



WHAT WE HEARD

*Insights from Youth and
Youth-Serving Organizations*





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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Between October 2025 and February 2026, The Endowment convened three groups to better understand youth services in New Hanover County. These sessions brought together nonprofit organizations, government and education partners, and youth leaders to identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities within the systems shaping youth outcomes.

While participants represented only a limited, non-scientific sampling of perspectives, the themes that emerged offer valuable directional insight. These insights will help guide our grantmaking, with particular emphasis on needs and opportunities within summer programming in 2026.

Methodology

The Endowment conducted three sequential convenings:

- Nonprofit Organizations - October 30, 2025: More than 43 youth-serving nonprofit organizations
- Government and Education Agencies - December 5, 2025: More than 25 representatives from law enforcement, schools, and county agencies
- Youth Focus Group - January 28, 2026: 28 Youth leaders from across New Hanover County

Each convening utilized structured facilitation to gather qualitative data through guided discussions. See Appendix A for a list of the participants.



In Short: *What We Heard, What We've Learned*

Together, the three convenings paint a picture of a community with tremendous assets: passionate leadership, collaborative spirit, diverse programming, and genuine care for young people. Organizations are doing remarkable work despite constraints, government partners are engaged, and youth themselves demonstrate resilience, ambition, and a clear vision for what they need to succeed.

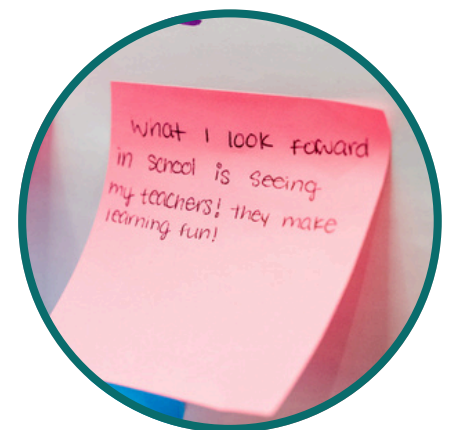
Systemic barriers threaten both youth outcomes and sector sustainability. Funding instability, transportation gaps, workforce shortages, and capacity constraints create a precarious ecosystem where dedicated professionals struggle to meet growing needs. Youth experience the consequences of these constraints through limited access to opportunities, unmet mental health needs, and anxiety about their futures.

The convergence of perspectives across the three convenings provides a foundation for strategic action. Service providers understand operational challenges and systemic barriers. Government partners bring programmatic assets and potential for policy influence. Youth voices ground strategy in lived experience and authentic need.

The Endowment is well positioned to act on these findings through strategic grantmaking, convening, and systems-level leadership. The goodwill, collaboration, and shared commitment expressed across the gatherings create a strong foundation for collective action and long-term impact.

Moving forward, opportunities abound to help address immediate needs such as funding, transportation, and organizational capacity while also building the long-term infrastructure needed for coordination, learning, and systems change.

Most importantly, taken together, the three perspectives affirm that youth success is not the responsibility of youth-serving organizations alone. It is a community-wide priority that calls for alignment across philanthropy, government, education, business, faith communities, and residents.



To better understand the shared challenges, opportunities, and differences that emerged across the convenings, this report provides a breakdown and highlights of the cross-convening insights.

Shared Themes

ACROSS CONVENINGS

Funding-Capacity-Impact

The most critical finding across all three convenings is an interconnected crisis of funding, capacity, and impact. Insufficient funding prevents organizations from hiring adequate staff, paying competitive salaries, and serving all who need help. This creates workforce shortages and capacity constraints, leading to staff burnout and "crisis mode becoming normal." The result is that youth cannot access the services they need, creating waitlists, geographic gaps, and missed opportunities for intervention and support.

This vicious cycle was articulated by nonprofits describing difficulty focusing on work when survival dominates, by government agencies noting insufficient time and resources for collaboration, and by youth experiencing the consequences through unmet needs and gaps in support.



Mental Health as Both an Individual and Systemic Challenge

- Youth mental health: anxiety about education and career, self-worth concerns, stress from competing demands, environmental factors, relationship challenges
- Staff mental health: burnout from overwork, anxiety from funding instability, impact of societal instability, compassion fatigue
- Systemic mental health gaps: insufficient behavioral health urgent care, limited school-based support, financial barriers to professional help, lack of preventive mental health services

The interconnection is clear: stressed, anxious, overwhelmed staff have reduced capacity to support youth with mental health needs, while youth mental health challenges increase service demand on already-strained systems.

