



# Building Effective Youth Councils

A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making

*Executive Summary*

*Shanetta Martin, Karen Pittman, Thaddeus Ferber, Ada McMahon*

Published by the Forum for Youth Investment, July 2007

In collaboration with:

The National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, and  
The National Conference of State Legislatures

as part of the Youth Engagement Series  
for Municipal and State Leaders

◆ NATIONAL DISSEMINATION PARTNERS ◆

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES



NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
of STATE LEGISLATURES  
*The Forum for America's Ideas*



**the forum**  
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT  
*moving ideas to impact*

# Overview

## What is a Youth Council?

Many mayors, governors and legislatures across the country have created youth councils: formal bodies made up of youth (typically ages 16-18) who advise high-level decision makers and elected officials.

The structure and role of councils vary from city to city and state to state. In some cases they provide advice on proposed and pending legislation, state budget expenditures and funding for youth programs. In Maine, the council also has the duty of drafting and proposing legislation. Whatever their structure, youth councils give young people a meaningful role in the policy and decision-making process.

Young people of all ages have found their voice through organizing, advocacy and community leadership. Since young people aged 18 and over have direct voting power, youth councils are not the only way that young people can be involved in policy making. Youth councils, however, provide the opportunity to have direct access to policy makers. Increasingly, youth and adults are looking for strategies to ensure that they take full advantage of this opportunity.

## About the Guide

The Forum for Youth Investment believes that meaningful youth engagement is critical for the creation of sustainable, widespread, high-impact change in the systems and settings that can either support or hinder young people's progress.

This guide builds on the Forum's earlier work on youth engagement — *Youth. Action. Community. Development: The Com-*

*munity and Youth Development Series*<sup>1</sup>, produced with funding from the Ford Foundation and available on the Forum's Web site ([www.forumfyi.org](http://www.forumfyi.org)). This guide is also part of a larger goal of the Forum to produce timely, practical and helpful publications for change-maker leaders on the national, state and local levels. These leaders can be members of government, nonprofit organizations, communities or youth and their families, all of whom take a Big Picture approach to ensuring that young people are Ready by 21™: ready for college, work and life.

The guide is designed to help states and localities create or strengthen their own youth councils. It is a synthesis of theory and practice that provides a general framework for thinking about youth councils, explaining the principles for youth action and the importance of youth engagement. It also incorporates advice and lessons from people in the field who have started or currently staff youth councils across the country. The guide incorporates examples from these youth councils to illustrate key points, focusing heavily on the youth councils in Boston, Massachusetts; Hampton, Virginia; and the state of New Mexico.

Because of the growing interest in creating state youth councils, we have written the lessons here with the particular challenges of state councils in mind. But most, if not all, of these lessons are also applicable on the local level.

The guide is divided into three parts:

<sup>1</sup> The Forum for Youth Investment. (2001). *Youth Development and Community Change: A Guide to Documents and Tools Developed Through the Forum's Ford Foundation-Funded Projects 1997-2001. Community & Youth Development Series.* Takoma Park, MD: The Forum for Youth Investment, International Youth Foundation.

- ***The Rationale for Youth Engagement in Government*** provides a theoretical and historical context for youth councils by articulating the rationale for engaging youth in policy and decision-making processes and by explaining the Forum's Principles of Youth Engagement.
- ***6 Keys to Creating Effective Youth Councils*** delves into the nuts and bolts of creating a youth council. This section focuses on two essentials — *laying the foundation* and *supporting youth action* — and offers tested options for achieving six key tasks associated with these two objectives. There are two types of action required to create an effective council. If your state or community has an established, staffed and funded council, you may want to skim the first three keys associated with laying a strong foundation and focus on the second three to learn about strategies for increasing the effectiveness of your council and its members.
- ***Resources*** includes basic information about a range of youth councils, a list of additional available resources, samples of youth council enabling legislation, and samples of youth council application forms.

All in all, this guide should provide you with the basic information, advice, tools and resources necessary to create effective youth councils.



