

YOUTH FRONTIERS: EVALUATION OVERVIEW

Youth Frontiers (YF) is a nonprofit organization that partners with schools to build positive communities where students can thrive socially, emotionally and academically.

Through programs that help young people realize the importance of living a life of character, Youth Frontiers is trying to change the way kids treat each other in every hallway, lunch line and classroom in every school across America so that today's young people can make tomorrow's world better.

WHY IT WORKS



Since 1987, Youth Frontiers has never wavered in our commitment to ensure that students and educators participate in the best possible retreats and the most effective programs every day. **Our ongoing evaluation efforts, both internally and with independent institutions, confidently report that:**

- **We deliver a high-quality retreat experience every day.** In the 2016-17 school year, **86.4 percent of schools** reported their retreats as "excellent." This accounts for Youth Frontiers' high rate of returning schools: **Nearly nine out of 10 schools** bring us back year after year because they believe strongly in the value and impact of our programs.
- **Our programs are supported by sound educational and learning theories**, such as character education, social-emotional learning and the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets®. We believe that supporting the social and emotional growth of students is essential not only to their character development but also to their academic outcomes. Schools recognize the ways that we complement and enhance their curricular programs, such as with the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Responsive Classroom models. Through a shared responsibility with schools, we can ensure that the lessons and skills that students learn on the day of their retreat will permeate throughout their school community. Our follow-up materials, developed with and for our schools, solidify students' learning and weave character lessons into the daily fabric of their classrooms.
- **We are changing kids' attitudes about how they treat themselves and others, and inspiring the next generation of leaders of character.** This report features details of key findings from our evaluation projects to date, including the final report from our collaboration with University of Nebraska Medical Center's Munroe-Meyer Institute.

Please let us know if you have any questions or would like additional information.

Joe Cavanaugh
Founder & CEO

Kenneth A. Dragseth, Ph.D.
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Former YF Board Member

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YF Demographics

YF works with diverse student populations in diverse school environments including public, charter, private and parochial schools in urban, suburban and rural settings.

- On an average retreat, 39 percent of students will be enrolled in a free and reduced lunch program.
- Our schools range from 0 percent to 99 percent free and reduced lunch participation.

**Based on 2016-17 information from the Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Nebraska Departments of Education.*

Complementary Programs and References

Many schools use complementary programs in conjunction with their Youth Frontiers retreat. Some of these programs include:

- Advisory Periods/Homeroom
- Boys Town Social Skills
- Building Assets – Reducing Risks (BARR)
- Character Counts!®
- Ethics Curriculum
- LINK Crew
- Lions Quest
- International Baccalaureate®
- Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
- PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports)
- Responsive Classroom
- Restitution
- Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets®
- Second Step

YF and Test Scores

Although there may not be a clear way to demonstrate a causal or correlative relationship between YF and test scores or improved academics, schools who use YF programs have, on average, a higher level of proficiency on statewide tests.

Based on the 2008-09 School Report Cards, submitted to the Minnesota Department of Education, schools who use YF programs had an average MCA-II Reading Proficiency of 74 percent compared to the state average of 71 percent. Furthermore, YF's partnering schools had an average MCA-II Math Proficiency of 70 percent compared to the state average of 60 percent.*

There is also a great amount of evidence connecting social-emotional learning programs to higher achievement and academic improvement (casel.org).

**Reading score range for schools who use YF programs: 15 – 96 percent proficiency.*

Math score range for schools who use YF programs: 28 – 93 percent proficiency.

Independent Evaluation of the Youth Frontiers Leadership Conference

What we learned:

The Youth Frontiers Leadership Conference is an effective program that inspires identified 11th-grade student leaders to set the tone for improving their school environment. Students identify personal strengths to utilize as a leader and create an action plan to improve their school.

Pre- to post- student surveys showed statistically significant improvements across multiple items with sizable effects. Furthermore, students reported taking concrete action steps toward improving their school in the area they identified. Clearly, participation in this conference empowers students to think of themselves as leaders and then to take on the responsibility of making their schools better.

Key Findings

100 percent of participants recommended the Leadership Conference.

