

A Portrait of the Youth Involvement in Civic Governance and Decision-Making Project in Nebraska

Description of the Project

The goal of *2004 Youth Involvement in Civic Governance and Decision-Making Project* in Nebraska was to lay the foundation for a sustainable program that would allow youth and adults to connect with one another, develop trusting relationships, develop leadership skills that would translate into giving young people increased capacity to make a difference in the future. The primary objective of the project was to establish mechanisms for civic engagement and develop a sense of community connectedness that would result in retaining youth in rural Nebraska and their hometowns. The project was implemented in four rural communities in Polk, Wayne, Hayes, and Cedar counties.

The initial plans for the project involved the creation of steering committees at each of the four county sites. These committees were responsible for recruiting youth and adults. The project utilized technology by having Cooperative Extension educators use distance learning classrooms and satellite trainings on the *Creating Youth/Adult Partnerships* curriculum. In addition, each of the four sites received training from the youth/adult partnership teams. These trainings focused on developing leadership skills, identifying community issues and projects, taking action on the issues, and completing the projects.

The Youth/Adult Partnerships training was conducted for Extension staff in January 2004. The National 4-H Council's *Creating Youth/Adult Partnerships* manual was distributed to 45 Extension staff. The *Partners in Community Leadership* curriculum was purchased from the North Central Rural Development Regional Center for the four sites to use as a resource for the leadership development component. A training session for the participants at all four sites was conducted using a program called *NU Skills*. With this method, each group was connected via conference telephone and a computer program. This "live" synchronous training technology allowed each site to communicate with the entire group. This portion of the training gave each site an opportunity to make a presentation about their community and receive feedback and suggestions from the other sites. During this phase of the training, the four sites named the project, Leaders Energizing Activities in Partnership (LEAP).

The Hayes Center LEAP group received training, developed leadership skills, surveyed the community for a service project, and examined possible solutions. The group successfully planned and implemented a major community improvement project that involved replacing a retaining wall, adding and repairing benches and picnic tables, trimming and shaping trees and shrubs, and planting ornamental grasses and perennial flowers.

The LEAP group in Wakefield worked with an after-school program to coordinate and reinvigorate the Summer Reading Program at the Wakefield Library. The reading program was in jeopardy of not being conducted due to lack of funding. The LEAP group identified the problem and was eager to get involved.

The Hartington LEAP focused on developing an infrastructure and sustainable mechanisms for youth involvement in civic governance. Both the local Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Council were approached by the LEAP group to examine how youth could be given more meaningful roles in the community. Both of these organizations are now in the final stages of adopting by-laws changes that will allow youth to serve as voting members of their governing boards. The LEAP youth have identified their preferences for the boards on which they would like to serve, and interviews are planned to select the youth who will serve on these boards.

In Stromsburg, the LEAP group focused on making improvements to Buckley Park and improving the basketball courts. They met with the City Council and City Park Board for approval and support for this plan.

The public relations plan included writing and issuing news releases announcing receipt of the grant to local newspapers at the four sites, news releases about the accomplishments of each of the four county sites, and a statewide news release about the grant and site accomplishments (sent to all Nebraska newspapers). An informational brochure about the grant was prepared and each site distributed it to key people in the community. Each site had a youth team give presentations to various groups such as city council and community development boards. Letters about the project were sent to school principals and teachers, to city councils, and to Community Improvement Program Committees. The project posted information about the trainings, projects and accomplishments on the Nebraska 4-H web site. National 4-H Council and Land O'Lakes Foundation were recognized as the project's sponsors in all news releases and at all public presentations. Engraved metal plates and permanent metal plaques recognizing the contributions and involvement of the Land O'Lakes Foundation and National 4-H Council were mounted at the project sites.

When asked to assess how successful the project had been in terms of achieving its intended goals, the project coordinator reported, "The project went great. We identified four communities and assigned four staff. Each completed a project through the youth/adult partnerships. These projects jump started the youth adult partnership concept here in Nebraska and helped to get the concept and processes established. Our primary goal was to give youth and adults opportunities to work together. I think that we were successful in providing these opportunities for them to work as partners to address community issues. The project events translated into helping them develop positive attitudes about working together and got them to appreciate their importance to the community."

