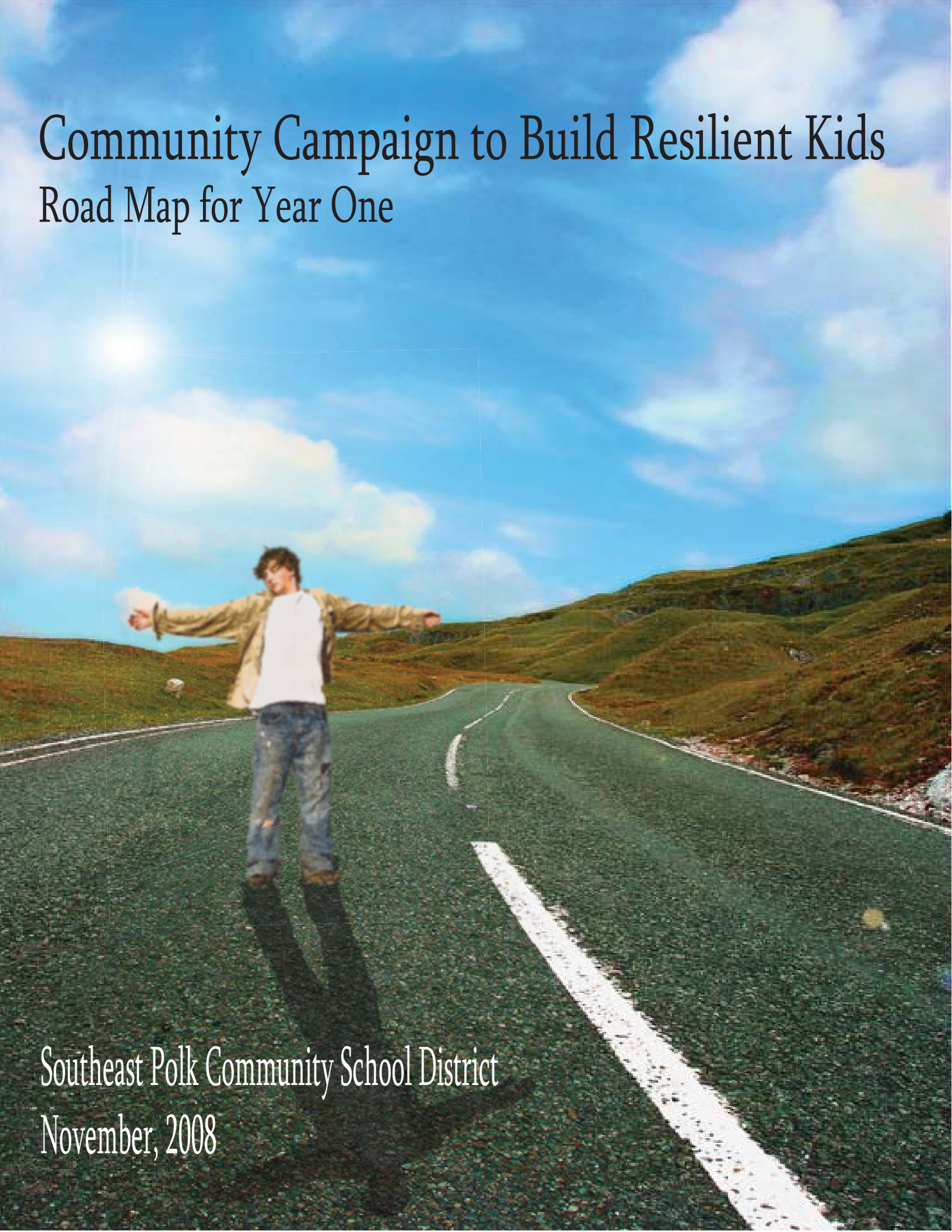


# Community Campaign to Build Resilient Kids Road Map for Year One



Southeast Polk Community School District  
November, 2008

# Community Campaign to Build Resilient Kids: A Road Map for Year One

## Introduction

In the United States, a suicide death occurs about every 16 minutes. In Iowa, there is almost one suicide per day (or at least 6 suicides per week); in Polk County more than one per week. So, suicide is more common than we want to admit—it is the 11<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in the US. It is the second leading cause of death for all Iowans 15-40 years of age.

But despite its prevalence, the economic and human cost of a single suicide death can be crippling to a community because of how each death ripples outward.

So when eastern Polk County was battered by not one, but four youth suicide deaths in the span of seven months, the tragic loss, grief and fear has threatened to bring the close-knit community to its knees.

