

YB YOUTH BUILD

BUILDING A (CULTURE) WAR-FREE ZONE

I am YouthBuild. I proudly accept the challenge YouthBuild offers me to transform my life through education, leadership development, completion of vocational training, and service to my community. I gladly receive the opportunity to develop my independence, work history, and personal integrity. I make this pledge now to myself and to the world. I am YouthBuild. I do make the difference.

Much like practicing a daily exercise regimen, the McLean County YouthBuild students build muscles – habits of mind – by reciting this creed as a daily intention. They also practice these habits of mind and an accompanying set of interpersonal and community-building skills daily in a program that mirrors their intention back to them in each part of the day. These habits and skills become especially important when challenges, presented within and outside of the program, become particularly complex and layered. Given the nature of the program (in this case, a charter school), the nature of students’ personal histories, and the nature of their local community, students have to navigate complex and layered challenges frequently; opportunities to flex these growing skills and habits of mind are abundant.

The habits of *accepting challenge and exercising personal integrity* is:

“Something we build into the structure of the program intentionally at the individual, interpersonal and community levels. We begin every day with the creed, and then we work very hard through building relationships and through the way we structure learning to support our students in embodying the creed every day. The creed is something they can practice throughout the program and their lives – and it is something that each student can come back to when challenges arise,” Jazzman Anderson, Digital Divide Instructor at YouthBuild of McLean County, explains.

The creed serves as a north star not only for helping YouthBuild students navigate the opportunities that they have committed to when they joined, but also in examining – and revising – their commitments in the wider community.

A significant test of YouthBuild students’ capacity to leverage their habits and skills emerged as racial tension built between two groups of students. A group of white students had started wearing clothing displaying Confederate flag memorabilia. Black students, well-aware of the

deep legacy of slavery and white supremacy associated with the Confederacy and the symbol of the Confederate flag, expressed concern and approached the administration about it.

For their part, white students saw a piece of cultural heritage in the symbol – a symbol that had been around them all of their lives and one that they had seen friends and family members display throughout their childhoods. For them, the symbol was a subtle, if vague, nod to an independent spirit. In context of the culture they identified with most – the local culture of their families and peers – these students hadn't given much thought to the contested meaning behind the Confederate symbol or the unspoken “culture wars” associated with the flag that had started well before they were even born. From their perspective, they didn't mean offense, and moreover, had no active cultural memory of the offense that symbol held for other students and staff.

Because YouthBuild focuses on building a strong program culture and students are given regular opportunities to exercise leadership and problem-solving skills, the first tack of the YouthBuild leaders was to allow students to discuss the issue and work through a solution that they would bring back to the administration. Though students found the initial conversation useful, they didn't reach a mutually agreed upon solution to bring back to the administration, and the symbol cropped up in student apparel again – sometimes emblazoned on t-shirts under sweatshirts, on belt buckles, or on scarves.



Some level of adolescent defiance and attachment to a symbol that youth feel is “for us, about us” isn't new. Reflectively, Anderson stated,

“ The students needed more scaffolding. There was little understanding about why the symbol was harmful and a need for more education about the history. We ended up going back to readdress it – this time in an all-school forum.”

As an organization committed to deep inclusion, YouthBuild is not just interested in enforcing codes, but in encouraging creeds and building genuine community. To really resolve the issue, adult leaders had to go back to YouthBuild's core principles of student engagement to tackle a symbol that was much more deeply embedded in the construction of young people's identities than might first be assumed.

Importantly, the YouthBuild staff had cultivated some tools to do so. YouthBuild staff place a high priority on building positive relationships from day one and on building a program culture in which all young people feel like they belong. Developmental relationships build leadership skills from the start so that young people discover their strengths, expand their possibilities, and challenge themselves to grow. YouthBuild is also very intentional about fostering meaningful relationships among young people across shared identity and difference through shared experiences. The daily creed reinforces the shared values forged through these relationships. When conflict arises, there is a base level of respect, trust, and mutual support to draw on.

“ At YouthBuild we say that we have to ask students for their permission to teach them,” Anderson reflected.

Many YouthBuild students come to the school having had mixed experiences within other learning settings. Starting from guiding principles for developmental practice, YouthBuild understands that permission is granted through consistent, daily application of these principles with every young person. The trust that follows provides a pathway for engaging young people.

The issue arising with the Confederate flag symbol was no different – YouthBuild leaders needed to find a way to engage young people with their permission. Gaining their permission on this issue would require an equal balance of clear, unequivocal messaging about school-appropriate apparel; a strategy to address a gaping cultural and historical memory divide around a long-controversial and hurtful symbol; respectful, developmental scaffolding with options for how students could act on new information and reinvigorated community expectations; and an anti-racist approach in strengthening the YouthBuild community. Seeking to address this issue from the perspective of building relationships and reminding everyone of the shared commitment to building a community of safety and respect, the staff held a whole-school community meeting.



These meetings are used frequently to reinforce culture and put forth thorny challenges to the whole community. The creed provides a daily reminder: *I am YouthBuild. I do make the difference.* This includes the challenge to re-examine parts of one’s own cultural assumptions and aspects of the communities that feel like home to them, especially when they hinder growth in knowledge and skill development and make it difficult to live up to the commitments to the YouthBuild community and beyond.

Anderson, a Black staff member, recalled the whole-school meeting. A white staff member, born and raised in the local community, was first to address the group.

“ We have a problem in our YouthBuild community, and we need to address it. Now I understand the Confederate flag, and I was raised with that symbol all around me...But it’s causing a rift in our community, and quite frankly in the larger community, but we just don’t talk about it. We will talk about it here – in *our space* – at YouthBuild.”

Starting the meeting off with a trusted messenger who directly unpacked both spoken and unspoken questions of heritage, history, pride, and bias, set the tone for the rest of the meeting. Other staff members followed, including Black and biracial staff members. The meeting was scaffolded around the careful, intentional relationships that all staff members cultivate with YouthBuild students. Staff members shared personal stories, providing a safe space for education about the history of the Confederacy and the flag. Hearing stories from

trusted adults – individuals they had worked alongside for months and adults who have had their backs many times in other situations – was essential to the process. In the culture wars writ large, it is easy to talk past each other, hold on to conceptualizations of culture and heritage that confine others, and adopt incomplete and inaccurate histories. It is harder to address these issues head-on and choose to build a new shared cultural identity.

““ But we can decide if this issue is bigger than us, or we are bigger than it,” another staff member challenged. “We decide what our intentions are. How do we support our intentions for this community so that it supports everybody?”

Putting the community challenge of inclusion in front of young people presented an opportunity to shape mindsets and habits. This type of response to community challenge stands in dramatic contrast to the prior school experiences of most of the students – rarely had they had this kind of open opportunity and virtually none had both led with a positive developmental approach and addressed a cultural divide. YouthBuild’s unrelenting commitment to a learning and development culture that allowed the group to move to a new level of shared understanding and commitment stands in sharp relief to a larger national culture that has often been unable to build community with an honest reckoning of common history and a robust developmental lens through which to inspire everyone’s growth.

Rather than ignoring or sidestepping issues that the larger community presents, YouthBuild looks to build young people’s capacities to engage with challenging issues, both personal and public. At the conclusion of this particular community meeting – one of many designed to provide emotional and instrumental support to all students while building a strong, common program culture – the students who donned Confederate apparel apologized. But they were also offered – and took on – the opportunity to lead and design a new whole-school t-shirt representing a shared school culture that everyone could buy into and that everyone could be proud to wear.



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