

# Types of Youth Engagement Activities

## **Youth Legislative/Executive Advisory Boards**

One of the most common types of youth engagement in the public sector is to form a group of around 6-20 youth to act as an advisory board to an existing government body. For example, many cities have youth commissions that review issues pertaining to young people and make policy recommendations to the city council. Youth advisory groups can also be applied to departments of a city, county or state government, as well as in nonprofit organizations. The success of a youth commission can depend greatly on the level of support and mentorship provided to the groups. A group consisting only of youth may need great encouragement to tackle complex and substantive policy issues.

## **Seats on Existing Boards/Commissions/Committees**

Integrating a youth member or two into existing policymaking bodies can be a relatively simple form of youth engagement that also makes a meaningful impact. In some instances, dependent on state law and the scope of responsibilities, these youth may be voting members, while in other instances students have only an advisory vote. With an adult mentor on the body to help familiarize students with processes and issues, youth members can become highly knowledgeable contributors to policymaking. The downside is that a smaller number of youth can participate than youth advisory boards or other forms of youth engagement that reach out to a larger number of teens. Some jurisdictions combine this form of engagement with a youth commission.

## **Policy Hearings/Briefings**

When youth have strong messages to communicate on a timely issue, a policy hearing or briefing can provide an excellent outlet. Youth who have completed research on community issues and policy solutions may invite policymakers to listen to presentations by “youth experts” on a topic such as public transportation, teen pregnancy prevention, or the impacts of sprawl on youth. Such hearings are usually held in government venues, including the state capitol or city hall.

### **Advocacy Meetings with Decision-makers**

Advocacy meetings are another way youth can communicate their positions about legislation or bring attention to a community concern. Adult advisors or students themselves can set up a series of short meetings with key decision-makers, such as legislators or members of city councils, county boards, and planning commissions. These meetings provide more personal interaction and can build the kind of professional relationships that may enable youth to have great influence on policy decisions.

### **Speaking at Legislative/BOS/City Council Hearings**

With most local governments, youth can participate at any meeting during the public comment section of the agenda. Most jurisdictions have a time limit on public comment, but they will try to allow all those interested to speak. Students can comment on proposed ordinances, other policy decisions, or about topics they want to bring to the attention of the council. Students can also contact a member of the city council to advocate that a particular item be placed on the council agenda. Having students address the state legislature is more challenging to arrange. We suggest contacting a bill author's office and being prepared to offer compelling reasons why students should speak at a hearing.

### **Policy Conferences/ Forums**

If you want to involve a large number of youth for a one-time event, a conference or forum may be your best bet. Such an event can be primarily education, but should integrate some connection to action. For example, students may spend time learning about a topic, and then develop youth recommendations, which could be presented to a panel of decision-makers at the conference closing.

### **Youth Delegations to Conferences/Meetings of Policy Professionals**

Including teams of youth in conferences of adult professionals can provide great benefits to both students and adults. Participation allows youth to gain tremendous knowledge in a field and also to contribute unique perspectives to sessions. Providing an in-depth orientation to prepare youth for participation is especially important with all such opportunities.

### **Program Evaluation**

Youth can be instrumental in evaluating any programs that serve or directly impact young people. They can provide an insiders view of an organization, observing strengths and weaknesses that may not be perceived by adult evaluators. Youth evaluators can be highly effective in developing and administering surveys, focus groups, and interviews with other youth.

### **Grant-making (Application Review)**

For organizations that allocate any types of funds for programs that impact youth, getting student input on expenditures just makes sense. Students help develop RFP's and criteria for awarding funds and/or can be involved with reviewing applications.

### **Community Needs Assessments (Asset Mapping, Focus Groups, Surveys, or Charettes)**

Various forms of community assessments can be conducted at the beginning of a larger project or as stand-alone youth engagement activities. Asset mapping is typically a large endeavor using data and GIS software, while focus groups and short surveys are much less elaborate. Assessment projects that integrate use of video are also a popular, but rather expensive method. Charettes allow a group to gain information about community needs and wants through a community design scenario.

### **Peer Education Activities**

Classroom presentations, essay contests, information booths at popular teen hangouts, and mural projects are just a few examples of ways youth can get engaged to improve awareness of community planning and design issues.

### **Press Conferences/Media Advocacy Campaigns**

When youth have a message to communicate – either to policymakers, to their peers, or to the general public – the mass media can be a powerful tool around which a youth engagement effort can be centered. With your help, youth can put together dynamic press conferences at a relatively low cost. If your organization has the funds, a multi-media campaign in which youth design advertisements can be both fun and make a difference.