This *Road Map* articulates the vision of a Leadership Team convened by Southeast Polk Community School District in the fall of 2008 to meet these tragedies head-on. Included are the steps that will be followed over the next year as part of a *Community Campaign to Build Resilient Kids*.

## Where we live

Approximately 30,000 residents live within the boundaries of the

Southeast Polk school district. The district has a 2008 K-12 enrollment of 5,966 students. The traditional high school houses 1,700 in grades nine through twelve, and the alternative high school serves 56 additional students.

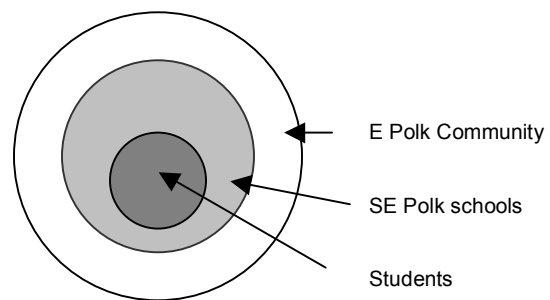


Figure 1

The schools and school-related activities figure prominently in the lives of the residents of the Southeast Polk school district, regardless of whether households have school-aged children or not, and the school forms a kind of social center for the region (see **Fig. 1**). During one meeting of the campaign's Leadership Team, members spoke of organizations and businesses in the area who schedule events around the Southeast Polk school calendar.

Given the unique community character of the Southeast Polk region the problem of youth dying by suicide has quite possibly become the community's number one concern. The youth go to school at Southeast Polk, where they interact with their

peers. And the school is in many ways the heartbeat of the community (see **Fig. 1**). These unique characteristics of the community argue for the Southeast Polk schools to take a leadership role in a suicide prevention plan, but must include the whole community.

**The community responds**

The Leadership Team conclusions identified above were arrived at through an intentional process designed to gather input from all those who wanted to offer it. Below is a condensed summary of the activities.

**September 24, 2008** Tom Downs, superintendent of Southeast Polk schools, invited community leaders to attend a *Community “Think Tank”* at Toad Valley Golf Course concentrating on the topics of positive mental health and suicide prevention. This meeting, attended by 93 people, produced a preliminary list of the 10 questions or issues the attendees believed are most important to address.

**October 14, 2008** An open invitation to the Southeast Polk community brought 109 people to the high school Cafeteria to work in small groups to address the eight (reduced from 10) questions, and possible future steps.

**November 12, 2008** The Leadership Team met to define the problem and determine what “success” will look like. The team approved provisions of a “Road Map” to spell out future work, and empowered a Planning Team to begin carrying out the work.

The Leadership Team met to develop a vision for the community campaign. Members identified several community strengths that not only contribute to the quality of life, but also serve as protective factors for youth, to counterbalance suicide risk factors (see **Fig. 2**).

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|--|
| <p><b>What are the benefits and strengths of living and working in this community?</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Small-town attributes; a close-knit feeling of community and relationships</li> <li>2. Active parent involvement</li> <li>3. Lots of traditional family structure</li> <li>4. Supportive of each other when someone is in need</li> <li>5. Neighbors are engaged with each other; everyone knows everyone</li> <li>6. The school is the one thing we all share in common</li> <li>7. The district newsletter, The UNIFIER, was named that because the school district is the one “unifying” factor in the area</li> <li>8. Businesses plan around the school calendar</li> <li>9. “Socialness” revolves around the district</li> <li>10. This is a very giving community</li> </ol> |
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**Figure 2**

However, even with these protective factors, there were some disturbing results from the Iowa Youth Survey (see **Table 1**).

2005 IOWA YOUTH SURVEY STATE (IA) & SOUTHEAST POLK (SEP) COMPARISON	6 <sup>th</sup> grade		8 <sup>th</sup> grade		11 <sup>th</sup> grade	
	IA	SEP	IA	SEP	IA	SEP
In the last 12 months, did you make a plan about how you would attempt suicide?	4%	5%	10%	11%	14%	23%

2005 IOWA YOUTH SURVEY STATE (IA) & SOUTHEAST POLK (SEP) COMPARISON	6 <sup>th</sup> grade		8 <sup>th</sup> grade		11 <sup>th</sup> grade	
Have you ever tried to kill yourself? (once)	4%	6%	6%	13%	8%	23%
Have you ever tried to kill yourself? (three or more times)	1%	1%	2%	3%	4%	10%

**Table 1. Southeast Polk and State of Iowa 2005 Iowa Youth Survey Data.** Compared to the state average, more SE Polk students report suicide plans and attempts at every grade level. The most alarming responses are from 11<sup>th</sup> grade SE Polk females—*nearly one in four* have either made a plan for suicide or had at least one suicide attempt. And 10% of 11<sup>th</sup> grade females have attempted suicide *three or more times*.

