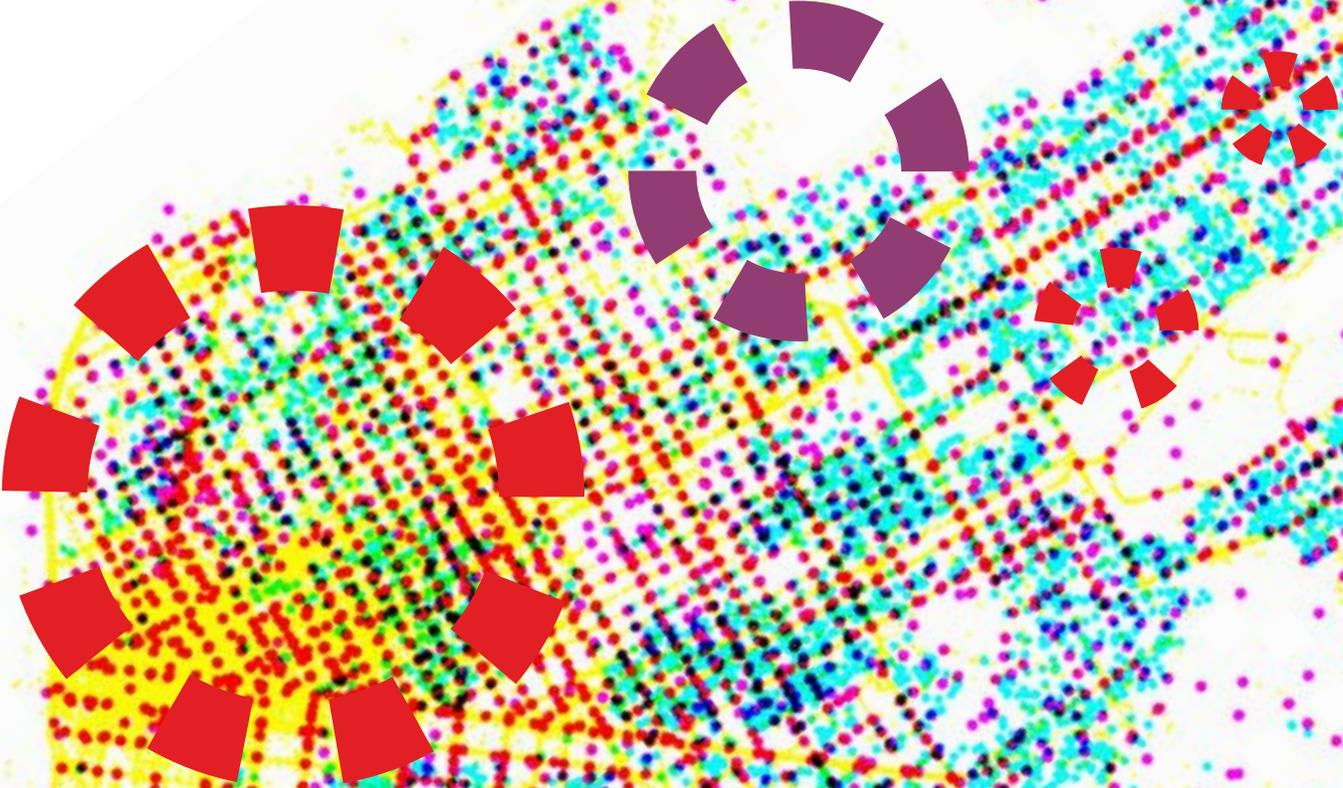


YOUTH ADVISORY STRUCTURES: SUGGESTIONS FOR AGENCY PRACTICE



Introduction and Table of Contents

This informational guidebook has been written to help your organization create its own youth advisory group. The guidebook is organized around six questions.

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By answering these questions you will have a better understanding of the purpose behind youth advisory groups and find a framework and strategy that fits with your organization culture and mission. Youth advisory groups can add tremendous value to an organization. It is important to understand the needs of your particular organization before trying to implement a youth advisory group. As a way to begin, we want to share 3 myths of youth advisory groups we have found while working on this guidebook.

3 MAJOR MYTHS WE UNCOVERED

1 YOUNG PEOPLE DO NOT WANT TO BE INVOLVED IN ADVISORY GROUP WORK.

In talking with young people from across Minnesota, one thing is very clear: Young people enjoy and take seriously their involvement in youth advisory groups. They want to be involved, especially if the group is facilitated in a way that allows them to have fun, learn about their community, and take action on what they have learned.

2 YOUTH ADVISORY GROUPS ARE JUST ANOTHER WAY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO COMPLAIN ABOUT STUFF THAT THEY DON'T LIKE BUT NEED.

Young people often get labeled as lazy, unmotivated, and apathetic. We all know the typical response when young people are asked to give their opinions: It's boring! Youth advisory groups are not forums for basic opinion-giving. The focus and purpose of youth advisory groups is to develop and create space for **youth voice**. Youth advisory groups invite and support young people to communicate to others an informed idea about something that matters to them.

A word of advice: Be creative and co-create with young people the youth advisory group. Youth advisory structures work best when they come from and connect to the local community, youth organization, or agency. This guidebook is not intended to be a recipe book. Use the ideas but also change them when the local context requires it or when young people ask for the group to be different.

