

Understanding GPRA Data Outcomes with Youth

North Hartford Ascend



NORTH HARTFORD ASCEND

[North Hartford Ascend \(Ascend\)](#) is a prenatal-to-career initiative to ensure children living in the North Hartford Promise Zone – which includes the Clay Arsenal, Northeast, and Upper Albany neighborhoods - have the support they need to reach their full potential. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhood Grant Program, Connecticut Children's is facilitating a cross-sector team of early childhood experts, community leaders, community-based organizations, and residents to identify community priorities and enhance the academic, health, and quality of life outcomes of North Hartford Promise Zone residents.

CHILDHOOD PROSPERITY LAB

[Childhood Prosperity Lab](#) (the Lab) advances social innovations that support the optimal health, development, and well-being of children, families, and communities where they live, learn, work, play and pray. Collaboration is key to our work. We partner with practitioners, service providers, families and changemakers across Connecticut and beyond to improve child health outcomes. Our multidisciplinary team at Connecticut Children's brings expertise in family sciences, child development, public health and more to drive impactful change. The Lab has three core components that are unique to our approach:

- Co-designing solutions in partnership with children, families and communities using human-centered design approaches and methodologies;
- Strengthening family and community protective factors; and
- Advancing systems change to help children and families thrive in all areas of life.

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Author: Annika Anderson

Contributors: Madhura Suryawanshi, Wes Younts, Franchesca Amor Aguilar, Madelyn Figueroa-Beniquez & Jacquelyn Rose



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PROJECT OVERVIEW & SCOPE OF PARTNERSHIP

University of Hartford's [Center for Social Research \(CSR\)](#) is located within the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice and is known for its interdisciplinary research expertise. CSR and the Hartford Data Collaborative (HDC) co-lead data collection and evaluation for Ascend. HDC, an initiative within [CTData Collaborative](#), works with nonprofits across the city to collect, link, and analyze data to improve programs and services for all Hartford residents.

In May of 2025, CSR submitted an inquiry to Childhood Prosperity Lab to explore how Human-Centered Design (HCD) approaches and methodologies might be applied to elicit insights and perspectives from both residents in the community and service providers. The partnership has since evolved to incorporate the voices and lived experiences of youth and families into the work.

Promise Neighborhood Grantees are required to report on the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRAs), which refers to the process of developing and using performance measures to evaluate the effectiveness of grant programs. The GPRAs require agencies like Connecticut Children's to set goals, measure results, and report progress - ensuring accountability and transparency in federal programs. As part of North Hartford Ascend, CSR measures ten GPRA's. CSR and North Hartford Ascend collectively value sharing data with residents and providers in the community to 1) understand and elevate community voice and priorities; 2) strengthen the relationship and trust between providers and residents; 3) collaboratively understand and make meaning of the data and 4) in partnership, determine how to put the data into action.

Through co-design, CSR is working towards packaging publicly available data stories that will be accessible, understandable, and representative of what is currently known about the outcomes related to Ascend. In April, CSR presented a sample "GPRA Data Story" to their colleagues in the Data and Evaluation Work Group to elicit feedback on the content and presentation of the data. In addition to eliciting feedback from their peers, CSR engaged Ascend's Resident & Community Advisory Group (RCAG) and service providers at Ascend's June Service Provider Meeting. The following goals guided these co-design sessions:

1. Articulate the value
 - Why does the data matter?
 - What does the data mean?
 - Now what?
2. Assess the strengths, challenges, and opportunities for the understandability of the data
3. Generate the space for inquisitiveness and curiosity

While the data story presented in the co-design sessions focused on the *Student Mobility GPRA*, the feedback and recommendations provided will be applied to *all* the GPRA data stories. For these reasons, the structure, language, visuals, and framing of the sample data story were the selected focus areas of discussion and reflection in co-design sessions. A key recommendation that stemmed from RCAG and the service providers was to engage youth and caregivers in the conversation about the GPRA data. Being that the outcome data is about the youth themselves, CSR's goals for utilizing HCD in this session included:

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1. Exploring potential root causes of the data from a youth perspective; and
2. Identifying which programs, services, and resources youth and parents might prioritize to improve outcomes.

