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**MessageBRIEF**  
**Youth Community Connections**  
Minnesota's Statewide Afterschool Alliance

## The Amazing Journey of Adolescence

What's really going on?

We now have scientific research on adolescent brain development to help us better understand youth development. We've learned that young people complete their physical development early in the second decade of life. Yet, changes continue to occur in the brain that shape their ability to reason, solve problems, and understand the consequences of their behavior until late adolescence and early adulthood. Important new connections and pathways are being formed throughout the second decade of life that will ultimately affect their social, emotional, and intellectual well-being.

While all of these changes are going on in their brains, young people need to have the right kinds of experiences so they develop in a positive direction. We have the chance to steer youth toward productive, successful adulthood—and we know how to do it.

### COMMUNITY LEARNING SUPPORTS POSITIVE BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

The best kinds of experiences to build these new brain connections are *community-based*, where youth interact with a variety of people and safely begin to explore the world.

Community-based programs give young people the chance to experience problem solving and decision making in safe environments under the guidance of caring, knowledgeable adults.

These are exactly the kinds of experiences that a developing adolescent brain needs to learn good judgment and build a healthy social identity.

Annually, each youth in Minnesota has about 2,000 hours of discretionary, non-school time, without structure or supervision - roughly equivalent to a

full-time job. We should be helping them use this time wisely.

### THE POSITIVE EFFECTS LAST A LIFETIME

Over and over again, participation in afterschool and community-based programs during the nonschool hours has been linked to better school attendance, grades, test scores, work habits, and interpersonal skills.

We've all witnessed first-hand the effects that youth development programs can have. Whether it's young people singing in a civic chorus or planting community gardens or helping younger children learn literacy skills—these programs build self-esteem and prove what wonderful things young people can achieve.

What we don't witness is how these experiences forge new brain pathways. Eventually, thoughts like "I can work with others" "I can solve this problem" become the natural response to all kinds of situations. Young program participants mature into solid, well-rounded adults who give back, take part, and respect others.

Science has helped us better understand adolescent brain development, and gives us a much better appreciation of how youth programs shape that development in positive ways. With what we know about the kinds of experiences youth need for positive brain development, there's no excuse for not making these activities available to every young person in Minnesota.

***Let's support young people by giving them the right kinds of learning experiences.***