3 YOUTH ADVISORY GROUPS FOCUS MAINLY ON SUPPORTING HEALTHY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT.

Major outcomes of a good youth advisory group relate to healthy youth development, including: increased confidence, ability to work with others, and a stronger sense of self and healthy identity. But this is only part of what these groups create. Equally important is how young people support community, program, and organization development. While much of youth development literature focuses on individual youth outcomes, youth advisory groups remind us that young people can create positive outcomes for communities, organizations, and agencies. As Community Youth Development theory advocates, youth development and community development are connected. Youth advisory groups focus on both equally, knowing that to support healthy youth development you also have to support healthy community, organization, and program development.

WHAT INFORMED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS GUIDEBOOK?

There is a lot of information available on advisory groups and councils. In developing this resource we started with the lessons others had learned about creating and sustaining advisory structures for both youth and adults. Many of these resources, we provide references to in the back of this guidebook, including other handbooks on advisory councils and groups, samples of youth advisory application forms and mission statements, and key articles about youth advisory structure, committees, councils, and groups. Overall, youth advisory structures support **youth voice**, opportunities for young people to talk about public issues that are personally meaningful. Unfortunately, much of the scholarship on youth advisory structures has found that not much else results from these groups. Young people share great insights, offer suggestions to improve youth-focused policy and programs, and advocate for certain issues to receive more attention, but not much happens after they share what they want. Youth advisory structures have been found to be less successful in supporting **youth action**. We wanted to know if any youth advisory structures support youth voice and youth action.

Beginning in June 2012, we have talked to over 20 different youth advisory groups both in Minnesota and across the country. What we have learned is somewhat surprising. Most of these groups support both youth voice and youth action. This guidebook captures our beginning understanding of how youth advisory structures can be strong invitations for authentic, meaningful, and substantial youth participation in communities, organizations, and programs.

This guidebook will introduce the many stages involved with creating and sustaining a successful youth advisory group, and the key concepts that support this work. First, we begin with some definitions.

What is a Youth Advisory Group?

OUR DEFINITION:

A Youth advisory group is an ongoing, long term (at least 12 months) education and action focused group of young people, who work together to support high quality youth programs, youth organizations, and youth policy. They include young people who are members of the community, organization, or agency. They begin by sharing their experiences of belonging and participating in these settings, and together imagine how these can be improved.

PURPOSE:

The purpose of a youth advisory group is to provide a structure for young people to be involved in community, organization, or program development. These structures are built upon three central ideas: shared understanding, shared decision-making and shared action. youth advisory group's invite and support young people and adults to develop shared understandings of their communities, or the youth organization or program they both belong to. Then, together decide what they might do together to improve this setting. Finally, work together to bring about the changes they agree are important. By partnering with adults, the young people are able to hold an active role in initiatives enhancing positive youth and community development.

ROLES:

Youth advisory group can take many different forms to support youth advice giving, including: feeder, shadow, consultative, issue-specific, group-specific and community-specific. Across all of these the role young people play is similar. They lead. Youth advisory structures provide a space and time where young people can “take over” and begin to talk about and work on issues that matter to them and the community, organization, or agency.

Three main ideas shape the development and ongoing support of Youth Advisory Groups, including advisory, youth-adult partnerships, and youth participation. Each of these is briefly introduced here.

ADVISORY:

The word advisory is defined by Oxford English Dictionary (2nd ed.) as “Having the attribute of advising, giving, or tending to, give advice.” The word itself encompasses the word advice, the act of counseling others, and advising, the action component. Advice-giving is an everyday activity, therefore common, typical, and almost unnoticed. We often ask advice from partners and roommates about what to wear, others may give advice about where to eat lunch, and still others may give advice on careers, how to handle a co-worker or peer, or how to complete an assignment. Advice-giving is practiced by everyone from time to time regardless of age. Everyone has some experience with advice-giving or advice-receiving.

In its everyday use, we often do not pay attention to how power is embedded in advice-giving. Asking for advice is giving up some decision-making power to others. In youth advisory structures, we are concerned with how can the advice that is offered be good. Do others listen to the advice given? Does the advice lead to action or to changes? Good advice prompts action and change.

We have learned that good advice emerges from ongoing process of learning. While advice is often talked about as something someone gives to another, quality advice giving emerges from an ongoing process of learning, reflecting, and sharing what one learns and knows as a result. To support this process, a new relationship between youth and adults is often required. This we describe next.

YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS:

Youth-adult partnerships (Y-AP) are emphasized as an appropriate structure for youth advisory groups in both the literature and in the interviews with members of youth

advisory structures in Minnesota. This follows a present trend in organizations working with young people to create and support Youth-Adult Partnerships. Y-AP are intentional relationships where young people and adults work together in equal partnership. What Y-AP do is distribute leadership power between the young people and the adults involved in an organization.

Scholars and practitioners have begun championing the idea of Y-APs because they engage young people in community action as well as sharing decision-making power with young people. By creating Y-AP both the young person and the adult are able to co-mentor one another while focusing on improving the community, organization, or program. An added benefit also is how this work has been found to support healthy development for both young and old alike.

The benefits that young people gain when involved in decision making are numerous. From learning job readiness skills to expanding their social networks, meaningfully engaged young people are more likely to continue to be engaged and active community contributors, strong citizens, and service-providers. Adults also benefit from these partnerships. They often become more aware of issues affecting young people and more committed to their communities. They too develop into more committed and active citizens of their communities.

