



Building Connected Communities for Substance Use Prevention

A program of Wake Forest University School of Medicine

Overview

Wake Forest University School of Medicine invites eligible organizations (middle schools and youth-serving agencies) in North Carolina to apply for funding to develop a youth substance use prevention program, Youth Thrive Lab, designed to prevent youth substance use by strengthening youth protective factors, supporting youth-adult partnerships, and building their capacity for system change. Youth Thrive Lab targets individual-level protective factors such as **school connectedness, positive peer networks, community belonging, and leadership development** while at the same time building youth capacity to understand and change organizational or community-level factors such as practices, environments, and/or policies. Each Thrive Lab site would integrate hands-on learning about the connection between social factors and behavior with activities that empower middle school-aged young people to co-create solutions that reduce risk and build resilience. Following principles of youth engagement, youth will be engaged as leaders or partners in planning, tailoring, implementing, and/or evaluating the projects at their sites.^{1,2}

Each awarded entity will enlist on-site adult facilitator/co-facilitators who will oversee the recruitment of approximately 8–20 young people to participate in weekly/biweekly after school sessions focused on leadership, relationship-building, and youth-led action projects that address community-level factors related to substance use (e.g., stress, social isolation, unsafe spaces, lack of healthy activities).

What Is Youth Thrive Lab?

Youth Thrive Lab is a new, youth-centered prevention initiative designed to prevent early substance use among middle school youth (Grades 6–8) by strengthening protective factors, building youth leadership, and growing youth-adult partnerships.

Selected middle schools/youth-serving agencies will receive funding and training to implement a youth-led, adult-supported prevention lab focused on:

- School connectedness
- Positive peer networks
- Coping & resilience skills
- Youth leadership development
- Community and systems change

Youth are not just participants — they are partners and leaders in shaping solutions that improve their schools and communities.

Why Middle School-Aged Participants?

By middle school, youth begin forming attitudes about alcohol, vaping, and drugs.

Research shows:

- Prevention investments can return up to \$18 for every \$1 invested
- Strengthening belonging, leadership, and coping skills reduces long-term risk
- Youth engagement increases community-level impact
- Youth Thrive Lab builds both individual resilience and community change capacity.

Who Should Apply?

We are seeking **up to 7** middle school or community-based agencies serving middle school-aged youth.

Sites must:

- ✓ Identify an on-site adult facilitator
- ✓ Recruit 8–20 youth participants
- ✓ Host weekly or bi-weekly after-school sessions
- ✓ Commit to youth-led action project implementation

2026 Call for Applications

Application Deadline: September 11, 2026 (4pm ET)

Type of award: Awards funded under this opportunity will be structured as grants

Number of awards: Up to 7 awards for this pilot year, notifications by **October 2**

Amount of award: Each award will be up to and include \$15,000.

Award duration: Awards will be for eight+ months.

Funding Details

Each selected site receives \$15,000 total awards. Each site will submit 3 invoices at designated times throughout the eight+ months to support:

- Adult facilitator stipends
- Youth incentives
- Activity supplies & materials
- Action project implementation
- Showcase event
- Evaluation & administration

Funding includes:

- 1.5-day in-person facilitator training (TBD in Winston-Salem)
 - Lodging, event meals and mileage will be covered/reimbursed
 - Most likely arrive Friday evening and train Saturday til 4pm
- Ongoing coaching & peer learning calls
- Evidence-based prevention resources
- Implementation tools and materials
- Program evaluation support

Selection Criteria

A team of reviewers from WFUSM, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services and possibly external reviewers will evaluate all proposals. The review process will consider how the applicant's proposal addresses these selection criteria:

- How strong is this site as a place where youth naturally gather?
- How strong is their plan to recruit at least 8 youth, including those less connected or not typical leaders?
- Does the facilitator seem well-positioned to support youth engagement?
- Is the site ready and able to implement the program?

"Bonus Consideration" (Not scored, but noted)

- Strong commitment to youth voice and shared power
- Creative or compelling ideas for youth-led projects
- Deep alignment with agency/school need
- Potential for long-term sustainability

Program Timeline (2026–2027)

- July–September 2026: Site selection, award & preparation
- October–early December 2026: WF will host a day & ½ Facilitator training
- October 2026–June 2027: Program implementation & evaluation

Interested in Applying?

Please review the application that follows. Join us in building communities where youth thrive.

Youth Thrive Lab – Site Application (2026–2027)

Thank you for your interest in Youth Thrive Lab! This brief application helps us understand your site, your connection to youth, and your readiness to implement a youth-led prevention program.

Section 1: Organization Information

1. Organization/School Name:

2. Primary Contact Name & Title:

3. Email:

4. Phone:

5. Address:

6. Type of Organization (Middle School / Youth-Serving Organization / Other):

- ☐ Middle School
- ☐ Youth-Serving
- ☐ Other (please describe):

7. What percentage of your students/participants qualify for free or reduced lunch (if not known, please provide evidence regarding youth resource access and needs)?

Section 2: Youth Engagement & Setting

8. Describe your site and the youth you serve (3–5 sentences).

9. Youth Thrive Lab prioritizes locations where young people naturally gather. Describe your setting and why youth come there (2–4 sentences).

We encourage sites to engage a diverse group of youth, including those who may not already be in leadership roles or who may feel less connected.

Section 3: Youth Recruitment

10. How have you successfully recruited youth to groups or activities in the past?

11. How will you recruit young people to participate, including those who may not typically be involved or who may feel less connected? (3–5 sentences)

12. We ask sites to recruit at least 8–20 middle school youth (Grades 6–8). How confident are you in your ability to recruit at least 8 youth?

Very confident

Confident

Somewhat confident

Not sure

Section 4: Adult Facilitator

Research consistently shows that one of the single most powerful protective factors against substance use is a relationship with at least one caring adult. The adult facilitator does not need to be perfect. They need to be present, consistent, and genuinely curious about these young people.

13. Who will serve as the adult facilitator(s)? (Name, role, and brief experience in 3-5 sentences)

14. What strengths will this facilitator bring to working in partnership with youth? (3–5 sentences)

Section 5: Readiness & Commitment

15. Are you able to host weekly or bi-weekly sessions?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

16. What excites you most about Youth Thrive Lab? (1–3 sentences)

17. Briefly describe any relevant experience and available resources to support your success (e.g. meeting space, existing connections/partnerships with youth, administrative support, etc.).

Section 6: Commitment

18. Please confirm your organization's commitment to the following requirements.

- ☐ We can recruit at least 8 youth participants
- ☐ We will identify an adult facilitator to attend day & ½ in person training (this will be the adult facilitator(s) working with youth in the Youth Thrive Lab)
- ☐ We are willing to support youth-led projects
- ☐ We will complete our Thrive Lab reporting
- ☐ We can participate from October 2026 – June 2027

19. Is there anything else you would like to know about your organization, team, youth participants, or interest in participating in the Youth Thrive Lab? Please use the space below.

Please email a completed application to Kristin Kidd at Kristin.kidd@wfusm.edu by September 11, 2026, 4pm ET

ⁱ Ballard, PJ and M. Pankratz. (2023) Engaging youth to improve Substance Misuse Prevention: Information Guide Series. January. Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

ⁱⁱ Ballard, P. J., Kennedy, H. K., Collura, J. J., Vidrascu, E., & Torres, C. G. (2023). Engaging youth as leaders and partners can improve substance use prevention: a call to action to support youth engagement practice and research. Substance abuse treatment, prevention, and policy, 18(1), 71. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13011-023-00582-7>