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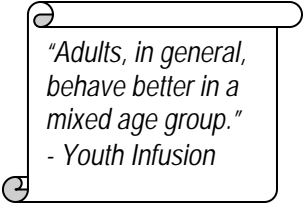
Section 4:  
Youth  
Participation

## Youth Participation

Boards that deal with issues of relevance to youth are increasingly recognizing that youth involvement helps to form policy that is more effective and responsive to the needs of young adults. Incorporating the young adult voice has challenges that are all its own, but the rewards are unique and worth the effort.

*Benefits.* Boards that engage youth as members often find those youth to be significant assets, not only to the board itself but to the policies it creates. Involving youth in this capacity has been gaining support as a means for the youth to build self-esteem, learn decision-making and problem solving skills, and to explore the world of work. It allows youth to develop a strong sense of civic responsibility and hone their leadership skills while having an authentic voice in shaping the policies and outcomes that are meant to benefit them.

Allowing youth to build those skills has multiple uses to the board. The mere presence of a youth is a continual and extremely useful reminder of what the population the board seeks to aid is really like—it is sometimes all too easy for adults to forget what being an adolescent is actually like. Our adolescent experience varies based on context and background. A young adult can share his or her own experience to help shape policies so that they are more likely to work for other adolescents.



*"Adults, in general, behave better in a mixed age group."  
- Youth Infusion*

Too often adults “talk at” youth and develop policies “for” youth instead of listening and participating with them to develop and establish policies that will actually work. Offering youth the opportunity to help develop the policies that will impact them is a sure way to create buy-in, ownership, and ultimately, better policies. And you may even find that adults are positively influenced by the presence of an energetic young person!

*Things to Remember.* There are a number of logistical, legal, and other issues to keep in mind when involving youth in your board. It is strongly recommended that you take some time as a board and openly address the issues below before youth board members begin to attend meetings.

It is a good idea for the parents or guardians of a youth board member to have regular contact with at least one adult member of your board. One option is for this

member to be the primary contact for the parents so that time commitments, any special needs, and transportation concerns can be addressed. You can also invite the youth's parents to events. And so as not to create any misconceptions on the part of the youth, it is a good idea to be very clear that you are in contact with their parent or guardian.

While Chapter 2 discusses issues and strategies related to fees, transportation, and barriers for family members, there are additional factors to consider with youth. Your board will need to establish a protocol to compensate youth for their time with an honorarium, stipends, or consultation fee. It is also necessary to consider the manner of compensation so that you do not negatively impact any public assistance benefits. Travel and other expenses related to board participation should be covered by the board (Matarese et al, 2005).

In addition, it's a good idea to consider the following areas<sup>2</sup>:

- Meeting Time. The meeting time cannot interfere with school, work or extracurricular schedules. Your board may want to consider being flexible in meeting dates and times, and discussing it with the youth board members at the beginning of their school term;
- Refreshments. Youth will want and need to eat, just as adults. They can contribute to a potluck or benefit from your catering budget, but either way it is not a bad idea to make food available.
- Mentor recruitment and training. It is best if you are able to recruit and provide training to the designated board youth mentor. That mentor should at a minimum talk to and ideally meet with the youth at least once before the first board meeting.
- Potential language barriers. It will be important to identify and support linguistic needs (e.g. interpreters) as necessary. Whether because of jargon, pace, or the use of acronyms, your board will need to be sensitive to all discussion short cuts that might prevent any new member, not just youth, from understanding the conversation.
- Potential cultural barriers. It is suggested that new members share any barriers for meeting board member expectation due to observances, holidays or other cultural impacts.
- Diversity. Diversity awareness is similar to what has already been addressed in reference to family members. However, some people say that youth have

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<sup>2</sup> *Youth Involvement in Systems of Care: A Guide to Empowerment*, The American Institute of Research

their own culture. It is therefore important to recognize and accept the dialogue, posture, habits and style of dress that are distinct to youth, as well as to be clear about the expectations and norms within the group.