The three GPRA's that were prioritized for the youth design session include *Students Are Safe*, *Students Are Healthy*, and *Students Have Access to Technology*. These GPRA outcomes were defined to the youth during the session as:

- **Students Are Safe:** Student safety is when a student feels protected from things like violence, theft, and bullying at school, as well as while traveling to and from school.
- **Students Are Healthy:** A student's nutrition, fitness, oral health, emotional wellness, and sleep may all contribute to a healthy lifestyle and overall well-being.
- **Students Have Access to Technology:** Having access to 21st-century learning technology means that students have access to a computer, the internet, and other digital tools (e.g., software, apps). Ideally, it includes access both in school and at home or in the community (e.g., public library, community centers).

OUR APPROACH: METHODOLOGIES & FACILITATION

Childhood Prosperity Lab (the Lab) team members are Human-Centered Design (HCD) practitioners. The Lab defines HCD as a methodological framework for centering the needs, goals, and perspectives of children, families, communities and other key stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social innovations. Team members from Childhood Prosperity Lab are certified HCD Practitioners, specializing in the thirty-six methods that comprise the LUMA Framework.

Methodologies & Facilitation

The Lab team proposed *Problem Tree Analysis* as the core HCD methodology to guide the conversation based on CSR's goal to explore root causes of the outcomes and the opportunity to use a "tree" as a visual, interactive metaphor for the adolescent and youth audiences. *Problem Tree Analysis* is defined as "a technique for mapping causes and effects.

Using the tree as a metaphor, you separate the causes (roots) from the effects (branches) of a central issue (trunk)", according to the LUMA Institute (LUMA Institute, 2025). The Lab created three "trees", one to represent each GPRA, and used the following symbols to represent a form of *Stakeholder Mapping*: roots, sun, apples, and leaves. Before changemakers devise solutions, stakeholder mapping can help to "frame the problem" by asking questions like "Who is involved? What do they care about? How much influence do they have?", according to the LUMA Institute.



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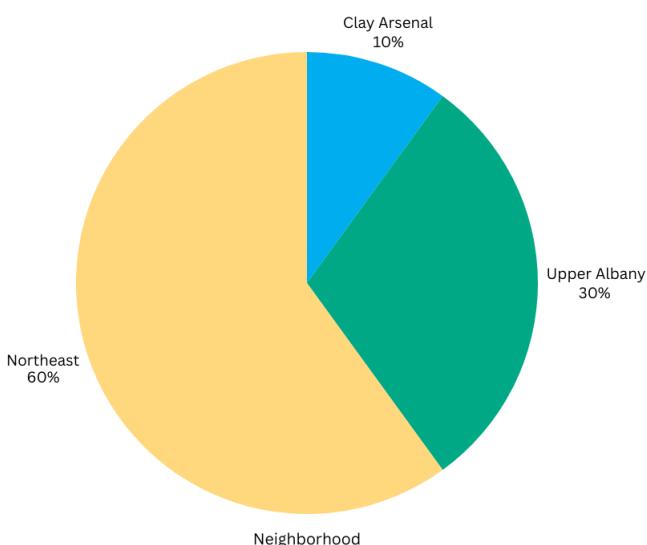
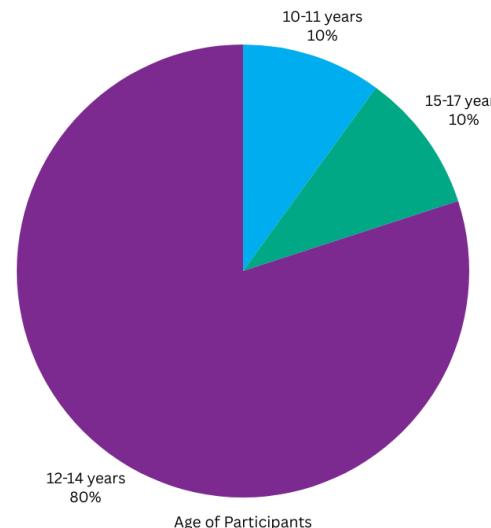
Participants were given a handful of brown pipe cleaners with a blank tag to represent the roots (root causes); construction paper cutouts of leaves (programs that have a perceived negative impact on the indicators); cutouts of a sun (programs/services that have a positive impact on the GPRA); and cutouts of green and red apples (programs/services that the students didn't know of and/or were curious about). The group collectively explored one GPRA at a time. A team member from CSR started off by sharing more about the GPRA, offering a definition, why it's important, and data collected on the indicator. Each participant had a worksheet that captured such information as a reference.