Mentorship and Safe Relationships Gap

- Youth consistently identified trusted adults, mentors, support systems, and safe relationships as both existing assets (where they feel safe) and critical needs (what every young person should have).
- Government agencies noted that mentorship opportunities are limited and not meeting the level of need.
- Nonprofits described passionate staff providing caring adult presence but emphasized insufficient capacity to reach all youth who need it.

This convergence suggests that while mentorship programs exist and caring adults are present, the community has not achieved scale or consistency to ensure every young person has the "consistent, safe, reliable, trusted adult in their corner" that youth identified as essential.




Shared Themes ACROSS CONVENINGS ...continued

Collaboration as Aspiration and Challenge

A fascinating tension emerged around collaboration. All three convenings identified strong existing partnerships and collaborative spirit as community assets. Organizations described working "hand in hand," government agencies demonstrated cross-sector program coordination, and youth benefited from these partnerships.

Multiple stakeholders noted that while collaboration is valued, it is difficult to sustain given limited time, energy, and funding. There is strong interest in more structured coordination, including regular nonprofit meetings, shared data systems, and stronger institutional connections.



The community has laid the groundwork for collaboration, yet additional infrastructure, capacity, and investment are needed to realize its full potential for systemic change.

Career Readiness and Economic Mobility Pathways

A more hopeful shared theme was strong emphasis on career exploration and workforce development. Government agencies provide extensive career pathway programming (CFCC Career Academy, CTE camps, MarineQuest, ELEMENTS program). Nonprofits offer workforce training (Voyage, StepUp, Navigational Studios). Youth specifically requested opportunities to explore careers, shadow workplaces, develop professional skills, and gain financial literacy.

This convergence suggests fertile ground for expanded investment in workforce development pathways, particularly when combined with addressing transportation and funding barriers that prevent youth access to existing programs.

Gaps and Access Barriers

Participants identified a set of interconnected barriers that limit equitable access to youth-serving programs and supports:

- Transportation barriers that restrict participation for rural and low-income youth
- Housing insecurity, contributing to instability and disrupted engagement
- Funding models that do not consistently follow youth with the most intensive support needs
- Leadership structures that do not reflect the identities or lived experiences of the youth served
- Racialized concerns, including youth anxiety about navigating systems as young people of color
- Limited availability of bilingual mentors and culturally responsive supports
- Persistent gaps in school diversification, identified as a missing element across conversations

Across the convenings, participants emphasized a shared aspiration for resources to more effectively and efficiently follow the youth who need the most support.

Taken together, these barriers compound one another, deepening disparities in who can access the strong programming, mentorship, and caring adults that exist within the community.

New Hanover County Schools

New Hanover County Schools were widely recognized as an indispensable partner, though participants also highlighted areas where coordination and responsiveness could be strengthened. Government agencies demonstrated strong school-based programming through CTE and career liaisons. Nonprofits have "standing relationships with teachers" and provide school-based services. Youth value specific teachers, classes, and school-based clubs.

Yet significant barriers exist: operational constraints challenging nonprofit collaboration, insufficient support for outside mental health providers, school funding cuts, suspension practices, overcrowding, and systemic challenges.



YOUTH REFLECTIONS



The youth convening provided direct insight into young people's experiences, aspirations, and needs. Their voices both confirmed adult observations and provided unique perspectives.

Youth Look Forward to...

During summer:

- Volunteering opportunities: working with kids, food banks, environmental work, nursing homes, STEM education
- Work experiences: camp counseling, beach jobs, internships, fellowships
- Being with friends and family
- Beach activities, travel, summer camps



During the school year:

- Learning new things: "finding new passions," "making a difference"
- After-school clubs, particularly STEM opportunities for minorities
- Hanging out with friends and family
- Specific classes they're passionate about: dance, engineering, music, and morning announcements
- Meeting new people, seeing teachers they trust
- Studying interests like biochemistry



What Youth Worry About...