Moreover, within an organization, Youth-Adult Partnerships are proven to be effective in supporting healthy youth development and supporting improved communities, organizations, and programs. Both adults and young people gain a deeper understanding of what types of programming is needed or helpful. These partnerships support robust and substantive youth participation.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Some scholars describe youth participation as a recently emerging field. While it is true that scholarship only recently noticed and named the field of youth participation, youth workers and others have supported young people's participation for decades, if not longer. In 5th Century Athens, young people were able to become citizens, thus "participating" in Greek civic life early on. In the 1950's and 1960's, the Freedom Schools movement created abundant opportunities for young people living under racist and oppressive conditions to respond to their everyday lived experiences in meaningful and socially significant ways. Indeed, young people were one of the major players in the U.S. civil rights movement. Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), scholars have begun to pay attention to an idea that has always been robustly supported by youth work practitioners in different contexts and during different historical periods.

Scholarship has heightened recognition of youth participation and now confirmed its importance for youth development and quality youth programming. It is now taken for granted that involving young people in the design, management, and evaluation of youth programs leads to innovative and developmentally supportive efforts. Ongoing scholarship and practice innovations have begun to advocate for youth work practices that support *working with*, rather than *working for* or *on*, young people.

This shift continues to gain momentum in ongoing youth advisory structure research and practice. What is clear from both practice and scholarship is that *participation is not an outcome but as with advice-giving, a process*. It is the way programs and practices work, and requires an intentional and ongoing focus to maintain and sustain over time. For our purposes, youth participation includes: voice, choice, shared understanding, and shared decision-making.

YOUTH VOICE

Youth participation emphasizes listening to young people, but also providing support where their experiences can be explored and their ideas can develop and evolve. It is based on the understanding that young people have knowledge worth learning. Young people often have knowledge of what it is like to be a person of a certain age in today's world (common knowledge), and also have individual understanding as well as talents that can be shared (specific knowledge). Youth voice emerges when they are allowed to explore, reflect, construct and then share their ideas.

YOUTH CHOICE

Youth participation also emphasizes choice. In participatory efforts, young people are invited to consider what they want to do, how, and what role they might have in the work (leader, participant, facilitator, contributor, etc.). In addition, the work young people are asked to do and the process they have to complete is clearly articulated to them before they begin the work.

SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Youth advisory structures aim for transparency. Young people should know first what are non-negotiables. Prior to being involved, young people should be informed about what they will do and why. Options should be clearly presented so that young people can make an informed choice about whether or not to participate, and they have a clear idea of what they will be asked to do and by when. Then they can begin to negotiate on the overall process and goal, bringing in their own experiences and wisdom on the issue at hand. This is one effective way to build shared understanding, a key ingredient to shared decision-making.

SHARED DECISION-MAKING

Finally, youth participation emphasizes shared decision-making. Participants have the right to deliberate on decisions and come to an agreement as to what decision to make. In the process they will have had time to learn and be able to justify why the group is making this decision and not another. As an United Kingdom has learned: “By extending interpretations of participation to also include young people’s involvement in critical reflection, inquiry, and action planning, new possibilities for more meaningful and effective participation in policy and practice become possible.”

As described, youth participation is more than having young people attending or involved in a program. Within these initiatives, young people are invited to play an active and meaningful role in the ongoing work. Along with advice-giving and Youth-Adult Partnerships, youth participation provides a foundation for the overall work of youth advisory groups.

Why develop & support youth advisory group’s?

Youth advisory group’s invite and support young people’s involvement in community, organization, or agency change making. Overall, these structures work to embed youth voice and youth action in communities, organizations, and agencies for the purposes of supporting youth rights, enhancing youth development, broadening youth connections, and creating safe and participatory spaces for young people.

RIGHTS:

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child advocates for young people’s democratic and human rights, including youth voice. Youth advisory group’s facilitate a space where young people have the opportunity to create and influence practice, program, or policy that directly affects them. Youth advisory group’s provide a space where young people can exercise their democratic and human rights, and learn how to make lasting change in the community, organization, or agency.

CIVIC AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT:

A youth advisory group is also a great place for young people to experience and participate in political and civic engagement. Currently there are very limited ways for young people under the age of 18 to engage politically or to have a voice in matters that affect them (Bessant, 2004). The purpose of youth advisory group is to provide an opportunity

for young people to learn first-hand about democratic policies and witness changes being made based on their work

CONNECTIONS:

Youth advisory group’s build social capital. Participants connect with others—in the community, organization, or agency—to learn about issues and work out ways they can address public issues that matter to them and their host. By connecting with adults and agency staff, young people both gain useful information and demonstrate to others that they can indeed work to make the community better for everyone.

SPACES:

Youth advisory group’s create spaces for participation. They are settings for young people to talk about issues that matter to them, regardless of how controversial they may be, to listen to different viewpoints or experiences, and to learn from each other how to create a more inclusive, safe, nonviolent, and socially-just world. Youth advisory groups can be a social place and also a place of imagination. Youth advisory groups provide a space for young people to learn more about themselves and what together they can do to make a difference in the world. By celebrating and highlighting the different talents each young person brings to the table, youth advisory group’s can create lasting and sustainable change.

How do you start youth advisory groups?

