

Jackson County Youth Substance Use Prevention Initiative

Youth Focus Group Findings Report

Spring 2026

Purpose

As part of the Jackson County Youth Substance Use Prevention Initiative (JCYSUP), youth focus groups were conducted in Spring 2026 to better understand youth perceptions of substance use, community norms, trusted adults, and prevention messaging. Findings from the Community Profile and Readiness Assessment highlighted the need for additional youth engagement and data collection to ensure prevention efforts accurately reflect the experiences and perspectives of young people in Jackson County.

The focus groups were designed to serve three purposes:

1. Validate and expand upon findings from the Community Profile and Readiness Assessment.
2. Gather youth perspectives on substance use, community norms, and protective factors.
3. Test initial Positive Community Norms (PCN) messaging concepts and identify effective communication channels for future prevention campaigns.

Results will inform future strategic planning, Positive Community Norms campaign development, coalition priorities, and youth engagement efforts.

Methodology

Three school-based focus groups were conducted with students at North Park School District during the spring semester of 2026.

Groups included:

- Grades 6–8
- Grades 9–10
- Grade 11

Facilitated discussions were paired with anonymous real-time polling using Mentimeter, allowing students to provide both quantitative and qualitative feedback.

Participation was exceptionally strong. Across all three groups, only two students from the entire eligible population of students in grades 6–11 were absent. As a result, the findings provide a highly representative snapshot of youth perceptions within North Park School District.

Topics explored included:

- Perceptions of youth substance use
- Perceived community norms related to alcohol and other substances

- Family expectations and adult influence
- Trusted adults and support systems
- Social media and information sources
- Positive Community Norms messaging concepts

Figure 1. Youth Focus Group Participation by Grade Group

Eligible Students	Participated	Participation Rate
Grades 6-11	22	100%
Grades 9-10	16	100%
Grade 11	4	66.67%

Participation included nearly the entire student population in grades 6–11, with only two students absent during data collection. This exceptionally high participation rate provides confidence that findings are broadly representative of youth perspectives within North Park School District.

These school-based focus groups were conducted during the school day. All students present at school that day were required to attend the focus groups. Combined with the very small community, lack of anonymity may have impacted focus group results, indicating a need for individual youth interviews during future analyses.

Key Findings

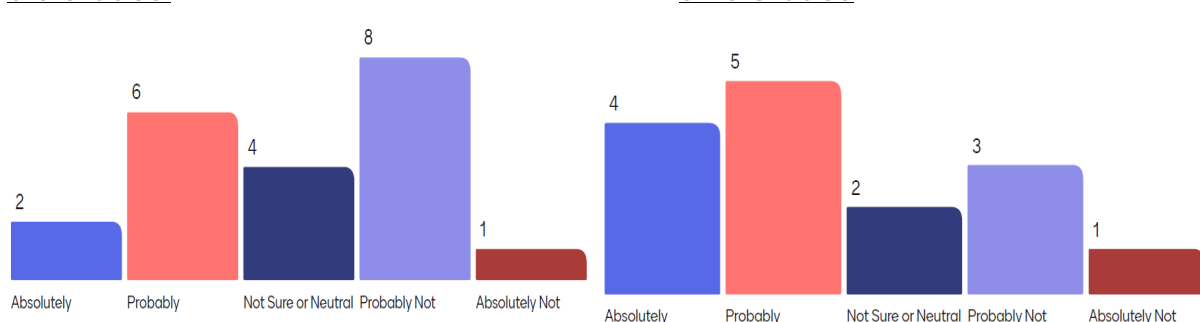
Youth Perceptions of Substance Use

When asked what comes to mind when they hear the term “substance use,” students overwhelmingly associated it with alcohol, nicotine, vaping, marijuana, addiction, and illegal drugs.

