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Initiative on Cities   Initiative on Cities - White Paper Series

2016-10-20

Engaging Youth in Local Government: Lessons from the Boston Region

https://hdl.handle.net/2144/18652
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ENGAGING YOUTH IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: LESSONS FROM THE BOSTON REGION

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There is widespread consensus that young people have a right to be directly involved in decisions that affect them, and an understanding that adults are the ones who must create formal pathways of engagement. Yet there remains limited empirical information about the best ways to do so.

This paper identifies key lessons gleaned from a multi-method study of twenty-four operating municipal youth councils throughout the greater Boston region. The insight assembled here is based on interviews with youth and adult stakeholders, observations of council meetings, a review of council documents, as well as a review of relevant academic literature. It is intended to guide practitioners in developing or reforming local youth councils.

WHAT FORMS MIGHT YOUTH PARTICIPATION TAKE?

The role of citizen participation is widely understood to be crucial for effective democratic governance. Youth are citizens too but their participation in government, while often thought to be a good idea, is not widely practiced and understood (Timmerman, 2009; Sinclair, 2004). Even among young people of voting age, it is notable that those age 18-24 consistently vote at lower rates than all other age groups (File, 2013) although voting behavior does increase at later ages as young adults move into more stable adult roles (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). As civic behavior is partially a habit to be developed, youth councils may play a vital role in aiding young people to develop this habit. Greater attention to establishing and sustaining youth councils may provide a key mechanism for fully engaging youth and tapping their expertise to enhance a city's commitment to youth.

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Youth civic engagement has recently been classified in four ways: citizen participation, grassroots organizing, intergroup dialogue, and sociopolitical development (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013). Youth councils, where young people are formally engaged in political and governmental institutions, are one form of citizen participation. These councils are important forums within local public systems "where youth are meaningfully involved in significant decisions regarding the goals, design and implementation of the community's work" (Zeldin, Camino, and Calvert, 2007, p. 77).

WHY ENGAGE YOUTH IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE?

Formal youth engagement can help to inspire young people to be more civically and politically involved, lead to better decision-making and contribute to greater social justice.

Youth gain:

- Enhanced personal and professional interest in community service, political action, or other forms of public engagement.

- Sense of empowerment, competence, and connection (Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson, & Shaw, 2014; Cashmore, 2011; Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2007).

- Improved knowledge of their options, rights and decision-making processes, improved sense of control in these processes, and enhanced decision-making skills (Cashmore, 2011; Checkoway, 2011).

Community gains:

- Improved access to relevant information, leading to better-informed decision-making, particularly in regard to policies that affect young people (Cashmore, 2011; Mitra, 2005; Frank, 2006; Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010).

Society gains:

- Improved social justice, via involvement of those whose lives are directly affected by governmental decisions (Augsberger, Collins, & Gecker, 2016; Checkoway, 2011).

WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY OF GREATER YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

Most challenges to greater youth involvement are attitudinal rather than structural, with the misperceptions of adults serving as a chief barrier. Frank (2006) identifies many of the problematic views adults hold, including developmental beliefs (youth lack the knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors and social connections of adults), perceptions of youths' vulnerability (youth are both in need of adult protection and can be co-opted by adults and thus cannot participate independently), legal views (because of their age they are not voting citizens and at best can be trained in civic engagement but do not yet have full authority to contribute to decisions). When these various messages and beliefs are widespread, they can create an environment in which some adults are unable to see the capacities of young people.

Another barrier, identified in this study, can be a lack of sustained commitment to formal youth councils. Youth councils run a risk of "fizzling out," without concerted attention to structure, funding, and staffing, including sustained commitment during political transitions. Zeldin et al. (2014) identify that societal norms and institutions are rarely designed to support youth-adult partnerships.