- Mutual respect in word and deed. If you do not treat them with respect, your new board members may feel as if you regard them as filling a quota and nothing else.

It cannot be stressed enough that making decisions with youth from the beginning can make dealing with these issues a great starting place for a profitable relationship rather than a set of pitfalls. Find out what times work best for the youth you hope to recruit. Identify a location with many transportation options or provide transportation for the youth. Ask youth what materials and equipment they need available to successfully participate as partners.<sup>3</sup> If you start out with open, straightforward dialogue, you will have accomplished much towards establishing the kind of relationship that will benefit you both!

Transparency is essential. This is especially important when hands are tied due to policy or other reasons so that youth still feel heard, even if their ideas cannot be acted upon.

*Organizational Benefits.* These benefits were determined by a study conducted at the University of Wisconsin, Madison:

- Youth involvement becomes systemic;
- Commitment to focused mission;
- Know what does and doesn't work;
- Inclusion of under-represented groups;
- Action orientation- increased community outreach; and
- Appeal to a potential funder.

*A Word About Tokenism.* There are several ways to make a youth board member feel like a token:

- Having just one youth on a board;
- Treating your youth board members like observers; and

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn, J. & Kahn, R. 2007. *Guidebook to Creating and Maintaining a Youth Partnership for Health*. Denver, CO: Colorado Youth Partnership for Health, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

- Giving the adult members access to equipment and materials that the youth is not permitted to access.

Strategies to reduce tokenism:

- Consider the possibility of bringing on 2 or 3 youth at a time and encouraging all or any to attend all meetings whenever possible.
- Consider a two-year term to give the youth time to become familiar with the board. Then they can help to transition other youth onto the board as their term comes to an end.
- Speak directly to youth and ask clear questions particularly in the beginning, to foster engagement

*On Time for Reflection.* Time for reflection is equally important for youth as it is for adults. Youth need time to think about your offer once it is made, and they may need a little guidance on what they should consider before making a decision. When you invite a youth to become a member of your board, you might ask them to reflect upon the following and not give their answer until they have thought it over<sup>4</sup>:

- How does the board's mission reflect your values and interests?
- How does this board help you fulfill your goals and aspirations?
- Did you feel comfortable with the board members?
- How do you feel about making a contribution of time and energy to this board?
- How can you see your strengths and talent benefitting the board?
- What other information do you need before you make the decision to join?
- Will your family support you in this endeavor? Who can we contact?
- Will the meeting times and expectations interfere with your school/work?
- Do they have a referral of another youth that would be interested in board membership?

### ***Strategies for Engaging and Retaining Youth Participation***

*Recruitment Strategies.* The amount of energy you put into recruitment and selection will be reflected in the caliber, diversity, and commitment of the youth you select<sup>5</sup>. It

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<sup>4</sup> Youth in Government

<sup>5</sup> Moving Ahead

is therefore doubly important to prepare fully before beginning the recruitment process. Before you begin to recruit youth, we recommend that your board:

- Clearly articulate why they are seeking youth input;
- Develop a board policy that stipulates the inclusion of youth;
- Have a strategy for involving the youth in the decision-making process.

*Retention Strategies.* When youth are treated with respect and trust they tend to do a good job. They are very good at living up to or down to an adult's expectations. Creating an environment where the youth feels engaged, motivated, and valued is not only about coaching and mentoring the youth, but also about training the adults on how to work with youth. When youth encounter excessive guidance and the kind of supervision that is born of distrust, they will rebel.<sup>6</sup> Your board members need to expect the best and communicate high expectation and levels of trust.

