Youth Engagement Feasibility Study

DATE: April 8th, 2016
TO: Alliance Board of Directors
    Executive Leadership Team
FROM: Rebecca Gilgen—Executive Director
      Ivan Lui—Data Coordinator
      Marquise Burns—Americorp VISTA Intern

Executive Summary

The intent of this study was to assess the current understanding and practice of youth engagement among Alliance partners, and understand what opportunities exist for new or increased youth engagement.

Checkoway (2011) defines youth engagement as “a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives. [It] refers to the active engagement and real influence of young people, not to their passive presence or token roles in adult agencies.” For the purposes of this study, we define youth engagement from our literature search as:

- Youth are informed about issues affecting them, and trained on how to engage.
- Youth are consulted and heard.
- Youth are involved in making decisions that affect themselves and others.
- Youth initiate, plan, direct, and own some or all of the work.
- Youth work in partnership with adults.

This study blends a brief literature review and qualitative analysis of interviews of 6 Alliance partners: City of Brooklyn Center, City of Brooklyn Park, Anoka-Hennepin School District, Brooklyn Center Schools, Osseo Area Schools, and Robbinsdale Area Schools.

Key Findings

1. Every respondent had heard of the term youth engagement. There were varying degrees of alignment with each other and with our working definition of youth engagement.
   a. The majority of respondents defined youth engagement as youth having a voice, and youth implementing and owning the work.
   b. A third or less of the respondents defined youth engagement as training youth to engage, involving youth in decisions that affect them, and youth working in partnership with adults.
2. None of the respondents’ organizations had a policy or any formal training on youth engagement, although many used YPQA as a quality assessment tool.

**In addition to these key findings we learned:**

- All of the respondents’ organizations provide substantial programs and services for youth and make major decisions and policies that affect youth.
- In respondents’ organizations, youth are viewed mostly as participants, recipients, customers, and clients. There was a desire mentioned by many to move towards youth as leaders and partners.
- Each organization is involved in some form of youth engagement work. The organizations engage youth at varying levels (from not very much to student advisories and youth councils) in shaping programs and services, or offering input into decisions and policies affecting youth.
- Barriers to implementing youth engagement include lack of budget and resources, the lack of trained staff, and overcoming staff’s fears and inertia of doing something different than what is currently being done.
- The trainings on youth engagement requested by respondents include: educating staff on what youth engagement is, how to do youth engagement, how to communicate with youth, and why youth engagement is important.

**Next Steps**

- Share this report with the Alliance partners, youth, and community.
- Explore opportunities in 2016-2017 to implement new pilot projects or assist existing programs, including:
  - Youth on city commissions
  - Develop formal youth engagement policies and frameworks in coordination with all the Alliance partners
  - Student advisory teams
- Use this report and other data and best practices to develop training around youth engagement.
Full Report

Background Research

A brief literature search was conducted on the topic of youth engagement (or youth participation). Twenty-six years ago, the National Commission on Resources for Youth (1975, p.25) defined youth participation as “involving youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs, with the opportunity for planning and/or decision-making affecting others, in an activity whose impact or consequences extend to others, i.e., outside or beyond the youth participants themselves.”

More recently, Checkoway (2011, p.341), in his paper that examines the current knowledge-base about youth participation, defines it as “a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives. [It] refers to the active engagement and real influence of young people, not to their passive presence or token roles in adult agencies.”

In 1992, Roger Hart, a sociologist working for UNICEF created the Ladder of Participation (Appendix A) as a model for the continuum of youth participation. The 8 rungs progress from manipulation, decoration, and tokenism, all the way to engaging youth as partners.

In an effort to articulate best practices around youth engagement, the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studied 15 organizations nationwide (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, and Calvert, 2000). Specifically, they looked at the benefits of having youth and adults contribute to decision-making, the outcomes of such a joint process, and conditions for creating a positive environment for engaging youth.

We summarized the results of the studies cited above to create a working definition of youth engagement. For the purposes of this study, we define youth engagement from our literature search as:

- Youth are informed about issues affecting them, and trained on how to engage.
- Youth are consulted and heard.
- Youth are involved in making decisions that affect themselves and others.
- Youth initiate, plan, direct, and own some or all of the work.
- Youth work in partnership with adults.

The studies noted that youth, adults, and organizations benefit from incorporating youth engagement in youth-adult partnerships. Youth involved in youth-adult partnerships have demonstrated increased positive outcomes in academic achievement, life skills, and personal and social development. Young people benefit greatly from the guidance of adults who want to pass on their knowledge and skill. Additionally, they gain access through those adults to institutional power and resources.
Working in partnership with youth, adults grow in their perception of youth as legitimate contributors to organizational decision-making, their ability to work with and relate to youth, and their understanding of the needs and concerns of youth. Working with youth also strengthened the commitment and energy of adults.

