

**Focus Group Report**  
**High School Student Perspectives**

**October 22, 2002**

**The Horizon Project**

**Focus for this group**

Youth empowerment – high school student perspectives. What do our youth see as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for our community? What are their ideas for top priority improvements for Elkhart County?

**Composition of group**

This group included ten high school students, representing five high schools in Elkhart County. Three of the students represented ethnic minorities.

**Vision for the future**

- **Be one community** rather than lots of little community; get to know each other better.
- **Support for other schools:** support each other's teams going to state; cheer on the bands from other schools.
- **Tolerance:** overlook religious beliefs and relate to a wide range of people; accepting diversity – race and religion.
- **Be kid friendly:** be more family oriented; better community parks; after school care; meet kids from other schools; summer programs for little kids; Boys and Girls Club activities outside in the summer; summer day camps.
- **Rectify neighborhood deterioration:** not have so many bad apartment areas – not a good image; don't like some apartment complexes; get rid of the bad problems; improve some areas; sidewalks are cracked and ugly and there is trash in some neighborhoods; some areas have weeds and are not kept up; some old cars parked on lawns; Elkhart has a beautiful sculpture in the down town; it is an oasis in an ugly part of town.
- **Respect the right to choose:** people should have a choice in how their neighborhood looks.

**Perspectives on Elkhart County**

**Strengths**

- **Close knit community:** people know each other; if there is a tragedy, we come together to be there for each other.
- **A lot of events and festivals:** many people's interests are taken care of.

- **Lots of school spirit:** especially around athletics.
- **Something for everyone:** schools have speech and drama teams, academic stuff, and the smaller sports.
- **Some places for kids from different school to get to know each other:** The Post has music and is more of a youth church thing; the 112 club has different music on different floors; Extreme Times has Christian activities; coffee shops; Boys and Girls Clubs; the Refinery.
- **Many places feel safe:** not afraid to be in Goshen.

#### Weaknesses – education

- **Problems in education:** education is a big problem – 20 years behind schools out East; they push students harder when younger; we will compete against kids from other parts of the county; more money is going to schools that are doing well; this will hurt us; how can they improve without money?
- **Uneven quality in education:** Central was boring; Goshen teachers get more involved.
- **Inadequate education on sexuality:** this area is so conservative; sex education is a taboo topic; we teach abstinence only; we have high pregnancy rates – it is very high; some schools have day care centers for the children of students – some of the centers are pretty big; we need to prevent the problem.
- **Unequal support for activities:** at Goshen they don't treat all the sports equally; Cheerleading is not given sport status. It is a sport at Concord.

#### Weaknesses – cultural factors

- **Closed-minded people:** lots of people are closed-minded concerning new people and new ideas; they are closed-minded in religious beliefs; cliques and intolerance start in junior high; some cliques are religion based.
- **Race issues:** at Goshen High School race is too big of an issues; people are expected to hang out only with their own racial group.
- **Too much pressure for religious conformity:** Extreme Time is when youth pastors are brought in; you have a choice to go to it; then on Wednesday lunches youth pastors can come; opinion page of school newspaper is often dominated by religious issues; there is a lot of religion and lots of pressure; religion is like a club that you can join; there are prayer times at the flag pole.

#### Weaknesses – few activities or opportunities

- **Few job opportunities:** hard to find a job that pays more than minimum wage; not much advertising of jobs for youth; hard to get a job if you are under 18; lose jobs to college students when summer comes – hours cut back, more openings for college students.
- **Very few nighttime options:** have to hang out at Steak and Shake after 11:00 or Taco Bell or Meijer.
- **Hard to find things to do in the winter.**
- **Towns are too small and there isn't anything to do;** unless you want to pay for it; don't know what the night life is like – there isn't any; you have to go to Elkhart to a club; not a lot of diverse things to do; no place to convene; only two movie theaters.

- **Things are so spread out:** you have to travel to Goshen, Elkhart, or South Bend; not even a coffee shop until recently in the Concord area; so many more things to do in South Bend – the mall, more restaurant, and pool halls.