The Iowa Youth Survey data reinforced what leaders in the Southeast Polk district feared—their community was vulnerable, a feeling the Leadership Team articulated at a November, 2008 meeting (see **Fig. 3**).

**There's a lot of anger and fear . . . how do we make it stop?**

1. Are we letting our kids down?
2. Will we lose that close-knit feeling?
3. Is our "can-do" attitude threatened?
4. There's a feeling of helplessness
5. Some parents are threatening to pull their kids out of SEP
6. This threatens our support of each other
7. Maybe we don't know each other as well as we thought?
8. Our values are being challenged – are vulnerable

**Figure 3**

Based on their assessment of the information included above, the Leadership Team reached three conclusions:

1. *The at-risk population that needs immediate help and attention is high school youth*
2. *The emphasis should be on helping youth become more*

*resilient to overcome the risk factors for suicide*

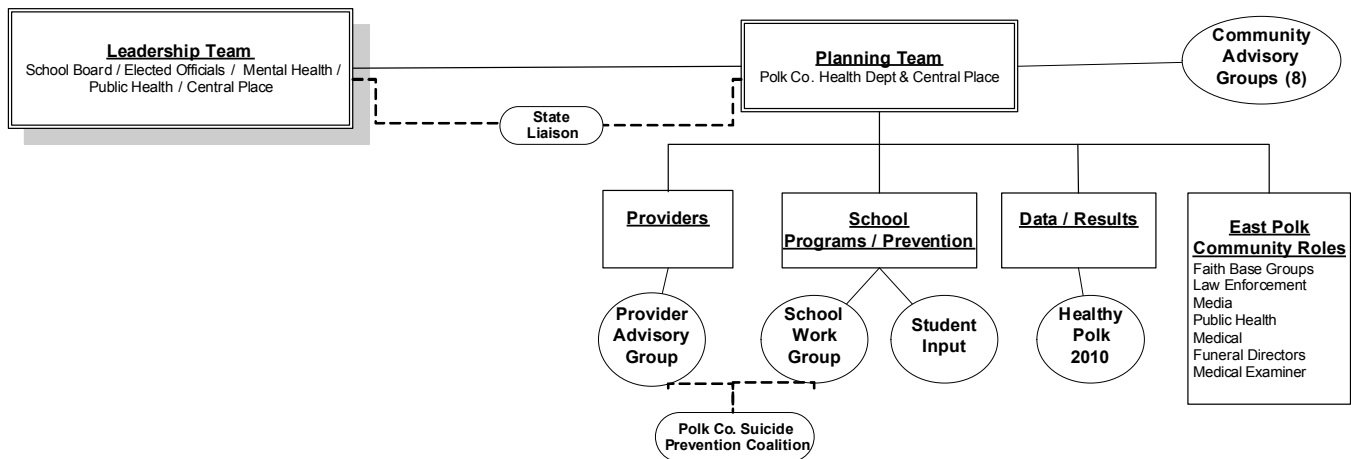
3. *Preserving and enhancing the benefits and strengths of living in the Southeast Polk school district is a priority, and these will serve as protective factors for youth.*

### How we will do it

An organizational chart (see **Fig. 4**) was developed to show how the community will be involved in the process of building resilient youth. The Leadership Team has determined that a successful campaign demands two strategies: 1) helping youth become more resilient to overcome most of the risk-factors for suicide, and 2) preserving and enhancing community strengths/protective factors. Figure 4 also gives an outline of the roles of the work groups.

The Leadership Team members are:

- Tom Downs, Southeast Polk school superintendent
- Lori Slings, school board member
- Cathy Beck-Cross, Central Place director
- Terri Henkels, Polk County Health Department director
- Paulette Franklin, executive director, Altoona Area Chamber of Commerce
- Dr. Stan Danielson, physician, Altoona Family Care Center and Southeast Polk team physician
- Dave Stout, Des Moines Child Guidance Center director
- Dr. Doug Workman, physician, Broadlawns Medical Center



**Leadership Team:** Make Executive Decisions about the plan and leverage necessary resources required for planning , implementation .

