

Research-to-Results ^{Brief}

Child **TRENDS.**

...information for practitioners on how to use youth governance to involve “at-risk” youth in out-of-school time.

Publication # 2008-24

June 2008

YOUTH GOVERNANCE: HOW AND WHY IT CAN HELP OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS INVOLVE AT-RISK YOUTH

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BACKGROUND

Out-of-school time programs provide intervention and prevention services to young people who are deemed “at-risk” with the goal of improving their social, emotional, and academic development.^a However, research indicates that children and youth who are most “at-risk” are less likely to participate in out-of-school time programs, and do so less regularly than others.¹²

Given this pattern, program staff members need to be creative in their efforts to recruit, engage, and retain at-risk children and youth in programs. Implementing a *youth in governance* model can be an effective strategy for involving these young people. This brief defines youth governance and briefly discusses the benefits of involving at-risk children and youth in out-of-school time program governance. It also identifies steps that out-of-school time programs may consider when implementing a youth governance model and presents recommendations for dealing with potential challenges to implementation.^b

WHAT IS YOUTH GOVERNANCE?

Youth governance refers to the practice of having young people work in partnership with adults to establish the policies, goals, and activities for a program. This practice can take the shape of youth serving on boards or of youth taking on other decision-making roles.³

Youth-adult partnerships are fundamental components of any youth governance model. These cooperative efforts between young people and adults are characterized by mutual respect, communication, and sharing of power.⁴

WHY INVOLVE YOUTH IN PROGRAM GOVERNANCE?

Research and program experience suggest that youth involvement in program governance can result in positive outcomes for youth, adults, and programs.⁵

^a The term “at-risk” has been applied to children and youth experiencing personal, family and community disadvantages, ranging from exposure to family stress, poverty, physical abuse, negative self-perceptions, academic or school failure, teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency and neighborhood problems (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007; Moore, 2007).

^b It is, of course, necessary to involve children and youth in age-appropriate ways. While elementary school-age children may have a role in program decision-making, this brief focuses on older children and youth and how they can be involved in varied governance activities.

Youth involved in program governance experience:

- Less involvement in risky behaviors, such as drug use and juvenile delinquency;⁶
- Improvements in areas such as teamwork, critical thinking, decision-making, public speaking and dependability;⁷ and
- Increased self-esteem and improved self-identity.⁸

Adults working with program participants experience:

- A stronger sense of community connectedness;⁹ and
- A greater understanding of young people and their developmental needs.¹⁰

Programs that involve youth as decision-makers:

- Gain new energy and ideas;¹¹
- Become more connected and responsive to the needs of young people in the community;¹² and
- Can more easily revise their overall mission to better serve children and youth.¹³

TIPS FOR INVOLVING YOUTH IN PROGRAM GOVERNANCE

Research supports the value of youth leadership and decision-making in programs.¹⁴ Researchers theorize that involving young people in program governance may be one of the most effective strategies for promoting positive youth development. However, the practice of involving youth in organizational governance, particularly at-risk youth, can be frustrating and time-consuming for staff, in addition to being helpful and rewarding. The following tips may help programs successfully incorporate a youth-in-governance model into their operations:

Tip 1: Prepare adults for the idea of youth being involved in program governance.

Involving youth in program governance may require an attitude shift among the adult board, staff, or committee members. It is common for adults to resist the idea of young people as decision-makers because of adult stakeholders' loyalty to the program, their attachment to established structures, and a commitment to current processes. Adult stakeholders should be informed that their roles and responsibilities may change when young people have a voice in the decision-making process. Adults also should recognize that involving youth in program governance will require an ongoing negotiation of ideas and resources,¹⁵ and that no "set design" or "standard formula," exists for implementing youth in governance program.