- Overwhelmingly, students reported that the Leadership Conference exceeded their expectations.
- Students also reported that networking with other students from other high schools was helpful: hearing other students' stories inspired them to make changes at their own schools.

Five out of nine students' belief statements saw statistically significant positive change from before to after the Leadership Conference. Those positive effects were in the following categories:

- I feel responsible for standing up for what is right at my school.
- I feel empowered to stand up for what I know is right in my school.
- I feel like I am a leader in my school.
- I set goals that will make my school a better place.
- I can achieve anything I set my mind to.

We also surveyed 12th-grade students who participated on the YFLC as 11th graders. The following themes emerged from our survey:

- Students said that the conference taught them to be more tolerant and to speak up for others.
- Students said that the conference gave them confidence to take on leadership roles and get to know new people.

During one of the Leadership Conferences, the evaluators observed two female students approach a male student sitting by himself at lunch. They asked if they could join him for lunch. He said, "No, that's ok, I'm used to eating lunch alone." They said, "Today you're not." And they joined him. He smiled for the rest of lunch.

Munroe-Meyer Institute Background: The Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI) of the University of Nebraska Medical Center is a federally designated University Center of Excellence for Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service. MMI's Department of Education and Child Development is comprised of faculty and staff dedicated to enhancing services and programs for children and youth as well as their families.

Key Dates: 2014 - 2016

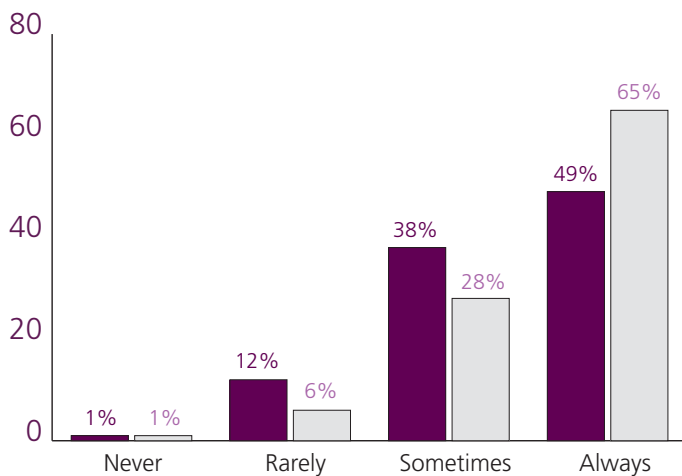
Project Evaluator: Lisa St. Clair, Ed.D. Partner/Senior Evaluator, Omaha Program Evaluation Services, Omaha, Nebraska; Jolene Johnson, Ed.D. Assistant Professor, Munroe-Meyer Institute, Omaha, Nebraska

YF Leadership Conference Twin Cities Evaluation Results

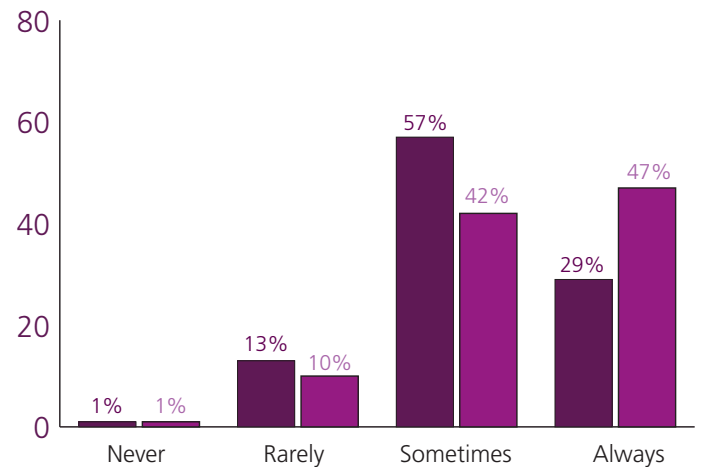
These are the results from the Youth Frontiers Leadership Conference in the Twin Cities on February 25, 2016. These students, who were identified as leaders and chosen by an educator to attend our conference, were asked to respond to the following statements using a four-point scale (never, rarely, sometimes, always).