**State Liaison:** Advise the Leadership and Planning Teams

**Planning Team:** Oversee the gathering of information and analysis ; develop and recommend strategies to the Leadership Team . Work performed by work groups , below .

**Provider Group:** Mental health-related content , with technical assistance from Polk County Suicide Prevention Coalition "Provider Advisory Group"

**School Programs/Prevention:** Issues related to school programming and school -based prevention strategies with technical assistance from Coalition "Schools" work group. Receive input from students on specific needs and strategies .

**East Polk Community Roles:** Issues that affect the entire Eastern Polk community, such as appropriate commemoration , media coverage , available services , connections between cases .

**Data/Results:** gather data necessary to assess the situation currently and as strategies are implemented , linking with Healthy Polk Community efforts.

**Advisory Groups:** These would arise as people commit to one of the eight questions at the 10/14/08 meeting. At least twice yearly, feedback would be received from these groups on their specific issue , either by survey or focus group .

Figure 4

- Tom Hockensmith, Polk County Board of Supervisors
- Joe Horton, associate principal, Southeast Polk High School
- Marti Kline, Southeast Polk director of community relations
- Dale Chell, Iowa Youth Suicide Prevention Coordinator

The Planning Group (coordinated by Polk County Health Department and Central Place Family Resource Center) will carry out the vision of the Leadership Group.

The four work groups (shown in rectangles) that make up the planning team will be led by individuals with demonstrated experience in planning and implementing community initiatives. The groups will be staffed by enough individuals to get the needed work done.

Every effort will be made to merge the efforts of the work groups with corresponding work groups or initiatives in the community that already exist (shown in Figure 4 below

the work groups in circles). Linking the Southeast Polk efforts to the broader community will have the effect of strengthening both efforts through shared resources, data and successes.

A large number of community members have expressed an interest in helping with this campaign. Not all members will be available for meetings, nor have the project-based experience necessary to develop initiatives. However, the campaign will strive to use all interested people in a productive way.

Eight community advisory groups will be convened at least twice a year to guide the progress of the Planning Team. Many of these group members have already self-selected based on their response to one of the eight questions they addressed at the October 14, 2008 Community Conversation:

1. *What is the role of physical and mental health services in suicide prevention?*
2. *How do we get kids, especially adolescents, to reach out when they are in need?*
3. *How can coping skills eliminate suicide as an option?*
4. *Who is responsible for the mental health of children and adolescents?*
5. *What cultural factors prevent people from getting mental health treatment?*
6. *What are the important teenage risk factors for suicide?*
7. *How can we help kids and adults know how to recognize—and know what to do—when someone needs help?*

8. *How does the community's reaction to individual student deaths encourage (precipitate) or discourage (prevent) suicide?*

## The first year

Below is a timeline for the first year that was approved by the Leadership Team at its November 12, 2008 meeting:

**November 21, 2008** Southeast Polk Sr. High Associate Principal and State Youth Suicide Prevention Coordinator review existing School District Suicide Action Plan and make recommendations for the future

**November 21, 2008** Publish campaign “Road Map” for Year 1 and suggest timeline for additional years

**Nov. 21 – Dec 2, 2008** Leadership Team review of “Road Map”

**December 17, 2008** Populate all work groups and 1<sup>st</sup> meeting of full Planning Team

**February 25, 2009** Convene the Community Advisory Groups to review first efforts and draw feedback

**March 18, 2009** Planning Team meeting

**June 17, 2009** Planning Team meeting with 1<sup>st</sup> draft of recommendations for Leadership Team. Some school recommendations may be implemented before this time.

**September 23, 2009** Convene Community Advisory Groups to review draft recommendations

**September 30, 2009** Planning Team meeting to review community input

**November 12, 2009** Year One Report presented to Leadership Team

## **Future years**

The Planning Team will outline a plan for year two and beyond within the publication of the *Year One Report*.

## **Summary**

The Southeast Polk community has spoken loudly that they want to participate in a campaign to help prevent additional suicides. The Leadership Team chosen to direct this campaign has outlined a vision. That vision is to build upon the strengths of the community to help youth overcome the risk factors for suicide.

While the youth of Southeast Polk school district are not unique in the challenges they face, they are uniquely supported by energized and caring leaders, and by many community partners who want to ensure that the youth live successful and healthy lives.

The investment being made in this campaign by many people throughout Polk County shows how valuable those youth are in Southeast Polk and beyond.

*This report was prepared by Polk County Health Department,  
www.polkcountyiowa.gov.health.*