LESSONS LEARNED: RESULTS OF A STUDY OF TWENTY-FOUR MUNICIPAL YOUTH COUNCILS

This report is based on research into twenty-four active youth councils in the greater Boston region conducted by the first three authors between 2015 and 2016. To protect the confidentiality of councils, letters (e.g., "A") denote specific councils. Though varied in their origin and duration, these councils all intended to engage youth in council activities.

The research examines the elements that contribute to enduring councils that provide authentic vehicles for representative youth engagement. It also provides insight into the structures and activities that best nurture youth development.

The lessons shared here rose to the fore as most fundamental to undergird the operations of the council and its potential accomplishments. They were culled from numerous data collection efforts. Additional guidance of a more practical nature is also relevant (e.g., setting appropriate time and location, offering food), but the lessons here are intentionally conceptual categories to guide practice. Youth councils themselves can then decide how to apply these guidelines in their work.

LESSONS LEARNED:
Elements of a Successful Youth Council

1. Dedicated, trained staff support and funding resources
2. Engaged political leadership
3. Diverse youth membership
4. Relevant youth development opportunities
5. Breadth of meaningful activities
6. Clear, but flexible, focus and structure
7. Efforts to dispel anti-youth attitudes and processes

① Dedicated, Trained Staff Support and Funding Resources

The first form of necessary leadership is that of the adult staff member or members involved in the operation of the council. Like most community-based entities, on-going commitment by a dedicated person or persons is needed to steer the course of a youth council, though there is variation in the sample as to whether this person is focused on the youth council full-time, part-time, as a part of another role, or in a volunteer capacity.

While a single dedicated staff person is necessary, a supportive environment and access to resources is also critical. In the town of T, the political milieu is that of stated support for youth programs and youth well being, but without the necessary resources and authority to allow for action. The youth council was led by a single full-time staff member and dedicated volunteers. Although committed to enhancing the well being of youth in the city, they did not have a budget or authority to influence youth programs. In contrast, the youth council of town H has recently been given greater autonomy and power by the mayor. The full-time staff person in charge of the council is located within a larger youth-related department, which gives the all-youth council the ability to use departmental resources, as well as their own budget, when necessary. These two examples demonstrate that a single staff person may be sufficient; however, a supportive climate and access to funding and resources is critical.

Regardless of staffing intensity, staff members should have specific youth-related expertise, or seek to increase their competency over time. Staff should be trained in positive youth development and civic engagement. For example, some interviewees bolstered their skills through webinars, conferences and networking with other youth council leaders in the region.

The time and resources staff members are allotted in running a council is illustrative of the municipal leadership. The joint efforts of leadership at the political level and day-to-day staff person/s is crucial.

② Engaged Political Leadership

While not widespread, engagement of local political leaders, such as the mayor or city manager, in local youth council efforts appears to be a powerful force. In the town of R, the mayor is a central figure in viewing youth as a constituency like any other, and occasionally attends meetings or interacts with the youth council at other city events. All of these interactions are considered by the youth in our sample to be significant.

Surprisingly few of the respondents report a direct connection between the youth council and the chief executive. Where it does exist, good leadership among political officials does not require specific youth-related expertise, but these leaders need to be connected to all constituencies and need to perceive youth as a vital constituency and resource.

"Where solid municipal leadership and staff leadership is present, often youth leadership flourishes."

Where solid municipal leadership and staff leadership is present, often youth leadership flourishes. In towns C and S, the alignment of leadership creates spaces for older youth to learn leadership skills and run projects among their peers. The values of the town or city where councils are present informed how the town leadership responded to youth. In towns F and L there is consensus regarding "town interests" or an atmosphere of support of education, volunteerism, and active community engagement.

③ Diverse Membership, Including Economic, Racial, Social and 'Achievement' Diversity

When recruiting and selecting members for a youth council it is critical to consider multiple aspects of diversity and to include youth with various attributes and histories (e.g., court involved youth, teen parents, immigrant youth). While it is not possible to incorporate all forms of diversity in council membership, it is — at a minimum — important to strive for membership that is representative of the youth in the city/town/neighborhood. It is also important to consider many aspects of diversity such as race/ethnicity, economic status, immigrant origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability/disability.