*Boston Youth Council meeting with Senator Kennedy*

## 6 Keys to Creating Effective Youth Councils

“Young people want and deserve a voice in their communities. City officials make decisions that affect youth on a daily basis. Yet young people often have no direct role in shaping or influencing local policies and programs. Even well-intentioned efforts to work for youth – by ‘protecting’ them from perceived threats or by ‘rescuing’ those who already are in jeopardy – can prevent us from recognizing the importance of working with youth to identify positive solutions and build stronger communities.”

— *Promoting Youth Participation, National League of Cities*

“WANTED: 20 high school students with vision, community spirit, leadership and — here’s where it gets interesting — the ability to deal with City Hall.”

— *Hampton Daily Press, October 27, 1997*

# Introduction to the 6 Keys

What does it take for every community and state to create an effective youth council with a diverse and engaged membership that is supported, connected, respected and heard? There is little dispute that, if done well, involving young people in the policy-making process can empower youth and build their strengths, help policy makers view youth as a resource to inform their decisions, and result in policies and priorities that are more relevant to youths' lives. But what does it take, especially at the state level, to create youth councils that really work as a part of an overall commitment to youth engagement?

Youth councils are representative bodies whose composition, functions and structure are often set by law. Their members are appointed and publicly recognized. The public and formal nature of youth councils pose challenges to almost every aspect of infrastructure development – from outreach to funding to staffing to the selection of an administrative home. Adding to infrastructure challenges, the strong intuitive appeal of youth councils means that frequently the time lapse between idea and implementation is quite short. This means youth councils are sometimes created and announced before a solid plan has been devised for supporting them or a common understanding has been developed about their roles and responsibilities.

## The 2 Essentials

The specific advice and concerns expressed by the youth councils referenced in this paper relate to the challenges of learning to operate in city or state governments and of becoming familiar with the world of public policy and policy makers. Their experiences confirmed that there are two simple, but essential, ingredients

to a strong youth council: a solid foundation and an unwavering belief that youth engagement in government is good for government.

## The 6 Keys

Those interviewed were most passionate and consistent on one point: Creating successful youth councils entails laying a strong **foundation** that addresses issues of 1) membership, 2) infrastructure and 3) work environment. These are the first three keys to successful youth councils.

If these foundation-laying tasks are not done well, it will be difficult to provide youth council members with the supports they need to make a difference. Even when the basic foundation is well laid, however, youth council directors must work to deliberately support meaningful youth action by addressing the second trio of keys: 4) building youth **capacity**, 5) deepening youth **motivation** and 6) negotiating **opportunities** for access to policy makers and youth constituents.

Figure 6 shows the relationship between the six keys and the suggested steps to achieving them, all of which are further elaborated in the full report. The six keys were adapted from Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change<sup>1</sup>, also presented in the full report. Again, we suggest that those looking to create a youth council begin with the three tasks associated with *laying the foundation*. Those who already have a youth council in place and are looking to strengthen its impact or reach may want to scan the first three tasks but focus on

<sup>1</sup> Pittman, K., Martin, S., Williams, A., Yohalem, N. (2007, July). Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change. Washington, D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc

Figure 6: Six Keys to Effective Youth Councils

Support Meaningful Youth Action



**Key 6: Negotiate OPPORTUNITIES for Access**

**Arrange Authentic Access to Policy Makers**

- Create shared leadership opportunities with policy makers
- Bring members into policy-making process
- Hire a youth liaison
- Facilitate concrete opportunities to advise top officials
- Integrate members into government departments by pairing with directors

**Create a Visible Public Presence**

- Develop a communications plan
- Facilitate opportunities for youth to testify at public hearings

**Facilitate Connections to Youth Constituents**

- Be intentional about creating a “ripple effect”
- Convene the broader youth community
- Connect the broader youth community to resources and information



