

Report Of The Livingston Committee For Healthy Community Culture March 29, 2004

INTRODUCTION

On April 1, 2003 a senior at Livingston High School took his own life. This marked the second teen suicide to shake the community inside a year. In the aftermath of the shock and grief that ensued, members of the Livingston community sought to make meaning from this tragedy by seeking to better understand and address the forces in our community that may contribute to a culture that would lead two young people to commit suicide, and 15-20 more students whose aborted attempts at suicide required medical attention.

A diverse group of community leaders representing religious groups, the counseling staffs of the Livingston Public Schools, members of the Livingston School Board, Livingston Parent / Teacher Council, LMAC, the Livingston Police Department, and the Livingston Town Council began meeting at the beginning of May 2003, and has met on fifteen different occasions.

CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

The committee outlined a number of objectives for its work. The first main objective was to assess the strengths and assets one finds in Livingston that promotes physical, emotional, and spiritual health for young people in our community. Additionally, we sought to evaluate the challenges and forces in the community that contribute to an unhealthy environment for young people in town. **Necessarily, our evaluation was based on informal assessment and anecdotal evidence**, but the committee tried to achieve consensus opinions based on the diversity of the people represented in the group, and we sought to include in our discussions representatives from various constituencies in the community.

After this period of informal assessment and evaluation, the committee's second main objective was to identify a number of challenges that we sought to address with concrete recommendations we hope will begin a process toward improving the communal environment in which our youth engage and to help young people in town to develop a stronger skill-set for coping with the pressures and forces they face. This report will reflect our deliberations surrounding the first objective, and will offer our recommendations that emerged from the second.

We want to stress that despite some of the important challenges that will be outlined in this report, the overriding sense of this committee is that Livingston is a community with a great foundation for healthy community culture, and is privileged to have citizens and

professionals in the community who care so deeply for the town's health. Much that Livingston seeks to do as a town promotes healthy culture, and ought to be applauded and reinforced. For example, Livingston public schools employ guidance and counseling professionals at a comparatively low student to counselor ratio, which should be applauded and reinforced. Secondly, Livingston's Youth Appreciation Week is a vehicle that may help to bring many of this committee's recommendations to fruition, and in itself transmits a very important message to the community.

LIVINGSTON'S ASSETS AND STRENGTHS

Livingston is an extraordinary community, which prides itself on providing tremendous resources for its citizens to enjoy an excellent communal way of life. The committee identified many positive assets that contribute to making Livingston a community in which many seek to make their home.

- Safety – Livingston is generally perceived by its residents as a safe community, free from dangers that plague many communities not far from its borders. Public safety is a major concern of town leaders and Livingston residents. The town and its citizens work to make Livingston a safe community.
- Excellent Public Schools – Perhaps more than any quality, Livingston is nationally and regionally known for the high quality and standards of its public schools, which provide young people in our community with a world-class education. The public school system devotes substantial resources to gifted students and students with special learning needs. Members of the community take a great interest in the quality of Livingston schools, and work diligently to maintain their excellence. Livingston residents pay a higher rate of property tax than many surrounding communities in order to help support public institutions, especially the public schools.
- Many Opportunities For Recreation – Residents of Livingston enjoy tremendous recreational facilities and opportunities. Adults and children enjoy great town support and facilities for athletic participation, community involvement, and the arts.
- Civic Spirit – Livingston residents take a strong interest in community affairs. There is a spirit of volunteerism and civic involvement is high.
- Accessible Community Institutions – Livingston enjoys the benefits of “small-town” life with regard to government and community institutions. The town council seeks to be responsive to citizen needs, and the school board works with the community to collaborate in providing excellent schools. The *West Essex Tribune* is a highly accessible community paper and other media including

Channel 34 and updated websites serve as a forum for active community debate and celebration.

- Diversity in Houses of Worship – Livingston is fortunate to have a multitude of religious institutions that work in harmony together. Clergy take a strong interest in the town and work closely through the Livingston Clergy Association across denominational lines for the community’s best interests.
- Affluence and Material Comfort – While Livingston is more economically diverse than many inside and outside the community realize, Livingston residents generally enjoy a high standard of living. Few residents of Livingston experience poverty, and most do not lack for material comforts.

These qualities make Livingston a very attractive place to live for families. It is not uncommon for people who grew up in Livingston to return to raise their own families.

CHALLENGES AND FORCES DETRIMENTAL TO COMMUNAL HEALTH

In the midst of these great assets, we also found a number of forces that detract from communal health in Livingston for young people.

