

Youth Engagement & Youth-Adult Partnerships

What Are Youth Engagement & Youth-Adult Partnerships?

Youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships are hallmark guiding principles of positive youth development. These principles are the call to working with youth and young adults as resources to cultivate, not problems to fix. Youth engagement encompasses how the community supports youth in cultivating a sense of self and actively connects youth with peers, adults and their environment. Research demonstrates that engaging youth voice is an essential element of effective organizational development among community and youth-serving organizations^{1,2}. Moreover, involving young people in program development and implementation can increase the potential for success.

The critical component to engaging youth in the community and developing youth-adult partnerships is that youth are supported in participating in decision-making processes that currently may be reserved only for adults. The ultimate goal is for youth and adults to work together to make more effective decisions that positively affect youth, youth-serving organizations and communities. (See the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Youth Partnership for Health's DVD, *Nothing About Us Without Us*, and guidebook, *Engage Youth! Colorado's Guide to Building Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships* at www.healthyyouthcolorado.org).

Colorado youth-serving professionals confirmed existing research results on the benefits of engaging youth in planning, implementation or evaluation work³ and described the top three benefits as:

- 1) receiving a fresh perspective, creativity and insight into what will make the program, campaign, policy or strategy a more effective one, including the generation of completely new ideas;
- 2) increasing youth engagement, commitment, retention, buy-in, ownership and peer-to-peer outreach;
- 3) increasing program effectiveness and positive outcomes. (Colorado Youth Development Team, 2009. www.healthyyouthcolorado.org).

Tips & Recommendations for Youth Engagement & Youth-Adult Partnerships

There are many effective methods for garnering youth input into programming, such as focus groups; youth advisory boards; youth governance boards; youth representation on advisory or governance boards; youth philanthropy; and youth as researchers, evaluators, organizers, social marketers and journalists. The following tips and recommendations were culled from the Colorado Youth Development Team's *Supporting Young People to Reach Their Full Potential: Positive Youth Development Efforts in Colorado*. (www.healthyyouthcolorado.org).

Youth from across the state shared what they feel is needed in adults to make the youth-adult partnership work. This includes:

- 1) attempting to make things fun;
- 2) having a positive focus;
- 3) having an open mind;

- 4) having confidence in young people's abilities;
- 5) encouraging youth to take on new leadership roles;
- 6) being a supportive role model;
- 7) being relatable; and
- 8) being actively and authentically interested in developing a relationship with youth.

As evidenced from this list, youth-adult partnerships are not a simple undertaking and warrant a significant amount of time, as all collaborations do. Some tips that were generated from adults and youth from across the state include the following:

- **Consider that youth want to be involved in the decisions that affect them.** During the community conversations, youth expressed, "People don't even think about asking youth what they want." Other youth pleaded, "Come to us; don't implement a program for us without our input 'cause it may not even work." To successfully engage youth, adults need to change the way they do business to create the space for new partnerships, creative ideas and diverse forms of leadership training.
- **Start partnerships early.** Ensuring that young people are involved from the start often saves time and resources in the long run.
- **Offer a variety of ways to get people's opinions.** This may include in-person meetings, e-mail and other technological venues such as social networking sites.
- **Plan ample amount of time for the project.** New partnerships take time to develop, especially when you are working with youth and adults' schedules.
- **Know that youth want to be involved at all levels of the process,** including the parts you wouldn't necessarily think of being "youth-friendly," such as designing surveys, developing request for proposals, interviewing potential staff members and defining funding requirements. These areas often challenge organizations and agencies, since youth are not traditionally involved in these arenas.
- **Value youth input and support their contribution monetarily with youth consultation fees and the resources and access (e.g., transportation) necessary to contribute equally.** Some organizations have begun to shift the way they think of youth stipends and refer to them as "consultation fees." This demonstrates the value the organization places on youth expertise. Just as accountants are paid for contributing their financial expertise, youth deserve to be compensated for contributing their expertise on youth culture and issues as well. Staff time to coordinate and food for meetings are also necessary forms of financial support.
- **"Act on our input. Don't just talk like you want it,"** said a young woman from *La Plata County*, and when constraints exist that prohibit organizations to take action on youth input, be open and honest about it.
- **Participate in youth-adult partnership trainings, particularly related to communication.** One young woman from *Colorado Springs* admitted, "Youth need to not be stubborn and meet the adults halfway. You get there by baby steps: Listen, give each other advice and compromise. Adults can't be so strict because that causes youth to



rebel. We need to help each other out; take responsibility for ourselves but really listen to each other instead of blaming. Compromise and communication!"

- **Provide youth leadership trainings geared toward diverse young people to set them up for success in a variety of situations.**
- **Utilize existing systems and groups for community youth representation.** For example, a young woman in *La Plata County* suggested that to get communitywide input from the youth into the *La Plata County* Child, Youth and Family Master Plan, they should use the schools' established systems for advisory classroom representatives.
- **Create the interest, support and opportunity in your organization for youth input.**

The following recommendations are arranged in separate checklists for three target audiences – youth-serving professionals, decision and policy makers and funders.