**Key 4: Build Youth CAPACITY**

**Provide Ongoing Training & Support**

- Provide skill building for youth
- Provide orientation and training for adults
- Identify authentic ways to integrate training and real work
- Make sure youth have skills needed to do tasks assigned
- Provide informal coaching & support

**Utilize Teams**

- Create youth-adult teams
- Create a core team if necessary
- Use work teams as capacity-building and workload sharing strategy



**Key 5: Deepen Youth MOTIVATION**

**Help Youth Identify Core Issues**

- Reconcile youth concerns with political realities
- Connect immediate issues to broader systemic challenges
- Make sure members do their homework
- Find creative ways to document broader youth opinions

**Help Youth Understand Strategies for Policy Change**

- Be sure youth know roles council can play
- Help youth leverage formal and informal access
- Help youth understand that change takes time

**FOUNDATION**

Lay the Foundation



**Key 1: Determine Council Membership**

- Define composition carefully
- Select manageable size
- Weigh representation goals against size/cost
- Consider age range
- Create aggressive recruitment strategy
- Recruit diversity
- Connect to existing organizations for outreach



**Key 2: Ensure a Sound Infrastructure**

- Secure adequate, long-term funding
- Assess funding needs
- Lock in out-year funding
- Select an appropriate administrative home
- Weigh pros and cons of being inside government
- Connect to coordinating body rather than single department
- Institutionalize Council



**Key 3: Provide a Supportive Work Environment**

- Recruit the right staff
- Get youth development and policy backgrounds
- Find creative ways to get more expertise
- Create a strong home base
- Provide a dedicated workspace
- Plan face-to-face meetings
- Use technology to connect
- Ensure members have a strong home-base back home

the set of tasks associated with *supporting meaningful youth action*.

## The Big Goal

Youth development, youth leadership, youth voice, youth service, youth action, youth organizing. Underlying all of these terms is a commitment to engage young people as people with talents, opinions and a desire to make a difference while simultaneously remembering that they are young people. Youth programs of all stripes have difficulty getting this balance right.

As Tolman and Pittman note in *Youth Action*<sup>1</sup>, “Efforts that lean too far toward individual development may run the risk of linking young people with purposeful but unimportant activities that keep them busy, but are not essential to the long-term wellbeing of their organizations or their communities. Efforts that lean too far toward community development or broad social justice, however, run the risk of exploiting or excluding young people as programs struggle to maintain their pace and focus in the drive to achieve external goals.”

Youth councils tend to err on the side of individual development. “Rubbing elbows” with policy makers can be heady stuff for youth (or for anyone). It is easy to declare your youth council a success because it offered young people leadership skill development, opportunities to speak in public, to travel, to interact with a diverse group of youth and to have air time with policy makers. But youth councils can and should be more than leadership development opportunities. The more informed young people are about the issues and the policy options, the more they represent not just themselves but their peers, the more likely it is that policy makers

will listen and policies will change. Even the most informed young person needs an outlet in order to affect policy. Youth must be taken seriously by the adults who work with them, be expected to work hard, be given a real role and have access to the policy-making process.

“Twenty-two of us have been given the means to represent our peers and potentially change Washington”

— MEMBER, Washington State Legislative Youth Advisory Council

<sup>1</sup> Irby, M., Ferber, T., Pittman, K., with J. Tolman, & N. Yohalem. *Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth*. Community & Youth Development Series, Volume 6, 2001. Takoma Park, MD: The Forum for Youth Investment, International Youth Foundation.



**The Forum for Youth Investment** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are **Ready by 21™: ready for college, work and life**. This goal requires that young people have the supports, opportunities and services needed to prosper and contribute where they live, learn, work, play and make a difference. The Forum provides youth and adult leaders with the information, technical assistance, training, network support and partnership opportunities needed to increase the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement.

The Forum for Youth Investment  
7064 Eastern Avenue N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20011  
P. 202.207.3333 F. 202.207.3329  
[youth@forumfyi.org](mailto:youth@forumfyi.org)  
[www.forumfyi.org](http://www.forumfyi.org)