2025
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND YOUTH COUNCILS

A report on effective strategies and practices necessary in integrating youth voices

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guide was developed by youth in Community Schools in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) to explore best practices for youth councils in Community School high schools. It is designed to support practitioners in strengthening youth councils to foster meaningful decision-making. We extend our appreciation to the FAST funders for their generous support in making this work possible.

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PURPOSE

This project report highlights the vital role youth councils play in Community Schools and serves as a guide for educators and administrators to strengthen student councils within Community Schools. Youth councils bring together students to drive meaningful change in schools by strengthening school policies and practices that serve all students. By fostering authentic student leadership, these councils empower young people to shape policies that directly impact their learning environments. Given that students experience shifts in the education system every day, their representation is crucial in creating lasting improvements for future generations.

ABOUT COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

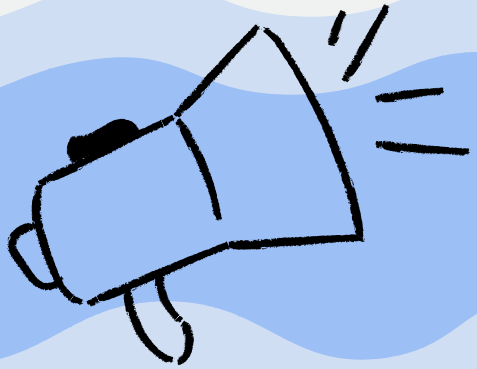
A Community School is a strategy that works closely with families, local organizations, and community partners to provide students with the resources they need to succeed. It is more than just a place for learning. It serves as a hub that offers educational support, health services, and other essential programs before and after school, on weekends, and even during the summer.

One of the key elements of a **Community School** is collaborative leadership, meaning students, teachers, families, and community members work together to make decisions that impact the school. Youth councils can play a big role in this by participating in school leadership meetings and helping to shape school policies. When students are involved in decision-making, it strengthens the entire school community. For example, students in Community Schools have organized events, connected with peers across the country through national networks, and worked alongside teachers and administrators to improve their schools.

This kind of leadership not only builds students' skills but also creates a more supportive school environment. Many students involved in Community Schools say they feel more connected to their school, which has led to better attendance and academic success. Community Schools not only provide comprehensive support for students but also create opportunities for youth to actively participate in shaping their educational experience, ensuring their voices are heard and valued.

IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH VOICE

Youth voice is a collective term that describes how young people share their ideas and perspectives with the world. It is essential to a well-functioning society because it reflects the needs and aspirations of young people themselves. Rather than having adults speak on their behalf, fostering youth voices empowers young people to recognize the value of their thoughts and confidently share them with others.



SPEAK LOUDER

This is especially important in spaces that directly impact youth, such as in the field of education. Schools exist for young people, and because they are the ones actively engaging with the system, their voices should play a critical role in shaping it. When schools prioritize youth voices, they create environments that better meet the needs of a diverse student population.

Currently, youth voice is integrated into school settings through student councils, leadership programs, school surveys, and peer mentoring, among other initiatives. These opportunities promote leadership and collaboration, helping students develop confidence and understand the significance of their voices. However, when schools fail to value student input, they risk disengaging students and failing to equip them with the necessary skills to thrive in society. Without active participation, students may struggle to advocate for themselves later in life, and schools risk implementing policies or curricula that are disconnected from students' actual needs.

To build a stronger and more inclusive future, youth voices must be prioritized and invested in, ensuring that young people have a meaningful role in shaping the institutions that serve them.

YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

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Youth councils have the potential to transform student engagement and leadership development in Community Schools by providing students with a platform to be heard and an active role in decision-making. Effective youth councils do not simply give students a voice, they create true partnerships between students and adults, fostering collaborative problem-solving and shared leadership. As the Alaska Association of School Boards (2018) suggests, when students take an active role in shaping their learning experiences, they become more invested in their education and gain confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully.

In these partnerships, adults serve as mentors, rather than authority figures, offering guidance without overpowering student voices. Trust is built when adults listen, value student perspectives, and create an inclusive, supportive school environment. When youth councils are structured effectively, they not only benefit the school but also have a broader impact on the community by preparing students to be engaged, active members of society (Alaska Association of School Boards, 2018).