**[Note for “Opportunities” section: many of these opportunities are fairly specific and could be considered as strategies for improvement.]**

### **Opportunities – activities for youth**

- **Develop and publicize events for youth:** music festivals and concerts; line dances; art festivals; concerts in the area – use the fair grounds and not just during the fair; have diverse groups; don’t have to drive to Deer Creek; have concerts at Ox Bow Park.
- **Wider range of places to gather:** a dollar theater; more coffee shops, and bookstores.
- **More sports opportunities:** greater variety in little league sports; junior football league; indoor sporting center; 3 on 3 basketball.
- **More outdoor activities:** activities night at Ox Bow Park, community soccer games, bon-fires, flashlight tag, campouts, special nights at campgrounds; ice skating would be awesome; create outdoor rinks; good water park.
- **Publicize existing events:** the one hour concerts right by the Y on the river walk; get the word out to the schools.
- **Good locations:** between Goshen and Concord; The Old Bag Factory has a nice atmosphere – nice old look; Osco location in Concord Mall – make it an open area with good stores, coffee shop, and a dollar movie theater.
- **Countywide leadership academy** for high school students [suggested by an adult observer].

### **Opportunities – strengthen education**

- **Relationship education in schools:** relationship education on sharing and communication should start a lot younger; this strengthens the whole community; some kids see their parent fight every day; include sex education; give contraceptive information; 70% of 18 year olds are sexually active they need education; teachers need to pull their heads out of the sand; kids need to have access to contraceptives.
- **Bring together kids from different schools:** need activities for people from different schools to get to know each other; some get to know each other at work; some sports kids go to summer camps and get to know each other; sports teams could get together and work out in the summer; a school could have a guest speaker and invite kids from other schools; Shared articles for school newspapers from students in other towns; switch school newspapers.
- **Student exchanges would be good:** have more ties; more than just one student; student council exchange; student exchange – you take their classes for a day; “I do not know how other school operates.” Involve a random selection of students.
- **Have people with a shared skill level in the same classes:** some classes have too wide a range of skill levels.
- **Transfer options:** when a schools has a strong programs allow students to transfer in for that program; some schools could have a strong emphasis and be specialized.

There is also a danger with this opportunity: the schools that students flee could become even weaker.

- **Relationships among teachers:** teachers from different schools could get to know each other; good teachers could help other schools improve; get teachers together to learn from each other.
- **Specialized curriculum:** have lots of classes so you can specialize; it is good to have a lot of choices.
- **School dress practices:** wide range of attitudes toward school dress codes and uniforms; some awareness that dress can contribute to the feeling of not being good enough or the feeling of being left out of a group.

#### Opportunities – other

- **Diversity will always be around:** we will always have judgment with us; we have cliques that are based on people, money, who your parents are; help people get to know each other better.
- **Need better stores:** GAP, Banana Republic, Limited, Old Navy, Express, Abercrombie, and outlet mall like Michigan city.
- **Improve appearance of roadways:** make sure prime roads look good; the entryways currently do not look good.
- **Help communities and neighborhoods to work together.**

#### Threats – social factors

- **Coaches re-enforce competition between schools too much** – not to wear colors of other schools; too much animosity; coaches hate the other towns and teams.
- **We are such big rivals:** people in other towns are treated like being in another county.
- **We are so divided into classes:** like the upper class; people are too locked into their own economic group; too much social separation and isolation; Elkhart east side feels too much like a ghetto; Colorado is more accepting; Indy is more accepting.
- **People leave when they grow up:** looking for more tolerance and more job opportunities.
- **Small town familiarity:** don't want to be known by brother, sister, mother, or father.
- **Some areas are not safe:** roll your windows up in the down town areas; cars are being broken into; most high schools are supervised by police, but there is the wish that school parking lots could also be patrolled.

#### Threats – economic factors

- **Loss of jobs:** the RV industry goes down.
- **Some careers can't be practices here:** like corporate law; need to move to a larger city; our big city is South Bend; it is not that great of a big city; it is not a nice area to life in.
- **Rapid growth:** expanding too fast in Elkhart County – traffic gets too bad, too much construction.

Compiled 11/16/02