After a brief orientation to the outcomes, the participants were then asked to identify potential roots, leaves, suns, and apples (as defined earlier) for the indicator. After each prompt, participants were invited to join facilitators at the front of the room and place their thoughts on the "tree". Facilitators then invited an open conversation about what the students had written. Using the *Round Robin* methodology to ensure everyone's voice was heard, students shared their reflections and feedback. This sequence of activities and discussion was repeated for all three GPRA's.

Our Approach to Recruitment

The Lab created a flyer (Appendix A) to spread the word about the opportunity. In response to feedback from a former session, the flyer more specifically directs viewers' attention to the \$50 gift card incentive for participation. The Lab partnered with Parker Memorial Community Center to host the session in the North End of Hartford and catered a hot meal from a local small business. Dishes were selected based on the allergies and preferences shared by the youth in the registration form. To elevate the opportunity, the Lab leaned into its network of service providers, posted the flyer on social media, and dropped off physical copies at Parker Memorial and the Hartford Public Library Albany Branch.

Of the participants that attended the session, 80% were between the ages of 12-14, 10% were between the ages of 15-17, and 10% were between the ages of 10-11. The youngest participating adolescent was ten years old, the youngest resident of the community that the Lab has engaged in Ascend to date. At



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registration, the Lab collects information on which neighborhood the participants are from and which schools they attend to inform future outreach and engagement strategies. Of the participants who attended the session, 60% reside in the Northeast neighborhood, 30% reside in the Upper Albany neighborhood, and 10% reside in the Clay Arsenal neighborhood. While the participants reside in the North Hartford Promise Zone, none of them were actively enrolled in the five target schools of Ascend (elementary schools Wish and S.A.N.D.; middle schools Martin Luther King Jr. and Milner; and Weaver High School). According to their registration, the students attend Betances STEM Magnet School, Annie Fisher STEM Magnet School, CREC Academy of International Studies, and Achievement First.

Our Approach to Centering Adolescent & Youth Development

Engaging youth requires a thoughtful approach. Developmentally, we know that adolescents and youth enjoy playful activities and socializing with peers. These considerations were at the center of the design and facilitation of the session. The utilization of pipe cleaners, apple cutouts, and other generative materials cued the participants that the session was hands-on. After reflecting on each prompt, we invited the youth to come to the front of the room to stick their item on the tree. At one point during the session, a healthy and humorous competition emerged to see who could stick their “sun” the highest above the tree. Facilitators not only allowed but also *encouraged* the participants to have fun and move around, especially because the topics of discussion were about their health and safety. To support transitions from one discussion to another, the facilitators would playfully instruct youth to grab a “root” (pipe cleaner) and twirl it around their heads three times. This strategy lets them know that we can have fun, but we are going to move on to the next topic.

KEY LEARNINGS & FINDINGS

Early in the session, the facilitators realized that the youth were more interested in expressing root causes versus rating the programs and services connected to Ascend. Additionally, youth were less familiar with the array of programs and services involved in the initiative. The facilitators followed their lead and pivoted to focus more on their everyday experiences to make meaning of how Ascend can be responsive and interpret data outcomes. The following paragraphs capture key themes from participant feedback as they relate to each GPRA.