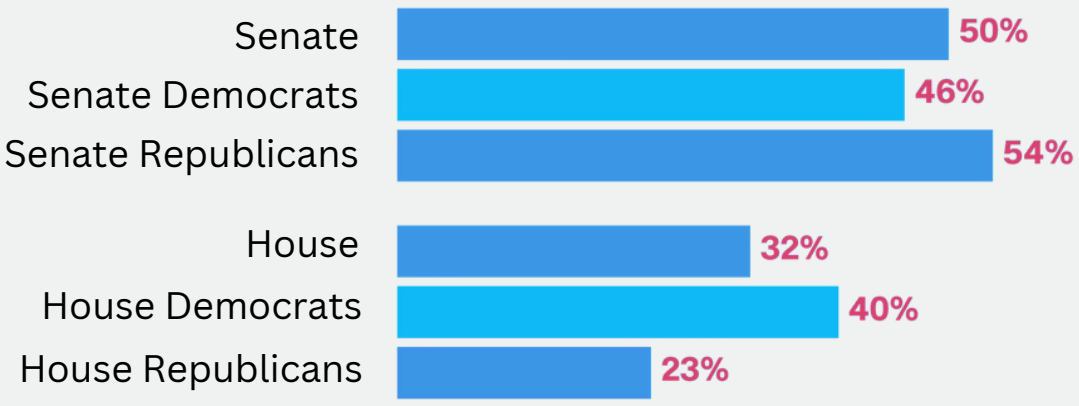
PURPOSE OF YOUTH COUNCILS

What role does it have?

Youth councils play a vital role in youth development, fostering leadership, and driving meaningful change that helps shape the leaders of tomorrow. While youth councils may vary in focus and purpose, their core mission remains the same: to amplify youth voices and empower young people to take an active role in decision-making. Across the nation, different councils address various issues, from education and healthcare to civic engagement, but all contribute to building young people's skills in leadership, problem-solving, and advocacy.

As government decisions at the federal, state, and local levels are predominantly made by older adults, there has been a growing movement to include younger voices in policymaking. In the U.S., the average age of senators in the current Congress is **63.9**, while the average age of House representatives is **58.3** (2021 CNN News Chart). Given this age gap, it is critical to involve young people in governance to ensure that policies reflect the perspectives and needs of future generations.

Average Age by Party and Chamber (2021)



50%

of the US senate is 65+

07

DESCRIPTION OF YOUTH COUNCILS

Youth councils operate under various structures and practices, often differing based on whether they are government-sponsored or independently run. Government-sponsored councils may focus on influencing policy and civic engagement, while non-government-sponsored councils often center around community-based initiatives, education, or social advocacy. Despite these differences, all youth councils share a common goal: to elevate youth voices through active participation in governance, leadership, and community engagement. Whether established within a school, a local government, or a nonprofit organization, these councils provide young people with the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes that impact their lives.

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MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT-ADVOCACY COUNCILS

Many councils studied within government-affiliated settings held variability in size, application process, and meeting format. Councils typically hold up to 30 individuals between the ages of 13-19 and were recruited through public schools (Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016). Within recruitment, many organizations followed a traditional application process where questions were filled out and an interview followed, although rigor in selection varies. In regards to the formality of meetings, many councils have reported following governmental procedures where sub-committees, minutes, and a clear agenda were present with occasional instances of motions and voting (Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016). Other youth councils share their ideas and opinions, though they do not necessarily have decision-making power (USAID, 2009). With this in mind, contributions of youth to policies varied greatly depending on where councils were located and what goals identified were.

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NONPROFITS AND ADVISORIES

Nonprofits and advisories can hold similar structures in regards to application processes, size, and meeting formats, however key differences identified were in regards to the goals of these groups. While government based youth councils had a tendency to be more focused on policy-making, councils within non profits were more centered on advocacy and community based initiatives. This can be seen through councils such as the UChoose Youth Advisory council where students ages 14-20 meet bi-monthly to spread awareness on youth health initiatives, specifically in regards to STIs and reproductive health. While policies are not directly addressed, outreach projects and activities are formed for the community. The students in this council meet regularly to, “provide young people’s insights to inform Baltimore City Health Department programs,” (UChoose Baltimore, n.d., p. 1). Rather than lobbying for policy reform this council’s main focus centers around supporting and shaping already established programs and initiatives.

