

Next Generation Community Leaders

NJ cities create space for youth civic engagement

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Perhaps it is the long shadow of the 2016 election, or the extensive media coverage of the Parkland student activists, or the many walkouts and marches thereafter, but right now, high school-aged youth across NJ are eager to engage in civic action. Our work over the past year has shown us this is an opportunity for city leaders across New Jersey.

Too often, youth are not considered as potential partners. Many community leaders think of high school aged youth as problems to be “managed” or “contained” but it is worth re-imagining youth as having a unique set of assets: knowledge of their community, the ability to connect to hardest-to-reach citizens, and understanding of their peers.

We have learned from working with youth-serving organizations in New Jersey that have implemented youth civic engagement programs thoughtfully and purposefully, in a way that leverages youth’s innate abilities. Through their work these organizations are promoting strong relationships between young people and their local government, and sustained, positive outcomes for the community as a whole.

In 2017, New Jersey Health Initiatives, the statewide grant-making program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, funded the Next Generation Community Leaders initiative. Ten cities in NJ received \$200,000 grants and technical support from the Institute for Effective Education at Rutgers-Camden to engage youth as partners and prepare them as future leaders. In these 10 cities, from Bridgeton to Secaucus, each grantee built a team of 10 to 15 youth who are charged with developing a project over the course of this year to improve health outcomes in their city. In our role providing assistance to these grantees, we’ve been traveling regularly to these cities and working with adult leaders to better understand what it takes to create space for youth civic engagement in NJ. Independent evaluation

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suggests that great teams have been created and strong teams are at the heart of effective youth engagement. However, successful youth engagement doesn't just happen on its own—it requires thoughtful planning and purposeful execution.

Through our scholarship and experience with youth in NJ we have learned successful youth engagement requires three key components:

1. Strong teams. Youth work better in teams. Well-trained adult leadership is absolutely vital in creating a healthy environment in which strong teams can grow. Will this group be a safe space where laughter and teamwide inside jokes flow freely, or will it be a stressed space where youth feel constrained by social risk and bullying? Will meetings provide a sense of purpose, or will they meander aimlessly, full of yawns and kids on phones?

We have found that the process of building strong teams is strengthened through youth sharing a common challenge, which contributes to shared identity and memories. Regularly scheduled meetings serve to reinforce team values and uphold fun and silly traditions, while leaving time for serious reflection and debrief. A secret handshake, a funny story, a team puzzle, scavenger hunt,



Teams of students learn through team-building activities.

group shout-outs, or other rituals help solidify interpersonal connections that will be important as the group moves forward together.

2. Skillful community consultation. Effectively engaging youth occurs through partnership with the community—the leaders and organizations already working to improve the community (e.g., elected officials, municipal government, nonprofits). In our work we have seen well-intentioned leaders struggle to connect with youth teams; many professionals are not used to interfacing with youth, and are reluctant to give room for youth to participation

fully in a discussion. Adult-dominated discussions inevitably backfire. If we want the best from our youth, the typical script when youth listen while adults talk must be flipped.

Teams that have had the best experiences with outsiders prepare both the visitor and the team ahead of time, using our guidelines. If a team is visiting the planning board, for instance, youth should each come prepared with a question that pertains to the scope of their project idea. If the youth are meeting with the local YMCA director, the director should be encouraged to facilitate a discussion around a specific set of topics of interest to youth, not prepare a one-sided lecture. The purpose of these interactions is for youth and adults to exchange ideas as partners; even if we all agree the adult is an “expert” in one area, we must also remember the youth have expertise in other areas. Creating space for mutual learning opportunities is vital to plug youth into existing city resources.

3. Create a concrete plan with a clear arc and purpose.

Our program has four main phases over the course of the year: teambuilding, understanding your community, planning a project, and implementing the project. We have found this structure gives groups a shape and direction around which creative ideas can flourish. Although youth are enthusiastic and eager to contribute to health and well-being in their communities, it is important to create guardrails that support youth in developing projects that are achievable and

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Building a culture of youth engagement

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We believe youth efforts, just like the efforts of citizens and city officials are too valuable to waste. There are two structural areas we think can help facilitate a strong culture for youth engagement in your city:

First, if you can, compensate youth.

Just as the efforts of teachers, County Freeholders, and nonprofit leaders are worth money, so too are the efforts of youth. In many cities there is a fund for youth summer employment. Is there a way to transform summer employment opportunities in your city from filing papers or working summer camp, to a strongly-bonded youth team dedicated to civic action?

Second, give them a real chance to succeed.

Demand they learn from experts in focused ways. Provide the youth tools and frameworks to do this as leaders of their community, and demand a strong project that is thoughtfully planned out, well-researched, strongly networked and within the scope of the possible. Hold youth accountable to data collection and results. They must believe their work matters, and so must you.

meaningful to the youth and the community. For example, a series of circuses that travels around the city giving out free fitness training and cotton candy to residents might be fun, but it is not the best use of youth assets, nor does it offer a sustained benefit to the community.

To assist in the planning, our teams were required to create a logic model for

their project ideas. In doing this in an iterative way, “citywide circus projects” worked their way to something much more concise and stronger, when tough detailed questions about partnerships, space, timelines, and sustainable outcomes were grappled with. It was within the framework of logic model development, in conjunction with

thought partners and community experts, that our teams were able to find exciting, interesting, and feasible projects. A few logic model revisions later, most of our teams are ready to execute planning. The projects our teams will implement range from a summer feeding program to a citywide walkability audit; these ideas are impactful, connected to existing resources, and do-able.

In a time when politics is pop culture, city leaders have a unique opportunity to seize on youth energy to build an on-ramp for lifelong engagement. This work must be done thoughtfully and carefully, however when that happens, actual great work can take place. Youth are idealistic and hard-working, savvy and candid. With proper structures and well-trained adults around them, they can add much to the vibrancy of a city. It’s up to city leaders to put the pieces in place to realize this vision. ♣

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