Students Are Safe

- One student wrote, “*make kids passionate about life*” is a solution to student safety.
- Students agreed that a root cause of not feeling safe at school is insufficient staff and resources to support them. One student shared that the social workers “listen to respond, they don’t listen to *listen*.”
- Students shared that they cannot understand when a school shooting drill is real or whether it is just a drill. Students shared that some teachers and staff “normalize” this experience, but students expressed needing compassionate adults who can hold space to hear their fears. Due to this, students think that there are opportunities for Hartford Public Schools (HPS) to strengthen student safety outcomes.

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- The ten-year-old student shared that when they go to the bathroom at school, peers will smoke, and this can feel unsafe as an environment.
- A fourteen-year-old participant shared that they are afraid of gun violence in their school.
- The students attribute some of their peers' behaviors to the school safety climate. They shared that the misbehavior of a few can have ripple effects.
- Students want to learn more about the Artist Collective as a program/service.
- Students identified The Village and the police as partners who have a positive impact on student safety. Two students identified the Department of Children and Families (DCF) as a program that can strengthen their efforts and approaches to supporting student safety.

Students Are Healthy

- Students shared that their peers at school talk about self-harm, and that *mental health* should be a priority for programs, services, and resources connected to Ascend.
- One student wrote that "not having anyone to talk to when you are sad" impacts their mental health, a sentiment that the rest of the group agreed with.
- When the group discussed nutrition and access to healthy foods, one student shared that their lunch is so late in the day at school (1:00 p.m.) that they could not focus in class.
- Students agreed that the school lunch options do not taste good, which deters them from wanting to eat the meal. That said, one student did document that "we get served good and healthy food every day" regarding HPS.
- One student shared that their peers will skip lunch if they fear that they will be bullied for what they brought to eat.
- One student fears the spread of diseases and acquiring cancer.
- Students want to see more diverse physical education activities at school or after-school programs. They shared that there are too many "tests" and not enough opportunities to play freely.
- Students shared that after-school programs are positive for their health. One student wrote "e-sports" as a form of play that supports their mental and social health.
- Students shared that they feel "over monitored" by the teachers and staff at school. A few examples that they highlighted include:
 - Students shared that they frequently get cold from the air conditioning during the day, but they are not allowed to wear hoodies. According to the students, the temperature distracts them from learning.



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- Students shared that when they need to go to the nurse, they are not allowed to walk to the office themselves. The nurse will come to the classroom to walk them to the office, which makes students uncomfortable because they shared that it violates their privacy.
- Students shared that when they need to use the bathroom, their teachers and the staff will physically time them, citing that they have less than five minutes to use the restroom and that it is not enough.
- Students agreed that in-school suspension negatively impacts their mental health.
- Students identified after-school programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) as programs/services that positively support their health.

Students Have Access to 21st Century Learning Technology

- Students shared that in- and out-of-school suspensions are a barrier to learning.
- Students agreed that online bullying hurts student mental health and their overall use of technology.
- Students view artificial intelligence (AI) as a resource that positively impacts their access to and use of learning technology.
- Students remarked that laptops at their school frequently break, so a solution is for every student to have their own personal computer to care for.
- Students shared that at school, their phones are collected by teachers and they go into pouches. The participants see this as a barrier to communicating with their parents throughout the day.
- One student shared that the Wi-Fi is slow at school and that when they can't complete their assignment, their teachers get angry at them when it isn't their fault.
- One student shared that their peers will bring an old phone to put into the teacher's pouch so that they can keep their actual phone on them.
- Students identified the Full-Service Community School and Tech class as positive resources for supporting access to learning technology. One student identified HPS as a positive service for these outcomes, while two students articulated an opportunity for HPS to better support these outcomes.

OUR IMPACT

After the session, the Lab sent a quality and satisfaction survey to participants. Five participants formally completed the post-session feedback survey. Of the feedback collected:

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- 100% agree or strongly agree that there were ample opportunities for their voice to be heard.
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt a sense of community.
- 100% expressed an interest in staying connected with Childhood Prosperity Lab for future co-design opportunities.