- Social Pressure – Young people report a high degree of peer and social pressure. These pressures consist of pressure to conform to social norms, pressure to find acceptance by peer groups, family, and the community, and competitive pressure to “be the best” and to “fit in”. Young people who do not conform often find themselves on the periphery of social and communal life. At the same time, young people also feel tremendous pressure to be “okay” and not to admit to peers or others when feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope. In addition, *parents* in the community feel pressure to conform to communal norms and their peers, and for their children to conform and “fit in” as well.
- Academic Pressure – Generally young people in Livingston experience an extraordinary amount of pressure to achieve academic excellence. Students report feeling this pressure even in the elementary grades. Admission to competitive colleges and universities represents a nearly all-consuming occupation and in many cases obsession for many young people and/or their families. Average ability is considered by many to be unacceptable, and pressure is brought to bear on young people to excel.
- “Hyper-Programmatics” – Many in the community feel pressure to take on more commitments than they can reasonably handle. Some students take on an academic program that precludes a lunch period during the day. After-school activities allow for little “down time”, if any. Busy schedules of both parents and kids leave little room for family time.

- Misplaced Priorities and Values – Over-emphasis on winning, being the best, and excellence can skew young people’s perspective on healthier life values. Affluence and material wealth, grades and test scores often are seen as the key parameters for success. Values such as personal satisfaction and fulfillment, a sense of connectedness or commitment to one’s neighbor, service to the community, and a sense of pride in hard work and personal achievement were seen as lower priorities.

The confluence of these challenges contributes to a cultural environment that can make it difficult for young people who do not conform or achieve the communal standards to cope with the pressures that arise.

SOURCES OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Ironically, the same forces that contribute to the community’s strengths often contribute to its weaknesses. Livingston is generally perceived as an affluent town, but pressure builds in families to “keep up with the Joneses.” Because Livingston enjoys such high quality public schools, and because the community invests so much in their success, students and their families feel great pressure, internal and external, to take advantage of all that is available to them. Livingston offers many outlets for recreation and athletics, but this often creates a pressure to take advantage of all that is offered.

The committee identified three different family paradigms that seem to contribute to the high pressure some young people feel to perform and succeed. These paradigms are gross generalizations based on our anecdotal conversations, and not all families in each category exhibit the behaviors and characteristics.

- 1) High Achieving Family – Because Livingston is perceived as an affluent community with a high standard of living, the town tends to attract families who themselves are high achievers. Parents are often highly educated and professionally successful people, who expect their children to be equally as successful. Often young people can point to high-achieving parents and high-achieving grandparents, so the expectations of their success are high. Families also sometimes find their validation and worth in the achievements of their children, which can manifest itself in “supermarket bragging rights” with regard to a young person’s achievement in competitive athletics, admission to gifted and talented programs, Grade Point Average (GPA), class rank, test scores, college admission, etc.

In these families achievement often is seen as the ultimate value. The development of competitive achievements is promoted, often at the expense of the celebration of other values and ethics. Parents are “winners” and so the message that some come to understand is that “winning” is what matters, and not how you play or how you feel about the game. Spiritual development is seen sometimes as a lesser value. Financial and professional security

sometimes takes precedence or is more highly valued than emotional and spiritual growth and health.

At times, because of this pressure to attain the credentials of achievement, i.e. high grades, test scores, awards, etc., parents will often fight battles on behalf of their kids to ensure them these credentials, sometimes with little or no regard as to what the child did or did not do to earn those credentials. A sense of entitlement without personal responsibility and accountability can sometimes ensue.

- 2) Leap Frog Family – Families in this category generally do not come from privileged backgrounds, but have worked and sacrificed in order to make their home in Livingston. Often immigrant families fall into this category. Because the young people in this family-type are reminded of the family’s sacrifice, tremendous pressure not to “waste this opportunity” is brought to bear. The struggle of some families “just to keep up” also adds to this pressure. Young people report being made to experience guilt or inadequacy when they don’t meet the family standard for competitive achievement and excellence.

- 3) At-Risk Family – Families in this category may experience any number of problems that create stress on young people. The downturn in the economy creates financial pressures on some families that force lifestyle changes on young people. Breakups in marriages and divorce create emotional stresses and pressures with which young people may not be adequately prepared to cope. Alcohol and substance abuse among parents, can force families to fall into this paradigm. Despite the unstable environment in which some may live, young people feel great pressure to be “okay”, and that pressure can keep young people from seeking help when they feel overwhelmed.