Education and career anxiety dominates:

- College decisions, getting into top-choice schools, maintaining GPAs
- Whether they're choosing the right career path
- Fear of "ending up doing something I hate for the rest of my life"
- Not knowing what to do after high school
- Affording college or gap year experiences

Mental health and self-actualization concerns:

- "Not being the person I want to become"
- "Not accomplishing my life goals"
- "Being enough"
- Procrastination and perfectionism interfering with success
- Having regrets or not keeping promises

Social justice and environmental concerns:

- Being a person of color
- War and national division
- Gun violence in the community
- "With everything happening in Wilmington, I'm worried about getting a call about one of my friends/family"
- Climate change

Relationships:

- Technology interfering with genuine connection
- Being around the wrong people
- Losing relationships they care about
- Strained family relationships
- Worry about growing old alone

What Gets in Their Way...

Time management is the biggest barrier, including overlapping commitments, balancing work and school, overscheduling, hearing about opportunities too late, and insufficient time in the day. Youth are "staying up too late and having 2/3 sets of sleep schedules" trying to manage competing demands.

Transportation prevents access to opportunities they're excited about.

Mental health interferes with engagement, including their environment, working with unmotivated people, their own thoughts, and being "too tired/lazy."

Money limits participation and creates stress, particularly college costs and expensive rent.

YOUTH REFLECTIONS

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What Youth Need to Thrive...

Youth articulated clear, specific needs when asked what every young person should have access to:

- Mental health support and mentorship:
 - Good support systems
 - Consistent, safe, reliable, trusted adults in their corner
 - Someone who sees them and pressures them to be better
 - Free counseling and safe places to talk
 - An outlet
- Resources and financial support:
 - Money for tuition, especially from low-income households
 - Funding so time doesn't have to be spent on work or scholarship applications instead of passions
 - Free or reduced-cost education
 - Access to information and systems to plan for the future
 - Food security
- Transportation:
 - Safe and affordable transportation
 - Free transportation for anyone in school
 - Easier pathways to obtaining driver's licenses
 - Safe bike lanes
 - Their own cars to reduce reliance on others
- Education and career readiness:
 - Access to college information and deeper understanding of college transitions
 - Opportunities to shadow in workplaces and explore career interests
 - Education about managing student loans, taxes, buying houses, credit
 - Exposure to "less talked about jobs that are successful"
 - Opportunities through clubs like FBLA, HOSA, DECA, or FFA
- Community spaces and belonging:
 - A place to hang out where they aren't obligated to buy anything
 - Teen/kid-based recreation centers
 - Pre-organized study groups
 - A community with people who can understand them
 - Accessible recreation and structured activities
 - Gym access
 - Things that bring them joy
- Basic needs (home, family, food, water):
 - A good home environment and family who loves them
 - Food and water access, particularly "highly nutritious foods to grow brain function"
 - A place to sleep and eat





Detailed Findings

COMMUNITY ASSETS AND STRENGTHS

Collaborative Spirit and Partnerships

One of the most striking findings from the providers was the emphasis on collaboration as a community strength. Nonprofit participants identified partnerships and networks as their most frequently cited asset, while government agencies demonstrated extensive programmatic collaboration through shared summer programming, cross-sector partnerships, and coordinated service delivery.



Leadership and Volunteers

The second most prominent asset across convenings was the human capital dedicated to youth success.

Nonprofit leaders emphasized "people power and community spirit", highlighting dedicated volunteers, passionate staff, amazing nonprofit leaders, and empathetic professionals.

Government agencies demonstrated similar commitment through their personal reflections on work-life balance, professional development, and their passion for breaking cycles of disadvantage.

Diverse Programming and Summer Opportunities

The convenings revealed an impressive array of youth programming across the county, with particularly robust summer offerings.

The October nonprofit convening documented over 25 different organizations providing summer camps, leadership development, academic support, workforce training, and enrichment activities serving thousands of youth annually.

Programming highlights include:

- Career exploration and workforce development (CFCC Career Academy, Voyage, StepUp Wilmington)
- Arts and cultural education (DREAMS Center, Children's Museum, Cameron Art Museum)
- Leadership and character development (Young Life, Mt. Calvary Center, Girl Scouts)
- Academic support and STEM education (El Cuerpo, Young Scientists Academy, NC Aquarium)
- Health and therapeutic services (Coastal Therapeutic Riding, Autism Society, Lake Forest Academy)
- Environmental education (NC Coastal Federation, NSEA SWIM)
- Justice system engagement (law enforcement camps, ELEMENTS program, DA's office internships)
- Government partners contribute significantly through NHC Sheriff's camp serving 300-400 children, Wilmington PD's relationship-building camps, and UNCW MarineQuest serving approximately 1,400 youth each summer.