The communities involved in this study approach diversity in a variety of ways. In the largest youth council studied, significant racial, ethnic, gender and geographic diversity has been achieved. Even here, however, there is evidence that there is not full representation. One youth member, self-identified as Asian, in town R reported, *"Honestly? I don't think many people know about [the youth council] in my neighborhood. It is mainly a Hispanic community and so that might have an impact. Maybe we should have more Hispanic [youth council] members from my neighborhood so that there's this connect between [the youth council] and neighborhood."*

Many councils lack economic diversity. One adult stakeholder reported, *"Town D is a very upper-middle class, non-diverse*

community, about 95 percent white; yet there are diverse segments of the community: lower class subsets, high population of homeless children, and low-income housing...we need to do a better job of outreaching to these segments."

But the most striking observation is that the youth councils are overwhelming populated by high-achievers. As noted by one respondent, *"the youth we have in our council are great, however, several of them are in National Honors Society or other high school clubs (O)."* This was confirmed by the youth sample from Boston where the majority of youth attended one of the top high schools in the city.

"...membership on youth councils, while inclusive in some respects, might also perpetuate social inequalities."

Thus, membership on youth councils, while inclusive in some respects, might also perpetuate social inequalities (Augsberger, Collins, Gecker, & Dougher, 2016). Adult stakeholders note the importance of looking beyond the "best students" and engaging a wide variety of youth, including youth in vocational programs or home school, and youth "at risk" for dropping out of high school.

Adult stakeholders must also ensure that networks to enter and participate are open enough to allow a wide range of youth to participate. Social networks appear to be a key component of youth councils, including as a recruiting tool for members. Promoting a diverse array of online and offline forums, both for recruiting and engagement of non-member youth, is key to engaging a wide spectrum of young people.

④ Relevant Youth Development Opportunities

Youth interviewed for this study report joining the youth council so they could *"make a difference in their community."* To achieve this, communities must provide on-going training, support and guidance from adults working with the council.

Youth members are operating in a relatively foreign environment. Government is often little understood and government functions and structures are not transparent. In order to set members up for success, adult staff must hone particular youth skills and deepen their knowledge of process and players.

A. Orientation & Onboarding: An orientation, prior to the start of any council activities, might range in duration and content depending on the needs of the locale, but should provide youth with an overview of the local government structure and functions, the role of the youth council (e.g., in terms of advising local government on policy, programs and/or practice), the activities of the council, and the expectations of youth council members. Holding an orientation prior to the start of the council provides youth with a context for their role and responsibilities, while helping them to understand the position of the council (e.g., within or outside local government) and the potential impact of council activities.

B. Presentation & Public Speaking: Youth need to be prepared for interactions outside the youth councils, particularly with members of the city council or city departments. Adult stakeholders should support youth in practicing presentations, for example, as well as anticipating potential responses and questions.

C. Leadership Roles: Once youth are on the council, they should be provided opportunities to engage in activities that assist them in developing their leadership knowledge and skills. Study participants discussed a wide range of activities, including attending meetings, participating in education and prevention efforts, conducting community service and outreach efforts, and engaging in policy advocacy. Both youth and adults should carefully select these activities to ensure that youth have the opportunity to assume leadership roles, while simultaneously receiving support and guidance from adults. For example, in town O youth raised awareness of the importance of transportation for youth. They worked with adults from the local transportation authority to create a "youth route" for the bus, which traveled from the high school to the movie theatre and the mall.

D. Networking:
a. *With Other Youth:* Interactions with youth from a wide range of backgrounds allow each of the youth participants to grow in their social competence.

b. *With City Leaders:* By creating opportunities for skill development and engagement in political process, youth foster relationships that can further their educational and career goals.

c. *With Government Staff:* Access to city government employees can help foster a deeper understanding of government career options and potential paths to achieving those placements.

