

ADVOCACY GUIDE: RESOURCE 17

Community Change Idea: Youth Councils and Leadership Programs

Youth councils and leadership programs are popular in schools as a way to promote civic engagement and elevate youth voice. While these models have been around for a long time, they have varying degrees of success when it comes to providing a meaningful experience for students to create a lasting impact at their school. Token tasks and roles like creating posters or speaking occasionally when called on by adults miss the opportunity for students to truly lead.

Current models of youth leadership programs also depend heavily on youth identity; that is, they tend to draw students who already think of themselves as leaders. This can result in a limited pool of students from which to recruit and also limits the diversity of the youth perspectives that are represented. Efforts to rethink and reinvent models of youth leadership should start with how to reshape what a “leader” looks like in the minds of students.

Logistics

- Figure out the frequency of meetings and set specific dates and times.
- Identify space to hold meetings.
- Figure out an arrangement for getting snacks and food (i.e. donations from families, Costco run, potluck style, collaboration with an after-school program).
- Calendar out any major events, either at school or in the community.
- Calendar out any social team-building events.
- Arrange for possible advisors, guest speakers, visits to local community organizations.
- Figure out any help you might need and look into getting a student assistant or parent volunteer to support the program.

Program Design

- Identify the specific goal** of the youth leadership program, both for the students and for the school. On which issues will youth voices be most valued? Ask colleagues at your school where youth perspectives would be genuinely appreciated. What specific perspectives are missing? Think beyond diversity for diversity’s sake and think deeply about the high-priority issues that need a different kind of solution.
- Create a survey to prioritize issues.** Poll students in your class and around the school about the issues and problems they find most important. Ask them: What negatively affects your experience at school? What do you struggle with? What would school look like if you were happy, motivated, and engaged in meaningful work?
- Think about the program through a project-based learning lens**—what projects can students take on to exercise their

leadership? Design a year-long experience that starts with students sharing their stories and experiences and then progresses to action projects and public presentations of learning. Be careful about the timing for different milestones and give students enough time to plan, such as:

- August-Early September:** Recruitment and team-building
 - September:** Establish youth roles, routines, officers, and focal issues for the year
 - October:** Share personal stories and experiences about the focal issue, interview peers, conduct research, and plan awareness-building event.
 - November:** Design a campaign or hold a public event to raise awareness about the focal issue and prepare youth leaders to speak at the event.
 - December:** Identify possibilities for concrete action plans, policy changes, and other recommendations to resolve the focal issue in the spring.
 - January:** Help youth leaders find peer and adult mentors that can advise them on the best ways to execute a plan to resolve the focal issue.
 - February-March:** These are likely the best events to organize school and community action projects.
 - April-May:** Help youth organize an event to showcase the action project(s).
 - May-June:** Recruit youth leaders for next year.
- Figure out if you want to do one big project (which is assumed by the above timeline), or several committees of small student-led projects on a number of concrete issues. The rough flow will likely end up the same, but the scope of the issues will look different.



Recruitment

- Identify students and ask them personally. Be persistent and make a big deal about why they would be perfect for the role.
- Be specific about what students would be working on during the year. It isn't enough to just say they would be joining a leadership team -- what does this mean and how would they benefit?
- Emphasize that they can be involved as a leader and still have time to do their other commitments and interests.
- In a future year of a program (once you have things down!), involve students in creating campaigns that illustrate what a "leader" is, challenging preconceptions of leadership.

Roles and Routines

- Give students special titles and responsibilities, such as President, Vice President, Captain, Social Chair, Committee Chair, Planning/Logistics Officer, etc.
- Incorporate routines that make the program feel like a fun, low-key, and productive environment. Beginning with food and time to catch up is always a good option, followed by a clear agenda designed by students and time to plan and work in committees.
- Make sure someone takes down minutes and any next steps to revisit.

Public Presence

- Having a public presence helps youth leaders feel like they are making a difference, while also helping the rest of the school stay up-to-date with important actions and opportunities to get involved.
- Identify ways for youth leaders to be more public with their work. Options may include: connecting with the school paper, giving updates on the morning announcements, creating a podcast that includes stories and updates, presenting during assemblies or school events, or representing the school at community events and meetings.

Example Survey Questions to Determine Focus Issue

This survey is designed to help youth leaders focus on issues that matter most to students at this school.
Please keep this survey anonymous and answer as honestly as possible.

1. Grade Level:

2. How would you rate the school in serving your academic needs:

- a. Excellent: my needs are served and I have no complaints.
- b. Fine: my experience is not amazing and not horrible.
- c. Inadequate: my needs are not met.
- d. Poor: my academic experience in school is discouraging and hurtful.

3. How would you rate the school in serving your social and emotional needs:

- a. Excellent: My needs are served and I have no complaints.
- b. Fine: My experience is not amazing and not horrible.
- c. Inadequate: My needs are not met.
- d. Poor: My social experience in school is painful and damaging.

4. Check the issues that you think youth leaders should focus on this year:

- Mental health
- School safety
- Making classes more meaningful and useful
- Internship programs
- College readiness
- Career and technical education
- Bullying
- Improving digital safety and communication
- Creating more opportunities for clubs and electives
- Supporting arts education
- Challenging racism and prejudice
- Global issues like environmental concerns and climate change
- Improving relations with the outside community
- Increasing parent and family involvement
- Providing more support services, like counseling and college advisors
- Other: _____

5. What negatively affects your experience at school?

6. What would school look like if you were happy, motivated, and engaged in meaningful work?

