



YOUTH AND ADULT LEADERS FOR PROGRAM EXCELLENCE

Promising Practices and Impacts of Youth Engagement in Program Decision-Making and Planning

**Community Youth Connection
Issue Brief**

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Over the past two decades, the field of youth development has emphasized youth as assets, rather than as potential societal problems. As part of this trend, youth are sitting at tables where programmatic and community governance decisions are being made. It is increasingly recognized that young people are both products and agents of the settings in which they engage, and that these bidirectional processes provide a basis for their own development.

The research base for the practice and policy of youth engagement and decision-making is rather new, but a consensus has emerged, based on several syntheses (Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth, 2002; Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2002; Lansdown, 2001; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002; Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). The research indicates that:

- Young people benefit from having their voices heard and being taken seriously by adults and peers.
- Young people learn knowledge, skills, and competencies when they are fully engaged in program decision-making and planning.
- Program and community governance is a collective, not individual process. Consequently, governance is best shared between youth and adults.
- Organizations and community groups need to have the capacity to engage youth in decision-making.
- Young people can be stewards of program and community resources, and make sound decisions for programs and communities.

Promising Practices of Youth Engagement

Youth Voice

- When youth are provided legitimate opportunities to have a voice in their programs and community projects, they are transformed from participants into partners; from care recipients into key resources.
- Respect for, and commitment to, youth voice is best expressed by incorporating youth voice and advice into program implementation and community improvement.

Youth-Adult Partnership

- Youth and adults share the work and power.
- Adults balance high expectations for youths' performance with realistic assessment of their current abilities to engage.
- Adults encourage youth to develop their own ideas, but are available to provide assistance and guidance.

Group Effectiveness

- Youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) is integral to the group's processes.
- Each member, youth and adult alike, experiences a sense of being welcomed and valued. Each member, youth and adult alike, experiences a sense of trust and honesty.
- Each member has a sense that respectful disagreement and speaking up when needed is healthy, and helps lead to solid collective decisions.
- Group effectiveness also depends on members learning from one another. There should be mutual learning between youth and adults.
- Each member is excited and motivated about the group's goals and activities. There is a sense of shared purpose.

Impacts of Youth Engagement

Youth

- Youth gain a sense of confidence in expressing themselves, and a sense of competence to complete goals.
- Youth gain and strengthen a full range of skills in planning, coordination, communication, and decision-making.
- Youth gain social capital. Youths' experiences and participation help them make social connections which can bring job offers, invitations to join other community groups, offers for speaking engagements, and references for employment and educational applications.

Adults and Programs

- Adults gain appreciation for the commitment and competence of youth, and perceive youth as critical to program improvement.
- Adults feel that the program is better because of youth participation in decision-making.
- The program becomes more connected and responsive to the larger community.

Building Capacity for Youth Engagement and Decision Making

- The program avoids tokenism by striving to find roles and activities for many youth, not just one or two.
- The program engages youth through various decision-making roles; for example, serving on boards, programming planning, community outreach and public relations, community training, and other key committees.
- Adults and staff at all levels are committed to youth engagement, and strive to serve as role models for the practice.
- The program or community group has written policies about youth engagement that are known and understood by staff and participants.
- Youth engagement is a focus of discussions and program planning.
- Youth and adults receive training and support on how to work in partnership with one another.

These elements of youth engagement are assessed by the Youth Engagement Tool (YET) and the Organizational Youth Engagement Tool (ORG-YET) in *Youth Adult Leaders for Program Excellence: A Practical Guide for Program Assessment and Action Planning*. In addition, the assessment processes outlined in the resource kit are aimed at promoting youth engagement in program and organizational assessment and planning for improvement.

More information about the resource kit, including information about how you can purchase one to use in your organization, is available from <http://www.actforyouth.net/>.

References

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