If youth councils are constructed to provide such individual benefits to the youth, it is particularly important that access to participation does not result from "insider" networks but that recruitment and application processes aim to reach a wide range of youth.

SPOTLIGHT: Participatory Budgeting Process in Boston

Boston's youth council is engaged in a participatory budgeting process involving youth between the ages of 12-25, dubbed Youth Lead the Change. One million dollars has been allocated by the Mayor in each of the last three years to be spent on capital projects developed and voted on by youth in the city. The youth council was charged with implementing the participatory budgeting process, including collecting ideas from city youth, developing proposals for capital projects, and encouraging youth to vote on projects via a specific ballot process.

Youth on the council receive training focused on participatory budgeting, methods of communication and outreach, and teamwork. Youth who participate in the process have the opportunity to develop multiple leadership skills including teamwork, public speaking, communications, decision-making, and time-management.

For the youth involved, this concrete, important, and highly recognized activity helps to focus their attention and make their participation meaningful rather than symbolic.

⑤ Breadth of Meaningful Activities

A wide range of youth council activities were identified via this study, including attending meetings, education and prevention activities, youth summits, recreational activities, community service, community assessments, counseling, and policy-specific actions (Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016).

Core activities should be both substantive and social, encouraging interaction both within the council and with the community at large. Young people may be interested in joining a youth council largely or in part because of the social aspects of meeting and interacting with other young people and/or city officials.

Some youth councils hold meetings that are formal, clearly following governmental procedure, with agenda, minutes, and sub-committees. Other councils hold meetings with less formality. These are more youth-centered and focused on youth development programming rather than governmental procedures. Neither is superior but rather should be matched to the overall purpose of the council. Where possible there should be a combination of formal procedures offering structure and guidance, as well as informal opportunities for youth to run activities and socialize with peers.

Second to attending and participating in meetings, educationally focused prevention activities are the most common activity of those surveyed. Some of the councils receive funding from the Massachusetts State Department of Public Health or federal funding through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Such funding drives some of the education and prevention activities in which this subset of youth councils engages.

Yet, the essence of youth development strategies and the promise they hold require that they not be solely problem-focused. Funding may be important, but a council exclusively focused on substance abuse prevention (or another problem) may lose its overall orientation toward broader engagement in governance. External funding is neither good nor bad but should be pursued purposefully and requires alignment with council mission, structure, and activities.

⑥ Clear But Flexible Focus and Structure

Each youth council should be relevant to the local context, the current mission, and the developmental phase appropriate to the body, including its degree of youth-centricity and control. At the same time, founders should anticipate that issues of community crisis, political and staff leadership and funding shifts will likely manifest at some stage and force a council to adapt.

Councils must be adept at responding to both changes in the community (political leadership, community problems identified by data or crises), potential opportunities (particularly around funding), and the expressed needs of the members (particularly youth). Additionally, over time interest in a true youth-centric, youth-controlled council may emerge.

All youth councils surveyed were initiated by adults and, as a result, were not fully youth-centric in their structure in the early stages. Among those surveyed, there is now a four-level continuum of adult-centric / youth-centric practice. Several components distinguished placement on the continuum: 1) youth membership, 2) youth decision-making, 3) youth initiative, and 4) youth leadership (Augsberger, Collins, & Gecker, 2016).

All of the councils have mechanisms to include youth voice, but the degree to which youth share power with adults appears to be linked to the structure of the council. Structures that are more youth-centric provide youth with more power than those that are adult-centric. Other factors included access to the mayor or city manager and voting privileges on the council. Youth-centric councils embody most or all of these characteristics: membership is a majority youth; youth make decisions; youth decide what issues to focus on; and youth hold leadership positions.

