

Promising Practices for Youth Involvement in Civic Governance

Youth/adult partnerships are relationships between youth and adults where there is mutuality in teaching, learning, and action (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes & Lorens, 2001). Both youth and adults benefit from participation in youth/adult partnerships. Youth come to see themselves as competent individuals who are able to contribute to important decisions that impact their communities (Camino, 2000). Adults benefit from partnerships with youth by becoming more competent in working with youth, developing a stronger sense of connectedness with their communities, and experiencing a renewed sense of energy and commitment to their work (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Lorens, 2001). Organizations and communities benefit from the involvement of youth/adult partnerships because young people better understand their peers' interests and concerns and bring fresh perspectives to decision-making processes (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Lorens, 2001).

Findings from recent studies suggest that exposure to well-implemented civic engagement programs, particularly ones that include real-world experiences, can increase the likelihood of having youth take active roles in their communities in the future. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1997), young people reported that the most important factor in determining whether they participate in community service activities was whether there were adequate opportunities for such participation.

Further, research has demonstrated that by giving youth a voice in the activities in which they participate and the curricula they adopt, their experiences are more positive (Garvey, McIntyre-Craig, & Myers, 2000). Program coordinators can do this by allowing youth participants assess their community's needs, share program planning responsibilities, help with budgeting, and share responsibility for making the impacts of the program on the community clearly visible.

Researchers have also found that giving youth time to reflect and time to see the effects of the program are both potentially important factors in successful civic engagement programs. The use of regularly scheduled seminars, meetings, and trainings was found to be the strongest variable predicting civic engagement among youth (Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Katula, 2000). The length of the program (program dosage or intensity) was also associated with the effectiveness of civic engagement programs (Conrad & Hedin, 1982). Civic governance programs targeted at community service and involvement in community decision-making can increase positive attitudes among youth toward others and, when paired with opportunities for civic experiences, can increase their subsequent civic behaviors (Michelsen, Zaff, & Hair, 2002).

Increasingly, researchers are finding that community service activities can contribute to the psychological, social, and intellectual growth of participants (Conrad & Hedin, 1982). Short-term outcomes include improved grades and attendance at school, increased personal efficacy, recognition of the importance of participating in the political system, and socially responsible, community-oriented attitudes (Calabrese & Schumer, 1986; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988; Schumer, 1994). Long-term outcomes include increased likelihood of voting in adulthood, commitment to future service, decreased likelihood of dropping out of school, improved transition from school to work, and a strong intrinsic work motivation (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998; Kraft, 1996; Scales & Blyth, 1997).

In summary, there is a growing body of research suggesting that giving young people opportunities to become engaged in civic activities increases the likelihood that they will become healthy, active citizens (Michelsen, Zaff & Hair, 2002). Indeed, research has demonstrated positive outcomes for young people in terms of:

- Improved academic grades
- Lower dropout and suspension rates
- Improved engagement with school
- Less likelihood of substance abuse
- Improved attitudes toward adults and older people, in general
- Increased likelihood of being involved in community service
- Decreased likelihood of teenage pregnancy

Additionally, there is some evidence that young people's participation in civic activities can result in benefits not only for the youth but also for their parents and their communities, by bolstering parents' skills, civic knowledge, and involvement. However, few studies have been undertaken to study whether initial gains experienced during program implementation can be sustained. Given the limitations of existing research and of this study as well, readers are cautioned to consider the following "promising practices" as preliminary and await further research examining the long-term effects of programs designed to foster youth involvement in civic governance.

The following promising practices are based on the evaluation of the *2004 Youth Involvement in Civic Governance and Decision-Making Program*. They draw on an analysis of the telephone interview data and a comprehensive review of program documentation (e.g., site coordinator project reports, news releases, and newspaper articles), as well as a synthesis of existing research in the field of civic engagement (e.g., Skelton, Boyte & Leonard, 2002). These practices relate to program strategies that appear to be most effective in terms of influencing:

- Governance and leaderships skills among youth participants;
- Feelings of self-worth and self-confidence among youth participants;
- Recognition among adults of the value of involving youth in civic governance and decision making; and
- Attitudinal changes among participating adults and organizations about the contributions youth can make in addressing community issues.

Promising Practice 1

Effective programs are designed intentionally to provide opportunities for youth to feel appreciated for their work, efforts, and contributions. It is important for young people to see the impact they can have on their communities and receive public recognition for their participation and involvement.

Promising Practice 2

Effective programs involve youth in *all* phases of the program including program design, budget, scheduling, implementation, and evaluation. Giving young people a voice in the various stages of a program builds feelings of self-confidence, self-worth, trust, and mutual respect. Youth involvement throughout a program's life also provides practical opportunities for learning and applying important life skills, such as decision-making, problem-solving and leadership.

Promising Practice 3

Effective programs intentionally work to balance unequal power dynamics between youth and adults. By sharing responsibility for all aspects of a program, including budgeting, fundraising, and scheduling, youth feel empowered, important, valued, and fully invested. Additionally, learning within the context of youth/adult partnerships is seen as a “win-win” situation as both youth and adults learn to appreciate and value one another’s perspectives, life experiences, and strengths.

Promising Practice 4

Effective programs combine civic governance education with community service projects conceived and carried out by youth-adult teams. Programs that foster a greater sense of connectedness between youth and their communities are more likely to see long-term success at both the program and individual level.

Promising Practice 5

Effective programs identify ways for youth and their parents to be involved. There is evidence that by working together, youth and their parents not only gain knowledge about civic governance, but also become more involved in their communities, thus helping to promote long-term benefits and retain youth in their communities to become future community leaders.

Promising Practice 6

Effective programs are ones in which youth feel they are listened to, respected, and taken seriously by adults. It is particularly important for adults in youth/adult partnerships to help young people develop their own sense of efficacy and autonomy. Successful programs recognize the benefits of and embrace all forms of diversity (e.g., economic, age, and culture).

Promising Practice 7

Effective programs utilize all forms of communication media—radio, TV, billboards, web sites, satellite and telephone conferences, newspapers, newsletters, flyers, bulletin boards, community forums, town councils, and “word of mouth”—to build community interest and support. Programs with well-developed public awareness campaigns increase the likelihood of developing community-based collaborations, thus establishing a foundation for program sustainability.

Promising Practice 8

Effective programs establish mentoring relationships between adults and youth. Within a context of mentoring, adults curb inclinations to “take over” or dominate. Instead, adults demonstrate patience and flexibility. Adults in healthy mentoring relationships with youth express feelings of being energized by the innovative ideas and enthusiasm of young people.

Promising Practice 9

Effective programs utilize various team-building approaches to develop healthy lines of communication, mutual trust, and respect. Field trips, retreats, conferences, community celebrations, and social gatherings can be used effectively to nurture mutually beneficial relationships among youth-adult teams.

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Promising Practice 10

Effective programs establish mechanisms and secure support in order to prepare for long-term success. Successful programs recognize that youth involvement in civic governance takes time, and they plan accordingly. Youth need to feel supported “for the long haul.”