only 57% find the 40 hours of community service program to be a useful learning experience, although 71% believe that the program makes a useful contribution to the community.
- Although girls tend to respond more positively than boys on all the questions related to “fit”, the gap is particularly large in relation to the 40-hour community service question, with 67% of girls and only 47% of boys finding the program a useful learning experience.

Hamilton Results:

The Hamilton participant findings correspond to the provincial ones with an average of 56% of students responded positively to questions about fit. For example:

- The percentage of Hamilton participants that perceive a connection between their courses and their lives outside of school matches the overall Ontario average at 58%.
- The percentage of participants who believe that teachers are interested in what they are learning outside of school is 43%.
- Only 54% of participants indicated that the 40 hours of community service were a worthwhile learning experience. However, 66% identified the belief that the service benefits the community.
- Girls in Hamilton also responded more positively than boys to the questions related to community service although the gap was less than the Ontario average at about 10%.
3.2 Confidence in School

*How confident are Ontario’s youth in what and how they are learning in school? What does the research tell us about young people's sense of trust, their level of engagement, and their feelings of efficacy or empowerment in school?*

3.2.1 Sense of Trust

**Provincial Results:**

Young people have a moderate level of confidence in what and how they are learning in school. Between two-thirds and 70% of students indicated a sense of efficacy, engagement and trust in school.

- Over ¾ of students felt they could be themselves in school (81%) and that they felt safe (76%);
- Although 73% of students had at least one adult to discuss school problems with, only 49% had someone in school to discuss personal problems with.

**Hamilton Results:**

- In Hamilton, 75% of participants identified that they can be themselves at their school. Similarly, 74% answered that they feel safe at school.
- The responses of Hamilton participants echoed the provincial findings from the survey in the area of trusting relationships with adults. While 68% indicated that they have an adult at school to discuss school problems with, only 48% have an adult to discuss personal issues with.

3.2.2 Level of Engagement

**Provincial Results:**

- Although over 70% of students are interested in most of the courses they are taking in school, only 45% often learn something so interesting that they can’t stop thinking about it.
- 75% of students reported that technologies really helped them learn, a finding that is consistent across all groups (one of the few where variables such as sex, immigrant status, language spoken at home did not make a difference).

**Hamilton Results:**

- Of the Hamilton participants, 72% indicated an interest in most of their courses but only 47% became so interested in a piece of learning that they couldn’t stop thinking about it.
- Over three quarters of youth (76%) responded that they are helped by technologies in their learnings.
3.2.3 Feelings of Efficacy or Empowerment

Provincial Results:

- Only 51% of students felt that they had opportunities to make their schools a better place (27% were unsure), with slightly more, 53%, reporting that teachers at their school valued students’ opinions about their classes;
- At the same time, 76% indicated that they felt comfortable standing up for themselves, with 71% knowing how to stand up for themselves without hurting others.

Hamilton Results:

- Only half (51%) of Hamilton participants believe they have opportunities to make their school a better place while almost a third (30%) are unsure if the opportunities are available. Likewise, only 57% identified the belief that teachers in their school value students’ opinions about their classes.
- The majority of participants indicate that they are comfortable standing up for themselves at 75%. In addition, 70% identify the ability to stand up for themselves without hurting others either physically or emotionally.

3.3 Confidence in Communities

How confident are Ontario’s youth in their communities? What does the research tell us about young people’s sense of trust, their level of engagement, and their feelings of efficacy or empowerment outside of school?

3.3.1 Trust – Out of School

Provincial Results:

Young people’s confidence level is low when it comes to their communities and learning outside of school. Between only 57 and 63% of students indicated a sense of efficacy/empowerment, engagement and trust in their communities and learning outside of school. Specifically:

- Although 91% of students reported that they can be themselves outside of school (compared to 81% in school), only 62% felt that young people were welcome and respected in their communities and even fewer, only 48%, trusted most of the people in their communities.
- The lowest level of trust was reported toward the “mainstream media”, with only 38% of students indicating that they thought that most of the news in the mainstream media was true. It should be noted that this finding should be interpreted cautiously and not necessarily negatively. Not only did about 30% of students answer that they were ‘uncertain’, the 38% positive response rate could be interpreted either as an indication of independent, critical thinking. We probably do not want young people to accept, uncritically, everything they hear or see on the media as true.
Hamilton Results:

- Of the Hamilton participants, 85% indicated that they can be themselves outside of school compared to 75% who believe they can be themselves in school.
- Only 62% of participants hold the belief that young people are welcome and respected within their communities while 44% identify a lack of trust toward people in their communities.
- Trust in the veracity of the mainstream media is shared by only 34% of participants with another 31% indicating they are unsure.