There are four key strategies to retaining youth (and adult members) on your board:

1. Provide the youth in advance with the materials they need to come to the meeting informed and ready. Without adequate support, their missteps will reinforce prevailing stereotypes and demeaning attitudes.
  - Send board meeting invitation out well in advance of board meeting. The meeting invitation will often include objectives for the meeting, a meeting agenda with the youth listed, and any logistical information. Even if the other board members know the logistical information because it is the same as always, it is a good idea to list it explicitly for each meeting.
  - Send out a reminder just prior to the meeting with RSVP and/or dial in information if unable to attend.
  - Provide a list of the commonly used acronyms.
  - Identify and support any cultural and linguistic needs (i.e. interpreters) particular to the youth
2. Clarify roles and responsibilities
  - Discuss specific responsibilities and the youth's role with youth and adult supporters. This can be done by the mentor or by someone else.
  - Review the meeting objectives. Discuss both the specifics on the topics of the meeting and youth's role as regards those topic areas.
  - Ensure that the adult support and the youth have developed a coaching schedule to prepare for the meeting or presentation

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<sup>6</sup> *A Board/Committee Member Curriculum.* (1994). Community Partnerships with Youth, Inc., Youth in Governance.

3. Establish a clear set of ways in which youth can participate.
4. Give youth a chance to facilitate a piece of the meeting
  - Identify several opportunities for youth participation, like committees, interviewing administrators, meeting with existing youth boards, reviewing certain policies/procedures for input, etc.
  - Utilize multiple formats within the meetings, such as presentations, small group discussions and surveys. Adults will likely appreciate the variety as well!
5. Conduct a Skill and Interest Inventory. A good match is the key to the success of youth in governance. Please also see the attachment called Youth Skills and Interest Inventory Form.
  - Help youth to identify what they have to offer the board by conducting a skill and interest inventory. An inventory may begin with: "I am good at" and then contain a list of skills, like writing, analyzing, recruiting, public speaking, etc, or "I am interested in", with examples of mental health, changing systems or sharing my experience with others. The youth would then circle the appropriate area.
  - Match the youth with tasks that align with their interest and skill. For example, a young person with artistic skills may help to format or develop and printed materials your board is developing.

*Mentors.* As recommended previously, a mentor is an excellent way to increase retention and satisfaction of new board members. A mentor can provide an understanding of the board mechanisms, expectations, history, members, and roles. The main thing to consider when choosing an adult mentor for a new youth board member is that he or she is eager to cultivate the youth voice, has shown patience, and is level-headed. It is also important to make sure that he or she has the time to dedicate to supporting this young person.

It is also a good idea to provide the mentor with some suggestions appropriate for the particular case of mentoring a new board member. Here are some suggestions you can make to the mentor:

1. Dedicate time to adequately support the youth;
2. Meet and orient the youth prior to the first meeting;
3. Reach out to the parents or guardian of the youth;

4. Arrange to meet youth before and after subsequent meetings to prepare, process and answer any questions that a youth might have;
5. Train the youth in the appropriate skill sets for their role in a particular meeting;
6. Involve youth in developing content and, if possible, setting the time and location for the meeting;
7. Explain a few of the more commonly used Roberts Rules of Order, or other board decision making protocol used, particularly how to make a motion and second a motion and how to make requests for the floor and the agenda.

### ***Additional Issues that May Arise when Youth Participate***

*Sharing Power.* It is difficult for any organization to share power with a new partner, and this may be particularly true as it relates to sharing power with youth. To address some of the unique challenges present in a youth-adult partnership, it is crucial to recognize that it may be particularly difficult for adults to see youth as worthy of power. Likewise, for many youth, power sharing may be a new and difficult role. The structure of voting, how to establish an agenda item for discussion, and how to raise a concern should therefore be reviewed with all members toward the beginning of the youth's term.

*“Partnerships of any type are challenging, and youth-adult partnerships are no exception. Bringing people of different ages and backgrounds together requires facing some barriers.”*  
—Jones & Perkins, 2006; from the YPH guidebook

Some staff may not be forthcoming about their resistance to giving youth an equal vote, or they may not even truly understand the cost-benefit of youth engagement. A frank discussion about the level or model of youth involvement is necessary to address any lingering misgivings.<sup>7</sup> Training for both youth and adults is available and recommended – please see below resources to access training available for Colorado communities.