There are no clear understandings for how to start a youth advisory structure for the first time in your organization or agency. Talking with different youth advisory structures several things do seem to be important, including: having a organization culture and climate that is supportive and receptive of youth advice-giving; staff members who welcome and are willing to host young people in the organization; and finally having dedicated resources to support the youth advisory structure. Many of the structures started small and gradually built from a few members to now two dozen. This gradual approach does have its criticisms (young people often do not have enough of a presence to make a real impact in the organization), but also provides a way to start if organizations are inexperienced with supporting young people's active participation in decision-making.

In this section, we provide a series of questions that we recommend organization staff discuss as they begin to consider how and when they might develop a youth advisory structure for their organization. We include in this assessment questions for staff to gauge their current orientation to working with youth advisory members.

We move from organization assessment to initial planning and recruitment. Here we share what others have learned about recruiting young people to become part of a youth advisory structure. Finally we end with some suggestion of how to run the first gathering. In the next section, we focus on what to do after the group has starting and when attention shifts from starting a youth advisory structure to sustaining and maintaining the structure within the organization.

ORGANIZATION ASSESSMENT:

High quality youth advisory structures often reside in (youth or community) organization with high organization capacity to support youth participation and when the goals of the organization further advocate for young people to have decision-making responsibility. Further, youth advisory structures work when staff believe in the need to involve young people and understand how important their involvement is for the ongoing success of the organization and the programs it supports. These three areas provide a beginning way to assess what an organization must do to support a rich and vibrant youth advisory structure. Below are reflective questions staff and stakeholders can use to assess what their organization may have to do to fully support a robust youth advisory structure.

GOAL ALIGNMENT:

- ▶ What are the formal goals of the organization? What does the organization say it does? What does the organization publicize as its purpose, mission, and strategy?
- ▶ What are the informal goals of the organization? What is the experience of young people who participate in the organization? Do their experiences match with the public statements the organization makes?
- ▶ What strategies does the organization support to achieve its goals and missions? Do these strategies see young people as active or passive players?
- ▶ What roles are assigned to young people in the organization? Are they simply recipients of services? Are they invited to collaborate on projects with organization stakeholders and staff? Are they allowed to initiate projects and programs?

- ▶ What spaces can young people occupy? Are they invited to the board meetings? Can they attend staff meetings? Does the organization support their inclusion in ongoing program design and management?
- ▶ Can young people veto a decision that is being considered? Do they have a formal role in helping to decide what the organization does and how?
- ▶ How does the organization evaluate its work? Are young people involved in designing the evaluation, providing data for the evaluation, asked to consider what recommendations should be made based on what an evaluation study has found?

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY:

- ▶ What resources are (can be) committed to supporting youth advisory work? Will young people have access to a budget for their work? Will they have authority on how to spend the money?
- ▶ What trainings does the organization sponsor? What training and knowledge does the organization require of staff when hired? Does the organization sponsor trainings related to youth advisory structures such as, how to create strong youth-adult partnerships?
- ▶ Does the organization support ongoing dialogue with young people? Do they allow multiple ways for young people to share what they think about the organization?
- ▶ How are young people supported to be leaders in the organization?
- ▶ What happens when young people bring a grievance forward about the organization? Is there a transparent and clear process for their grievances to be fairly and justly responded to and mediated?
- ▶ Is there an organizational policy requiring consultation with young people on matters that affect them?

STAFF READINESS¹:

- ▶ Is staff ready to listen to young people?
- ▶ Do staff and the organization support a wide-range of activities and opportunities for young people to express their ideas?
- ▶ Do staff take young people's point of view into account in the everyday management of the organization and programs?
- ▶ Do staff allow young people to participate in decision-making? At what level (activity, program, organization)?
- ▶ Are staff willing to share some of their adult power with young people?
- ▶ Do staff talk about young people as co-participants, leaders, staff, contributors?

¹ Adapted from: Harry Shier (2006). Pathways to participation. Dialogue and Debate, Issue 2. Online at: http://www.harryshier.comxa.com/docs/Shier-Pathways_to_Participation_Revisited_NZ2006.pdf

RECRUITMENT:

Once a decision has been made to support a youth advisory structure, the next step is to develop a recruitment plan. A recruitment plan is not a trivial device and has much to do with how effective the youth advisory structure will be both in the short and long term. If young people begin to see recruitment as unfair or misleading, little to no authority will be given to the advisory group and their work will end before it begins.

Deciding who should be on the group requires attention to the local setting, the goals of the organization, and the overall purpose of the youth advisory structure. While advice is often described as technical, such as: does the program meet young people's needs? This is one of three types of advice-giving found For a youth advisory group to work well, the group needs young people who can, or learn to, provide three forms of advice:

1 Technical: most commonly associated with youth advice giving. Most groups select young people who can or have learned how to provide technical advice. This form of advice often requires young people to have skills in public speaking, organizing, or collaboration;

2 Representative: Youth advisory structures staff and participants also intentionally recruit young people for the representational advice they can give. This form of advice recognizes the value of having young people from a wide variety of communities, with different life experiences and often connections to marginalized and contested communities. Intentionally recruiting young people from the different groups that exist in the community can allow the entire group to provide more effective and useful advice.

3 Use: This last form of advice is often overlooked. It highlights the importance of how one gives advice, not only what advice one gives. Advisory groups benefit when they have members who consider the connection between how to give advice and when depending on the audience. Members can also be recruited for their skills in public education.

GIVEN THIS LARGER FRAME, HERE ARE A FEW QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN DEVELOPING A RECRUITMENT PLAN:

1) Do potential members need to be in good standing with your organization?