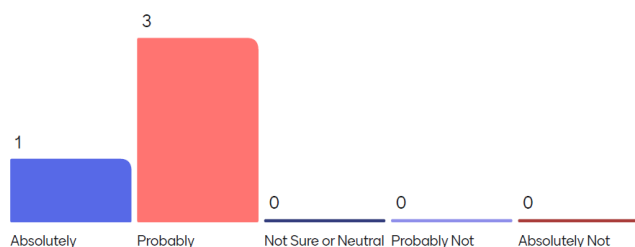
Common responses included:

- “Alcohol”
- “Drugs”
- “Nicotine”
- “Addiction”

Figure 2. Youth Perceptions of Substance Use Among Peers by Grade Group



11 Grade



Youth perceptions of peer substance use varied across grade levels. While many students believed some substance use occurs among their peers, responses were mixed, suggesting uncertainty regarding the actual prevalence of use. This finding is important because perceptions of peer behavior often influence personal decision-making and social norms.

Among older students, responses also included references to fentanyl, cocaine, methamphetamine, coping, dependence, mental health, and social influences. These responses suggest that youth generally understand substance use as both a behavioral and health issue, rather than viewing it solely through a disciplinary lens.

Substance Use Is Viewed as a Moderate Concern

Youth perceptions varied regarding whether substance use is a significant issue among students.

Middle school students were generally uncertain, with most selecting neutral responses when asked whether substance use is a major issue among students.

Older students were similarly mixed, with many indicating that substance use exists but is not necessarily widespread.

These findings suggest that youth recognize substance use as present within the community but may perceive it as affecting specific groups rather than the student population as a whole.

Perceived Substance Use Often Exceeds Personal Experience

One of the most important findings emerged when students were asked whether most students their age use substances.

Responses reflected uncertainty and mixed perceptions. At the same time, youth generally agreed with the statement: “Most North Park students do not use substances regularly.” This pattern mirrors findings from the adult community survey, where perceptions of substance use often exceeded actual reported behaviors.

The results suggest an opportunity for Positive Community Norms messaging to reinforce the reality that many students are already making healthy choices.

Peer Influence and Social Networks

A consistent theme across focus groups was the influence of peer groups on youth decision-making. Students frequently discussed the role of peer pressure in shaping choices related to substance use, while also acknowledging that peer groups can serve as protective factors.

Youth described North Park as a small community where friend groups often span multiple grades and social circles are limited. As a result, students reported feeling that peer influence can carry greater weight than it might in larger communities.

One student explained that if someone within their friend group offers alcohol or another substance, it can feel more difficult to decline because there may be few alternative social groups available. Several students noted that maintaining friendships and social belonging can increase pressure to participate in activities that align with group norms.

At the same time, students also identified peer groups as protective factors. Many youth reported that they have little knowledge of what occurs within other social circles and that their perceptions of youth substance use are largely based on the experiences of their own friends. This finding may help explain why perceptions of substance use can differ from reality. Youth who are surrounded by peers who use substances may assume use is more common than it actually is, while youth whose friend groups do not engage in substance use may perceive it as relatively uncommon.

These findings reinforce the importance of Positive Community Norms (PCN) strategies that help youth understand the behaviors and attitudes of the broader student population rather than relying solely on observations within their immediate social networks. By highlighting healthy majority behaviors, PCN campaigns can help reduce misperceptions and weaken the influence of perceived peer pressure.

Family Expectations and Adult Influence

Youth perceptions of family expectations differed by age group.

- Middle school students generally agreed that most families set expectations discouraging alcohol use.
- Older students were more skeptical and less likely to believe that most families communicate clear expectations regarding underage drinking.

Despite these differences, students across grade levels consistently responded positively to messages emphasizing parental support for alcohol-free choices.