3.3.2 Efficacy – Out of School

Provincial Results:

Although over three-quarters of students (76%) felt comfortable standing up for themselves, a considerably smaller proportion responded positively to other questions related to efficacy.

- Only 60% believed they could make a difference in the world through their own actions; 52% that they could make a difference to solving issues such as poverty and pollution; and fewer than half (47%) reported that they had opportunities to make their communities a better place (e.g. safer, more environmentally friendly, more welcoming).
- It should be noted that between 26 and 33% of students indicated that they were uncertain about these last three questions which was a higher percentage than those disagreeing with the statements. This suggests that students did not know whether or how to make a difference in those areas, not necessarily that they did not think that they could make a difference.

Hamilton Results:

- A slightly higher percentage of participants felt that they can make a difference in the world (57%) than those who believed they can make a difference in their schools (51%).
- Less than half of the participants (49%) believe they can make a difference in relation to issues such as poverty, pollution and crime. Even less participants (45%) identified that they have opportunities to improve their communities. In response to both these questions, over 30% of participants indicated that they were unsure of their abilities to create change.

3.3.3 Engagement – Out of School

Provincial Results:

- Generally, out of school engagement is considerably lower than engagement in school (57% compared to 68%). Two-thirds of students (66%) indicated that they would vote in elections when they were old enough to do so. (need to check what the actual rate of youth voting is in Ontario) While not a particularly strong indicator of engagement, the response to this question was more positive than any of the others.
- Only 51% of students thought there were enough interesting things for young people to do in their communities (did this vary from community to community?), while a somewhat higher proportion reported taking part in at least one program or activity in their community (55%) and liking to do things that make their communities a better place (57%).
Hamilton Results:

- Like the Provincial findings, the out of school engagement of Hamilton participants is lower (54%) than engagement in school (63%).
- Almost two thirds of the Hamilton participants (61%) indicated that they will vote in elections when they reach legal voting age.
- Over half of the participants (56%) indicated that there are interesting things for young people to do in the community while exactly half (50%) actually take part in at least one program or activity. The percentage of participants who identified an enjoyment of improving the community was 49%.

3.4 Confidence in the Future

*How do Ontario’s youth feel about their futures? What does the research tell us about students’ future orientation, their confidence in both their personal futures and the future of their community and country, and their aspirations for themselves?*

3.4.1 Future Orientation

Provincial Results:

Young people in Ontario are very future-oriented, with an average of 84% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements about future orientation. For example:

- A very high proportion of students, 95%, reported that they intend to graduate from high school, with somewhat fewer, 88%, indicating that they intend to graduate from college or university;
- 86% of students said they think a lot about their lives and 84% reported having dreams for the future, although only 72% said they know what to do to make those dreams come true.

Hamilton Results:

In Hamilton, there was a slightly lower response of participants (79%) who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about future orientation than the Provincial average (84%). For example:

- There was an 87% response rate by Hamilton participants indicating that they intend to graduate from high school and an 81% rate indicating an intention to graduate from college or university. This is lower than the provincial average of 95% intention to graduate high school and 88% intention to graduate college or university.
- There was an 80% response rate to both a question indicating participants think a lot about the future and a question identifying they have dreams for the future. However, only 70% of participants revealed a belief that they could make those dreams come true.
3.4.2 Confidence in Personal Future

Provincial Results:

Students are much more confident in their personal futures (73%) than they are in the future of their country or community (35%). Specifically:

- 77% of students believed that opportunities will open up in their lives in the next 5 years, while 68% reported that they expect to achieve more than their parents did with respect to income and career.
- On the other hand, only 32% of students believed that their town or city will be a better place to live in five years, and slightly more, 38%, believed that Canada will be a better place to live in 5 years.

Hamilton Results:

Similar to the Provincial findings, participants in Hamilton identify a higher level of confidence in their personal futures (71%) than in the future of their country or community (37%). For example:

- Almost three quarters (73%) of participants expect opportunities to open for them in the next five years and 69% expect to achieve more than their parents.
- Conversely, only 35 to 38% of participants expect improvements in their city or country in the next five years.

3.4.3 Aspirations for Self and Society

Provincial Results:

Ontario young people have high aspirations for their personal lives and their future contribution to society. Specifically:

- 82% said they hope someday to start a family and be a good parent, with 80% saying that pursuing their passions was the most important thing to them.
- A lower proportion of students reported that, for them, a job is about more than money (70%) and that it was important to have a job that makes a contribution to society (68%). It is worth noting that 22% of students were not certain about the last question.