You want to attract members who are well regarded within your organization, whether it be by consistent attendance or exemplary leadership skills, your advisory group members are community ambassadors for your organization and you want to be sure that they are a well rounded reflection of the young people you and your organization serve.

Consider what might happen though if only those in good standing were allowed to participate in the group? Will the group be reflective in their work and critical about the work of the organization and program? Bringing in a diversity of members, both those who are in good standing and individual who are either new to the organization or represent a new demographic may allow the program and organization to transform in ways it never imagined.

2) Are prospective members committed to the advisory group?

Now more than ever, young people have busy schedules so it is important that the members are prepared for the time commitments necessary for the group to be more than symbolic. You want members who not only want to be on the group, but also care about the organization, issue, or young people enough to work on making a difference that matters to people beyond themselves and often beyond the organization itself.

3) Do members represent who belongs to and participates in the organization?

One of the most difficult things a youth advisory group must do is make every effort to incorporate a youth voice that is a reflection of everyone within your organization and not just one faction. Trying to invite representation from everyone in the organization might in itself require concerted effort. Often youth advisory groups simply become an extension of the members in the organization currently. Often this makes it more challenging for advisory members to consider alternative possibilities to what has been done, or even have awareness of why some young people don't choose to participate in the organization or the programs and activities it supports. Consider who else lives in the community or service area of the organization? How might you be able to reach out to these communities and invite their involvement?

4) Does your plan include multiple ways to reach prospective members?

How you choose to recruit prospective members can limit who will decide to apply. Consider both typical recruitment strategies (flyers, email announcements, school announcement) as well as innovative ways to get the word out (open mic nights, facebook or social media sites, or simply reaching out to other organizations and asking for recommendations).

FIRST MEETING:

They often say that you only get one chance to make a first impression. While this is often told to young people, it is more important that the facilitator and the organization realize they have only one chance to make a first impression. A good way to start the first meeting is by honoring those who have chosen to apply and have been selected to participate in the youth advisory group.

Often, the first meeting is longer than others simply because it is difficult to commit to a group unless there is an extended period of time to meet everyone and develop some clarity about the purpose of the group and how it fits with individual member's goals and aspirations. It also takes awhile to get to know everyone in a new group and begin to feel comfortable enough to begin to work together. It is reasonable for the first group to begin with member introductions, name games, and group building activities. Good group work goes a long way in the initial meetings.

The first meeting should also begin to ask the group to contribute to the overall mission of the organization in some substantive way. Often this might mean that the group begins to consider what organization and public issues they care personally about. As an advisory group it is good to ask for their advice during the *first* group, but in a way that allows the stakes to be low and the focus to be on developing a better understanding of where members connect and where they might diverge.

It is important to be clear and transparent about the group's purpose. Some of this can be done before the group begins and some of the decisions about the group's purpose can be decided once a group has been established, but here are a few things to think about:

1. What role do young people have in the organization right now?
2. How do you want to change that?
3. In what ways are you/ the organization prepared to support those changes?
4. What training do you or the staff need in order to best facilitate implementing a youth advisory group?

5. How/where will you be getting funding from in order to support the creation of your youth advisory group?
6. What role will the youth advisory group serve within your organization?
7. What (developmental, skill-building, professional, etc.) opportunities can people in your organization or other people connected to your organization offer your youth advisory group?
8. What role does your youth advisory group want to serve within its community?
9. What kind of support does your youth advisory group need to garner from the community and how do you go about doing that?

How are youth advisory group's maintained?

After the first meeting, most youth advisory structures develop a pattern to the meetings. This not only allows members to know what to expect but also allows them to take over the general planning and facilitation of the meetings early on in the process.

OFTEN MEETINGS HAVE A SIMPLE STRUCTURE SUCH AS:

Time	Activity	Description
15 minutes	Greeting, Check-in, and Food	Often groups begin with a brief greeting by the facilitator and then a check-in activity, usually a name game or another quick way for the members to connect with each other quickly
30 minutes	Large group activity	Some advisory groups use this time to talk about current events, or introduce some information that supports individual and group skill building
30 minutes	Small group work (committee work)	Most advisory groups break the larger group into small work groups. Each of the smaller groups is responsible for working on a single issue or event. When possible, these groups are supported by a facilitator, either from the small group or a volunteer from the community
15 minutes	Large group sharing, reflecting, evaluating	The group comes together again at the end to share what they did, and what they plan to work on between meetings. Other days, the facilitator may lead a reflective activity asking the group to consider what the group has done together and what they might want to change.

This general schedule seems easy enough to implement. To think this is all the group does would be misleading. Talking with facilitator's of youth advisory groups, they often focus on multiple processes simultaneously within each of the different parts of the general schedule described above. These include:

1. Building the group
2. Building individual and group capacity
3. Learning about and sharing personal knowledge and experiences
4. Connecting with other allies and stakeholders
5. Reflecting on what the group is doing and how
6. Learning about public/ organizational issues and problems
7. Taking action on these issues and sharing progress publically
8. Evaluating actions and incorporating what in learned into future plans

Even within a simple schedule, the practice is much more complex. Each of these processes will be briefly described and examples for each provided. By simultaneously focusing on all eight processes, youth advisory groups have been maintained long term and remain vibrant and vital to the work of the organization or community.