TO PUT THIS IDEA INTO PRACTICE:

- ◆ Host a staff meeting or a board roundtable discussion.
- ◆ Provide frontline staff with general information about adult-youth partnerships.
- ◆ Using a flip chart and markers, ask frontline staff tough questions which may include:
 - What are the advantages and disadvantages of having youth more involved in program design and implementation?
 - How will this make your current position less demanding or more challenging?
 - How much time do you feel you can dedicate to building an infrastructure to support more youth involvement?
 - When and how might an organization begin to involve youth in governance?
- ◆ Allow all staff the opportunity to openly share their opinions without judgment.

Tip 2: Establish a clear vision and goals for how and why youth will be integrated.

It is critical that all adults understand and agree on the purpose and goals for involving youth in their program. A common misconception that adults may hold is that youth will want to run all the key aspects of the program or project. However, experience suggests that young people want to share responsibilities *with* adults, as opposed to doing everything themselves.¹⁶ In fact, young people welcome and need adult participation in the forms of coaching, modeling of behaviors, and sharing tasks¹⁷ because they have limited experience in designing, planning, and executing programs. This situation is particularly true for at-risk youth. To avoid poor program implementation, adults should establish a strategic plan for how youth will be best utilized and should determine how the adults will actively support the integration of youth into the governance process.¹⁸ If goals for integration are ambiguous, this ambiguity is likely to result in poor program implementation and to have a negative impact the young people's experience in the governance role.¹⁹

TO PUT THIS IDEA INTO PRACTICE:

- ◆ Have program staff identify governance roles for youth.
- ◆ Ask program staff to discuss the benefits and disadvantages of each of these roles.
- ◆ As a team, draft a plan that incorporates youth in the roles defined by staff.

Tip 3: Build trust and establish rapport among youth.

Engaging at-risk youth in leadership roles can be a challenging task because many of these young people have experienced few positive relationships with adults. As a result, some youth will be skeptical of adult intentions when asked to assume governance roles.²⁰ Program staff should put time and effort into establishing rapport and building trust with youth upon inviting them to participate. The following observations about building trust may be helpful:

- *Be patient:* Be prepared to empower and allow youth to take on responsibilities and leadership roles without expecting perfection. It should not be assumed that, just because young people have been integrated into program decision-making, they have all of the skills to participate fully. Understand that new members, both adults and youth, will need time to adjust. Remember that leadership learning occurs even when people make mistakes.²¹
- *Listen and don't judge:* Listen carefully and ask questions that are non-threatening when youth are speaking. It is important to try to understand issues from a youth perspective.
- *Be open and authentic:* Youth should get the sense that adults are genuine and interested in the contributions they can make to the program.²²

TO PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE:

- ◆ During staff meetings or roundtable discussions, have staff members share their honest perspective of their relationships with program youth.
- ◆ Using the flip chart, allow staff to brainstorm what they believe are effective strategies to build trust with program youth.
- ◆ Challenge staff members to reflect on real-life experiences where they have attempted to establish rapport with youth, and discuss whether the methods used were a success or not.
- ◆ Give staff an opportunity to role-play the strategies as a team.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES OF INVOLVING YOUTH IN PROGRAM GOVERNANCE

As with any new approach, challenges will inevitably arise. The difference between programs that integrate youth in governance roles effectively and programs that do not depends largely upon how people deal with the challenges that may arise.²³ Drawing on research and insights from practitioners, we outline three common challenges and present suggestions for overcoming them.

Challenge 1: Power Struggles Between Youth and Adults.

It is not uncommon for adults to have difficulty relinquishing power to young people during the planning and decision-making process involved in developing a youth in governance model. At the same time, young people may be uncomfortable taking on the responsibility that comes with the power.²⁴ Instead of denying differences in obligations, interests and skill sets, a successful program will build on and accommodate these differences.²⁵ Sharing power can be achieved through coaching. Practitioner wisdom indicates that one of the most difficult skills for adults to acquire is being able to coach young people without making them feel powerless. Therefore, adults should provide legitimate opportunities for young people to play a meaningful role in the partnership, while also holding them accountable.²⁶

Suggestions for Dealing with Power Struggles Between Youth and Adults:

- Adults should act as coaches—offering proactive guidance to young people—because of their experience and access to institutional power.²⁷
- After supporting young people in taking on new roles as decision-makers, trainers, and organizers, adults should not assume that young people will automatically or consistently understand what is expected of them.²⁸
- Adults should provide clear, consistent, and constructive feedback during preparation phases until the planned youth in governance model is implemented. Programs should provide opportunities to discuss power issues openly.²⁹

Challenge 2: “Adultist” Behavior

“Adultist,” a relatively new term that is not yet used widely, refers to the systematic mistreatment and disrespect of young people. As researchers use the term, it pertains to subtle behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people.³⁰ To successfully engage and empower youth in program governance, adults should avoid adultist behaviors and attitudes during interactions with youth. This avoidance is critical because most youth would agree that during disagreements with adults, the word of a young person may not be taken over that of an adult. Also, some youth may feel that adults do not take their concerns as seriously as they would the concerns of another adult. If young people feel adult bias, they may be less inclined to speak up during discussions, and thereby forgo opportunities to engage fully in governance.

Suggestions for Dealing with “Adultist” Behavior:

- Programs should establish guidelines for how the governance board will make decisions. These guidelines should indicate the role of adult and youth committee members.³¹
- When possible, young people and adults should have an equal say in making final decisions.³²
- Adults should avoid giving young people orders to do things without explanation. At the same time, programs should be wary of thrusting young people into decision-making without training, practice, and an understanding of their responsibilities.³³

Challenge 3: Avoid Stereotypes of Youth Abilities

It is not unusual for adults to have stereotypes of young people (and vice versa). Unfortunately, stereotypes about the competence levels of young people often lead to a paradoxical situation. As two researchers expressed this situation: “Youth are unable to demonstrate their competence due to lack of opportunity, and adults fail to provide the opportunity because they have not yet witnessed the youth competence.”³⁴ Therefore, when identifying youth to participate on boards and to work in partnership with adults, it becomes critical that adults avoid stereotypes of youth capabilities. Instead, adults should act as coaches and—in some cases—trainers, in order to avoid setting youth up for frustration, confusion, and possible failure.³⁵

Suggestions for Overcoming Stereotypes:

- Programs should build on the individual strengths of young people and provide ways for them to grow in areas where they are not yet strong.³⁶
- Adults should recognize that cognitive and decision-making skills among youth may vary by age and within age groups.
- Programs should not overlook at-risk youth for leadership just because of their inexperience. Although these young people have enjoyed fewer opportunities to assume formal leadership roles, research shows that they often have innate leadership skills that they exercise regularly just to survive everyday in their home environments.³⁷

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Program: Washington Enrichment and Cultural Arts Network (WE CAN)

Location: Washington, D.C.

In the following interview, **Johnice Galloway-Miller**, the program director for WE CAN, describes the organization's experiences with a youth governance model.

What does WE CAN offer young people?

The Washington Enrichment and Cultural Arts Network, Inc. ("WE CAN") operates Reach-One-To-Teach-One, a Literacy and Arts Program in Ward 7 of the District of Columbia. Youth ages 14 through 25 participate in reading, poetry, writing, math, conflict resolution, dance, visual arts, positive rap music, and cultural and recreational enriching activities.

How does WE CAN prepare program staff for the adult-youth relationship?

During staff orientation, we review WE CAN's organizational standards. This review includes giving an overview of the concepts and principles of youth development based on the Advancing Youth Development curriculum. At least two of WE CAN's frontline youth workers are required to take a 30-hour course in Advancing Youth Development. WE CAN also prepares its staff by discussing the background characteristics of the youth population in the program.

What things do you do to inform the adults that youth will have a vital role in planning activities?

WE CAN senior staff explain that a goal of the program is for youth and adults to develop and implement decisions collaboratively. This approach empowers youth but also teaches accountability and responsibility pending the outcome of the activity or event. During staff orientation, program staff are briefed on how young people's ideas are incorporated into the design of the program, but are also told how critical it is that they remain involved in supporting the implementation of the activities planned by youth. Every five weeks, WE CAN senior staff solicit suggestions from frontline staff about how to further improve the adult-youth partnership in planning future program activities.