Nonprofit Sector Strength

Despite funding challenges, participants consistently described a strong and resilient nonprofit sector characterized by:

- A long history of effective and trusted nonprofit organizations
- Innovative and resourceful ("scrappy") organizations that adapt to changing needs
- Growing representation, including the presence of Black-led organizations
- Niche community-based organizations filling specific gaps and serving targeted populations

Across multiple conversations, The Endowment was also recognized as a valued part of this ecosystem frequently described as a connector, innovator, and trusted partner with a strong understanding of community needs and nonprofit realities.



Funding Instability and Financial Constraints

The most frequently cited challenge across all convenings related to funding and sustainability.

Funding instability manifests in multiple ways:

- Insufficient funds for staffing and competitive salaries
- Inability to provide services proportionate to the needs of the communities served
- Lack of rainy-day funds to launch strategic initiatives
- Funding caps forcing programs to turn away eligible youth
- Volunteers giving their own resources to serve kids
- Uncertainty about philanthropic sustainability

Youth directly experienced the consequences of funding constraints, expressing worry about college costs, student loans, expensive rent, and the need for money to pursue their dreams. Multiple youth noted that financial stress limits their ability to focus on education and passions because time must be spent working or pursuing scholarships.

Workforce Shortages and Organizational Capacity

The third major systemic challenge noted is insufficient staffing and capacity across the youth-serving sector. Nonprofits mentioned workforce and capacity constraints describing staff who are "overworked and in crisis mode becoming normal," high caseloads with no time for long-term follow-through, and workforce shortages for specialized roles like therapists and autism support staff.

Housing Insecurity and Basic Needs

Housing emerged as a critical gap mentioned by both nonprofits (affordable housing and shelter supporting children) and government agencies. Youth referenced housing indirectly through concerns about expensive rent, student loans, and needing "a safe place to sleep and eat."

Nonprofits also identified broader basic needs challenges, including families at risk, SNAP benefits insufficiency, food insecurity (NourishNC serves 3000 food-insecure kids), and families "working so hard" to meet their needs.

Transportation as a Systemic Barrier

Transportation emerged as the second most critical gap, mentioned consistently across all three convenings.

Youth identified transportation as a major barrier, specifically noting lack of public transportation, inability to get places without a car, challenges obtaining licenses, and the difficulty of relying on others for rides.

Transportation impacts:

Participants shared that transportation challenges:

- Prevent youth from reaching programs, services, and employment opportunities
- Disproportionately affect rural and low-income families, compounding existing access gaps
- Limit participation in summer programming, after-school activities, and workforce opportunities
- Create reliance on adults or caregivers whose availability may be inconsistent
- Reduce opportunities for independence, autonomy, and sustained engagement
- Youth themselves emphasized the urgency of this issue, expressing a desire for safe and affordable transportation, including "free transportation for students" and safer, more accessible bike lanes within the city.



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Community Awareness

Nonprofits identified challenges with community awareness, trust, and collaboration, noting that "the public needs to be informed about our sector," and there's a "lack of understanding."

Mental Health Needs and Support Gaps

Nonprofits noted staff and client anxiety, and societal instability worsening staff mental health. Government agencies identified the lack of behavioral health urgent care as a significant gap.

Youth provided the most detailed and nuanced perspectives on mental health gaps and needs across the convenings. Their input surfaced multiple, overlapping dimensions of mental health challenges, including:

- Mental health barriers including their thoughts, environment, being too tired, and isolating
- Mental health worries including fear of not becoming who they want to be, not accomplishing goals, perfectionism, procrastination, and general anxiety about success
- Need for mental health support

Youth emphasized that free counseling, safe spaces to talk, and constructive outlets for expression are critical supports. Several participants also noted that while informal or limited local help may be accessible, "professional help is hard to come by because of money," pointing to cost as a significant barrier to care.

Educational System Barriers

Multiple stakeholders identified operational challenges for effective and seamless collaboration with the educational system.

Government agencies identified diversification in student bodies of schools as a missed opportunity and concerns about parental accountability and kids falling through the cracks.