The strongest-performing messages included:

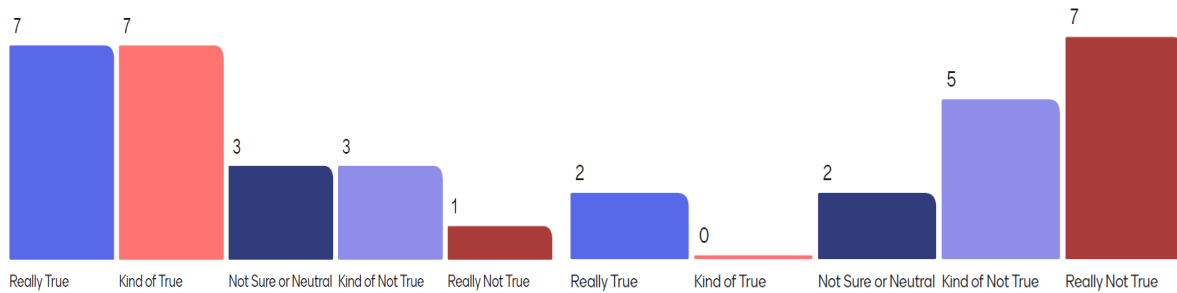
- “North Park parents agree with the choice to be alcohol-free and discourage underage drinking.”
- “The majority of North Park parents discourage underage drinking and agree with the choice to be alcohol-free.”

These findings reinforce previous assessment results identifying adult influence, communication, and role modeling as important protective factors.

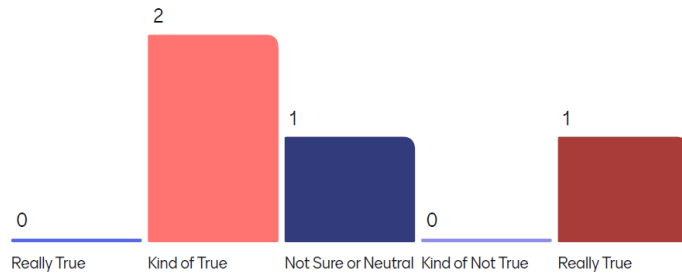
Figure 3. Youth Believe that Most North Park Families Set Clear Expectations Regarding Alcohol Use

6-8 Grades

9-10 Grades



11 Grade



Middle school students were generally more likely to believe that families set clear expectations discouraging alcohol use, while older students expressed greater skepticism. These findings align with broader assessment themes emphasizing the importance of parent communication and adult role modeling.

Youth Perspectives on Adult Influence and Community Messaging

An unexpected theme emerged during the message testing portion of the focus groups. While students were asked to evaluate messages designed for youth audiences, several participants emphasized that adults, community members, and visitors also need to hear these messages.

Students frequently discussed the role that adults play in shaping community norms around alcohol and substance use. Consistent with findings from stakeholder discussions, key informant interviews, and the community survey, youth recognized that adult behavior and expectations influence how young people perceive substance use. Several students suggested that Positive Community Norms messages should not be directed solely toward youth, but should also be shared with parents, community members, and visitors to reinforce positive role modeling and strengthen community-wide understanding of healthy norms.

"Parents and community members need to hear these messages. They need to understand their role too."

Students also expressed pride in their community and believed that positive community norms messaging could help communicate Jackson County's strengths to others.

"We need visitors to see these great statistics about us and our parents, so they see how great a community this is to visit."

These comments reinforce the value of a two-generation prevention approach that engages both youth and adults. They also support broader community-wide Positive Community Norms campaigns that highlight healthy behaviors, community strengths, and shared responsibility for youth well-being.

Youth Stress and Generational Understanding

Across all focus groups, students emphasized that their experiences differ significantly from those of previous generations. Youth described feeling pressure from multiple sources, including academics, athletics, extracurricular activities, social relationships, social media, and the constant connectivity created by technology.

Students explained that growing up in a small community can intensify these pressures because actions, relationships, and mistakes are often highly visible to peers and adults. Several youth expressed a desire for adults to better understand these realities and recognize that today's youth navigate a different social environment than previous generations.

A recurring message was that many young people are making healthy choices and want adults to recognize those efforts. Students shared that a desire to spend time with friends, attend activities, or be out in the community should not automatically be interpreted as risky behavior or substance use. Instead, youth emphasized that they are often seeking connection, belonging, and opportunities to spend time together.

One student summarized this perspective by explaining that youth are "good kids" who are not looking for trouble, but rather looking for connection.