Pre-Retreat Results **Post-Retreat Results**

“I feel like I am a leader in my school.”



“I feel responsible for the culture of my school, both the good and the bad.”



97 percent of students surveyed would recommend the YF Leadership Conference to other students.

“The Leadership Conference motivated our students to step up and be true leaders. Our students responded so well to the message of the day and it truly made a difference in their lives.”

– Educator,
John F. Kennedy High School

“This experience challenged me to think of the different ways I could improve our school environment and provide more opportunities for students with special needs.”

– 11th Grader,
St. Anthony Village High School

CAREI Evaluation Project

What we learned:

In this three-year intensive study of YF's core student programs, the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) studied three research questions:

1. Does participation in YF retreats help students attain social-emotional learning competencies?
2. Do youth feel more connected to peers and school staff after a retreat?
3. Is there a relationship between participation in YF retreats and students' prosocial, positive behaviors at school?

CAREI researchers found that the retreat approach is a **viable strategy** for reaching students and teaching social-emotional skills. Furthermore, CAREI also found that students, teachers and administrators value the programs. To enhance learning retention and skill application after a retreat, Youth Frontiers has implemented several recommendations from CAREI's 2009 and 2010 reports, including:

1. Implementing a menu of pre- and post-retreat activities for the classroom.
2. Making our activities and language more concrete and developmentally appropriate for each age group.

CAREI has hypothesized from the data that participation in our retreats helps students realistically assess their own attitudes and behaviors and those of their peers. Students report higher levels of disrespectful behaviors after the retreat because they have greater awareness of what it means to be respectful and to act with moral courage. Based on the data from the 2011 report, Youth Frontiers examined how our language and activities could better engage boys and nonwhite students. We have also tried to extend the impact after the retreat even further through more extensive follow-up materials that utilize technology.

Year One Literature Review Key Findings:

- Youth Frontiers has incorporated many **best practices** into its retreat format including using older students as role models, using a variety of formats that are relational and youth-centered and providing opportunities for personal reflection.
- Research indicates the power of emotional intensity and small-life events, known as **quantum change**. In other words, for some students, the retreat will transform their lives in a profound way.

Year Two Kindness Retreat Case Study Key Findings:

- **Students retain key retreat concepts.** More than eight of 10 students correctly identified the three types of bullying on the day of the retreat. Thirty days later, seven of 10 retained this learning.

Year Three Courage and Respect Retreat Study Key Findings:

- **Students perceive less bullying after the retreats.** Fewer students reported that bullying was a problem at their school after the Courage Retreat.
- **Students learn to resolve conflict respectfully.** After the Respect Retreat, more students reported that students at their school mostly resolve conflicts without fighting, insults or threats.

CAREI Background: CAREI is an internationally recognized leader in the field of educational research and evaluation. CAREI's mission is to improve the quality of education for all learners through neutral, rigorous research and evaluation of educational contexts and initiatives. Some of CAREI's research and evaluation projects in progress are being conducted for St. Paul Public Schools, Minnesota Department of Education, The Children's Theatre Company and the Wallace Foundation.

Key Dates: 2009 – 2011.

Project Evaluator: Dr. Kyla Wahlstrom, Director of CAREI, wrote the evaluation plan for YF. Dr. Tim Sheldon led the research project with support from Dr. Molly Gordon and Sue Rickers.

YF Client Review Evaluation Project

What we learned:

Schools recognize YF as an integral part of their school system. Administrators and teachers intentionally seek appropriate curricular opportunities within their school calendars to weave YF lessons into the fabric of the school. Schools value the shared partnership that exists between YF and their school community. It is this collective effort that sustains the impact of the lessons learned during a YF retreat throughout the school year. Therefore, many schools believe that **YF programs are more than just a one-day program.**

2016-17 Results

- **86 percent** of the schools interviewed rated YF's coordination and administration of retreat logistics as "excellent." This included YF's responsiveness to calls and/or emails, ease of implementing a retreat and YF's professionalism.
- **86 percent** of schools interviewed rated YF's retreat experience and the achievement of the retreat's short-term outcomes as "excellent." This included the retreat content, the activities and the skills and lessons learned by the students during the retreat.
- **94 percent** of the schools interviewed rated YF's retreat staff as "excellent." This included the retreat staff's professionalism, their gender diversity, the diversity of their backgrounds, their ability to form authentic relationships with students, their understanding of education and the quality of their presentations.