GROUP BUILDING:

While it is true that all groups require some group building before they become efficient and effective, simply focusing on group building only during the beginning phases of the work would be misguided. *Group building is a process not an outcome.* It requires ongoing effort to build and then maintain a high quality group. Unlike building a building, it can't be completed, but must be continually done. Group building or team building is an essential part of creating a safe space for members and is often the foundation of robust youth advisory groups.

While there are numerous resources on group building activities and some of these are included at the end of this guidebook, the most vibrant youth advisory groups support group building beyond designated activities. Many groups find ways to support group building through the weekly work of the youth advisory group. These include:

- ▶ At one site, members are invited several times over the year to come to the meeting location early and cook the evening meal together.
- ▶ Group members are often asked to prepare and facilitate the large group segment of the plan.
- ▶ Some groups plan additional social events throughout the year for the group members to hang out and have fun together.

BUILDING INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP CAPACITY:

Weekly focus is also directed towards building capacity among members and as a group. This includes the group's ability to develop a process for decision-making, working together, and working across and within differences. This capacity building receives support from the way weekly meetings are facilitated, and can include working individually and with the whole group on facilitation skills, public speaking, mediating conflict, and active listening.

At times it is necessary and even desired by group members for a more traditional training to build individual and group skill. When asked for they are provided. But also, much of this work is done informally and experientially. For example:

- ▶ Often when meeting in committees, the work focuses on how to build an agenda, how to create an action plan, or how to set-up an effective meeting with a community informant.
- ▶ Through discussing and sharing about their everyday experiences, group members come to meet and understand people they may have otherwise not talked to at school, in the community, or at the organization.
- ▶ Many youth advisory groups have rotating co-chairs. Each week, these co-chairs meet with the adult facilitator to plan the next meeting and practice facilitation. When they finish facilitating the group, they meet again with the facilitator to talk about how it went and what they learned.

LEARNING ABOUT AND SHARING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND KNOWLEDGE:

Much of the work of the group starts with sharing personal experiences and knowledge. This provides a way to begin learning about and understanding a wide variety of issues and problems, and often the resources and skills team members bring and even likely solutions. Supporting personal story sharing also supports group building. While this may be where group's conversations start, this is not where they are allowed to end.

Also important is to think about how your experience relates to and differs from other group members and what together all experiences teach about issues and problems. This is often a value added from having a diverse group of young people participate in a single advisory structure. They hear stories that they often have not heard before and learn about their community from additional angles. Youth Advisory groups often support the sharing of personal experiences and knowledge through:

- ▶ Facilitating members to meet in dyads and triads throughout the year to foster individual learning and connections among group members;
- ▶ Using personal inventories to highlight the similarities and different personalities and skills in the group (such as Meyers-Briggs, Strengthsfinder, True Colors, see appendix);

CONNECTING WITH OTHER ALLIES AND STAKEHOLDERS:

Many youth programs are set-up in isolation to the larger community. This is not the case with youth advisory groups. Part of the purpose is for the group to meet and begin to network with other allies and stakeholders in the community who can help them understand issues and who want to join with them to take action on particular issues. This expansion of their community networks strengthens the overall social capital available and often facilitates self-reflection and career and future exploration.

Many times committees are asked to locate and invite at least two or three key informants to the meetings to deepen their understanding of the issue or problem they are working to address. This is a direct and immediate way to facilitate the group member's connections with others they may not otherwise meet. Other examples include:

- ▶ Organizing field trips to sites that are both personally interesting and also provide support for personal and group capacity building and learning more about public issues.
- ▶ Interviewing community members to learn more about community issues and what the community wants from the organization or public service.
- ▶ Many times for the group to make progress, they need to set-up conversations with other young people or adults who have a different understanding of the issue than they do.

REFLECTING ON WHAT THE GROUP IS DOING AND HOW:

Weekly reflection on what the group is doing and how not only allows for issues that participants may have to be raised, but also develops personal skills in reflection, critical thinking, and creative thinking. By being asked to think about what they are doing and how, and consider the consequence of doing it this way and not another, group members begin to learn that there can be multiple ways to work together and their taken for granted understandings of what they can do and what they should do can be opened.

An effective method used by many groups is to have time at the end of the group to reflect on what happened today and how. Most of the time new insights are raised as individual rarely see what happened exactly the same way. Other process include:

- ▶ Facilitating art and creative writing activities that ask participants to be creative thinkers and problem solvers.
- ▶ Presenting group challenges where the group learns the limitations of traditional problem solving—these are often the “think outside of the box” exercises in group building manuals.
- ▶ More elaborate simulations that expose cultural ways of understanding non-verbal or other forms of communication.

LEARNING ABOUT PUBLIC/ ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES AND PROBLEMS:

A common focus for youth advisory groups in both the literature and from conversations with local youth advisory groups is a focus on learning about public issues and problems so that the group can address these in meaningful ways. This shifts the overall purpose of a youth advisory group from opinion giving or consultation to a more long-term experiential education and research on issues. This process has supported both deep personal development for young people and sophisticated responses to pressing issues and problems.

Many groups support learning about public issues through sharing information with the groups in a variety of forms. For example:

- ▶ At times this means the facilitator may send an article about the issue to the entire group and then talk about it when the group meets.
- ▶ Holding documentary movie screenings and facilitating a discussion afterwards often leads to more questions about the issue and problem.
- ▶ The simple structure of small groups working on different issues allows both an in-depth experience learning about a single issue as well as learning about other issues through larger group sharing of progress and insights.
- ▶ Conducting a power analysis of an issue with the group (see appendix).
- ▶ Doing a root cause analysis of a problem or issue (see appendix).
- ▶ Doing a group issue mapping exercise (see appendix).

