



Staying on Message A Fictitious Public Radio Interview

The following provides examples of likely questions in a hypothetical interview with a Minnesota Public Radio reporter, and two kinds of responses the interview subject -- an Out of School Time Commissioner and child development expert -- might consider. In each case, the second response is preferable, as it is framed to reflect our latest research about most effective lines of communication about youth development programs.

Host: Recently the University of Minnesota convened a panel of leaders from business, education, youth development and other fields to look at what more Minnesota might do to insure that teenagers have positive opportunities for development. The result is a report calling for greater investment in youth development programs.

Joining me today is Joan Goodwork, who serves as CEO of the XENA Corp was a contributor to the report.

Joan, tell me about this panel and why you concluded it is necessary to create more programs for teenagers.

Weak Answer: Well, the Commission on Out Of School Time was established to look at how teenagers are spending their time after school and during summer and vacation periods. Minnesota has the nation's highest level of parents in the workforce. And we know that the period between when school is out and when working parents arrive home is the time when teens are the most likely to engage in negative behaviors. The Commission was charged with making recommendations for community based programs that would give teens an opportunity for positive experiences in the community as alternatives to "hanging out," TV and video games.

DON'T:

- *Use “teenager” which defaults to negative images of youth*
- *Suggest working parents are not available for kids*
- *Bring up negative behavior patterns*
- *Make teen choice of activity such as TV or hanging out the issue*

Strong Answer. I think everyone recognizes that young people are the future. They will soon be entering adulthood and taking their place beside us as co-workers, neighbors, colleagues, and it will be their sound decision-making and leadership skills that determine the future of our communities over the next few decades.

The Commission on Out-of-School Time was formed to make recommendations, in light of new knowledge we have about adolescent brain development, about how we can better prepare our young people for good outcomes, as citizens, parents and community members.

It’s helpful to think of adolescent development as two processes: changes on the inside, such as the continuing development of the young person’s brain architecture, and changes in how a young person is connected to other people, including a developing capacity for engagement with the community. There’s lots of new science that teaches us, for example, how parts of the brain devoted to consequences, judgment and decision-making are still developing through the mid-twenties. The actual physical structures of the brain, that help us foresee consequences and make good judgments, aren’t in place yet. What our children learn in the family and at school is applied and tested during late adolescence as they become more independent and start forming relationships within the broader community. The Commission found that we need to provide more consistent opportunities for young people to gain positive and structured community interactions. There are some excellent programs such as 4-H or Boys and Girls Clubs in some communities, but too often there are few or no programs available for a large number of our youth.

DO:

- *Talk about youth and young people NOT teens*
- *Introduce early in dialog the image of brain architecture as a model for understanding development issue.*
- *Honor the family role and add in the community interaction experience that brains require*
- *Acknowledge existing programs that are models and that they are not fully available.*

Host: Schools have always provided extra curricular activities; there are church groups in nearly every community. What is that you think is missing?

Weak answer: Basically we found that our adolescents are not getting enough interaction with the community to form the kind of relationships and experiences they need to become successful and achieving adults. We need more places and activities for kids after school so that they have alternatives to being home on their own or getting together with peers without much supervision. Parents are doing what they can, but the hectic schedules of working families means too many kids end up on their own and that's not healthy -- for them or our community. The youth programs we propose will give the kids a chance to be around adults, to be engaged in structured activities that will make better use of their time, and provide chances to learn about relating to the wide the range of people they will encounter when they begin their working careers.

DON'T:

- *Tie these programs to job or academic achievement*
- *Talk about places and activities that "occupy time"-- these are not warehousing or babysitting programs*
- *Portray parents as unavailable because of work*
- *Characterize these programs as primarily preparing kids for the workforce*

Strong Answer. Minnesota citizens and experts who have studied the problem believe what's missing is a community wide commitment to the developmental needs of young people. This requires providing high quality experiences that appeal to the different interests of young people – from sports to performing arts – so that parents can guide their adolescents toward attractive options. There are fewer and fewer of these opportunities every day, even as developmental scientists tell us we need more of them. The current administration eliminated the \$4 million the State had been allocating annually, that communities throughout Minnesota were using to obtain additional Federal matching money for local youth development programs. As a result, a follow-up sample of programs found 1 in 4 no longer in existence and 2/3 significantly reduced.

Schools have traditionally provided some of these opportunities, but we all know schools have faced serious budget cuts in many programs. In most cases the solution has been for schools to shift the charges onto the parents. We believe that everyone who gets benefits from youth development should pay their fair share of the costs.

There are three beneficiaries. Healthy communities, and the community institutions that represent them, reap the quality of life and economic benefits of solid decent young people. Parents and youth themselves benefit, as they are offered experiences and opportunities for growth which no family could provide

on its own. And government benefits too. Agencies and services benefit from better citizens committed to solving problems before they happen in their communities. If we look at these three groups as the three-legged stool that has a stake in youth development, the actual costs become pretty manageable – you could fund a fine youth development effort for our state with about 33 cents from each of the three sectors per child per month. If we would all do our share, Minnesota would be a healthier state for families, communities and citizens.