Hamilton Results:

In comparison to the Provincial findings, Hamilton participants had a lower response rate in relation to their aspirations about their personal lives and contributions to society. For example:

- Of Hamilton participants, 81% identified a hope of starting a family and being a good parent. However, only 72% revealed that pursuing their passions was the most important thing to them in comparison to 80% provincially.
- An equal percentage of participants (66%) revealed their belief that a job is about more than money and that it is important to have a job that makes a contribution to society.
- Within all four of the above areas, there was a significant difference in response rates between girls and boys. Girls had a 10% higher rate of responding positively to the questions than the boys in all of the areas.
4.0 KEY FINDINGS

Once the surveys were collected, the information was analyzed and some key findings emerged. The participants were also asked at the end of the survey if there was anything else that they wanted to say about their confidence in what they were learning or in the future. Following each key finding is a statement made by a student in the comment section.

1. Only half of Hamilton students believe they have opportunities to make their school a better place.

   “I just wish I could have my voice heard more, there is a definite lack of student opinion on the forefront, and it's a shame that the general student body isn't interested in making positive change. I do, but the school serves as more a vessel to detain you for four years rather than an institution that lets you demonstrate your personality and understand who you are, as WELL as make positive change around you.”

2. The intention of students in Hamilton to graduate from high school or college and university is lower than the Provincial average.

   “Well I want my future to be great but I don’t know how I can be successful if I take [applied courses]”

3. Students in Hamilton are more likely to believe they can make a difference globally than they can in their own communities.

   “My confidence about my future can show my peers and my self-confidence to show my self-respect and the community nor city to change the world that is not good into a good world that is nice and environmentally clean. Saving the earth is important. We need air to survive for all of us and the earth.

4. In both provincial and Hamilton findings, students believe that the community gets more value from students' 40 hours of community service than the value the students get from it.

   “Some aspects of our learning experience are too easily attained and acquired that the value of the education is lost; for example, community service hours for 40 hours I feel is not enough”

5. In both provincial and Hamilton findings, students have a high rate of response when asked if they have dreams for the future. However, the rate of response drops by 10 to 12% when asked if they believe they can make those dreams come true.

   “I have an idea of what I want to do in the community when I am older. The only problem I have is learning the steps to get there. I find that I need to know each individual step to get to my goal. I find that it will be a lot more relieving to know that I am prepared for what I need to get to my goal when I am older.”
6. Only two thirds of the Hamilton participants indicated that they will vote in elections when they reach legal voting age.

“Can’t really find out the point of learning courses like Canadian history”

7. The Hamilton participants were more likely to agree that they can be themselves outside of school than they can be within school.

“Teachers aren’t interested in student opinion, more or less come, do their job, and leave. If my voice could be better heard, I could have so much potential for change in this world”

8. Girls have significantly higher response rates than boys when asked about:

✔ Their hopes of starting a family and being a good parent.
✔ Pursuing their passions as being the most important thing to them.
✔ Job being about more than money
✔ The importance of having a job that makes a contribution to society.

9. The survey did not ask students about the age in which they are expected to make career decisions but this was a theme that emerged from the comments section.

“The school board needs to stop making us decide on what we’re going to do with the rest of our lives at the age of 15/16.”

“I feel like there is so much pressure now a days to figure out what you want to do with your life. Yes, I do agree that it is good to have a plan, but what if you really don’t know? I think that [it’s] good to take your time, don’t rush in figuring things out, make sure that [you’re] happy with what you are doing.”

“I get forced to make decisions that decide my entire future way too quickly

“I think it would be better if the students had enough support to continue school (college or university) instead of encouragement to making easy [money right] after compulsory education that they needed, because even though you are over the age of 14, you need help from your parents as well as your community. I think teenagers usually make decisions that they will regret after in their life in Canada.”
5.0 PROJECT UPDATE

The Social Planning & Research Council of Hamilton organized and hosted a conference to be attended by the partners of the Youth Confidence in Learning and the Future Project as well as student participants to share each municipalities’ findings and the students’ recommendations. These partners included the:

- Canadian Education Association (CEA)
- Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board
- Halton District School Board
- Peterborough Social Planning Council
- Social Planning Council of Sudbury
- Community Development Halton
- Social Planning Toronto