Organizations also saw positive outcomes in involving youth in the decision-making process. Since youth are at a developmental stage where they are exploring their own values and ideas, they can help focus an organization on its vision and mission. Youth often bring a fresh perspective to decision-making. Organizations become more connected and responsive specifically to the youth in their communities, but also begin to place greater value on inclusivity and representation of all parts of the community. Finally, funders were more convinced that organizations were serious about youth development when young people were involved as decision-makers.

**Scan Objectives**

One of the Alliance's core values is “Youth engagement, voice, and leadership”. In order to promote this value, we first need to understand what the current youth engagement landscape is among our partners. A 3-year AmeriCorps VISTA intern position at the Alliance was dedicated to promoting youth engagement, with the first year focused on this feasibility study. We will use the information to build on existing assets, connect and leverage resources, and where appropriate, provide partners with best practices in this arena.

The objectives for this feasibility study are to:

- Assess current understanding and practice of youth engagement within each BBA partner organization
- Understand what opportunities exist to deepen and create new opportunities for youth engagement
- Answer the question “Should we move forward?”

**Methods**

The Alliance based its feasibility study on the 2007 report *Promoting Youth Engagement In Hennepin County: A Feasibility Study*. We modeled the interview questions (Appendix B) on the ones used in that study.

We interviewed staff of the 6 Alliance partners (City of Brooklyn Center, City of Brooklyn Park, Anoka-Hennepin School District, Brooklyn Center Schools, Osseo Area Schools, and Robbinsdale Area Schools) that we had previously discussed youth engagement practices with. The remaining Alliance partners will be engaged in subsequent years. For the City of Brooklyn Park, we interviewed staff of multiple departments. A total of 9 interviews were conducted and a list of respondents is in Appendix C.
Each interview was conducted by Marquise Burns and lasted from 45 to 75 minutes in length. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. A simple qualitative analysis was completed on each question across all respondents.

**Feasibility Study Limitations**

This feasibility study was based on single interviews with selected staff of each of the Alliance partners. Results may not be valid across all staff and all departments of each organization. Also, some questions were based on the respondents’ own understanding of youth engagement. Since no common definition was provided to respondents, those subsequent answers could have been given with entirely different contexts in mind.

**Key Findings**

The following sections detail the key findings of the feasibility report.

**Organizations and Youth**

The first set of questions were used to understand how youth are currently participating or being served in the organizations surveyed, what decisions and policies affect youth, and how youth are viewed in each organization.

**How Youth Are Participating or Being Served**

All of the respondents’ organizations provide programming and services for youth. For our school district community education partners, youth participate in afterschool programming, which includes daycare, targeted services and 21st Century Grant programs, school sports, and enrichment programs.

The city park and recreation programs offered the traditional sports, enrichment, and summer programming. Zanewood Recreation Center provides afterschool Teen Zone and Kid Zone programs, free meal program, tutoring, youth employment (Leadership in Training), and drop-in programming. Also, in partnership with the YMCA, Zanewood also offers youth intervention services. Brooklyn Park Community Engagement offers the Cities United Sound Off Stations and My Brother’s Keeper programs.

Both cities partner together with the Alliance to run the Youth in Government Day each year in the spring.
**Major Decisions or Policies Impacting Youth**

When asked about major decision or policies impacting youth, the school district partners almost unanimously answered “everything”. Since they were part of the school system, they assumed that every decision and policy affected young people.

Many respondents answered access, cost (fees, availability of scholarships), and programming decisions.

Other answers given were equity policies, grade or behavior policies for participation, decisions about providing transportation, and any decision that city council makes for the community, such as the budget.

**How Youth are Viewed**

Respondents answered that youth are viewed mostly as participants, customers, or clients of programs, or as recipients of services. A few said assets or opportunities. Some of our school district partners answered learners or students. However, there was a desire mentioned by many that they would like their organizations to move towards viewing youth as leaders and partners.

**Youth Engagement Definition**

The table below lists the aspects of the youth engagement definition and the percentage of respondents who listed them when asked to define the term.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Engagement Definition</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth are informed about issues affecting them, and trained on how to engage.</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth are consulted and heard.</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth are involved in making decisions that affect themselves and others.</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth initiate, plan, direct, and own some or all of the work.</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth work in partnerships with adults.</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the respondents provided definitions that met at least 2 of the 5 parts of the definition we used. The part of the definition that was identified the most (7 respondents) was “Youth being consulted or heard” (sometimes called Youth Voice). The second highest part (5 respondents) was “Youth initiate, plan, direct, and own some or all of the work”. The fewest respondents named “Youth are involved in making decisions that affect themselves and others” as part of the definition.