"Every year we seem to get the best facilitators... so that leads me to believe that YF only hires the best!"

– Cayla Rother,
Jordan Middle School

Key Findings/Measures of Impact:

- YF retreats provide a **common language** for teachers to reference within their curricula, school activities and citizenship expectations.
- YF retreats provide a foundational experience for students to think about how their individual decisions impact the greater community. Through the direct instruction on the retreat, students have an increased awareness of their choices and use this experience as a **catalyst to change their behavior.**
- YF delivers a **consistently high-quality program.** Retreat content, activities and student engagement receive high praise across the board.
- Schools consider YF staff to be **professional partners.** Schools value the professionalism, expertise and competence of the YF retreat staff. Their ability to connect with the students, model appropriate risk-taking and identify with the issues of adolescents today is highly regarded by school staff.

Scope of project: Led by an independent evaluator, YF conducted a series of structured interviews with key clients (schools) who had partnered with YF for two or more years. The goals of the project were to better ascertain or determine how schools are utilizing the YF retreats and resources, what sustained impact schools were able to observe or document and how YF could improve our programs.

Key Dates: September 2007 – December 2008.

Data Collection Strategies: Client interviews were conducted with the primary contact at a school – typically the principal, assistant principal, dean, classroom teacher, counselor or social worker. The lead evaluator conducted 25 percent of the total interviews independently and a team of YF personnel (who were trained by the independent evaluator) conducted the remaining interviews.

Project Evaluator: Bill Johnston, Independent Research Consultant

Brooklyn Center Schools Evaluation Project

What we learned:

Youth Frontiers was an integral part of the Brooklyn Center Schools' district-wide initiative to improve its school climate. Through this partnership, YF was able to show our ability and **success in working with a diverse population of students** and show some significant perception changes within the school community. **Discipline incidents dropped by one-fourth** after the first year that our programs were delivered. Although we are not able to correlate this data to our specific programs, we were a part of the network of support that facilitated this important shift. Part of our what we learned is to narrow our research aims in order to correlate our specific impact.

Key Findings/Measures of Impact:

- **Increased school connectedness**
One-third of ninth-graders on the Respect Retreat reported feeling more of a connection to classmates since the retreat.
Nearly half of fifth-graders on the Kindness Retreat believed their peers were including others more.
- **Commitment to positive decision-making**
Two-thirds of Wisdom Retreat participants believed that they would make better decisions during their last month of high school because of the retreat.

Brooklyn Center School District Background

The Brooklyn Center School District, located in a first-ring suburb of Minneapolis, serves a diverse community.

- Between 65 percent and 75 percent of students qualified for Free or Reduced Lunch (FRPL).
- Nearly 30 percent of the elementary and junior high students were considered Limited English Proficient (LEP) students.
- The student body is racially diverse, with 40 percent of students identifying as black, 28 percent as white, 16 percent as Asian/Pacific Islander, 14 percent as Hispanic and two percent as American Indian.

The Brooklyn Center School District has strong instructional programming and values social-emotional learning as an integral part of its full curricular offerings. The district's elementary school has been accredited as an International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Program school. **YF programs directly complement and enhance the IB philosophy of educating the whole child – nurturing the students' social-emotional development** (teaching values such as caring, cooperation and respect), while challenging their intellectual properties.

Scope of Project: A three-year partnership funded by the Charlson Foundation provided the delivery of all YF retreats to both students and educators in the Brooklyn Center School District. The goal of this evaluation project was to determine the district-wide impact of YF programs on school climate, student character and staff morale.

Key Dates: 2006 – 2009.