The conference that was held on May 2nd, 2012 at the Royal Hamilton Yacht Club also welcomed three keynote speakers: Ron Canuel, CEO of the CEA; Shadya Yasin, Network Coordinator of the York Youth Coalition; and Marvyn Novick, Professor at Ryerson University. The conference began with each municipality having the opportunity to present their specific findings. The participants of the conference then engaged in a series of roundtable discussions, from which some of these comments were inspired:

**What do these findings mean for you, your organization and/or your community?**

- “In regards to community service hours, why is there no connection between these hours and an ability to make change.”
- “Emphasizes the importance of starting young in engaging youth, for example with collaborative projects in school. Collaborative projects can potentially take place between lower and higher income schools.”
- “Findings are disturbing, as they present the same message across the board.”
- “As the results are somewhat redundant, it’s hard to know where we go now?”
- “School environments are static and haven’t changed since the 1900s, irrelevant and out of touch. They don’t address different learning styles.”
- “May indicate that many youth aren’t receiving the pre-employment/life skills through education.”
- “Aboriginal/Ethno-groups issues/needs not reflected in curriculum.”

**What are the most important things that need to happen to strengthen engagement in schools and narrow the gap between students’ learning in schools and their lives/learning outside of school?**

- “Parents must be welcomed partners in education. Community partnerships must be strengthened as well.”
- “School board barriers and resistance to community organizations must be reduced; however this is not something that happens all across Ontario.”
What are the solutions that should be adopted?

- “Collaboration between school and community.”
- “Visible appearance from guidance councillors would begin to provide a tangible solution to build relationships and then confidence in youth and their schools.”
- “Incentives, no punishments, associated and emphasized in community service hours.”
- “Civics courses need to be better linked to future voting rate and participation.”
- “We need to start looking at youth in a positive light and as an asset to the community.”
- “Teachers need to be educated on alternative methods, contacts, space etc. to teach and engage students.”

After the roundtable discussions were held, the conference thanked all of the adult participants for their input and presentations and invited the student participants to stay for a youth-centered portion of the conference. The student participants engaged in a series of youth-led roundtable discussions and were able to present their suggestions to one another in a format that they chose. Once transcribed, the suggestions that come out of this portion of the conference included:

What’s our advice for confident youth?

- “Youth who are deemed with behaviour problems, introverts, taking leadership camps”
- “Assemblies should include team based activities that build confidence and are lead by youth.”
- “Don’t punish blindly; understand why and try to help”
- “Acknowledge different learning styles – Let us move around or do what works best for us”
- “Be accepting of our personal circumstances”
- “Let us lead ourselves”
- “Help us connect and breakdown cliques and barriers”
- “Don’t assume, understand”
- “Keep up to date with what you know and how you teach us”
- “Don’t let us get bored!”
- “Don’t generalize; understand us individually”
APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHICS OF HAMILTON PARTICIPANTS

The demographic findings of the Hamilton surveys are presented in five areas: gender, grade, language spoken at home, country of birth and Aboriginal background. In total, 319 surveys were completed in Hamilton.

**Gender**

Table 1: Gender of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of female participants exceeded the number of male participants by 6%.

**Grade**

Table 2: Grade of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over half of the survey participants (53%) were enrolled in grade 10. The remaining survey participants were fairly evenly split between grade 9 (16%), grade 11 (13%) and grade 12 (18%).

**Language**

Table 3: Language Spoken at Home by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost three quarters of survey participants (74%) indicated that English is the language spoken in their homes. Less than 1% of participants speak French at home while 25% speak other languages (17 other languages were identified in this section).
Country of Birth

Table 4: Country of Birth of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Birth</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Born in Canada</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Born in Canada</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over 80% of the survey participants were born in Canada.

Aboriginal Background

Table 5: Participants with Aboriginal Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aboriginal</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 11% of the survey participants indicated that they have an Aboriginal background.
APPENDIX B: “SEARCHING FOR CERTAINTY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES” CONFERENCE - VISUAL DOCUMENTATION
listen to them!

what's our advice for confident youth?

DO WHAT WORKS best for us.

acknowledge different learning styles.

more youth programming.

get creative + innovative, keep us interested.

Don't generalize; understand us individually.

Help us connect and break down cliques + barriers.

Don't assume; understand.

let us lead ourselves.

Be accepting of our personal circumstances.

Have discussions of us.

(People love to talk)

Don't pick on us for being different.

Don't be afraid to bend the rules a little bit...

Don't punish blindly; understand why and try to help.

Let us move around or!

Let us keep up to date with what you know and how you teach us.

A place for us to just be.

Let us lead ourselves.

Be accepting of our personal circumstances.

What's our advice for confident youth?