With regard to all these family paradigms, a number of factors were common. Young people feel a sense of shame when they do not conform to the norm, and often feel isolated or alone, i.e. “We must be the only family like this...” or “I’m the only one who can’t do that ...” In each of these categories, young people feel tremendous pressure to achieve on a high level. For young people from “High Achieving Families” the pressure is from the stated and unstated expectation that the young person will be as good or better than mom and dad. For young people from “Leapfrog Families” the pressure is from the stated and unstated expectation that the young person “won’t waste our money.” For families at risk, young people feel pressure not to add to the crisis, to achieve on a high level to not add to the burden. In all cases, the message is transmitted that being on level is not acceptable – students need to be “advanced” or “gifted” in order to meet expectations. Families will often go into crisis mode when students do not rise to these high levels, employing tutors and engaging learning-specialists to find the “learning disability” that keeps their children from excelling.

GOALS FOR COMMUNITY TO ACHIEVE BETTER CULTURAL HEALTH

After considering the concerns and challenges identified from our deliberations, the committee focused on four goals that it hoped would create a healthier environment for young people.

Goal #1 – Reduce The Stigma Regarding Excellence. The committee addressed several concerns regarding the social stigma surrounding the drive for excellence. The concentration on competitive excellence – “being the best” – could be reconcentrated on the idea of “being *your* best”. The healthier notion of celebrating individual self-actualization – “being all you can be” we hoped would destigmatize young people with different levels of ability. A person’s worth ought not be measured solely by class rank, grade point average, test scores, and trophies. This shift in focus from “winning” or “being the best” to “happiness” and “pride” in “being *my* best” ought to be a priority for the community.

The messages that “winning” and “being the best” are communicated from the earliest ages and in many venues. For example, when sports organizations publish player names in the *West Essex Tribune*, a better designation than “Most Valuable Player” could be “Player of the Game”, so that being *the* best is not as much the focus as being *your* best.

Recommendations:

- Eliminate class rank at Livingston High School
- Clarify the criteria and basis for selection alongside publication of honor roll and high honor roll.
- Encourage sports and recreation organizations to promote language regarding “Player of the Game” rather than “MVP”.
- Promote affective learning programs in the schools
- Develop reading lists and materials for parents and community to use in order to boost socio-emotional learning
- Encourage Livingston Parent / Teacher Council to develop and promote materials to educate parents as to the detrimental effects of promoting their children as “their masterpiece” and “to respect children’s uniqueness while accepting them in all their ordinary glory.”¹

Goal #2 – Promote Healthy Individuation. As part of adolescence, young people learn to take responsibility and ownership for their lives, their decisions, and the consequences of those decisions. The committee agreed that the more we can encourage young people, even in younger grades, to take responsibility for themselves and their choices, the more we will promote the ability for young people to cope with disappointment and stress. The

¹ From Wendy Mogell, *Blessing Of A Skinned Knee*, p. 41.

community needs to help kids individuate from their parents and develop their personal identities in a healthy and safe environment.

The committee agreed that more emphasis in the community should be placed on helping parents and young people understand that struggle is part of a healthy process of growth. While tremendous resources exist to help our children to thrive, sometimes the wisest course of action can be the withholding of resources to allow the young person to garner his/her wherewithal to tackle the challenge. Creating and inventing, and struggling with limited resources promotes ownership, respect and self-respect. If we give our young people everything they could possibly need whenever they desire it, we deny them the growth and pride that comes from earning or building something on one's own.

Young people need to learn to take responsibility for their achievements and actions. Parents who are too quick to fight their children's battles impede a young person's development of skills they will need to cope with their own disappointment. It also teaches young people that a final result is more important than taking personal responsibility for one's life, actions, and achievement. For example, if a student earns a 79, and the parent goes to the teacher, guidance counselor, principal, or superintendent to get the grade adjusted to a "B", the student learns that what really matters is the grade, not the effort one put forth to achieve it, and secondly, the student is denied the learning opportunity that comes from wrestling with lower than desired achievement.

Recommendations:

- Encourage student participation in Parent / Teacher conferences from early age
- Upon entering middle and senior high school, develop and institute programs (i.e. assemblies) to encourage students to take responsibility for their success and failures.
- During Youth Appreciation Week or other venue – promote an essay contest on the topic "What was my best failure?"
- Publish guide for parents with regard to fighting kids battles and distribute to appropriate constituencies
- Encourage town organizations to expand efforts by SAGE (Set A Good Example) to publicize helpful parenting advice and tips in a variety of town venues, i.e. soccer, basketball, and baseball games, rec. department classes, newspaper and Channel 34, e-mail lists, religious organizations, etc.
<http://www.mnjysa.org/sage/SageCover.html>
- Encourage participation in TEENSCREEN diagnostics. Clergy should write letters to parents of kids in participating grades to encourage participation.
- Encourage Livingston Recreation Department and sports leagues to expand use of training programs for parents designed to promote appropriate behavior and encouragement of kids in activities and sports – i.e. the spectator code of conduct required by the Livingston Soccer Club.
- Encourage school systems (public and private) and religious organizations to promote programs and materials to encourage and train families in healthy and age-appropriate separation and individuation.