Youth-serving professionals can:

- Involve diverse young people in the development and implementation of programs with focus groups, internships, apprenticeships and as consultants throughout the entire process of program assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation. Support this principle and practice with the necessary financial and logistical resources, such as a budget for youth participation (e.g., stipends or hourly fees for youth consultation; transportation reimbursement; food expenses; staff time for outreach, coordination, communication and training development).
- Utilize one of Colorado's 84 youth advisory boards when making decisions that affect youth. (See www.healthyyouthcolorado.org.)
- Set up youth for successful engagement, partnership and collaboration by
 - training youth on the skills and background knowledge required for meaningful engagement;
 - training decision-makers and power-holders on how to engage youth in providing input, how to partner with them and what to do if their "hands are tied" and they are unable to act on the youth's or families' suggestions and ideas;
 - providing communication training for both youth and youth-serving professionals;
 - being clear about the roles, responsibilities and benefits of youth and adult partners;
 - creating line items in organization, agency and program budgets that support diverse youth engagement in decision making. (See www.healthyyouthcolorado.org)
- Intentionally engage youth with diverse backgrounds, such as youth with varying developmental disabilities; youth in military families; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender youth in positive youth development efforts. Use recruiting strategies that ensure diverse representation.
- Increase attention to youth's family and cultural assets to encourage celebration of their culture.

- Honor and support the myriad of learning styles and interests of youth. Young people are problem solvers and are intrinsically motivated by their own interests and concerns. Inquire about what those interests and concerns are and build from them in your organization's planning. Allow for them to be cultivated through a variety of media: visually, orally, experientially, kinesthetically, etc.
- Provide a diverse array of school and after-school programming to effectively reach out and engage all youth in their learning, development and enrichment.
- Encourage and support educators to create student-driven classes, such as service-learning, so they are more engaged and invested in their education.
- Offer adult support for young people to lead efforts that address their concerns and interests.

Policy makers and decision makers can:

- Develop policies and practices that require youth-serving professionals to be trained on youth engagement strategies so they effectively involve youth in the development and implementation of programs.
- Create policies and practices that support low student-adult ratios in classrooms, after-school programs and community-based organizations so that adults can devote the necessary time to build supportive relationships with youth.
- Advocate for youth and families to have a seat at decision-making tables.

Public and private funders can:

- Encourage or require grantees to actively involve youth in planning, implementing and evaluating youth-serving programs. Support this practice with the necessary financial and logistical resources, such as a budget for youth participation (e.g., stipends or hourly fees for youth consultation; transportation reimbursement; food expenses; staff time for outreach, coordination, communication and training development).
- Support training and technical assistance for positive youth development strategies and practices, including youth engagement. Examples in Colorado include the Assets for Colorado Youth training series (see www.buildassets.org) or the Youth Development Institute, an on-line professional development tools focused on youth development that is accessible to all Coloradans www.ydicolorado.org.
- Fund policies and practices that support low student-adult ratios in classrooms, after-school programs and community-based organizations so that adults can devote the necessary time to build supportive relationships with youth.
- Authentically engage youth in the grant-making process.

Who Is the Colorado Youth Development Team?

The Colorado Youth Development Team is a statewide, private/public partnership of youth, young adults, youth-serving professionals and other adults who care for or about young people. The team aims to integrate positive youth development principles and strategies into all programs, policies, organizations and community efforts that affect youth and young adults to enhance the services, opportunities and supports within their communities. The team envisions



Colorado as a state where all people value and pursue respect, communication and understanding between youth and adults to achieve a unified, healthy and engaged community, so that both adults and youth reach their full potential and lead healthy lives. Members of the team work to raise awareness, promote, increase and unify positive youth development efforts and strategies across the State of Colorado. The information in this tip sheet is gleaned from the exploratory research the Colorado Youth Development Team did to examine the existing policies and practices that support positive youth development in Colorado, challenges that exist and communities' suggestions for moving Colorado forward in supporting all young people to achieve their full potential. The research methodology included a statewide survey of 348 youth-serving professionals representing all 64 counties in Colorado reporting on their policies and practices for positive youth development and 13 community conversations with youth, young adults, parents/caregivers, community leaders and youth-serving professionals across the state. (For the full report, see www.healthyouthcolorado.org)

How to Get Connected to the Colorado Youth Development Team

<http://coloradoyouthdevelopment.ning.com> is the network site that is being used for increased and flexible participation, communication, coordination and collaboration within the Colorado Youth Development Team network groups. Please become a member, map your organization and check out the "Groups" tab to join the conversations happening within the Colorado youth development community, the Colorado Youth Development Team and its Training & Technical Assistance and Policy, Procedure, Practice & Funding Integration Networks. For more information, contact the Colorado Youth Development Team Coordinator, Amy Engelman, at amy@csi-policy.org or 303.455.1740.

¹ Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the processes and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Development Science*, 8(2), 75-90.

² Olson, J.R., Goddard, H.W., Solheim, C.A., & Sandt, L. (2004). Making a case for engaging adolescents in program decision-making. *Journal of Extension*, 42(6), 1-10.

³ London, J., Zimmerman, K., & Erbstein, N. (2003). Youth-led research and evaluation: Tools for youth, organizational, and community development. In K. Sabo (Ed.), *New directions for evaluation: Youth participatory evaluation*, 98. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.