These findings reinforce the importance of trusted adult relationships, positive role modeling, and open communication between generations. Prevention efforts that recognize youth strengths, validate their experiences, and create opportunities for meaningful connection may be more effective than approaches that focus solely on risk reduction.

Positive Community Norms Messaging Findings

One of the primary purposes of the focus groups was to test early Positive Community Norms (PCN) campaign messages. Results showed clear differences in how youth responded to various message styles.

In addition to message testing, youth reviewed sample campaign images and visual concepts. Students emphasized the importance of authenticity and indicated that images should reflect local youth, activities, and community experiences. Feedback was shared with the campaign development team and will be used to refine future Positive Community Norms materials.

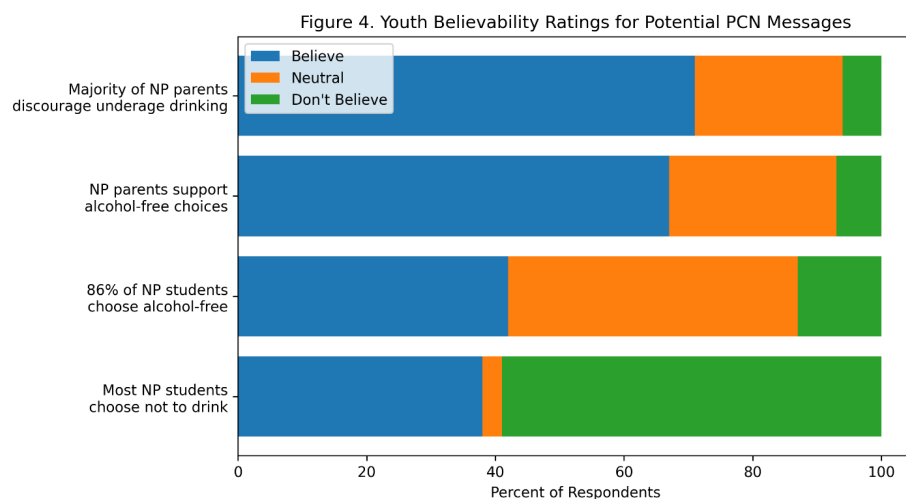
Messages Youth Found Less Credible

Students were less likely to believe broad statements such as:

- “Most North Park students choose not to drink.”

Many participants indicated skepticism toward this type of statement when no supporting data was provided.

Figure 4. Youth Believability Ratings for Potential Positive Community Norms Messages



Messages emphasizing parental support and clear family expectations received the strongest support from youth. Messages that included specific data were generally viewed as more credible than broad statements. These findings provide direct guidance for future Positive Community Norms campaign development.

Messages Youth Found More Credible

Messages that included specific statistics or focused on parents and family expectations were viewed more favorably.

Examples included:

- “86% of North Park students choose to be alcohol-free.”
- “North Park parents agree with the choice to be alcohol-free and discourage underage drinking.”

Youth responses suggest that future campaigns should:

- Use specific data whenever possible.
- Emphasize family and adult support.
- Avoid overly broad statements that may feel disconnected from student experiences.
- Highlight positive behaviors already occurring in the community.

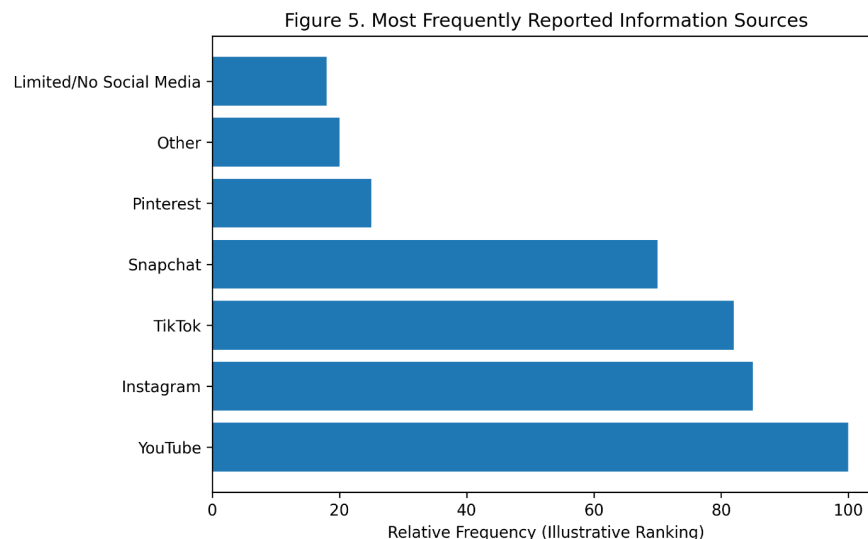
Communication Channels and Information Sources