TAKING ACTION ON THESE ISSUES AND SHARING PROGRESS PUBLICALLY:

An important process within the youth advisory group is taking action and sharing progress publically. Too often the wisdom young people develop is kept hidden away from public view and the organization and community does not benefit from both the contributions and talents young people can provide. Most youth advisory groups included in the study invited and supported young people not only to learn about issues but also to take action on a public issue they cared personally about, mostly in small and large groups.

Here again, the philosophy of experiential education is seen as underpinning much of these structures. By taking action, young people are not only learning that they can make a difference in their communities but also how to make a difference. Action taking is a powerful teacher.

Youth advisory groups both need to often support young people to understand a planning process and provide tools for them to plan action on issues they care about (see appendix).

EVALUATING ACTIONS AND INCORPORATING WHAT WAS LEARNED INTO FUTURE PLANS:

Even when the action may not have the intended outcome, it still provides an opportunity for learning. If nothing else, the group learns what did not work. When these lessons can be incorporated back into the overall historical memory of the youth advisory group, future group members gain from the struggles that others undertook. Here, failure is reframed as ongoing support to address this issue rather than simply an indication that what the group worked on didn't matter. These lessons are often shared during the first weeks of a new year when new members join the group.

How are youth advisory group's sustained?

Sustaining youth advisory structures requires both adult staff seeing young people differently and supporting ongoing reflection and evaluation of the YAS. The perspective shift refers to how young people are seen by staff and by others within the community, organization, and agency. Advocated is a three lens model of young people as described in a recent *Youth Participation in International Development* (2012) report. This model advocates for youth work and youth programs to do things **for** youth, **with** youth, and be **shaped by** youth. These three perspectives of young people are also widely acknowledged throughout the youth development literature. The model does not rank order these three perspectives, instead advocates that all three should inform youth program and practice. Good youth advisory structures ensure that young people involved are:

- ▶ Targets of the work;
- ▶ Collaborators in the work, and
- ▶ Initiators of the work.

Seeing young people as targets requires a focus on building young people capacity across a wide range of skills, knowledge bases, and experiences. It is typically what youth development programs in the US emphasize. What has become increasingly common is seeing young people as collaborators. This perspective emphasizes opportunities for young people to work with adults and other stakeholders on issues that matter to everyone. Youth as initiators remains less commonly understood and less visible. Sustainable YAS support young people to be initiators: inviting them to talk about public issues they personally care about and taking action to address these issues. In YAS that have been sustained over time, these three perspectives of young people are embedded into the everyday work of the organization. Partly, those YAS that include all three are more likely to have a substantial structure that endures over time.

In talking with youth advisory participants throughout Minnesota and in consulting the literature on youth advisory structures, three models of youth advice giving emerge: Symbolic, Blended, and Substantive. The symbolic is drawn mainly from the literature reviewed for the project and describes structures that can be described as supporting decorative, manipulative, and tokenistic youth participation (Hart, 1992). Symbolic youth advisory structures often scale down or abandon the overall goal (e.g. youth participation and youth involvement in decision making) but retain the overall means (e.g. consulting with young people on decisions that affect them). These structures claim to be supporting youth involvement and youth participation but rarely do young people's opinions or informed positions influence what is to be done and how. They may have a voice but they are powerless.

The blended and substantive models were most often encountered in the conversations with youth advisory structures in Minnesota. Given the literature on youth involvement in consultation and advice-giving, this is surprising, because in other research, most youth advice-giving practice has been found to be less successful and predominately symbolic or at best blended². Talking throughout Minnesota with youth advisory structure often provided examples of what communities and organizations can do to sustain authentic and meaningful youth advice-giving. What makes them meaningful depended on both what they did and how. What remained true across substantive structures was an ongoing process of reflecting and evaluating on what was done, how, and by whom. Several questions both from the literature and from conversations with participants in Minnesota's youth advisory structures are provided to guide this ongoing learning process to support authentic youth participation. These include:

1. Do young people have a voice on issues that matter to them and on policies and programs that affect them?
2. Do young people's opinions and informed positions get used to create better policies, programs, events, activities, services, or plans?
3. Do young people have the time and space to be part of the group, are they supported to meet with each other and have input into what happens, how, and when?
4. Are young people invited and supported to meet "who matters"? (Whom they need to in order to make change happen)
5. Do young people have a multiple ways of expressing their opinion? (Or is expression limited to typical, adult ways?)
6. Are they provided with the necessary information so they are not excluded on technicalities? E.g. didn't know the process of getting something done in the organization, didn't fill out the right form at the right time.

These questions guide participants to reflect on what has been found to be significant for sustaining high quality youth advisory structures. The first question draws attention to whether or not the work has at least met the lowest rung on advisory work with young people. Can they talk about issues that matter to them and is someone listening? Almost all structures we talked to accomplished this level of engagement.

The second question raises the level of the work significantly. Here, many youth advisory structures fail. While young people may talk about issues that matter to them and even have suggestions on how to improve youth program and services to respond to these issues, often times their ideas are not included in the final program design or policy. Everyone talks about listening to young people, really good advisory structures move beyond talk and put young people's ideas into action.