Adults may need to take cultural competency or responsiveness trainings to prepare for working with youth. Youth culture is just as unique as any other culture that adults may encounter in their jobs. [Sometimes the most inspirational messages come from youth who, in their innocence and optimism, risk saying what needs to be said.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *A Board/Committee Member Curriculum.* (1994). Community Partnerships with Youth, Inc., Youth in Governance

<sup>8</sup> *A Board/Committee Member Curriculum.* (1994). Community Partnerships with Youth, Inc., Youth in Governance

Youth are sensitive to language. The language adults use provide clues to their attitude towards youth, and youth will pick up on those attitudes. So it is a good idea for adults to review some of the key pitfalls of language as regards youth:

- Do not call your youth members ‘kids’ or ‘students’ – refer to them as ‘young adults’, ‘people’ or ‘partners’;
- Be an ally and help youth represent themselves instead of talking for them;
- Check competitiveness at the door: work together to support youth; and
- Be sensitive and open to dissent. You do not have to agree on everything. Ideological differences will exist with youth just as they might with other adults on the board.

*Policies and Procedures.* Sometimes board policies can get in the way of successful youth-adult partnerships. They may not provide for enough time to make decisions together, or they may include requirements around parental consent for involving youth. Some procedures may not even be policy, but rather a practice that is common to the organization and everyone just “knows.” In that case, think about creating some “ground rules” or unwritten procedures. Take a good look at your organization’s policies, and identify whether youth will have equal access to information and tools, have equal voting rights, and the opportunity to serve as an officer.<sup>9</sup> If they won’t, change your policies.

Finding out which policies are requirements and which are practices that can be changed is a first step. If policies do create barriers, you may need to work with the youth, and even their parents, to overcome those barriers. This may in fact be a logical first step towards engaging youth in developing more youth-friendly policies and signaling the importance your board places on youth involvement.

### ***Additional Models to Consider for Youth Involvement***

In addition to having youth on your board, consider some of these other possibilities for youth involvement. For more information on Ad Hoc Committees and Advisory Councils or Committees, please see Chapter 9, Beyond Meeting Participation.

#### *A Youth Advisory Council / Commission or Adjunct Body*

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<sup>9</sup> *A Board/Committee Member Curriculum.* (1994). Community Partnerships with Youth, Inc., Youth in Governance

- *The upside.* A youth commission may be less intimidating and take place in a less formal setting. They may be able to engage in a more open discussion of the decision-making process. Youth commissions can be a great training ground for emerging youth, in addition to allowing input from greater numbers of youth. An adjunct body may also take on more than one role (advise, evaluate, market), and can provide valuable ongoing input to all your issues & policies relating to youth.
- *The downside.* Without a defined role & structure to connect it to the board, it may fall apart and become disillusioned. Adults may struggle to share power with an advisory board, and members may have decreased decision making power. An adjunct board requires more staff time to recruit, train, provide support, and define roles of the advisory board. Finally, with an adjunct body, the full board does not receive the benefit of contact with youth board members.

#### *An Ad Hoc Committee or Task Force*

- An ad hoc committee or task force is a short-term entity that is created for a specific purpose.

#### *A Policy Committee*

- A policy committee has an institutionalized role in the board, as mandated by the by-laws. It offers significant advisory capacity from programming to organizational concerns.
- Youth can provide input on any policy ramifications that are specific to youth.
- With a policy committee, it is important to be clear about any limits to the youth's input.

#### *A Focus Group*

- A focus group is an informal group providing input on recommendations/decisions about youth programs / policies.

#### *A Mini-Grant Program*

- A group of youth who determine who will receive small grants for a specific youth-related project or initiative.