Youth reported obtaining information through a variety of platforms.

Among younger students, the most frequently reported platforms included:

- YouTube
- Snapchat
- TikTok
- Instagram

Figure 5. Most Frequently Reported Information Sources and Social Media Platforms



No single communication channel reached all youth. While social media platforms remain important, several students reported limited social media use or reliance on school-based communication. Future prevention efforts should use multiple communication channels to maximize reach.

Among older students, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube remained common, although some students reported limited social media use.

Several students indicated they use flip phones or have restricted access to social media. These may be anomalies or misinformation due to the facilitator leaving the word cloud open during discussion

These findings suggest that a multi-channel communication strategy will be necessary to effectively reach youth, including:

- School-based messaging
- Posters and visual displays
- Parent communications
- Social media
- Community events

No single communication channel appears sufficient to reach all youth audiences.

Youth Activities, Belonging, and Community Connection

Throughout the focus groups, students were asked what young people currently do for fun in North Park and what activities or opportunities they feel are missing. Responses highlighted both the strengths and challenges of growing up in a small rural community.

Many students identified sports, school activities, outdoor recreation, hunting, fishing, rodeo, and spending time with friends as important outlets. At the same time, students consistently reported a desire for additional activities and gathering spaces that are not tied to athletics or seasonal events.

Several youth expressed a need for more opportunities to socialize, recreate, and connect with peers outside of school-sponsored activities. Suggestions included expanded recreation opportunities (e.g. a recreation center), community events, places to gather with friends, and activities that appeal to a wider range of interests and age groups.

These findings align with previous stakeholder, key informant, and community survey results, which identified a decline in community amenities and limited recreational opportunities for both youth and adults. Youth engagement, belonging, and access to positive social activities are well-established protective factors against substance use and will be important considerations in future prevention planning and grant development efforts.

Implications for Prevention Planning

Findings from the youth focus groups reinforce several themes identified in previous assessment activities.

Youth generally recognize substance use as a concern but do not necessarily view it as a defining characteristic of their peer group.

Students responded positively to messages emphasizing healthy majority behaviors, parental support, and community expectations. However, they were more skeptical of generalized statements that lacked supporting evidence.

The results suggest that future prevention efforts should:

- Build upon existing family and community protective factors.
- Continue emphasizing trusted adult relationships.
- Develop data-driven Positive Community Norms messaging.
- Ensure a community-wide and Two Generation messaging approach.
- Include youth in campaign design and testing.
- Utilize multiple communication channels.
- Expand opportunities for youth leadership and engagement.

Notably, youth themselves expressed a desire for prevention messaging that reaches adults and community members, reinforcing the assessment-wide finding that substance use prevention is viewed as a shared community responsibility rather than solely a youth issue.

Conclusion

The Youth Focus Groups provided an important opportunity to hear directly from young people across Jackson County and validate findings from the broader Community Profile and Readiness Assessment.

Overall, youth perceptions aligned closely with themes identified through stakeholder discussions, key informant interviews, and the community survey. Students highlighted the importance of trusted adults, clear family expectations, and accurate information while demonstrating openness to prevention messages that feel authentic and grounded in real community data.

As Jackson County moves into implementation of its prevention strategies, these findings provide an important baseline for future evaluation, Positive Community Norms campaigns, youth engagement efforts, and strategic planning. Continued youth involvement will be essential to ensuring prevention efforts remain relevant, credible, and effective.