There were no parts of the definition that at least 2 respondents did not identify, so it seems that all of our interviewed organizations have some alignment to our definition of but there also was no one respondent that identified more than 3 out of the 5 aspects.
Other phrases that were used to define youth engagement included youth attending activities (3 respondents), working with families, having safe spaces for young people, building trusting relationships with adults, and organizations working to get young people what they need.

In the overall interviews, it seemed that most respondents touched upon most of the aspects of the youth engagement definition we were using. However, when asked to specifically identify “youth engagement”, these were the only parts they identified as such. There was no consensus around what the definition of “youth engagement” was, which is important to understand because if the Alliance is moving forward with promoting youth engagement amongst its partners, having a shared understand of what the definition is will be vital.

**How Youth are Engaged**

**Engaged in Current Programming**

When asked how youth are involved in shaping programs or providing input on decisions or policies, almost all the respondents mentioned youth advisory boards. These advisory boards provide youth voice to school boards, OST programs, or the Zanewood Recreation Center. About half the respondents said that youth participants are engaged during programming to provide feedback on shaping the program. This could occur with adults facilitating discussions with youth or with youth leading the process themselves.

Surveys given at the end of programs were another method commonly used to gather youth input. A few respondents said that even though there was no formal engagement occurring, staff will informally discuss with youth to understand what their thoughts were on programming or decisions.

Four (4) respondents mentioned in their interviews that they are not involving youth in providing input for decisions or policies within their organization, but want a more formalized process or additional ways to do so.

**Youth Engagement Policies**

Policies define the important issues within an organization and help provide accountability to those issues. They define guidelines for consistent behavior and practice for all staff.

None of the organizations that we surveyed had a youth engagement policy. Several of the respondents said that though they did not have a formal policy, youth engagement was considered “common expectation” or “part of everyday practice”, alluding to “unwritten policies”. Some of the respondents explained that it was because for their organizations, youth engagement was still a relatively new idea and that they are still learning about it. Three (3) respondents mentioned they use youth engagement in their hiring practices.
Expanding Youth Engagement

Respondents were asked about their ideas for expanding youth engagement in their organizations, and opportunities and barriers that might be connected to that expansion.

Expansion

Respondents from both of our city partners have been trying to involve youth in their city commissions, especially starting with the park and recreation ones. Our school partners mostly mentioned they wanted to initiate or grow currently existing student advisory groups both for their school boards and for OST programming. Many respondents talked about increasing partnerships with other organizations in order to help build staff capacity to expand youth engagement. Some talked about using youth engagement as an entry point into getting young people interested in participating civically or even considering careers in local government. For example, one idea was to expand the Youth in Government Day to engage more youth.

Opportunities and Barriers

Next, we asked respondents to talk about potential opportunities and barriers they saw as they expanded youth engagement opportunities. There were not many opportunities suggested. A few respondents talked about the opportunity to coordinate with partnering organizations (i.e. community education with park and recreation). Also mentioned was that expanding youth engagement would help us understand what the youth’s and families’ needs are, that it would actually allow some organizations to try it for the first time, and that it would provide opportunities for older youth to mentor younger youth.

There were many more responses to the question about barriers. Most respondents said that overcoming the inertia of “the way it’s always been done” was the largest barrier to expanding youth engagement in their organizations. Having enough money, hiring the right staff (and retaining them) and having enough time to implement youth engagement were also talked about.

Youth Engagement Training

Professional development opportunities for staff will be important for beginning or continuing any youth engagement activities. The feasibility study included a couple of questions concerning currently available training, and desired knowledge, skills and training around youth engagement.

Current Youth Engagement Training

When asked about training currently available, none of the organizations had any formal training on youth engagement. However, many organizations mentioned using Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), which has a measure on youth engagement, as a
Quality tool and some attended Youth Intervention Programs Association (YIPA) trainings. Other trainings mentioned included those offered by the Minnesota Council of Non-Profits, the University of Minnesota, state associations, city departments, conferences, or district training for teachers.

**Desired Youth Engagement Training**

The respondents were asked about what knowledge, skills, or trainings staff need to engage youth effectively. The top two trainings requested were about educating staff on what youth engagement is, and how to do youth engagement or best practices. As mentioned above, many respondents talked about how getting their staff to break out of old paradigms and to embrace youth engagement was the biggest hurdle. Also mentioned multiple times were sessions on how to communicate with youth, and why youth engagement is important. Community education programs wanted trainings for contracted instructors of afterschool programs.

Other training topics mentioned included working with youth of diverse backgrounds, how to engage disconnected youth, classroom management, how to advocate for young people, understanding current youth issues, building relationships with boundaries, how to partner with other organizations, and how to evaluate programming.

**Summary**

Although every respondent had heard of the term youth engagement, there were varying degrees of alignment with each other and with our working definition of youth engagement. The majority of respondents defined youth engagement as youth having a voice, and youth implementing and owning the work. A third or less of the respondents defined youth engagement as training youth to engage, involving youth in decisions that affect them, and youth working in partnership with adults.

