Executive Summary

Youth-Adult Partnerships in Community Decision Making: What Does It Take to Engage Adults in the Practice?

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Youth participation—the direct involvement of youth in shaping the policies, planning, and implementation of their programs, organizations, and communities—is perhaps the most innovative practice that has recently emerged from the fields of positive youth development and community change.

Youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) in decision making is the cornerstone of authentic youth participation. More than 30 years ago, the National Commission on Resources of Youth defined the criteria for quality partnership. Y-AP exists where (a) there is mutuality in teaching and learning among youth and adults; (b) each age group sees itself as a resource for the other; and (c) each age group offers what it uniquely can provide. Over the past decade, Y-AP in decision-making has increasingly been conceptualized as a fundamental element of quality in all of the places where youth and adults work together for a common purpose including governance, policy making, program planning, philanthropy, activism, communication, media, research and training.

Through the 4-H Youth in Governance Initiative, National 4-H Headquarters, CSREES, USDA, along with its non-profit private sector partner, National 4-H Council, is promoting Y-AP as a core practice for 4-H's nationwide system. 4-H is seeking to provide the field with models, resources and research-based information to help policy makers and practitioners "infuse" youth into governance of 4-H Youth Development, county legislative boards, and community coalitions for youth.

The present research, summarized in this executive summary, is part of this nationwide effort. The research,

conducted in five states and involving more than 60 interviews with staff, community leaders, and youth, has three purposes:

1. Review theory and empirical research on the benefits and outcomes of Y-AP.
2. Identify implementation challenges to Y-AP.
3. Identify goals and strategies used by staff that maximize the likelihood of Y-AP being successfully integrated into community governance and organizational decision making.

The full report will be available at www.fourhcouncil.edu/YouthInGovernanceProgram.aspx in June 2007.

Review of Theory and Research

Why engage youth and adults as partners in decision-making? The philosophical rationale has been put forth for many years: Y-AP, when implemented in a quality manner, ensures youth representation and voice on key issues, helps build civil society, and contributes to organizational development. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that youth participation allows children to better protect themselves, strengthens their commitment to democracy, and leads to better policy decisions.

Recent developmental theory and research is confirmatory. Youth and community scholars consistently conclude that when youth are active participants in influential settings of decision making, they can become significant resources for themselves and for others. Research indicates that youth can take the greatest advantage of these opportunities when they form emotional and instrumental relationships with youth workers, teachers, and community leaders over a sustained period of time. An emerging body of research indicates that youth participation has positive influences on the culture, structure, and programming of youth organizations and schools.

It is fairly easy to make a strong case for Y-AP in decision making. Quality implementation is another matter, however. Most adults simply do not have the prior experience, skill or perhaps the motivation to change their traditional ways of working with youth. Unfortunately, scant theory and research is available to guide policy makers and practitioners on how to integrate innovative youth development practices—such as Y-AP in decision making—into established programs, organizations, and governance bodies. To fill that gap, the present research goes into the field to document and analyze the voices and strategies of those practitioners who are actively seeking to infuse youth-adult partnerships into community decision making.

Challenges to Implementing Youth-Adult Partnerships

Y-AP in decision making is an innovative idea that has yet to enter mainstream thought or practice in the United States. 4-H staff recognize that they are swimming against the cultural tide, with relatively little institutional or normative support. During the interviews and case studies, staff most frequently spoke to three challenges:

4-H's traditions are a foremost challenge. Traditions offer valuable stability and powerful community support for 4-H programming. At the same time, traditions are deeply rooted with implicit beliefs about how things should be done, and thus can significantly impede the adoption of new or innovative practices, such as Y-AP in decision making.

This context challenges staff to broaden their traditional roles and responsibilities. Quite often, they must become "cheerleaders" and "advocates" for Y-AP. Staff must convince community leaders and volunteers to

participate in new types of training. They have to create new networks of community support.

The third challenge is time, and time is a scarce commodity. For staff, most of whom have been burdened with budgetary cut-backs over the past decade, finding the time to confront existing traditions and to take on new roles and responsibilities becomes a tremendous obstacle.

Strategies for Engaging Adults in Youth-Adult Partnerships

Some 4-H staff are impressively strategic in infusing Y-AP into 4-H governance, county boards, and community coalitions. By documenting the common strategies employed by these staff, this research has been able to identify a framework of "promising practices." The framework is "living" in that it is not meant to be a step-by-step progression of activities. Rather, it describes the overarching management goals and strategies that guide staff as they continually assess local conditions and refine their course of action to suit the changing context of each Y-AP project.

