

# Youth Engagement is the Solution in the West River Valley

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**SUMMARY:** Thrives increased youth engagement at Leland and Gray Middle/High School in response to high rates of vaping on campus. Thrives staff employed youth voices in creating initiatives that students deemed appropriate and effective. Students met weekly throughout the 21-22 school year. The group expanded in size and became more engaged and invested as the school year progressed. The work culminated in a final project that inspired the group's work for launching sustainable campaigns and actions for the upcoming 22-23 school year.



**CHALLENGE:** According to the Windham Central Supervisory Union 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey 30-day past tobacco use, 36% of students said that they have used electronic Vapor products which is 10% higher than the State average. In addition, 29% of all Windham Central students reported they do not have one or more teachers that they can talk to if they have a problem. Meanwhile, teachers are reporting decreased social emotional skill levels, inability of students to focus, decreased engagement during extra curricular activities and low attendance. Other staff report that, due to increased isolation from the pandemic, socialization skills decreased and trust students had previously formed with caring adults such as the SAP was compromised. Consequently, the level of students who needed support increased, while willingness to accept support and resources decreased.



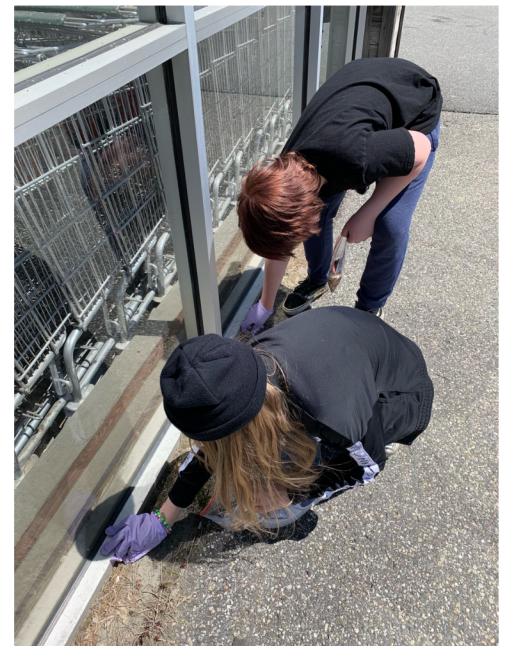
## SOLUTION :

Thrives began a new student group focused on nicotine prevention at the beginning of the 21-22 school year. This core group held an open house inviting the entire middle school to explore the Thrives office and ask questions about our work and about student engagement opportunities in our organization. This event was successful in recruiting new members. This newly formed group's campaigns included: education on tobacco media and marketing; statewide policy work through a letter-writing campaign to educate the health impacts of flavored nicotine products and the tobacco industry's targeting of youth and BIPOC communities. Students made an impact on school policy by providing smoke/vape free signage and a space for activities focused on emotional regulation at a Middle School Spring Fling event and interactive educational events at lunchtime for their peers. Additionally, a trip to the Vermont Statehouse in Montpelier to meet with legislators and other prevention groups from around the state expanded the students' understanding that this is a larger movement of which they are a part. This served to increase their sense of purpose and place in tobacco prevention.

The campaigns at the end of the school year brought an increased focus and determination to the group. One participating student stated "I feel like the community will see what we are really about. This gives us visibility. It tells people we aren't just about giving people resources to quit but that we care about helping our community and environment to be healthy." Students participated in connecting their school community to their towns through a Butt Litter Clean Up and Butler Installation project. Students then presented these projects to their peers in health and science classes and provided materials to complete the project themselves. In addition to the school based outreach, Thrives collaborated with an after school Scout Troop on nicotine prevention to expand reach. Students connected with retailers in their own community on nicotine prevention campaigns. One of these local retailers highlighted the group's work via social media. Students also presented to retailers where these projects were implemented. Retailers in our areas are now aware of the student prevention group, what they do and how they can be involved as a direct result of this student action.



"I feel like the community will see what we are really about. This gives us visibility. It tells people we aren't just about giving people resources to quit but that we care about helping our community and environment to be healthy."  
- Jacob Howe age 15



RESULTS:

Student participation grew from 5-15 members over the course of the 21-22 school year. Students shifted their focus from team building with one another to planning events and initiatives to respond to the issues they see in their school and community regarding vaping. The new connections with the after school scout troop expanded the community's understanding of this group's mission and impact. Thrives was able to hire a paid intern during the spring semester to help with student-based social media accounts to increase online youth engagement with peer-created messages. In every Thrives Newsletter, youth initiatives are highlighted increasing their sense of place, pride, and purpose.



Scout BSA troop 428 members and West River Provisions Store Owner Forrest Riley at one of the participating stores for the 2022 Sticker Shock Program

SUSTAINING: The students agreed to form a high school prevention group that collaborates with the middle school prevention group for the upcoming school year. Their focus will continue to be responding to high rates of vaping in school. Their action plan is as follows:

1. attend school board meetings,
2. have weekly tabling on each level of the school providing resources
3. join a statewide committee focused on policy
4. accept the school administration's invitation to join the newly formed vape task force and attend meetings to affect school policy on vaping.

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