Goal #3 – Let Kids Be Kids. Families need to be encouraged to limit a child’s schedule and commitments to allow time for emotional and spiritual development. For example, if we permit students to forego a lunch period during the school day, we may promote unhealthy eating habits and in some cases enable eating disorders so prevalent among teens. Families need to be helped to understand when the impulse for achievement is healthy and when it becomes destructive. It is important for members of our community to understand the importance of building in stress-relieving activity and opportunity as part of developing a healthier and more balanced life.

The committee also discussed our concern that young people are asked to grow up too quickly. Too often young people get the message from society and the community that they should be adopting adult dress and behavior at younger and younger ages. This manifests itself not only in a student’s academic program, i.e. college-level work in high school, but in other parts of life, including dating and sexual activity, drinking and use of drugs, after prom activities, etc. By setting limits we protect young people from situations and decisions they may not be prepared to handle, and we give young people the message that it’s “okay” not to grow up too fast.

Recommendations:

- Eliminate parental waivers for students to opt out of lunch. Mandate that students in all grades must take a lunch period every day.
- Ask school board to consider limiting the number of AP classes students can take in a given year.
- Create “Family Night” initiative in town whereby every town organization shuts down for a night. Develop initiative to help parents see that over-programming children is not always best for their emotional health. Help alleviate fears that by limiting kids’ programming child will not be kept from competing. For example: enrolling in five or six AP classes, on line classes, over-commitment in extra-curricular activities, etc.
- Create initiatives and programs to target young children to learn healthy skills to cope with disappointment.
- Promote value of family time – specifically the importance of sharing meals together on a regular basis and time for families to share recreation together.

Goal #4 – Promoting Diverse Definitions of Success. In discussing how success is generally understood by members of the community, we included the following criteria:

- Material Wealth – the value of a car, house, clothing, or the amount of money in the bank or in the wallet often serve as a scorecard for success
- Excellence – Not always for the sake of simply being good, but for the sake of being “the best”. Success in academics is aligned directly with class rank; in

athletics with MVP status or team record; in arts with awards or victory in competition; and socially as well.

- Credentials – Success is often found in the prestige of attending a competitive college or university, in attaining a professional degree from a particular university, or in the type of profession or career.
- Providing for family – Success is often defined as being able to provide the very best for one’s family.

We were concerned that service to others or the community, personal fulfillment, and spiritual development were not primary definitions or criteria for success. In conversations with young people, teens stated that success entailed being admitted to a competitive college, being the best at what you do, and having a job that was fun. There is a prevalent attitude among many young people that the path to success can only be found through attendance at a competitive college or university. Ironically, young people stated that they thought happiness was a requirement for success, but when asked what made for happiness, the same criteria for success as listed above were generally named. Our fear is that narrow definitions of success and narrow vision regarding pathways to success create stress on young people who may need or seek to define success in alternate fashion and who may one day arrive at success by an unorthodox or unconventional path.

Recommendations:

- Develop programs such as assemblies and/or poster drives highlighting different definitions of success and different paths to get there.
- Encourage Channel 34, the *West Essex Tribune* and other media outlets to promote a series called “Profiles Of Success” which highlights different people in the community who could be considered successful using a variety of diverse criteria.

CONCLUSION

As stated above, we believe that Livingston is a community with enormous potential to be a place where families can raise children in a healthy and safe environment. Livingston should be a town where young people are helped to realize their fullest potential, while at the same time learning the skills necessary to cope with life’s inevitable disappointments.

We strongly recommend that the Livingston Town Council support the creation of a committee whose mission it is to maintain the town’s focus on these issues and to consistently advise the town and its citizens on ways to create and maintain healthy community culture. We found that our *ad hoc* committee provided an important venue for representatives of different town governance and advisory bodies to share thoughts and concerns, and to coordinate the efforts of different groups with regard to the objectives and goals outlined in this report.

Furthermore, we recommend that the town create a staff position called “Community Coordinator” whose task it would be to help drive the issues and proposals contained in this report and to enhance communication between and among different town governance bodies, organizations, and committees.

It is our hope that the implementation of these recommendations, and the continued dialogue among community leaders with regard to these issues, will work toward a time when the Township of Livingston will never again suffer a crisis like those we have endured in the past two years.

Respectfully Submitted,

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