

What's so Important About Being “Youth-Driven”? *A White Paper on Youth Voice and Leadership*

“The Neutral Zone [a model youth driven program] is a place where creativity coats the walls in the form of graffiti, painting and photographs, where adolescent energy reverberates with the squeaks of sneakers and the impassioned voices of poets. It is a place we have built.”

– Hailey Huget, former Neutral Zone teen Board member

“Experience has shown that teens become interested and remain invested in programs if they are given the opportunity to serve in authentic leadership roles and initiate new ideas.”

– John Weiss, Executive Director of Neutral Zone

The Challenge

Over the past decade, communities across the country have come to understand that out-of-school-time “spaces” can have significant impact on the positive development of youth across social, emotional, and cognitive realms. Participation in organized, non-school activities can enhance academic, social, emotional, civic, and health outcomes, and reduce risk behaviors.

However, many programs with organized activities for young people find it difficult to recruit and retain youth once they enter high school. Although over 10 million school age children participate in after-school programs, only 7% are older teens. Research suggests that many older youth believe that existing programs do not relate to their needs. Teens present a special set of challenges for afterschool providers that must be addressed if programs are to attract and retain participants. For example, compared to younger youth, older youth are more autonomous and more likely to articulate specific needs and are less appeased by activities designed for a general audience. Additionally, older youth have many demands (study, sports, childcare, work, and sleep), and they often choose not to spend their limited leisure time (less than 90 minutes per day, according to a recent study) in after-school programs.

Furthermore, many high school students do not feel motivated or engaged by learning. The reasons for these challenges are widely debated. However, practitioners, scholars, and policymakers all agree that if students are motivated to achieve and are adequately engaged in classroom learning, their chances of academic success are greatly enhanced.

Both after-school and school-day programs need innovative strategies to attract and keep older youth engaged and motivated. Unfortunately, few models exist that have successfully addressed the motivation, interest and attendance challenges faced by older youth.

One Solution

The concept of “youth-driven” as it applies to programs for older youth is based on a simple innovation: involving young people in running their own initiatives. A “youth-driven space” for high school age youth is a setting in which youth participants are involved in program and organizational decisions. In a youth-driven space, adults provide opportunities for youth to lead activities, establish and run youth advisory boards, and help make decisions about the physical space, activities offered, field trips, how money is spent, organizational policy, and even staff hiring. In a school setting, youth-driven participation can contribute to curricular decisions, improving school climate, and making policy changes.

A youth-driven space gives youth the experience of working in collaborative teams comparable to what they may experience in real-life work situations. They endeavor to overcome challenges by exploring issues and make decisions that affect things they care about; they experience the responsibility of seeing the immediate impacts of their decisions. All of these experiences occur alongside supportive adults, which research finds to be one of the most important components of successful youth programs and mentorship.

What “Youth-Driven” Does for Youth

Scholars have identified several rationales for engaging youth in organizational governance and decision-making, including:

- Promoting social justice through youth representation
- Building civil society by creating committed citizens
- Fostering youth leadership to work in broader democratic movements on issues like racial justice
- Promoting youth development through skill building

School-based studies have found that when teachers encourage students’ voices in their classrooms, students become more engaged in learning and have higher attendance rates. Schools have also reported being safer, with better relationships between students and adults and among students themselves. New research on youth-driven practice is showing that these experiences can also lead to increased interest and participation in afterschool programs as well as gains in youths’ 21st Century Skills such as: problem-solving skills, communication skills, and positive attitudes towards innovation. This development is critical as research shows that many youth entering today’s workforce reportedly lack the minimum skills required by employers that include basic core and cognitive skills as well as skills defined as “21st Century Skills” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills).

How “Youth Driven” Works

The Neutral Zone serves as one of a growing number of successful teen centers in the country in which youth decision-making and involvement permeate multiple levels of organizational functioning from content to administration. There are multiple ways in which youth are involved in program and organizational operations as well as governance. Broadly outlined are 15 key ways youth participate at the Neutral Zone to make it their own:

- 1. Establish Norms and Expectations:** Youth work collectively to identify and agree on ground rules, norms, and bylaws to establish a supportive community and positive culture.
- 2. Recruit Participants:** Youth lead outreach to peers to encourage participation in programs and events through word of mouth, facebook, text messaging, webpages, and flyers.
- 3. Set Goals and Develop Strategic Plans:** Youth determine their own program goals and work collectively as a group to develop strategic plans using active planning techniques.
- 4. Facilitate Meetings:** Youth plan and facilitate their own weekly meetings working with an adult advisor to create agendas and work in partnership to run meetings. Adult advisors serve as support during the meetings and encourage ongoing reflection.
- 5. Facilitate Dialogue:** Youth explore issues about identity, social justice, personal reflections and community change through facilitated conversations and interactive activities.