REPRESENTATION OF YOUTH COUNCILS

A youth council can be considered a body of young people who provide counsel and support to organizations and governing bodies and create and participate in various projects and community initiatives. Youth councils significantly aim to encourage young people to speak out and enhance their opinions and ideas that will positively impact youth.

It is important that youth councils demographically represent the student body, including the representation of race, ethnicity, age, gender, socio-economic background, as well as skills, abilities, and preferences. Youth councils are vital in amplifying youth voices in decision-making, fostering leadership development, and empowering youth to advocate for meaningful change within their communities and schools. Youth councils can provide different viewpoints on solving problems, which can improve current ideas. “Youth representation often increases relevance, energy and deepens perspectives, and in turn — programs and services are improved as a result” (AASB, 2018,). Many youth councils need respect, positive communication among everyone, investment of time and information, and significant engagement to be effective and successful.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

For Implementing Youth Councils

Despite their successes, youth councils often encounter significant challenges that hinder their effectiveness. One of the most persistent issues is the youth-adult partnership dynamic, where adults may struggle to treat young people as equal contributors in decision-making processes. It is common for youth perspectives to be dismissed or overlooked, even within programs designed to center their voices.

A study conducted by students at Boston University found that young people often perceive adults as dismissive of mental health and substance abuse concerns. One participant specifically recalled a suicide case in their town, explaining how some adults refused to address the issue, ultimately limiting the response that could have been taken (Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016). Another challenge is the lack of youth-friendly communication and preparation in these spaces. Complex language and limited information often make it difficult for young people to engage fully in discussions or make informed decisions (Wollen, Vanderwill, Savage, & Day, 2022). To truly empower youth voices, there must be intentional efforts to create equitable spaces where young people receive the necessary tools and respect to participate meaningfully.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

For Implementing Youth Councils, Cont.

Another significant barrier is the lack of resources and structural support for youth councils. Many councils operate on a voluntary basis, meaning students are expected to contribute considerable time and effort without any form of compensation for their civic engagement. While unpaid participation may be feasible for some, many students face financial and family responsibilities that prevent them from committing time without support. Compensation, such as stipends, recognizes the value of their contributions and ensures that all students, regardless of financial background, can participate.

Additionally, transportation barriers further limit access to youth councils. Reliable transportation is essential for students to fully engage in leadership opportunities, yet many councils fail to address this need. Studies have shown that 87% of policy experts, directors, and child welfare workers emphasize a critical need for flexible transportation services. Research highlights that "Access to reliable transportation is fundamental to educational success," and this principle should extend to youth councils and other youth-focused programs (HopSkipDrive, n.d.).

To successfully implement youth councils, it is crucial to address these systemic barriers by offering stipends, providing transportation support, and ensuring accessibility for all students. These steps will strengthen youth councils and allow for more diverse, engaged, and empowered youth leadership.

Presenting

METHODOLOGY

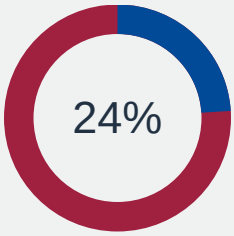
In response to the challenges youth face today, our project aimed to examine how youth councils and advisories operate, their influence on policy change, and areas for improvement. Over six months, we engaged youth through focus groups and surveys to analyze their experiences, perspectives, and the effectiveness of youth councils within Community Schools. Our findings highlight the successes and gaps in amplifying youth voice and decision-making within youth councils.

This project coupled youth voice focus groups and a 2024 survey completed by 100 respondents from seven states.