Project Evaluator: Edmund Sass, Ed.D., Professor of Education, College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Moderating for Good Evaluation Project

What we learned:

Youth Frontiers (YF) holds the position of having a solid reputation for building trust, professionalism and being a catalyst for change in school communities. The emotional benefits are immediate and are experienced by students as well as teachers and staff. For schools who have experienced the benefits of YF, the question of whether or not to continue a relationship with the organization is not one of “should” but one of “how” from a financial standpoint. The role of YF can be compared to a compass, pointing students in the right direction while also giving teachers and staff a common language to use when redirecting students after the retreat.

Key Takeaways (Counselor Beliefs):

- YF has a strong positive perception as a well-run professional program that speaks “kid” and can be trusted to deliver consistently high quality and unique experiences.
- The benefits of YF to counselors are mostly emotional. They report feeling: 1) relief that they are delivering key programming for their students 2) trust that the programming will be expertly delivered and 3) gratitude for a common language that will aid in continuing conversations about lessons learned beyond the retreat day.
- The YF experience met or exceeded counselors’ expectations of their first YF retreat.
- The role of outside programs is to “set the stage” for continued conversation afterward about issues like student behavior, personal development and learning.

Evaluation Objective:

Because school program funding continues to tighten, YF needed to better understand 1) what motivates schools (particularly counselors) to book retreats 2) what is their perceived takeaway and 3) how schools are evaluating the program effectiveness.

Objectives:

- Identify what the perceptions of YF are compared to other programs.
- What are the benefits of using YF programming?
- How are counselors “defending” their case for rebooking retreats annually to school administrators? How are they overcoming challenges to find funding for retreats?
- How can YF better support or facilitate efforts for rebooking retreats?
- What is the role of YF and the follow-up materials beyond the retreat experience?

Scope of Project: An independent focus group facilitator conducted a two-hour focus group with school counselors, some of whom use our programs and some who do not.

Key Dates: November-December 2013

Project Evaluator: Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA), Minnesota Chapter, December 12, 2013.

“[Youth Frontiers] sets the stage for our school expectation of how we want kids to treat each other.”

– Surveyed Educator

Retreat Programs Evaluation Project, 2002 – 2005

What we learned:

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills associated with the core areas of social and emotional competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills and Responsible Decision Making (www.casel.org). During a YF retreat, students are not only provided with instruction on how to build relationships and make more responsible decisions about how they treat themselves and their peers, but they also get an opportunity to practice these skills. The key findings of this evaluation project show that **YF retreat programs enhance students' social and emotional competencies.**

"[The Kindness Retreat] solidifies the big picture we are trying to instill in our school around empathy and responsibility."

– Ginny Clark, retired principal,
Greenwood Elementary

"[The Respect Retreat] builds class unity."

– Neil Schendel,
Willmar High School

Kindness Retreat Key Findings/Measures of Impact:

- **77 percent** of students reported that their classroom has been a kinder place since the retreat (60 days post-retreat).
- **More than half** of teachers reported that their students had stood up for each other more since the retreat and felt that, overall, their class had been kinder since the retreat (60 days post-retreat).

Courage Retreat Key Findings/Measures of Impact:

- **More than 70 percent** of students reported following through with their act of courage (60 days post-retreat).
- **More than half** of teachers felt there had been a "noticeable change in the way students treated each other since the retreat." (60 days post-retreat).

Respect Retreat Key Findings/Measures of Impact:

- **74 percent** of students reported that they had been more respectful of others since the retreat (60 days post-retreat).
- **95 percent** of teachers reported that the retreat experience was of a very high quality (seven days post-retreat).

Project Evaluator: Edmund Sass, Ed.D., Professor of Education
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

"YF gives young people an understanding of how they can live a good life by making choices that benefit their own lives, the lives of those around them, their communities and their world."

– Anne Larson, Moorhead High School
Retired Service Learning Coordinator

Annual School Client Survey

Annual School Client Survey: Each year, Youth Frontiers sends a customer satisfaction survey to educators whose students participated in retreats. The survey assesses the quality of YF’s customer service and retreat staff as well as the effectiveness of our programs from the educators’ perspectives. **99.3 percent of respondents recommend YF retreats.**

Percentage of Educators Who Rated the Following Categories of YF Retreats as “Excellent”

	Customer Service	Retreat Staff	Retreat Content
2012-13	91%	93%	87%
2013-14	89%	95%	88%
2014-15	85%	92%	82%
2015-16	85%	95%	85%
2016-17	86%	94%	86%

“The Courage Retreat helps our school by every year giving a deeply meaningful personal message to our students about their role in shaping the overall culture that we want in our building – that culture where every student feels connected, safe and respected.”