*Given the many challenges facing our state, finding solutions with the help of our youth, our future, is essential!"*  
—Representative Roberts

### **Example Boards with Youth Participation**

- Bridging The Gap, Mile High United Way  
[www.knovada.com/jcyoi/btgpartners.asp](http://www.knovada.com/jcyoi/btgpartners.asp)
- Colorado Youth Leadership Network:  
<http://www.youthleadership.com/CYLN/cylnmain.html>
- The YES! Academy
- The Youth Empowerment Services Academy
- The Denver Indian Family Resource Center.  
<http://www.difrc.org/services.htm>
- The Colorado Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Council  
[http://www.dcj.state.co.us/oajja/Boards\\_and\\_Councils/JJDP\\_Boards%20Councils.html](http://www.dcj.state.co.us/oajja/Boards_and_Councils/JJDP_Boards%20Councils.html)
- The Mayor's Youth Commission, City of Denver
- Assets for Colorado Youth
- Loveland Youth Advisory Commission: Extensive training for professionals and youth to enhance youth involvement
- 4H Programs

### **Examples of Youth-friendly Materials**

- The Colorado Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Council's Youth Committee By-Laws:  
*"The Youth Committee shall be comprised of all youth members appointed to the Council, interested non-youth Council members, and non-Council youth as appropriate who are appointed by the Chairman at the recommendation of the Youth Committee Members. The Youth Committee shall have the following duties: to meet a minimum of four times annually to ensure youth input and participation on the Council and to keep the Council informed of current youth issues at the state and national level."*
- The State Youth Council (SYC), led by Co-Chairs Bette Matkowski and Dani Crane, paves a pathway that leads to economic success for youth. The SYC provides policy recommendations to the Workforce Development Council and the Governor of Colorado that extend support and technical assistance to local youth councils. They also make recommendations on how Youth Discretionary Funds can be invested to ensure that Colorado's young workforce is well-positioned to achieve success via a variety of skill development opportunities, resulting in attaining both jobs in the short term and a capacity for increased earnings over the long run.

*"The Colorado State Youth Council in alliance with the Colorado Workforce Development Council is dedicated to supporting the growth of Colorado's youth. Empowering youth today with resources in Education, Employment, and Economic Development will ensure success of Colorado's future leaders."*

- **Student Coalition for Action in Literacy Education.**  
*"The Board shall consist of 13 – 18 members elected by the Board for staggered two year terms. Youth will be elected to wither two or three year terms. A minimum of four college and university students and two new readers will serve on the Board. Board members will consist of the following areas: new readers, national service organizations, foundations, corporations and other interested in the organization's mission."*
- **The Girl Scout Council:**  
*"Voting Membership: The voting members of the council shall be adult volunteers and girls ages 14 years of age and over whoa re members of the Girl Scout movement and registered through the council."*

## **Legal Issues**

*By-Law language.* It is important that by-laws on youth representation include<sup>10</sup>:

- The number of youth on the board;
- Term limits (recommend staggered 2 or 3 year terms);
- Expertise and interest in the organization's mission and target population; and
- Voting eligibility.

*Conflict of Interest.* Your Board may be concerned that involving youth in governance will create a conflict of interest. This can easily be addressed by a clearly written conflict of interest policy, which can be a single succinct paragraph. Always consult an attorney. One example of such a policy is taken from the National Center for Non-Profit Board's, "How to Manage Conflict of Interest: A Guide for Non-Profit Boards:

*"In the case that a Board or Committee member is aware of a potential conflict of interest with respect to any matter coming before the board or committee, she or he will not be present for voting in connection with that matter. She or he may however participate fully in the discussion of the matter prior to the vote."*

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<sup>10</sup> Youth on Board

*Legal Precedents.* Several states, including Colorado, have laws supporting youth board involvement: Colorado, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Maine, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Washington. Where the law is silent on the issues of youth on Boards of Directors, the lack of legal clarity can make people wary of inviting youth into boards. Colorado, like many other states, does not have a minimum age requirement for participation on a Board of Directors.

Here are a few suggestions on how to avoid legal difficulties<sup>11</sup>:

- Young people should not be signatories on checking accounts;
- Young people should not sign binding contracts with consultants, businesses or directly be responsible for hiring; and
- In matters related to legal contracts, it is best that young people not have a tie breaker vote.