LIMITATIONS

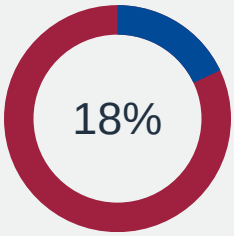
While our project provides critical insights into the effectiveness of youth councils, we acknowledge certain limitations. **Over 80% of our survey data came from New York and California**, and **36% of respondents were 9th graders**. Though our findings offer a valuable starting point, a more geographically diverse sample is needed to fully capture the experiences of youth councils nationwide. Despite these limitations, our project underscores the need for structurally sound, inclusive, and action-driven youth councils that meaningfully incorporate student perspectives into school governance. By addressing barriers to participation and ensuring councils have real influence, Community Schools can create more representative and effective platforms for youth leadership.

ADDITIONAL PERCENTAGES



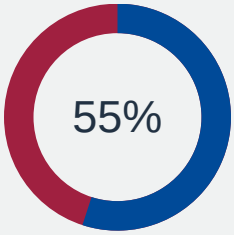
12TH GRADE DATA

Our second highest grade demographic after 9th graders



11TH GRADE DATA

Our lowest grade demographic



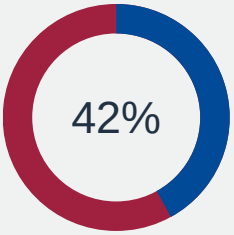
FEMALE DISTRIBUTION

Our gender distribution was predominantly female

VARIATION

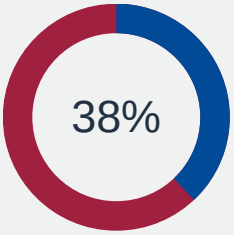
We found significant variation in council structures. The most common models were executive boards and open membership, but 34% of respondents indicated that their councils also included committees or appointed members. This diversity suggests that Community Schools tailor council structures to their needs and demographics. However, our data also suggests that some structural decisions are made administratively without sufficient student input. Developing youth councils with a greater focus on representation, particularly for underrepresented youth, could enhance their impact.

ADDITIONAL PERCENTAGES



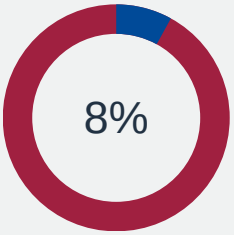
USE EXECUTIVE BOARDS

our highest statistic regarding structures



USE OPEN MEMBERSHIP

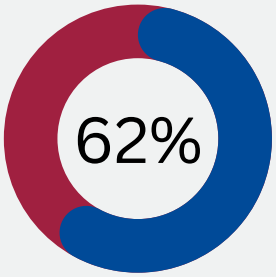
our second highest statistic regarding structures