*– Pete Dymit, Principal
Minnetonka Middle School East, Minnetonka, Minn.*

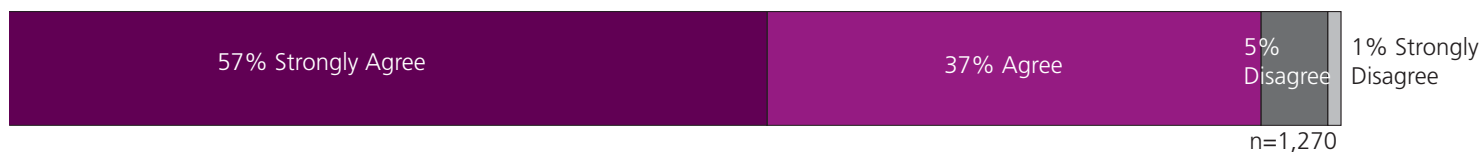
“As an administrator, I have seen the positive impact of a Youth Frontiers retreat. The retreat leaders were able to break down our students’ barriers through a variety of fun, highly energetic and engaging activities and take them on an emotional, soul-searching journey. Both their teachers and I have seen a significant improvement in their interpersonal skills and are confident that this has impacted their lives outside of school as well.”

*– Mark Peperkorn, Principal
Pilgrim Park Middle School, Elm Grove, Wisc.*

Annual Retreat Participant Survey Results

Annual Student Retreat Participant Survey: Youth Frontiers provides schools with 30-day post-retreat student surveys designed by the University of Minnesota for the CAREI Evaluation Project (see page 3). YF tabulates the results for each individual school and collectively for each retreat. Below is aggregate data for each retreat type that highlights attainment of key learnings, attitudinal shifts or behavioral change.

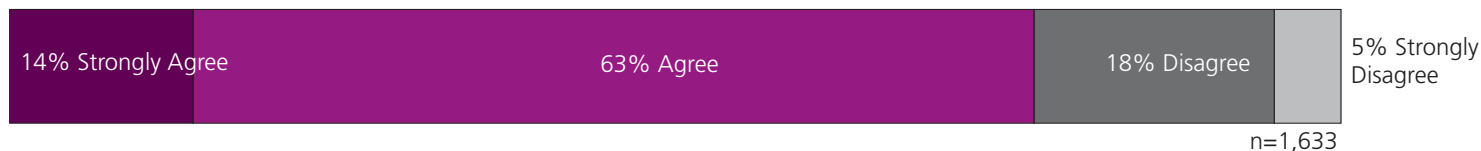
Since the **Kindness Retreat**, I feel more confident to help someone who is being picked on.



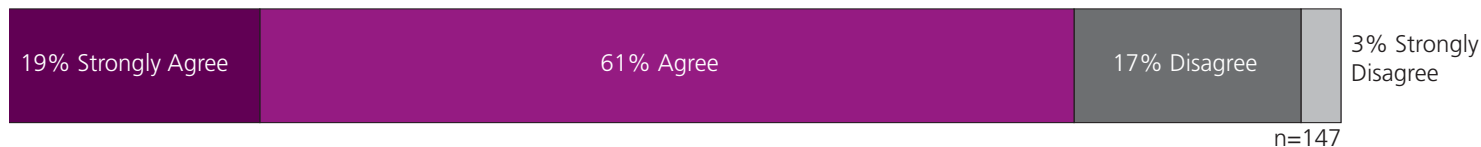
Since the **Courage Retreat**, I stand up to negative peer pressure.



Since the **Respect Retreat**, I have more respect for myself.



The **Wisdom Retreat** inspired me to finish school in a respectful manner.



The YF Logic Model

MISSION STATEMENT:

Youth Frontiers' mission is to partner with schools to build communities where students thrive socially, emotionally and academically.