DO:

- *Credential the Commission as both credible and comprised of ordinary citizens*
- *Stress that each adolescent has their own needs in development*
- *Show how budget and program cuts have affected opportunities for many young people*
- *Portray community programs as helping parents provide positive choices for their adolescents, but also emphasize broader shared responsibility and benefits*

Host: Okay, so let's say that we accept the idea that teenagers aren't yet adults, and that they need programs to help them learn things like decision making, teamwork, responsibility, etc. This has always been the job of parents until now. What's changed?

Weak Answer: Well, as I said before, more parents are working now than before. Many more adolescents find themselves on their own after school, or all day during school vacations. At the same time the amount of media, the internet, etc. are all giving kids ways of spending their time that is unstructured and often provides poor values and role models. Parents are hard pressed to offset the flood of negative influences their children have during out of school times. These programs will provide alternatives to the negative activities that many youth are engaging in.

DON'T:

- *Suggest parents can't handle the situation or are to blame*
- *Suggest kids are making bad decisions on how they spend time*
- *Say that being out of school is the problem*
- *Portray youth development as an alternative to negative behaviors*

Strong Answer. Parents have always relied on the community to provide role models and mentors to adolescents, as they do now. What's changed is our knowledge of what it takes to do a really good job of preparing young people to be productive members of society.

As kids get older they need the support of adults outside the school and immediate family. They are on a journey toward becoming full members of their communities. The entire community benefits when children grow up to become solid, well-rounded adults. We want to make sure that every child, in every community, has opportunities to test their wings and interact with adults in a structured setting, with the support of adults who understand the dynamics of youth development.

DO:

- *Acknowledge the role of parents but don't make it exclusive*
- *Show that new brain research points to opportunity for positive programs and good outcomes*
- *Characterize these programs as guides in the "journey" to adulthood*
- *Say each family and child needs these opportunities*

Host: In the past few years I've interviewed proponents of early childhood education who are saying much the same thing: that the developing brain of young kids requires more than they are getting from the parents. Now you are proposing the same thing on the other end, that teenagers need more. Meanwhile, as you have pointed out, our schools have undergone budget cuts and have reduced many activities to save money. How do you propose we pay for all these programs that child advocates want?

Weak Answer: What we are proposing is like early childhood programs in that it is based in new research findings about brain development. The issue isn't how are we going to pay, the issue is how can we afford not to take advantage of the information we have to build far more effective programs that will lead to better citizens, workers, and community leaders. The amount of money required to accomplish our recommendation is pretty small – only about \$12 million dollars. This is a small price to pay when you consider the benefits each child stands to gain.

DON'T:

- *Dodge the subject – the question how to pay for it must be addressed*
- *Use a figure like \$12 million and expect it not to sound like a lot of money*
- *Characterize the benefits as going solely or primarily to the kids in these programs*

Strong Answer. Putting more resources into youth development doesn't mean a huge cash expenditure. A lot of progress can be made by transforming existing programs to make them stronger, stabilizing their financial situation so they can offer consistent opportunities, and expanding their reach so that some communities, like

rural areas, are not left high and dry. Most adults in the community are qualified in some way to help programs as volunteers, event organizers, as mentors for youth -- that's about commitment, not dollars.

But, it will cost some money too. We need to make sure that professionally trained people are available to communities to help structure and operate quality youth development programs. Accomplishing this wouldn't take a great deal of money, however -- only about \$3 per Minnesotan. That's modest when you consider that virtually every Minnesotan in every corner of the state stands to benefit from the better preparation of the next generation of young adults to contribute to our economy and participate in community life. How we raise the money will probably be a combination of private and public funding.

DO:

- *Talk about the human resources and efficiencies that exist*
- *Use social math, break down \$12 million into "about \$3 per Minnesotan."*
- *Show the benefits to "all Minnesotans" not just the children*
- *Suggest public and private sources for the money – this is not a government program*

Host: Well, It sounds like a worthwhile program, I wish you luck with it. If our listeners have questions who should they contact?

Answer: We have a website that has a lot more information and contact numbers. People can visit www.OST.org to find out more. I also urge our listeners to contact some of the programs that are already doing great work such as the 4-H, YM and YWCA's, Boys and Girls clubs etc. they will be glad to show you the positive activities young people are engaged in and will have information on how more adults can get involved in youth development in their community. We also urge people to talk with local education and youth experts to learn how the recent cuts have affected communities across Minnesota. We think most people will be surprised to learn how much ground has been lost so quickly.

DO:

- *Have an easy contact resource to give*
- *Remind listeners of existing program model*
- *Keep their learning going*

Host: Thank you. My guest today has been Joan Goodwork, a member of the Out of School Time Commission, and an advocate for youth development programs in Minnesota. Now the news...