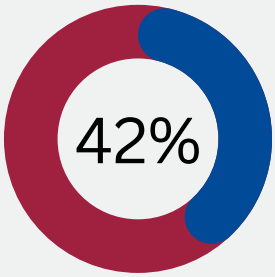
LIMIT MEMBERSHIP BY APPLICATION

our lowest statistic regarding structures

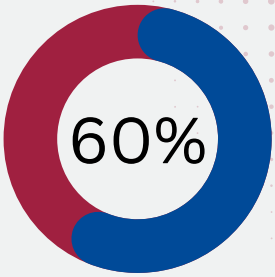
SELECTION PROCESSES AND REPRESENTATION



BELIEVE RACIAL DIVERSITY IS REPRESENTATIVE



BELIEVE SOCIOECONOMIC DIVERSITY IS REPRESENTATIVE



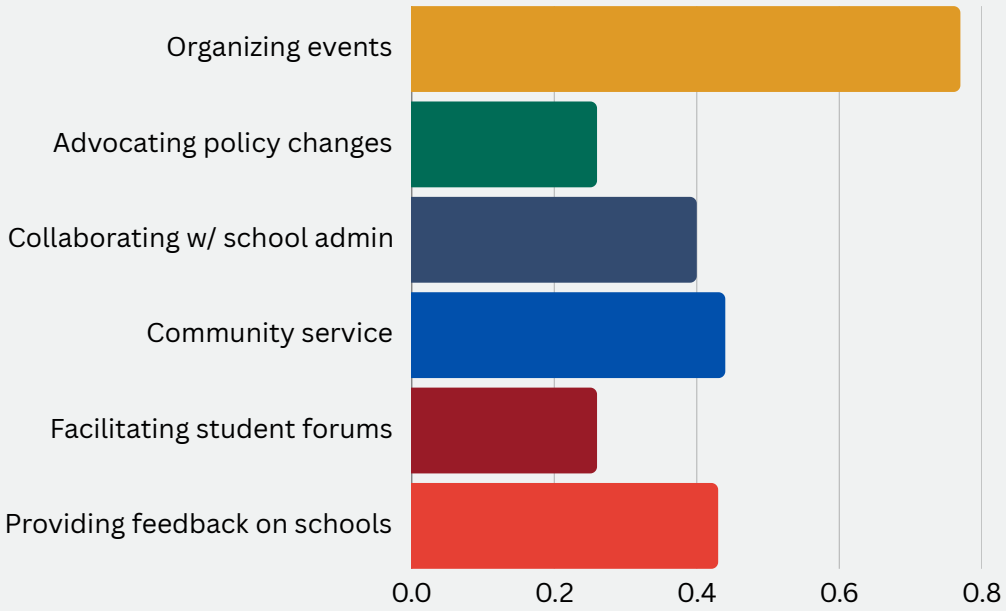
BELIEVE GENDER DEMOGRAPHICS ARE REPRESENTATIVE

Selection criteria for youth council members also varied widely. School-wide elections and student nominations accounted for **71% of the selection processes reported**, but academic performance and teacher recommendations were also prevalent. The emphasis on merit-based selection raises concerns about potential biases, as it may limit representation for students who are not high academic performers but still have valuable perspectives. This selection process may contribute to councils overlooking key student needs, reinforcing inequities in policy influence.

Additionally, our survey revealed disparities in student involvement and representation in school governance. **Only 42% of students felt their council reflected the socioeconomic diversity** of their school, and around **60% believed race, ethnicity, and gender demographics were accurately represented.** These findings underscore the need for more inclusive selection processes to ensure councils reflect the full spectrum of student experiences.

THE STATISTICS

Council activities and impact



Our data also revealed differences in how youth councils allocate their time and influence policy:

- 77% of councils primarily organize events.
- 26% of students reported their councils had the ability to advocate for policy change.

The limited focus on policy advocacy suggests that many councils function more as event organizers rather than as platforms for student voices in decision-making. This raises concerns about their effectiveness in addressing student concerns and influencing school policies. Without structured opportunities for meaningful dialogue and feedback, youth councils risk being performative rather than transformative.

Further, decision-making processes and feedback mechanisms within councils were found to be inconsistent. While some students felt their input was considered, others expressed frustration that their feedback did not lead to concrete changes. These disparities indicate that simply having a council is not enough—mechanisms must be in place to ensure student voices translate into action.

BARRIERS TO

Youth participation

Through both surveys and focus groups, students identified key barriers to meaningful participation in school governance:

- Time constraints due to academic and extracurricular commitments make it challenging to engage in council activities.
- Inconsistent engagement, with 20% of students reporting participating in discussions only about half of the time.
- The lack of clear roles and responsibilities contributed to confusion about the council's purpose and impact.

ADDITIONAL STATISTICS

27%

see conflicting meeting times as a barrier

24%

feel a lack of support from peers and staff

37%

feel a lack of outreach and awareness regarding opportunities

29%

feel there are cultural and language barriers

Additionally, youth consistently voiced frustration about the lack of structured time for school administrators to listen to student input. One focus group described a two-week wait to meet with a school counselor, illustrating how accessibility issues hinder students from raising concerns and driving change.

Another common concern was transparency in decision-making. Some students noted that administrators selectively chose which issues to address, leaving youth with little understanding of why certain decisions were prioritized over others. This lack of transparency made many students feel disconnected from the decision-making process.

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COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Our project also examined how youth councils communicate with students and administrators. Most councils used a combination of digital (Google Forms, QR code surveys) and in-person methods (meetings, assemblies) to gather input. However, students emphasized that communication methods alone are not enough and that what matters most is whether administrators genuinely listen to and act on student concerns.