Youth provided nuanced perspectives, both positive and negative. While many looked forward to specific classes, teachers, clubs, and learning opportunities, they also identified barriers including:

- The number of students at their school (overcrowding)
- Heavy homework loads creating time management challenges
- Concerns that they might end up doing something they hate
- Worry about grades, SATs, college acceptance, and career decisions
- Ability to afford extra curriculums like clubs and competitions that help with successful college applications



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Social, Political, and Safety Concerns

Participants across sectors described a challenging social and political climate that affects both service delivery and youth well-being.

Nonprofits pointed to a national tone perceived as hostile to diversity, the politicization of social services, government instability, immigration enforcement concerns, ideological shifts away from proactive public investment, and experiences of racism and human rights violations as factors that complicate planning and long-term support.

Youth echoed these concerns in more personal terms, naming fears about “being a person of color,” “war,” “division in our country,” “gun violence in our community,” and the ongoing anxiety of “getting a call about one of my friends or family.” Government partners similarly identified safety as a gap, citing a “lack of safety for youth” and broader safety concerns. At the same time, youth identified places where they do feel safe, including home, family, school, mentors, coaches, work, friends, and organizations such as Voyage, Youth Villages, and Communities In Schools.





OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORT

Across convenings, participants offered ideas on the types of support needed.

Multi-year general operating support: Nonprofits specifically wished for "more multi-year funding" and "less restrictive funding." Single-year, project-restricted funding exacerbates the instability and survival mentality preventing strategic work.

On a related note, workforce challenges stem directly from the inability to pay competitive salaries. Funding that supports staff capacity, professional development, and retention addresses a root cause of limited organizational capacity.

Transportation solutions: The consistency and urgency of transportation barriers suggests exploring innovative solutions, youth transportation networks, transportation subsidies, partnership with transit authorities, or youth-specific transportation services.

Collaborative infrastructure: Organizations want to collaborate more effectively but lack capacity. Investment in shared services, data platforms, coordinated intake and referral systems, and collaborative backbone support could multiply impact.

Mental health ecosystem: Both prevention and treatment gaps exist. Investment in school-based mental health, youth-accessible counseling, staff wellness support, and behavioral health urgent care addresses individual and systemic needs.

Youth mentorship scale: While programs exist, not every youth has access. Strategic investment to scale evidence-based mentorship and ensure equitable access could address the "trusted adult" gap.

Housing and basic needs: Affordable housing and family economic stability create the foundation for youth success. While not youth-specific programming, addressing family economic security impacts youth outcomes.



Learning and Continuous Improvement

Support sector evaluation and learning: Organizations requested "permission to fail," "space/time to try new ideas," and "current data."

Landscape analysis and gap identification: The summer program landscape activity during the convenings delivered helpful insights on summer program services. A regular, comprehensive landscape analysis could help identify geographic gaps, demographic gaps, and service coordination opportunities to inform offerings, delivery and improvements.

Youth outcome tracking: Multiple stakeholders mentioned the need for coordinated data platforms to track youth progress. Investment in shared outcomes frameworks and longitudinal tracking could demonstrate collective impact.

Best practice sharing: The sector includes significant expertise and innovation, ready to facilitate peer learning, site visits, professional development, and knowledge exchange. There is an opportunity to leverage this talent as infrastructure.

Convening and Network Leadership

Continue and deepen sector convenings: Multiple participants expressed appreciation for the convenings. Regular nonprofit gatherings, youth advisory structures, and cross-sector tables create the relational infrastructure for collaboration.

Create data-sharing and coordination infrastructure: The opportunity exists to catalyze development of shared data platforms, coordinated service mapping, gap analysis, and referral coordination.

Support collective storytelling: "Much of Wilmington is out of touch with the challenges facing youth" and "the public needs to be informed about our sector."

Youth voice integration: The youth convening provided invaluable insight. Creating ongoing structures for youth voice in community decision-making, youth advisory councils, youth grantmaking, youth-led research, ensures strategies remain grounded in lived experience.

Cross-sector collaboration facilitation: The strong existing collaboration between nonprofits, government agencies, schools, and higher education creates a foundation for deeper coordination.

Advocacy & Systems Change

State and federal funding advocacy: Many challenges stem from unreliable government funding, Medicaid rate cuts, and national divestment in social services. Collective sector-based advocacy could help influence sustainable public funding.

Education system reform engagement: School-based barriers require systemic solutions.

Transportation infrastructure advocacy: Youth transportation needs require a public sector response.

