

## In this issue...

Three factors that are enhanced by participation in student activities—finding and following a passion, or “spark”; finding one’s voice; and relationships and opportunities—provide young people the support they need to set and keep a positive course.

## The Untapped Strengths of 15-year-olds

A recent study exploring the importance of teen motivation and engagement in civic life finds that only seven percent of 15 year-olds in the U.S. experience a strong combination of three key factors critical to their success, according to research sponsored by the Best Buy Children’s Foundation.

The national survey of 1,817 teens, conducted by Search Institute—*Teen Voice 2009: The Untapped Strengths of 15-Year-Olds*—finds that a majority of 15-year-olds lack high levels of each of the concepts: “sparks,” “teen voice,” and “relationships and opportunities.” These three factors, when experienced at high levels and combined, provide young people the support they need to set and keep a positive course in the midst of a critical time in their lives.

“The Teen Voice 2009 study captures the direct voice of the U.S. 15 year-old, pointing out the opportunities we all have to work alongside young people, and help them find and follow their passions,” said Brian Dunn, Chairman and CEO, Best Buy Co., Inc. “Teens are a rich resource, and in supporting them we enrich not only their lives, but our own families and communities as well.”

*Teen Voice 2009* explores three interlocking concepts:

### Sparks

“Sparks” is a metaphor for describing how young people experience talents, interests, or strengths that make them feel really happy, energized, and passionate and that give them energy and motivation to do well in life. Two-thirds (66%) of 15-year-olds say they have at least one spark, yet fewer than half of the kids who know their spark say that anyone at school (48%), a coach, mentor, or other youth worker (43%) encourages their spark.

Why are sparks important? Teens who know their sparks are more likely to report higher levels of initiative, sense of purpose, and desire to make a difference in the world. They are also more likely to

place a high value on strong friendships, being civically engaged, and serving others. According to the report, “a clear and affirmed sense of purpose and passion helps teens anchor their identity in internal strengths that are not based primarily on the perceptions of other people. These internal strengths encourage teens to recognize that they have skills and qualities the world needs.”

### The Teen Voice Index

The Teen Voice Index (TVI) measures how much teens think their voices are heard on key issues that matter to them. Young people who find their voice both contribute in powerful ways and also set themselves on a positive path for their own future.

Overall, just 18% of youth scored high on the TVI. Fifteen-year-olds with high TVI scores are at least three times as likely as those with low scores to see civic engagement as important, hold prosocial values, and have a sense of hopeful purpose. They are twice as likely as teens with low TVI scores to be actively engaged in school and to have goals to master what they are studying. According to the report, “giving teens a voice and a sense of their power to make a difference can be a key to unlocking their potential. Empowered teens are most likely to do well in school, expect a lot of themselves, and show other signs of positive development.”

### The Relationship and Opportunities Index

The Relationship and Opportunities Index (ROI) tracks the access teens say they have to high-quality resources and relationships that help them nurture their strengths. The ROI highlights three elements that significantly help teens: Being valued and treated fairly; having access to and being involved in high-quality opportunities such as after-school programs; and having people who help nurture their sparks.

Only about one in eight 15-year-olds (12%) scored

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high on the ROI. Teens with high ROI scores are at least three times as likely as those with low scores to have a sense of hopeful purpose, express caring values, be actively engaged in school, and take on leadership roles.

### Relevance for Student Activities

Although this research is not specifically about student activity involvement, some connections are apparent. Participation in student activities can help students develop the strengths identified in this survey.

■ **Building relationships.** Among the types of sparks identified in the survey were many that are directly relevant to student activities: participating in sports, athletics, or other physical activities (28%), participating in or leading art, dance, drama, music, writing, or other creative activities (24%), serving others, participating in politics, or working on social issues (3%), and teaching, leading others, or public speaking (2%).

Although 66% of teens in the survey are able to identify at least one spark, less than half get support for their sparks beyond their families. Too many teens are left on their own to sort out how to cultivate their sparks, and too many people in teens' lives miss the opportunity to build a nurturing relationship with teens around the things that really matter to them. In the informal setting that student activities provides, activity advisors are among those who can build these types of nurturing relationships and help students cultivate their sparks.

■ **Empowered students.** When asked what's most important to them, after having strong friendships (86%), the next highest priority for the teens surveyed is "finding purpose and meaning in life" (80%), with "making a contribution to society" garnering 56%. Teens want to make a difference, and student activities offer an important way to make a real difference in the school and community. Activity advisors who can structure their programs so that students understand the purpose behind the activities they are planning and include real opportunities for students to help build a better school and community will empower students and help them find their own voices.

■ **Civic engagement.** Advisors are in a unique position to help students believe they can make things happen and solve problems. Only 18% of teens are actively engaged in social issues, indicat-

ing significant opportunities to help young people find their voice and contribute to their communities. Service-learning projects planned by activity organizations—especially when students understand the issues involved and that their efforts are making a difference—are an ideal way for students to contribute to making their communities better.

### Conclusion

Teens that score high on all three of these concepts—sparks, teen voice, and relationships and opportunities—are more likely to have a sense of purpose and hope for their individual futures, than those who don't. Yet only 7% of America's 15-year-olds experience high levels of all three of these critical strengths, and more than three in 10 teens don't experience high levels of any of these strengths that are so critical for their development and society's well-being. It's up to us as activity advisors to make a commitment to involve more students in our activity programs and help them develop their strengths. Student activities can be an important vehicle for helping students find and follow their sparks, find their voice, and develop relationships and opportunities to nurture their growth.

For more information about @15 and to view the full report, log on to [www.at15.com](http://www.at15.com).

*The Advocate* is published five times per year by the Alliance for Student Activities, a nonprofit corporation whose mission is to promote the value of cocurricular student activities and to provide professional development and support for advisors and future advisors.

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Submissions of student activities research for publication are welcome. Send inquiries to [lyn@alliance4studentactivities.org](mailto:lyn@alliance4studentactivities.org).

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