Youth also highlighted the role of peer encouragement in engagement. When students felt their voices were valued, they were more likely to participate in governance. However, when councils lacked administrative support, students reported feeling socially discouraged from speaking up. One student captured this sentiment, stating:

"IF WE DON'T HAVE A SAY IN THE ENVIRONMENT WE'RE IN, THEN DOESN'T THAT EXPLAIN WHY SO MANY STUDENTS DON'T CARE? IF STUDENTS HAVE A ROLE IN SHAPING THEIR EDUCATION AND HOW THEY SPEND THEIR TIME, THEY MIGHT BE MORE INVESTED."

To foster greater student engagement, focus groups recommended structured communication spaces such as town halls or assemblies, where students could express concerns directly to decision-makers. Additionally, making council processes more accessible both in language and structure would help ensure that all students, regardless of background, feel empowered to participate.

Lessons Learned: Best practices for success

Structure and Functioning of Youth Councils

Make membership open and inclusive

Councils should be easy to join. Avoid complicated applications that leave students out. A mix of open membership and leadership roles works best.

Do more than plan events

While dances and fundraisers are fun, councils should also focus on real issues that affect students, like school policies, mental health support, and student rights.

Student Involvement and Representation in School Governance

Use Different Ways to Recruit Members

Relying only on teacher recommendations or elections leaves people out. Spread the word through social media, peer invites, flyers, and school announcements.

Make Participation Easy

Hold meetings at times that work for students, provide snacks or incentives, and offer flexible ways to be involved.

Get School Leaders on Board

A strong council needs real support from teachers and administrators who are willing to listen and act on student ideas.

Impact of Student Government on Policy and Decision Making

Create a Clear System for Giving Feedback

Students should have a way to bring up concerns and track progress whether it's through meetings with the principal, student surveys, or a suggestion box.

Focus on Policy and School Decisions

Councils should have a say in school rules, curriculum, and student services, not just be in charge of social events.

Teach Students how to Advocate

Train members on how to speak up, present ideas to school leaders, and push for meaningful changes.

Developing Effective Feedback Mechanisms and Accountability

Have Regular Check-Ins with Students and Staff

Organize town halls or open meetings where students can share concerns and get updates on what's being done.

Track Progress

Use surveys, student feedback, or annual reports to measure if the council is making an impact.

Establish Communication Channels

There should be a clear way for council members to connect with school leadership, teachers, and students.

Use Youth-Friendly Language

Avoid jargon and complicated terms that may create barriers to participation. Clear, accessible communication ensures all students feel included and empowered to engage.

Removing Barriers to Representation in Youth Councils

Eliminate Selection Barriers

Councils shouldn't only be for top students. It is essential to remove strict GPA requirements or selective applications that exclude diverse voices.

Make Sure Everyone is Represented

Actively recruit students from different backgrounds, including those who aren't usually involved in leadership.

Youth-Adult Partnerships

Balance Student Leadership with Adult Support

Ensure adults mentor and guide, rather than control, council activities.

Foster Trust and Transparency

School administrators should regularly meet with councils, respond to recommendations, and communicate decisions clearly.

Prioritize Relationship Building

Youth councils work best when students and adults build strong trusting and respectful relationships.

Youth-Adult Partnerships

Value Youth as Experts in Their Own Experiences

Adults should recognize that students bring unique perspectives and lived experiences that are critical to shaping school policies and decisions. Treating youth as equal partners strengthens their confidence and impact.

Provide Skill-Building Opportunities

Offer training in policy development, strategic planning, facilitation, and more to build youths' capacity to lead.

Steps to Make Youth Councils Stronger

- ✓ Make membership easy and accessible so more students can get involved.
- ✓ Shift from event planning to real advocacy and policy work.
- ✓ Use different ways to recruit members so all voices are heard.
- ✓ Set up a clear system to turn student feedback into action.
- ✓ Train students in leadership, advocacy, and communication.
- ✓ Build strong relationships with school leaders so students have a real seat at the table.

CONCLUSION

Youth councils have increasingly drawn the attention of educators, governors, mayors, and administrators over the last decade. Literature has demonstrated that as youth councils become more prominent, youth engagement must be better upheld in policy implementation, general decision-making, and program evaluation. While many councils maintain a respected balance between youth and adult engagement, there is a recurring issue across communities where the youth are not properly given a voice in significant discussions. Our project has shown a majority of students within our sample do not have the ability to advocate for policy changes in their respective councils though it is recommended the youth are, "treated as experts in their own right" (USAID, 2009, p. 6). Youth councils are needed to increase the presence of youth engagement, as it is the youth who will facilitate change and progression toward the future. However, across the literature and the data we collected, disparities need to be addressed in order to improve our current setting in this regard.