The most successful staff relentlessly focuses their time and energy on three fundamental management goals:

Staff maintain adult attention on the purpose and expected outcomes of Y-AP. That is, staff constantly "plant seeds" to show how Y-AP meets organizational and community priorities. They actively seek out the support of influential champions and the involvement of professional networks.

Staff help adult stakeholders translate the vision of Y-AP into usable practices. In the words of staff, they demonstrate to others how to "walk the talk" of Y-AP. Staff provide modeling, training and consultation. They coach adults through interactions with youth, and then facilitate reflection on issues of quality.

Staff build a sense of shared ownership among stakeholders. They ensure that "Y-AP is how we do business." Toward this end, the most successful staff establish clear responsibilities and expectations for adult and youth stakeholders. They work to ensure that organizational policies, budgets and collective stories are properly aligned to support the goals of Y-AP.

Creating Conditions for Youth-Adult Partnership

Because public systems tend to mirror the more traditional values of a given society, innovative change in public systems is often considered an oxymoron. But change can, and does, happen. Five recommendations arise from this research:

Staff need to have confidence. Y-AP in decision making challenges established systems and accepted ways of doing things. The most successful staff have the confidence to act within this context of ambiguity and risk. They use this confidence to reconcile diverse agendas and push colleagues out of their comfort zones, when necessary.

Staff need to be strategic in their use of time. The most successful staff are highly focused in how they disseminate and promote Y-AP. As noted above, their efforts are centered around maintaining adult attention on the purpose and desired outcomes of Y-AP, translating the relatively abstract idea of Y-AP into practice, and building shared ownership and structure for Y-AP.

Staff need to balance structures and relationships. The foundation for good results in any realm of society is a structure that encourages and sustains them. The most successful staff are strong infrastructure builders. They

seek to create both institutional structures and interpersonal networks to support Y-AP.

Staff need to plan for transitions. Y-AP is highly fluid. Youth "age out" and adults "rotate off" committees. Local politicians and school superintendents retire. The most successful staff plan for transition, viewing it as an opportunity to ensure the sustainability of Y-AP in decision making. They create ongoing recruitment mechanisms, ensure clarity in role and responsibility, and institutionalize opportunities for collective reflection and planning.

Staff need leadership from the state. This aspect of the research is continuing. At present, our preliminary conclusion is that local staff can profit most greatly from two types of assistance. First, states must explicitly legitimize Y-AP as a priority for local organizations and programs. Second, staff require assistance in community capacity building.

Future Directions

Y-AP in decision making is not only an innovative practice, it is also one of the most difficult to implement with quality. For this reason, we believe that the lessons learned from 4-H staff in this study are transferable to other "less complex" or curriculum-based program strategies. Many innovative practices—mentoring, leadership training, organizing, coaching, community building—are grounded in principles and processes that are open to multiple interpretation and implementation choices. The present findings, therefore, could be used to inform other practitioners of innovative practice create a common purpose with others, translate good ideas into day to day practice, and build shared ownership among diverse stakeholders.

The present findings must be empirically tested by scholars and field tested by practitioners, of course. With the accumulation of such data, the field will be in a far stronger position to disseminate and provide the adoption of Y-AP in decisions making, as well as other evidence-based practices in the fields of youth development and community change.

References and Resources

Interested in knowing more? The following resources provide a wealth of information and links:

www.fourhcouncil.edu/YouthinGovernanceProgram.aspx

Linda Camino, Carrie Mook, Cailin O'Connor & Shepherd Zeldin (2005). Youth and adult leaders for program excellence: A practical guide for program assessment and action planning. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University. (www.actforyouth.net)

Dean Fixsen, Sandra Naoom, & Karen Blase (2005). Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature (FMHI publication #231). Tampa: University of South Florida.(http://nirn.fmhi.usf.edu)

Shepherd Zeldin, Reed Larson, and Linda Camino (2005). Youth-adult relationships in community programs: Diverse perspectives on good practices. *Journal of Community Psychology*, Volume 33. (Special Issue).

Shepherd Zeldin, Julie Petrokubi, and Carole MacNeil (in press). Youth-adult partnerships in decision making: Disseminating and implementing an innovative idea into established organizations and communities. *American Journal of Community Psychology.*

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