When asked how the project had impacted youth, the project coordinator reported, "The youth saw that they could have some influence in the community and we saw the youth take pride in being able to do something for the community. It gave them an opportunity to have real responsibility and be in charge of making something happen in their communities."

When asked how adults had been impacted by the project, the coordinator said, "We saw the willingness of adults to step up to the challenge and allow the kids to serve on boards and advisory groups. It was a positive move to decide to let the kids to be involved on this level."

According to the coordinator, the project made tremendous strides toward its goal of retaining youth in the rural communities by increasing their sense of ownership in and connectedness to the community. As she explained the impact on the community, "The kids were an untapped resource for the community. For example, a new library story hour for kids in the summer was set up by one project and this would not exist if it were not for this project. Other teams identified city parks that were rundown and the youth made plans to renovate them. This inspired the city councils to allocate more funds for equipment. The Lions Club joined as collaborators. The youth demonstrated tremendous leadership. We heard many adults in the community say that if the youth were willing to do this then they should join in and help out. The youth provided leadership and synergy was created with these other groups to create opportunities for community development and improvement."

When asked how the project could be improved, the project coordinator had this to suggest, "The time line was difficult. It was a real push to do the project in six months—which was the initial schedule—but fortunately it was extended to September. But even then, there were lots of time constraints and difficulties with kids getting out of school for the summer. I really think that to be effective as it can be, the project should be 12 months. This would give more time for doing background work in the community and providing more training for the youth adult partnership

concept. It is essential to have the project included, not just training. The project gives the youth and adults a common goal to achieve.”

Further, the project coordinator pointed to the sustainability of the project as evidence of success. As she explained, “Because of these projects we were able to get more funding to do this in ten more communities. The four projects will be used to showcase what we did. All four staff members felt good about what they accomplished with this project. We worked with small rural communities with limited resources, so what they got accomplished was tremendous earned value.”

The following summarizes the impacts of the *2004 Youth Involvement in Civic Governance and Decision-Making Project* in Nebraska on the youth, adults and the communities involved.

Impacts of the Project on Youth

- Youth developed leadership skills while addressing local issues.
- Youth have opportunities to develop leadership, decision-making, and problem-solving skills.
- Youth become motivated to secure permanent civic governance roles within their communities.
- Youth feel empowered to take action within their communities.
- Youth gained experience by working with adults in equal partnership to accomplish goals.
- Increased ability to make a difference in their communities.
- Increased sense of confidence.
- Increased sense of connectedness to the community.
- Improved relationships and understanding of adults.
- Improved attitude among young people about their role in civic governance.

Impacts of the Project on Adults

- Adults see youth as resources.
- Adults engage youth in decision-making in order to involve them in the future of their communities. Adults have opportunities to witness the contributions to their communities that youth can make.
- Adults recognize the value of youth involvement in civic governance as projects are undertaken and accomplished.
- Adults enhance their own repertoire of decision-making, action planning and community development skills while engaged in youth/adult partnership projects.
- Adults experience a stronger appreciation and understanding of youth.
- Adults develop a renewed sense of community connectedness through the eyes of youth.

Impacts of the Project on Communities

- Communities were bolstered by a renewed sense of interest by youth to remain in their hometowns.
- Communities see youth involvement in civic governance as crucial to their economic vitality.
- Communities recognize the value youth bring to community improvement in terms of infusing new ideas and energy.
- Communities benefit by having much-needed improvement projects completed by youth-adult teams.

The following highlights are drawn from the telephone interviews with Nebraska youth and adult participants in the *2004 Youth Involvement in Civic Governance and Decision-Making Program*. These quotes are used to capture common themes in the responses. All direct quotes from the youth and adults are italicized.

How youth described their role in the project and how they benefited through their involvement

I enjoyed it tremendously, It got me more comfortable working with adults. Now I feel a lot more confident talking with an adult.

At first I thought that working with adults would be kind of scary, it was kind of fun.

I think that working as a team is important and a great idea. You see what 12 kids can do in a small community, it makes you think about what a lot of kids could do in a larger community.