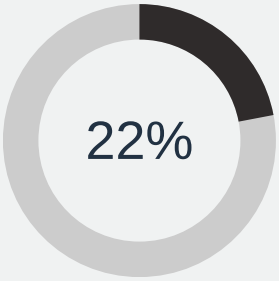
OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation #1: Improving youth and adult partnerships

Recommendation #2: Developing effective feedback and accountability mechanisms.

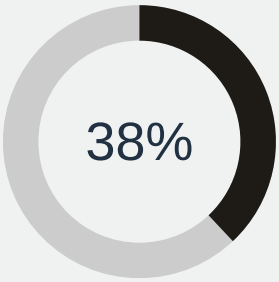
Recommendation #3: Improving diversity and inclusion in youth councils.

IMPROVING YOUTH AND ADULT PARTNERSHIPS



ADULTS OFFERED TRAINING OR DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

limited opportunites offered to youth from adults



ADVOCATING FOR YOUTH COUNCIL INITIATIVES WITH ADMINISTRATION

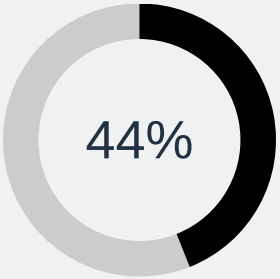
shows less youth advocacy

Our findings show areas for improvement regarding amplifying youth voices and ensuring they are weighed fairly next to adult perspectives. Students feel communication is not present between administrators and the student body as youth input is not taken into account in decision-making.

IMPROVING YOUTH AND ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

CONT.

Targeting skills such as public speaking, leadership, and community engagement strategies through training and workshops is an effective method to *"equip youth with the skills and confidence necessary for meaningful participation in decision-making processes" (Brosnan & Griner, 2024).*



ADULTS USUALLY WORKING TOGETHER IN MEETINGS

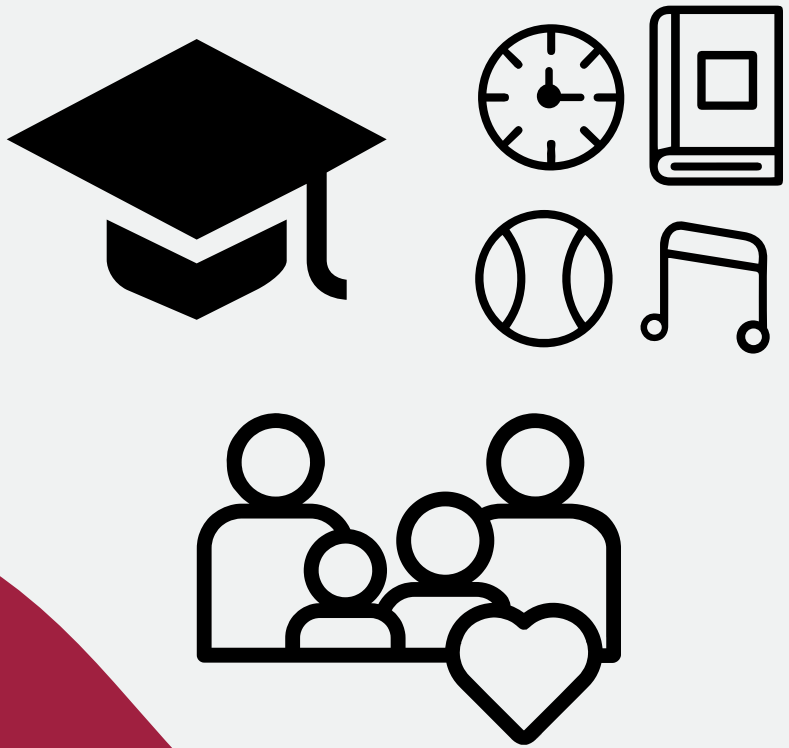
shows percentages of adults tend to not work together in meetings

Support more adults working alongside students and provide the right resources to voice their opinions with adult counterparts.