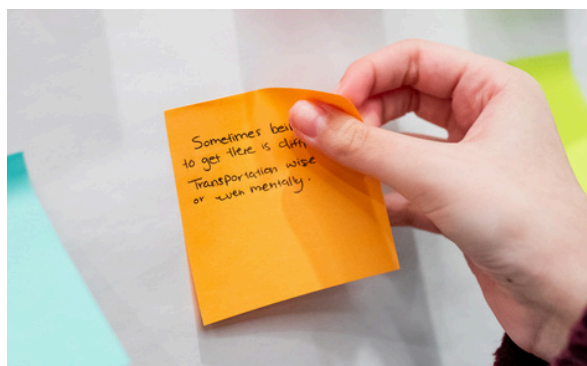
Affordable housing and basic needs: While beyond youth services specifically, housing instability and basic needs insecurity fundamentally impact youth outcomes.

Thank You

We extend our sincere thanks to everyone who took part in these convenings and generously shared their time, perspectives, and lived experiences. The openness and thoughtfulness of nonprofit leaders, government and education partners, and community members made these conversations meaningful and grounded in real-world insight.

We offer special recognition and gratitude to the youth who participated. Their honesty, courage, and clarity in naming both challenges and hopes were essential to our work. Youth voices reflect not only present realities, but the future of our community. We are deeply appreciative of their willingness to speak, listen, and envision what is possible, and we are committed to honoring youth perspectives as central to learning, decision-making, and progress.

Sincerely,
The Endowment Team



Appendix A: Convening Participants

Nonprofit Convening (10/30/2025)

Americanism Committee, American Legion Post 10
Autism Society of North Carolina
Boys & Girls Club of Southeastern North Carolina
Brittingham Foundation
Cameron Art Museum
Better Is Possible
Coastal Horizons
Coastal Therapeutic Riding Program
DREAMS Center for Arts Education
Education Without Walls
El Cuerpo
Family Promise of the Lower Cape Fear
Foster Pantry
Genesis Block Foundation
Girl Scouts: North Carolina Coastal Pines
Keep Your Hands Off Me, Inc.
Kids Making It
LINC, Inc.
Mt. Calvary Center for Leadership Development
NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher
North Carolina Coastal Federation
NourishNC
Schreiber Foundation
Soaring as Eagles Outreach Ministry, Inc.
StepUp Wilmington
The Children's Museum
The OOPS Foundation
United Way
Voyage
Youth Villages
YWCA Bright Futures

Nonprofit Convening (12/5/2025)

Cape Fear Community College – Career Academy
City of Wilmington Police Department
District Attorney's Office
Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce
New Hanover County Community Justice Services – Youth Empowerment Services Division
New Hanover County Courts
New Hanover County Government
New Hanover County Public Health
New Hanover County Public Library
New Hanover County Schools – Career & Technical Education (CTE)
New Hanover County Sheriff's Office – ELEMENTS Youth Violence Intervention Program
New Hanover County Sheriff's Office – SRO Unit
UNCW MarineQuest

Youth Leaders Convening (1/28/2026)

28 Youth Attended; they were nominated by the following organizations.

100 Black Men of Coastal North Carolina
Better is Possible CDC, Inc
Boys & Girls Clubs of South Eastern North Carolina
Career Readiness Academy at Mosley
District Attorney's Office
Education Without Walls
Emsley A. Laney High School
Eugene Ashley High School
Girls Leadership Academy of Wilmington
Isaac Bear Early College High School
John T. Hoggard High School
Kids Making It
Laney High School
Mouths of Babes Theatre
New Hanover County Resiliency Task Force
SEA-Tech
Schreiber Foundation
StepUp Wilmington
University of North Carolina Wilmington
Williston Middle School
Wilmington Early College High School
Young Scientist Academy



What do I need in order to be successful

Opportunities to
develop a network
- financial support
- community support

People believe in
me and support me
- financial support
- community support

Money
for College

Money
My Hubset
Friends who
also want to be
successful

Helping to
Confront
Anxiety

More Knowledge
that have
connections

Safe bike lanes
within the city.

More recreational/
park
areas.

Easier ways
to express myself
via music/art/
writing

PEOPLE TO
GIVE ME UP

More Knowledge
that have
connections

Community!
Especially with
with Fellowship
with Fellow
beliefs

Realize it is
not
just
the
money
that is
the
key

