

# Giving them a shot

By Tom Dickson

I'm worried about America's youth. But maybe not all of them.

This past March I volunteered to tally scores at the 2026 Montana state tournament for the National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP). Roughly 400 students representing 25 elementary, middle, and high schools from all corners of the state competed indoors at the Lewis and Clark County Fairgrounds in Helena.

The event is coordinated by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, which also provides basic archery instructor training and shares equipment costs for teachers interested in starting NASP at their schools. About 1.2 million kids grades 4 to 12 participate in NASP programs nationwide each year, including about 10,000 from Montana.

At the day-long state tournament, students competed in two categories: traditional bullseye targets, and 3D targets simulating deer, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, and other game animals. The kids pleasantly surprised me.

Though I don't have children or grandkids, I'm concerned about the future that young people face. They will soon be adults paying into the Social Security system you and I will rely on in old age. For selfish reasons, I want them to succeed.

But I also care because I remember what it was like to struggle in school and then find a job, a house, and a purpose in life. That was hard enough in the 1970s and '80s. What with chronic drought, gun violence, soaring real estate prices, global war, and AI threatening millions of jobs, it must be terrifying to be a young adult these days. Add to that the stress created by smartphones.

In his 2024 book *The Anxious Generation*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that kids who stay indoors glued to screens have "lost exposure to the kinds of challenging physical and social experiences that all

young mammals need to develop basic competencies, overcome innate childhood fears, and prepare to rely less on their parents."

The result? A global spike in adolescent mental illness since 2010.

Montana kids likely use smartphones just as much as those elsewhere. But at the fairgrounds I saw hundreds of easygoing, well-adjusted, socially skilled students. There wasn't a smartphone in sight.

Unlike what you read regarding today's supposedly dysfunctional youth, unable to make friends, talk in person, or date, the tournament's participants were friendly and outgoing. Six-foot-tall seniors advised pint-sized 5th-graders. Boys and girls, participating in equal numbers, cheered each other on. At day's end, one middle-schooler came up and thanked me for volunteering.

One factor could be that NASP's egalitarian approach reduces social tension. Kids all use the same equipment, which gives rich archers no advantage over poor ones. A kid in a wheelchair can shoot just as well as a basketball star. Girls and boys are equally skilled. And most of the top scorers are from

small towns, like Trout Creek (population 277), Arlee (270), and Twin Bridges (405).

Are kids from rural areas less stressed out and thus better able to concentrate on hitting a bull's-eye? Maybe, but the tournament also drew competitors from larger schools in Great Falls and Helena. They too were laughing, talking with their teammates, and scoring 9s and 10s.

Perhaps, instead, it's the very nature of archery—an enjoyable, easy-to-learn sport that fosters focus, patience, and self-confidence.

"Children need a great deal of free play to thrive," writes Haidt. "The small-scale challenges and setbacks that happen during play are like an inoculation that prepares children to face much larger challenges later."

Maybe that's what NASP does for students. I don't know. But I'm for anything that helps young people have fun while learning to navigate the ever-more complex and unstable world we've left them. 🐾

*Tom Dickson is the previous editor of Montana Outdoors.*