Utilizing youth-friendly language when educating students and involving them in conversations is essential for paving the way for youth to develop skills early on and become better integrated into advocacy processes.

DEVELOPING FEEDBACK AND ACCOUNTABILITY METHODS

Designing and designating specific roles for students and adults is important in ensuring student engagement is met across the board. Our research shows that the contribution of students varies greatly within their councils due to a lack of availability being present with barriers such as extracurricular activities, familial responsibilities, and academic workload.

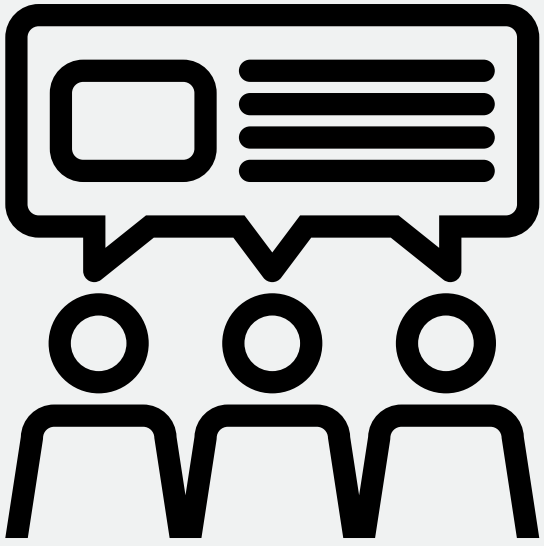


39%

Time constraints due to academic and extracurricular commitments

DEVELOPING FEEDBACK AND ACCOUNTABILITY METHODS, CONT.

To maintain consistent engagement with students, organized structures need to be created and enforced. Specific tasks should be given to individual students working on projects so everyone has a part to work toward and demonstrate. Additionally, feedback should be prioritized to ensure workloads are given fairly and students are satisfied with participation efforts. This can be assessed through surveys, polls, and peer reviews that are actively taken into account by advisors. Annual reports can also be utilized, tracking progress and accomplishments made, while also opening up spaces for feedback and critique.



ADVANCE DEMOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF STUDENTS IN YOUTH COUNCILS.

Approximately 60% of participants within our sample voiced inadequate socioeconomic representation within their councils, and 40% voiced inadequate representation regarding race and gender demographics. Having a council that reflects the population of a school or community is crucial because the demographic representation ultimately allows for unique perspectives and ideas for solutions to be brought to attention. Without representativeness, ideas for progress would be one-dimensional and likely lack innovation.

To uphold representativeness in youth councils, accessibility in selection and applications must be considered. Specifically, when recruiting middle and high school students, a merit-based selection system tends to be flawed as only existing student leaders and the "top" students are taken into account (Georgia Municipal Association, n.d). Though it is important for these students to have their platforms and let their hard work speak for themselves, many students in these positions (primarily existing student leaders) already have numerous settings in which they have their voices heard. It is not inherently harmful to uphold minimum GPA requirements or absence policies. However, it is essential to note that students selected should not all be in the same or similar academic standing.

ADVANCE DEMOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF STUDENTS IN YOUTH COUNCILS CONT.

Furthermore, socioeconomic status and region must be considered when designing a youth council. For example, within a state-based student council, students should be included from both rural and urban areas and different schools. Different regions require different resources, and it is important to recruit students from across a population rather than a single cluster. Students from poorer or more isolated areas will have the opportunity to speak on their disparities, as will students from busier and more populous areas.

Outreach initiatives are crucial as reaching out to all communities can lead to more representative youth councils. The North Carolina State Council visits sites and "collaborates with organizations that serve young people of color such as the NAACP and Hispanic groups" in order to reflect the representativeness of youth across the state and encourage different perspectives (Martin, Pittman, Ferber, McMahon, 2007, p. 21). Reaching out to organizations and inviting people to apply from all communities is key to creating an open youth council and making people across a population feel invited and accepted. Facilitating this commitment to representativeness ensures a council can address a wide range of issues and fulfill everyone's needs.

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