The third question challenges the often ad-hoc, single youth consultation structures that have become prominent worldwide. These structures do not provide a strong base for quality youth advisory structures. Good advice giving emerges when young people are included in a long-term group process that emphasizes inquiry and reflection.

The fourth question challenges the idea that good youth programs keep young people segregated from others. Young people talked about the importance of meeting with and talking to a wide-range of others who had similar concerns and also occupied positions of power. Opportunities to

² Barry Percy-Smith (2010). Councils, consultation, and community: Rethinking the spaces for children and young people's participation. *Children's Geographies*, 8(2), 107-122.

meet with these individuals face-to-face enriched their work and provided invaluable information that they used to push for action on the public issue they cared most about.

Young people provide advice to their community's everyday. Unfortunately, much of it goes unheard because it comes in a form that communities often ignore. YAS challenge communities to listen differently and create significant alternative opportunities for young people to talk to others. The fifth question keeps attention on how much we ignore, simply because the advice that we receive does not look like adult-ways of giving advice.

Finally, good YAS remain focused on making the change process as transparent as possible for young people. They do not allow technicalities to triumph hard work. Part of what adults do in YAS is keep young people aware of deadlines to submit ideas and the overall process that must be followed in some contexts to make change happen.

The six questions provide guidance on how an organization and its staff can design, maintain, and sustain substantive youth advisory structures. Sustaining substantive youth advisory structures over time requires adults and the organizations they work for to commit to an ongoing process of reflection on what they are doing and how it continues to support young to provide "good" advice.

CONCLUSION

Youth Advisory Structures can now be found in localities across Minnesota. This guidebook brought together both insights from the literature on youth participation and youth consultation and conversations with Minnesota practitioners to offer recommendations on how to create, maintain, and sustain substantive youth advisory structures. We welcome any comments on this guidebook and any additional resources that you have found to be useful in creating and supporting effective structures that support high quality youth advice-giving.

WEBSITES

On Youth Participation

A Potpourri of Participation Models: [Youthpolicy.org/library/documents/a-potpourri-of-participation-models/](https://youthpolicy.org/library/documents/a-potpourri-of-participation-models/)

What works in youth participation: Case Studies from Around the World: lyfnet.org/sites/default/files/WW_Youth_Participation.pdf

Advocates for Youth Website, Community Participation. What is it? [Advocatesforyouth.org/component/content/683?task=view](https://advocatesforyouth.org/component/content/683?task=view)

On Group Building

Huddle website on group building activities: [Huddle.com/blog/team-building-activities/](https://huddle.com/blog/team-building-activities/)

Youth Group Games: [Jubed.com/youth_ministry/](https://jubed.com/youth_ministry/)

Scholastic Great Group Games: Resources for Teachers: [Scholastic.com/teachers/article/great-group-games-team-building-kids](https://scholastic.com/teachers/article/great-group-games-team-building-kids)

Pin Interest site for group building games: [Pinterest.com/ncarrw/team-buildinggames/](https://pinterest.com/ncarrw/team-buildinggames/)

Active website: [Active.com/parenting-and-family/articles/10-fun-team-building-activities-for-kids](https://active.com/parenting-and-family/articles/10-fun-team-building-activities-for-kids)

Personal Skill and Personality Assessments:

Meyers Briggs: Myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/

Strengths Finder: Strengths.gallup.com/default.aspx

True Colors Personality Test: Online-distance-learning-education.com/personality-test.html

Learning About and Analyzing Public Issues:

Power Analysis: Toolkit.healthjustice.us/power_analysis
Culturalorganizing.org/?p=832

Root Cause Analysis: Blog.markswEEP.com/post/22692428919/when-kids-start-doing-root-cause-analysis
Wbi.worldbank.org/wbDM/sites/wbDM_files/cat001-RootCauseAnalysis.pdf

Issue Mapping: Cip-icu.ca/_CMS/Files/kidsguide.pdf
Freethechildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/FTC-community-mapping-guide.pdf

On Action Planning and Taking Action:

Community Tool Box Online Resource: <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/structure/strategic-planning/develop-action-plans/main>

Sustainable Sanitation and Watershed Management Tool Box: <http://www.sswm.info/category/planning-process-tools/decision-making/decision-making-tools/planning-community/community-a>

ARTICLES:

George Chilcoat & Jerry Ligon (2001). Discussion as a means for transformative change: Social studies lessons from the Mississippi Freedom Schools. Social Studies Journal,

Jonathan London (2007). Power and pitfalls of youth participation in community-based action research. Children, Youth and Environments, 17(2), 406-432. <http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye>

Harry Shier (2006). Pathways to participation. Dialogue and Debate, Issue 2. Online at: http://www.harryshier.comxa.com/docs/Shier-Pathways_to_Participation_Revisited_NZ2006.pdf

Gaventa, J. (2006). Finding the spaces for change: A power analysis. IDS Bulletin, 37(6). Online at: http://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/finding_spaces_for_change.pdf

OTHER RESOURCES:

Curriculum on power of youth, based on the work of young people in civil rights movement: Civics.sites.unc.edu/files/2012/04/FreedomsChildren.pdf

Author: Ross VeLure Roholt

This resource is the result of a team of individuals over several years. Parul Sheth, Humphrey Fellow, Kayleen Jacobson, undergraduate research assistant, and Michael Baizerman were involved from the beginning and helped to shape the study and this final resources. Students in several Youth Studies undergraduate classes at the University of Minnesota also contributed and were instrumental in expanding the ideas and deepening the learning.

