
Governor's Summit on Community on Youth
Governor Tommy G. Thompson
Madison, Wisconsin
May 24, 1999

Good morning. Thank you to everyone for coming today. I know many of you altered your plans and traveled great distances at your own expense to be here today, and your efforts are truly appreciated.

I can't think of a better reason for us to come together. We meet today in the name of our youth.

Let me start this morning with an important premise.

We have great kids in Wisconsin. Our young people are the pride of our state, and each and every one of us. They bring great joy to our families, great honor to our state, and great potential to our future.

So I don't want people looking down upon our young people, even with the recent school tragedies.

Instead, we must look to lift our young people up – helping them rise to meet their dreams and aspirations to lead positive and productive lives.

And the reason we gather today is that some of our young people need a little bit more help succeeding than others. In every community, there are young people who feel disenfranchised and disconnected – who may be wandering down the wrong path.

They may not have a good home life. They may have unique troubles. They may be frustrated by events in their lives and pessimistic about what the future holds for them.

When we come across such young people, we must all make sure they have an adult they can turn to for help, guidance and love.

This is where we come in. And I mean all of us. Not just those in this room, but each and every person in Wisconsin.

We must be those people our youth can turn to.

We need to come together as individuals and communities to reach our youth before they become troubled, then erupt in violence or turn to crime.

This is a complex task, one that requires a united effort.

Source: Marquette University Libraries; Tommy G. Thompson Collection; Series 2: Gubernatorial Speeches

For we all have a responsibility to our help our youth thrive, from young people themselves to parents and adults.

Thus, we have assembled today a roundtable that represents what needs to happen in communities across the state: all segments of our society working together to help young people. Our roundtable includes parents, students, educators, law enforcement, the faith community, the business community, the medical community, social service agencies, government agencies and the media.

One person can indeed make a difference in the life of a child, which is why we need more youth mentors and volunteers. But when we all work together as a community, we can make an even greater difference for all our children.

Now I know this all sounds nice and it's plain, Elroy common sense, but somehow, as a society, we still miss young people who need help, even when they're our own children.

So today's summit is a call to action. It's about how we move beyond good intentions and provide meaningful guidance for our young people.

We must start by making the time to get involved – for no amount of money can replace the human touch that our troubled youth long for so desperately.

In today's busy world of 12-hour workdays, I know the biggest challenge for all of us is time. There doesn't seem to be enough of it and I certainly know how tough it is to balance the demands of job and family. But we must all do a better job of making time for our young people.

Parents, we need to wake up to our children's lives – make sure we know what's going on.

We need to make the time to talk to our children, stay active in their lives, and let them know they can turn to us when there are problems.

The world our children live in today is much different than ours even if their problems and struggles may be similar to those we experienced.

Our children's exposure to a barrage of new influences in movies, music, video games and the internet makes the line between right and wrong too blurry sometimes. Violence seems commonplace to them. Thus, they see violence as an all-too-easy alternative to solving their problems.

We need to help them sort through these influences.

The rest of society must wake up and help our youth face as well. When you see a young person struggling, step in – take that person by the hand – and show them the way.

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Our schools, churches, law enforcement and social agencies can tremendously influence our children and steer them in a positive direction. Big brothers and big sisters and the boys and girls clubs are just two great examples.

Our students need to get more involved with helping their peers through tough times, too.

When you see someone struggling, depressed or heading down a dangerous path, you need to be courageous enough to step forward and let someone know. The most important thing is to get your friend or your classmate help. Believe me, they will appreciate your efforts in the long run.

And our friends in the media must continue using their unique ability to rally a community to keep us focused on our youth.

Just as importantly, we need the media to do more stories on the good our youth are doing – and put those stories on the front page and at the front of your newscasts.

I'll share with you some of my polling data. People want to see and read positive stories – good news does sell. The media's help in this area will send a strong message to our young people that they can make news by doing good. We must all work to reinforce the positive in our young people.

And, the state will remain a strong partner for youth. In fact, this budget alone includes \$20 million for new youth programs in our communities.

And from this summit, we hope to create a new initiative to provide further partnership to communities. We also will develop a book based on the ideas shared at this summit and make it available to everyone as a resource, and we will create a website that will provide one place for teens, parents, adults and community leaders to turn for information and help on youth-related issues.

What makes me proud and optimistic is that Wisconsin already is doing so much of what we will talk about today. We're a state that places a high value on family and community, so it is second nature for us to work together for all our children.

But again, we must all move beyond good intentions and truly make a difference.

If what happened in Littleton or Atlanta scares you. Or if the threats in schools from Madison to Eau Claire to Rosendale frustrate you – do something about it.

Get involved. Be a mentor, a tutor, a coach, or a volunteer at your church.

The answers to the problems of youth violence literally rest in our hands.

So let's have a good discussion today. Let's learn about successful programs and share our experiences and expertise.

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But most importantly, let's take the ideas, innovation and inspiration shared today back home to our communities and make it happen.

Thank you and god bless.