*Colorado's New Youth Advisory Council Bill.* On April 29, 2008, The Youth Advisory Council Bill (HB-08 1157) was passed through the Colorado State Senate. The bill was sponsored by Representative Ellen Roberts and Senator Sue Windels, and it establishes a Youth Advisory Council of 40 voting 14- to 19-year-old members and four non-voting members from the legislature. The council is intended to meet at least four times a year and provide the General Assembly with perspectives from young people on proposed and pending legislation and other issues.

*"Young people obviously have a big stake in our future and are affected by what we do in this building. This law will give the youth of Colorado a formal voice in the public discourse."*

*—Governor Ritter*

## **Lessons Learned**

It is always a good idea to benefit from the mistakes others have made! Here are few lessons that other groups have learned in involving youth in their boards and decision-making processes:

- Lack of clarity about the exact responsibility of an adjunct youth group leads to distrust of the authenticity of the boards using the youth perspective in decision-making;

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<sup>11</sup> Youth on Board

- Board members who may be unfamiliarity with the youth training provided for new board members may leave adults with unrealistically high or low expectations of the youth;
- It is a good idea for youth to be told the extent of their impact and authority and the value of serving;
- Add 2 or 3 youth at the same time to avoid tokenism;
- Provide training: board mission, group norms, decision-making rules, roles and meeting processes including time frame, minutes and voting protocols;
- Provide information regarding parking or other transportation / building particulars;
- Don't forget to have some fun;
- Expect to share personal stories with youth if your expectation is for them to share their experiences in the system. Disclosure works two ways; and
- Network youth leaders and boards to enhance visibility and importance of youth perspective.

### ***Other Resources For Your Board***

- Youth Engagement Training Healthy Communities Coalition of Larimer County [www.healthylarimer.org](http://www.healthylarimer.org)
- Resources to help involve teens in decision making. [www.ActforYouth.net](http://www.ActforYouth.net)
- On-line toolkits available for youth involvement in policymaking, program evaluation and strengthen partnerships. [www.TheInnovationCenter.org](http://www.TheInnovationCenter.org)
- Youth Voice Toolkit: This toolkit is a series of one- and two-sheet publications, that identify a number of innovative practices, and practical considerations and critical concepts that are focused on engaging Youth Voice, particularly among historically disengaged young people. [www.freechild.org/YouthVoice/](http://www.freechild.org/YouthVoice/)
- Youth Infusion Website: <http://youthinfusion.com>
- Youth Infusion Network : <http://enfusion-network.org>
- Effective Youth Development Practice with Teens of Color [www.cartainc.org/youthengagement.html](http://www.cartainc.org/youthengagement.html)
- Building Partnerships for Youth <http://cals-f.calsnet.arizona.edu/fcs/bpy/content.cfm?content=YAPartners>
- Freechild Project [www.freechild.org/yapartnerships.htm](http://www.freechild.org/yapartnerships.htm)
- Colorado Youth Development Team's Training & Technical Assistance Clearing House, Amy Engleman, [Amy@csi-policy.org](mailto:Amy@csi-policy.org), 303-455-1740
- Youth Power, Kippi Clausen, Project Director, Bridging the Gap, <http://www.unitedwaydenver.org> , 303-561-2386

- Healthier Communities Coalition Youth Engagement Training, <http://www.healthylarimer.org/>, 970-495-7503
- Colorado Youth Advisory Council. Contact the Council for consultation on legislation effecting youth within specific Colorado regions or having statewide impact, and access to other youth networks and perspectives across issues and systems statewide. Contact Civic Canopy at <http://www.civikkanopy.org>
- A successful example of youth mentoring can be found with the Association of Alaska School Boards: ASB training programs help instill standards in board members. Their Youth Leadership programs connect young Alaskans with adult mentors and offer opportunities for learning new skills in civics and communication. [www.aasb.org/content/partnerships](http://www.aasb.org/content/partnerships)

### ***Materials and Examples***

- ✓ Youth Skills and Interest Inventory Form
- ✓ Board Assessment: Readiness For Youth Engagement
- ✓ Example Employer Release Form for Youth

**Please note:** The resources provided in this workbook are in no way exhaustive.