While we (Augsberger, Collins, & Gecker, 2016) may favor a youth-centric model, just nine of the twenty-four councils researched fall into this category. The adults who supervise these councils were hired by the municipality to do so; providing support, encouragement, and information in order to help the young people succeed. These councils have the necessary structural support and capacity — often existing as stand-alone entities employing a youth development framework.

Lastly, it is important to remember that youth members cycle off these councils; for developmental reasons they do not stay more than a couple of years. Hence, the focus of activity and the overall character of the work of the group should be reflective of the members in order to have a sense of engagement and ownership.

⑦ Efforts to Dispel Anti-Youth Attitudes and Processes

The vast majority of adult stakeholders involved in this study view youth as capable, powerful, and a necessary voice within the political process. Yet, it is seen as inevitable that youth will interact with individuals and groups who are not supportive of youth and who may have explicit or implicit biases against youth. The idea that "adult attitudes are the greatest barrier to effective" youth participation (Bessell, 2009, p.299) was echoed in this study. While adult interview respondents represented individual professionals who believe in the potential of youth voice and participation, youth councils continually contend with cultural attitudes at-large.

Bessell (2009) identifies four key areas where these attitudes are embedded: "institutional context and procedural requirements; cultural and social norms; lack of clarity about children's participation; and concerns about negative consequences" (p. 313). Thus, the adult allies of the youth council may be called upon to support the youth council in a variety of ways to confront attitudes and procedures that discourage youth engagement.

In addition to honing youth leadership and speaking skills, adult allies should confront anti-youth attitudes within systems including youth perceptions (or misperceptions) about their value to government. Youth indicated that their perceptions of government employees was initially prohibitive to their own active engagement.

Prior to joining a council, youth typically had little interest or information about city government. In some cases, youth held negative connotations of government and adults, feeling that these structures and individuals did not value the opinions of youth. In discussing views of city government, one youth stated that prior to joining the youth council, *"I thought that there were just a bunch of grown men who made ideas and collectively agreed on the ideas but didn't really reach out to anybody else... I thought that it was more exclusive and not involving the community."*

Adult stakeholders are aware of some of the barriers within government that youth perceive as restrictive to participation. In town K, *"difficulties of the bureaucratic procedures have been noticeable."* Several young people shied away from participating on the council because they were intimidated by the formal procedure of being sworn-in. Understanding how formal structures may be unintentionally anti-youth might also assist in explaining why it is that high-achieving youth seem to participate in councils.

In practice, adult allies of youth must be aware of the myriad ways adult systems of operation in government can feel very foreign, and thus anti-youth, to young people. Adult allies can then take steps to make institutional practices more youth-friendly, for example, altering unnecessary formalities or finding a home for the council that provides flexibility. At a minimum, practitioners can prepare youth to expect to face anti-youth attitudes in their work, since these attitudes reflect social norms well beyond any individual.

CONCLUSION

Through the course of conducting this research, many practitioners asked for advice about forming and running youth councils. Having a youth council within or attached to city government is widely considered to be a good idea, yet many well-intentioned efforts fall short in practice. Even successful and established youth councils seek out information and new ideas to improve their operation.

By highlighting some of the critical elements of successful councils — where youth felt they were giving and gaining tangible benefits and adults were deriving value from youth involvement — we hope to demystify and improve some aspects of youth council formation and management.

Lastly, it is important to remember that many of the youth in this study had positive experiences with adults and city government based on their involvement with the youth council. Without hands-on experience with encouraging adults and systems, youth attitudes and opinions of government are neutral at best, creating disinterest in civic engagement. By providing formal ways to engage, and engagements that yield tangible benefits, adults provide a very real incentive for youth to participate, learn and grow.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed ethnographic methods including phone interviews with twenty-four adult stakeholders, in-person interviews with twenty-seven youth council members, observations of seven youth council meetings, and a review of documents (e.g., mission statements, website information and meeting minutes). All data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) including reviewing the overall data, developing initial codes, applying initial codes to additional data, expanding upon the codes, and collating the codes into themes.

The Boston University Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol. ■

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