None of the respondents’ organizations had a policy or any formal training on youth engagement, although many used YPQA as a quality assessment tool.

**In addition to these key findings we learned:**

- All of the respondents’ organizations provide substantial programs and services for youth and make major decisions and policies that affect youth.
- In respondents’ organizations, youth are viewed mostly as participants, recipients, customers, and clients. There was a desire mentioned by many to move towards youth as leaders and partners.
- Each organization is involved in some form of youth engagement work. The organizations engage youth at varying levels (from not very much to student advisories and youth councils) in shaping programs and services, or offering input into decisions and policies affecting youth.
• Barriers to implementing youth engagement include lack of budget and resources, the lack of trained staff, and overcoming staff’s fears and inertia of doing something different than what is currently being done.
• The trainings on youth engagement requested by respondents include: educating staff on what youth engagement is, how to do youth engagement, how to communicate with youth, and why youth engagement is important.

Next Steps

Numerous opportunities for expansion of youth engagement have been identified. With this new information, and by leveraging the diverse members and partners of the Alliance that we intend to take the following action:

• Share this report with the Alliance partners, youth, and community.
• Explore opportunities in 2016-2017 to implement new pilot projects or assist existing programs, including:
  o Develop formal youth engagement policies and frameworks in coordination with all the Alliance partners
  o Youth on city commissions
  o Student advisory teams for school boards and OST programs
• Use this report and other data and best practices to develop training around youth engagement.
APPENDIX A: Roger Hart’s Ladder of Participation

ROGER HART’S LADDER OF PARTICIPATION

**RUNG 8 - Youth initiated shared decisions with adults**: Youth-led activities, in which decision making is shared between youth and adults working as equal partners.

**RUNG 7 - Youth initiated and directed**: Youth-led activities with little input from adults.

**RUNG 6 - Adult initiated shared decisions with youth**: Adult-led activities, in which decision making is shared with youth.

**RUNG 5 - Consulted and informed**: Adult-led activities, in which youth are consulted and informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of adult decisions.

**RUNG 4 - Assigned, but informed**: Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, decision-making process, and have a role.

**RUNG 3 - Tokenism**: Adult-led activities, in which youth may be consulted with minimal opportunities for feedback.

**RUNG 2 - Decoration**: Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, but have no input in how they are planned.

**RUNG 1 - Manipulation**: Adult-led activities, in which youth do as directed without understanding of the purpose for the activities.

APPENDIX B: Youth Engagement Feasibility Study Questions

Purpose: The purpose of this feasibility study is to assess current understanding and practice of youth engagement within each BBA partner organization as well as how to deepen and create new opportunities for Youth Engagement.

Interviewee Name:

Current Position:

1. How are youth currently participating or being served in your organization or programs?
2. How, if at all, are youth involved in shaping these youth services and programs? How, if at all, are youth involved in shaping services and programs in general (not necessarily related to youth)?
3. What are the major decisions or policies that your organization makes that have an impact on youth directly?
4. How, if at all, are youth involved in offering input into these decisions or policies? If yes, can you provide examples?
5. In your opinion, how are youth viewed in your department? For example: client, customer, recipient, etc.?
6. Have you heard the phrase “youth engagement”? How would you define youth engagement? What youth roles or actions would you categorize as youth engagement? (or see youth performing?) How is Youth Engagement important to your work?
7. Does your department have a policy on youth engagement? If so, can you share it with me?
8. Based on your definition what are you doing related to youth engagement? Why? Are there specific outcomes your department has around youth engagement?
9. What are your ideas for expanding Youth Engagement work within your organization?
10. What opportunities & barriers exist pertaining to that expansion?
11. What knowledge and skills do you think staff need in order to effectively and appropriately engage youth in your department?
12. What training around Youth Engagement does your staff currently have access to? What additional training (knowledge and skills) around Youth Engagement does your staff NEED?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add?
## APPENDIX C: List of Staff Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partner</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anoka Hennepin School District</td>
<td>Community Education</td>
<td>Sandra Bengtson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn Center Schools</td>
<td>21st Century Programs</td>
<td>Willie Finley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osseo Area Schools</td>
<td>Community Education</td>
<td>Carrie Cabe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbinsdale School District</td>
<td>Community Education</td>
<td>Aviva Hillenbrand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Brooklyn Center</td>
<td>Community Activities, Recreation, and Services</td>
<td>Jim Glasoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Brooklyn Park</td>
<td>Recreation and Parks</td>
<td>Jody Yungers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jan Ficken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Michelle Margo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Anthony Bates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paul Vang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lakendrick Hayes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Engagement</td>
<td>Antonio Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sandy’Ci Moua</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIBLIOGRAPHY


National Commission on Resources for Youth. (1974). *New roles for youth in the school and community.* New York: Citation Press (pp.25, 227)