Youth describe what's best about working with adults

I think that you learn more than you knew before. I can talk to adults now more without getting nervous.

It helped me a lot in terms of having self-confidence because I got to practice speaking in front of adults and different community groups. I got a better understanding of how adults think.

It helps educate you more about getting involved with the community.

The adults have more mature money-making ideas and the young people have the creative ideas, so the ideas get combined to make better ideas.

You can learn a lot. Before this project, I never realized how many decisions are made. I was probably intimidated before, but this project helped me see that everyone was really equal.

You feel like you can make a difference and that you're not just a kid—and that you count.

I got to present ideas and see them happen, You get to see what you want to happen, happen.

The best part of the program for me was to feel like I had more of an individual voice and that the adults would listen.

There is more of an understanding between adults and youth of how and what they think. It brings ages more unified.

I think seeing their opinions and how our opinions are different on the same subject – cause kids like to go to the park and grown-ups can help get things done, so both know things the other groups don't.

Youth outline the negative aspects of working with adults

Different opinions come with different generations. Sometimes the adults don't always listen.

Sometimes it's a little stressful. I don't think that adults sometimes realize that we all work at different speeds.

Sometimes the adults can be stubborn with their perspective.

Youth make suggestions for improving the project

Advertise it! Get more youth involved!

Nothing, it was great.

Do more advertising and have more youth involved.

Probably get more youth involved. There would be more possibilities if we had more youth volunteers.

Get a little bit more organized. Sometimes meetings weren't structured and scheduled haphazardly.

More communication between groups would have been helpful.

How adults described their role in the project and how youth and adults benefited through their involvement

Because the community is in the process of building a new library, the summer reading program on a scale that has been implemented in the past was in danger of not being held. The program serviced 80 kids ranging from age 3 to fifth graders. The students stepped in to run the program on a scale that was similar—in some ways larger – than was done in the past. The students took over the leadership of the program, planning the arts and crafts, planning the curriculum and running the program.

It helped me to see that we do need to utilize the youth, and that if you ask them they will show up.

The project changed the minds of several Lions Club who worked on the project with the youth. As a result, several of the youth on the project were invited to join the Lions Club.

Adults describe the advantages of working in partnership with youth

Fresh ideas and fresh minds. Sometimes adults lose steam. A lot older youth allowed to work with younger youth is a recipe for good role models.

Youth have a lot more enthusiasm, often more than adults have. They come up with things that adults just wouldn't try.

Youth have fresh ideas. The young people open our eyes to other resources. They have more energy than adults and that helps to keep projects moving quickly.

We have a small community and it gives each other a chance to see the roles that the others play. Youth are an asset to our community, they bring fresh ideas

The youth bring a new spirit, new blood.

Young people get to see that they can make a difference, which encourages them to make a difference and to show adults that they can make a difference. It's a win-win situation for all of us.

They have a no-holds barred attitude on their ideas, they don't have the experience to see that something cannot be done. The adults could use more of that.

They are optimistic—and have that youthful outlook on things that really motivates people to get involved.

Having the opportunity to work with the youth has been a definite plus – the energy that they bring, it's a definite plus.

When you get youth cleaning up the damage that other youth have made, it sends a strong signal and it gives a clear incentive for them to keep it that way.

Adults outline some negative aspects of working in partnership with youth

It was a really positive experience. Time, maybe – we had conflicting schedules. Kids are busy people! But we worked around it, so it wasn't really negative.

Sometimes a lack of maturity stunts progress.

The kids who worked on this project were really involved in high school activities and it's hard to schedule activities with kids who were already heavily involved. It made for some time constraints on meetings and project times.

Adults make suggestions for improving the project

Nothing that I can see. I would appreciate working with the kids again and I would participate.

Timing, quick deadlines, lot of competing activities, so would prefer a longer time frame to accommodate all competing demands.

I was tempted to say the timeframe at first, but the time frame forces things to get done.

Involve more adults – we had three primary adults, and I think having more would strengthen the youth/adult partnerships.

It worked out fairly well, but I think we could have used more volunteers. There were more kids than expected.