Both respondents opted to share qualitative, open-ended feedback:

- *"Honestly, the food wasn't the best, but the faculty was great. I loved how much everyone felt heard and the session definitely taught me a lot!"*
- *"The food was ok and the experience was great. Our voices were heard and the energy everyone put into the discussion is why those two hours were so fun."*
- *"I thought the chemistry between the facilitators was awesome; they meshed well together."*
- *"They were nice, they had multiple food options for vegans. They had great energy."*

"I thought the chemistry between the facilitators was awesome they meshed well together."

NEXT STEPS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are informed by the session with the youth. The recommendations are intended to be considered as concrete next steps for North Hartford Ascend as the initiative evolves:

- **Elevate key themes and feedback from youth to the Family Navigation & Partner Engagement Work Groups to collaboratively explore solutions:** In addition to presenting to two thematic work groups connected to North Hartford Ascend, a specific call to action should be integrated into the conversations. For example, based on participant feedback, the Partner Engagement Work Group might be tasked with inventorying which programs and services are connected to Ascend and/or not connected to Ascend that are best positioned to respond to the urgent mental health support youth articulated. The work group might consider exploring a conversation with [Connecticut Children's Youth Suicide Prevention Center](#), an initiative that launched in 2025. Their efforts focus on early identification, education, advocacy, and the implementation of evidence-based programs and screening tools.

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- **Plan, implement, and evaluate a place-based Community of Practice (CoP) on the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework with social workers and teachers in Hartford Public Schools:** Childhood Prosperity Lab, a partner of Ascend, has facilitated three CoPs with Ascend Service Providers since 2024. To address feedback from youth, it is recommended that the Childhood Prosperity Lab host a CoP for HPS staff so that we build the capacity of staff to strengthen the key protective factors: resilience, social connections, concrete support in times of need, knowledge of parenting and child development, and social-emotional competence of children. The curriculum of the CoP can be adapted for these specific audiences and can highlight real examples that were uplifted by youth in the session. The Lab can work closely with HPS staff to support practice change – meaning that they will leverage the Plan, Do, Study, Act cycles to drive small yet significant changes in how they can support youth mental health and well-being in schools.



- **Increase the visibility and accessibility of after-school programs in the Northeast, Clay Arsenal, and Upper Albany neighborhoods:** Youth agreed that after-school programs positively support their health, and that a solution to student safety might be to “*make kids passionate about life*”. Participation in after-school programs might dissuade youth from partaking in risky behavior; strengthen the protective factor of social connection; and nurture hobbies, passions, and interests that motivate youth.
- **Engage youth in another co-design session to further understand how social media and technology impact their health, development, and well-being in school and in life:** Throughout the session, it was evident that social media, artificial intelligence (AI), and access to reliable Wi-Fi impact student mental health and their ability to learn in school. One participant wrote “online bullies” as a root cause of student safety and health (pictured). It would be helpful to hear from a youth perspective which programs, services, and resources are supporting this social driver of health in the community, as it is currently underrepresented in community child health initiatives.

STAY CONNECTED

- **Email:** childhoodprosperitylab@connecticutchildrens.org
- **Facebook:** Connecticut Children’s Community Child Health
- **LinkedIn:** Connecticut Children’s Office for Community Child Health
- **[Advancing Kids](#) Blog**

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Appendix A

The QR code for registration has been removed for the purposes of this report.



Join us!

We are looking for youth voices to shape our work

Participants will engage in a series of interactive and structured activities to help service providers connected to North Hartford Ascend understand outcomes of data related to the initiative.

SCAN ME

\$50 gift cards will be provided for your time and to cover transportation costs!

Monday, August 25th, 5:30-7:30 PM
Parker Memorial Community Center

- Participants must be a resident of North Hartford.
- Preference for youth participants ages 14-18.
- A meal will be provided.

[Click HERE to register or scan the QR code!](#)

Note: Youth ages 18 and under will need to provide written parental consent to participate.