6. **Curate Art Shows and Concerts:** Youth collect, display, and feature artistic works of other young people. Additionally, youth book, promote, and oversee music concerts and special events featuring other youth artists.
7. **Promote Events/Projects:** Youth reach out to invite the broader community to attend special events and projects by creating press releases and marketing materials and through public speaking and media engagement.
8. **Fundraise:** Youth participate in fundraising by hosting special events, meeting potential donors, and asking for major gifts.
9. **Grant Making:** Youth administer a grant-making system to allocate funds raised to support Neutral Zone programs and distribute funds to weekly programs.
10. **Provide Feedback to Peers:** Youth give critical feedback to their peers in areas of writing, artwork, and music performance through structures that offer support and encouragement for improvement.
11. **Evaluate Programs:** Youth evaluate their own successes by reflecting on goals and assessing information collected through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Following projects and initiatives, youth reflect on areas of success and develop recommendations for? areas to change for the future.
12. **Ownership of Physical Space:** Youth design their own meeting and hangout spaces by adorning the walls with original art installations, painting murals, and hanging posters or flyers.
13. **Organizational Leadership:** Youth participate in organizational decisions, including staff hiring and starting new programs or initiatives.
14. **Governance Leadership:** Youth participate in governance decisions about policies and procedures by serving on the Board of Directors and Board Committees.
15. **Community Outreach:** Youth reach out to the broader community through presentations, dinners, point-of-entry meetings and tours to share Neutral Zone’s mission and programs.

Taking the “Youth Driven” Idea to New Places

The Youth-Driven Space (YDS) program is a coaching/training model for after-school youth-serving organizations and school-based programs, developed by Neutral Zone and the Weikart Center for Program Quality. The YDS program is designed to increase the capacity of organizations serving high-school-age youth to develop program, organizational and governance strategies. This approach helps youth have a stronger voice and involvement in the mission and operation of the organization. Through this process, organizations support development of youth 21st Century skills (or “soft skills”), including collaboration, communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork and leadership, by providing opportunities for youth to function within the management system of the organization.

The YDS model is designed to transform existing youth programs and school-based programs into youth-driven spaces through four key areas:

- *The establishment of a youth advisory council* – A group of youth meets regularly to make decisions and offer guidance about program offerings and organizational operation.
- *Youth facilitation for youth meetings and activities* – Youth members take on the roles that adults typically perform in a youth program, leading meetings and activities with their peers.
- *Helping adults learn to build strong adult/youth partnerships* – Adults in YDS do not simply step down and let youth lead; rather, they play an active supportive role in helping youth be successful.
- *Building sustainability* – Impact is sustained by including YDS principles in governance operations such as mission statements and by establishing deliberate support across administration, staff and the community at large.

YDS Impacts

The first wide-scale YDS intervention study was conducted from 2010-2012 by the Community Evaluation and Research Collaborative at Michigan State University. The results indicated that the model had substantially developed youth-adult partnerships and youth leadership opportunities and strengthened youth engagement, peer relationships and 21st Century skills through the 14-month implementation period. Some of the specific outcomes included:

Organizational Outcomes

- More opportunities for involvement, adult support, and youth-adult partnerships
- More youth responsibility for decision-making in activity and organizational management
- Greater understanding of what constitutes *meaningful* youth involvement and responsibilities.

Youth Outcomes

- Greater sense of community and programmatic engagement and less social exclusion
- More opportunities for youth to explore their identities and reflect on who they wanted to be in the future.
- Gains in a wide variety of 21st Century skills, with the greatest changes occurring in problem solving, organizational skills, management and administrative skills, creative thinking and innovation, goal setting and group process skills.
- During youth-adult meetings, youth showed increased solution generation, information sharing, problem identification, and evaluation of information.

For More Information: To learn more about the YDS training/coaching model contact:

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