When is the strategic plan for involving youth as program or activity leaders developed?

The strategic plan is established during the proposal preparation phase. The plan is critiqued further during management meetings several months before the program begins and is then reviewed and modified on an ongoing basis.

How are decisions made to determine how youth will be involved in planning activities for the program?

WE CAN's program staff considers whether the young person's involvement gives him or her the chance to actively learn and build skills, and whether the activity provides youth with the opportunity to discuss ideas and express themselves.

What things are done to ensure that youth have a positive experience in the leadership role?

WE CAN's senior staff ensures that program activities and expectations are communicated clearly to both youth and adults, and that the adults are capable of providing the proper support to assist youth in successfully executing the activity. The program director administers regular satisfaction surveys, which provide valuable information about young people's experience in the program.

How does WE CAN staff build trust with youth?

WE CAN establishes trust by listening to youth's ideas, suggestions and concerns, and then discusses possible solutions to issues without judgment. This process is done through group settings and one-on-one meetings with youth. A critical way to build trust with young people is to listen to what they have to say and demonstrate that program staff values their input and opinion. WE CAN's staff demonstrates patience by affording youth new responsibilities and creating a safe environment where they do not feel as if they need to be perfect. Program staff use the mistakes young people may make as opportunities for learning.

How do program staff listen and not judge youth?

Staff members listen to and encourage young people to complete their thoughts and thoroughly explain their side of a story without looking for the right or wrong perspective. A critical way to learn from youth--instead of passing judgment—is to consider not just "what" young people do, but "why" young people do certain things.

How do program staff know they have gained the trust of youth?

Youth show their trust in many different ways. They openly share their journal writings with staff. They ask to have discussions on subjects that they are afraid to talk about with their parents or legal guardians. They admit when they are at fault and share with staff their most personal and private thoughts.

NEXT STEPS: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR PROGRAM

A number of national organizations and programs are currently invested in youth-adult partnerships. The following resources may be useful for involving at-risk youth in out-of-school time program governance roles.

National 4-H Council – The 4-H Youth in Governance Initiative supports youth participation in governance roles in programs, organizations, and communities. The Initiative focuses on the skills that youth and adults need to be effective in governance. People can search the Youth in Governance library references by type, title, and author.

Available online at: <http://www.fourhcouncil.edu/YouthInGovernanceProgram.aspx>

Points of Light Youth Leadership Institute – The Institute seeks to provide young people the encouragement, peer networks, and leadership skills necessary for them to make meaningful contributions to their communities and to begin a lifelong journey of leadership and service. For more information, visit <http://www.pyli.org>. The Points of Light Foundation also published *Youth Voice: A Guide for Engaging Youth in Leadership and Decision-Making in Service-Learning Programs*.

Available online at: <http://www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/7/YVGuide.pdf>

Community Partnerships with Youth – Community Partnerships with Youth is a national training and resource development organization with over ten years of experience promoting a youth voice in organizations and communities. The organization has developed training guides and offers training programs directed at helping young people understand their role as community trustees and as important participants in program governance.

Available online at: <http://www.cpyinc.org>

Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) – YLI seeks to build communities in which young people and their adult allies come together to create positive social change. YLI designs and implements community-based programs that provide youth with leadership skills in the areas of drug and alcohol abuse prevention, philanthropy, and civic engagement. Building on these real-world program experiences, YLI creates curricula and training programs that foster social change efforts, while promoting best practices in the field of youth development.

Available online at: <http://www.yli.org>

National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) – NYLC provides training and technical assistance to programs seeking to implement youth leadership and service-learning activities. It develops training sessions tailored to meet the needs of the client that are led by at least one adult in partnership with at least one young person.

Available online at: <http://www.nylc.org>

Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development – The center supports the belief that young people should have a role in planning and implementing community and organizational programs and policies that affect them. It promotes youth-adult partnerships and connections and has developed a number of resources to support these partnerships based on mutual respect.

Available online at: <http://www.theinnovationcenter.org>

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