



Highlights of a Conference Call on Engaging Youth — Tips from the San Diego and Ann Arbor Youth Councils

On May 11, 2004, Karen Young, co-director of Youth On Board (www.youthonboard.org) moderated a conference call hosted by New Ways to Work. The call was part of a series of conversations on the topic of “Involving Youth in Organizational Planning, Policy, and Decision-Making”. Representatives of youth-serving organizations from San Diego, California and Ann Arbor, Michigan shared their progress and suggestions of strategies for successfully engaging youth.

Representing the **San Diego Workforce Partnership**, Michele Watson, Mary Wilson, and Mark Nanzer reported starting a Youth Advisory Board about a year ago in order to get youth involved in Youth Council policies and programs in meaningful ways. The team recruited members through connections with current program providers and through presentations sponsored by the San Diego Workforce Partnership. The Youth Advisory Board currently has seven diverse members ages 14 to 18; their goal is twelve. It met for the first time last May to recommend roles and responsibilities and to guide recruiting efforts.

Here are some lessons learned:

- It’s important to brief the staff beforehand so that everyone is on board. Make sure all Action Items are clearly understood, and that people understand what the Youth Council is trying to achieve.
- Everyone at presentations is excited when you hand out materials, but follow-up is essential — with both youth and adults — or participation never materializes.
- Kids don’t want to fill out surveys, so the San Diego team has been working on new ways of assessing and recruiting. Retreats and seminars have been effective at making youth want to participate.
- The Youth Council started a mentoring program that connects a Youth Council member to a Youth Advisory Board member. The mentors break the Youth Council meetings down for the younger members and provide context and support.

- Don’t have meetings at 7:30 in the morning! It’s not conducive to youth attendance.

Ann Arbor Community Foundation was represented by Katie Schuster and Christina Cody. Their Youth Council (non-WIA) started up in 1989 with matching grant challenges from the Kellogg Foundation to build up the endowment element of local community foundations. The grant stipulated that the endowments be governed by youth, who would guide appropriations and take leadership on youth issues. Assisted by 1999 state legislation that lowered the age at which youth could serve on a board to sixteen, the program currently has a dynamic group of 25 youth members from public and private schools in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Initial training is provided at a new member retreat each November, which introduces youth to the basics of grant-making and philanthropy. Training ranges from protocol — how to engage with other members — to finance and evaluation processes. All members are required to serve on a subcommittee, and attend from one to four meetings a month, depending on their level of involvement.

The Ann Arbor staff made these recommendations:

- Hire a paid Youth Council advisor if possible. This emphasizes youth involvement as a priority and enables staff to do the necessary outreach. In this capacity, Katie Schuster supports young people on both a personal and organizational level. She tries to meet beforehand to set the agenda, so that youth can own and run the meetings. Schuster attends, but takes a back seat. “The challenge is knowing when to step forward,” she explains. “We’re building trust that adults are there to be allies, and the proof is that they can say, ‘Katie, you’re pushing too much.’”
- It’s important find ways to build enthusiasm in young people by engaging them in all aspects of the work, such as committees on technology and web design. This helps create ownership and sense of collaboration between youth and adults.
- Another aspect of Schuster’s role is “bridging” between youth and adults, as well as linking kids to each other. A priority is working with adult



staff to make sure they're always conscious of what it means to involve a young person, perhaps reminding them about follow-through. Another element, Schuster says, "is stepping back and saying, 'How are we doing, and how can we make it work better?'"

Questions and answers from participants:

What about the legal aspects of involving youth under eighteen. Have you taken any precautions?

The Youth On Board website has a booklet about Youth Council Involvement and the Law. Check out whether your state has a law about whether kids can vote on boards. (Most are silent.) We recommend that you state clearly in your papers that you use youth. Because the board of directors is not a youth-serving entity, they are often exempt from the requirements of many agencies that are specifically designed to serve young people.

Do you pay any stipends, wages, academic credit? Other incentives?

At San Diego, participation is fully voluntary, though some youth may receive school credit. The rewards for Ann Arbor participants consists mainly of community service hours.

Who's on a Youth Advisory Board?

The San Diego Youth Advisory Board consists of a majority of youth, with a couple of adults from the workforce partnership providing support. It's rotational, with two Youth Advisory Board members participating as representatives at Youth Council meetings along with 27 adult members. Youth Advisory Board members have equal voting privileges as adults, with 2 votes given to the rotational members. Adult participants enjoy the first-hand work with youth, as a break from purely administrative duties.

If youth rotate, how connected do they feel? How does the rotational part work?

In San Diego, Youth Advisory Board members take turns rotating into two slots to attend Youth Council meetings a couple of times a year. Participants in the Youth Council prep their peers on the Youth Advisory Board on what happened, so everyone feels involved. All have the opportunity to attend as peers, which makes them feel more involved, and in turn more committed to staying on.

If an organization interested in establishing Youth Advisory Council, what does it require in terms of staff time?

Start-up is time consuming, ideally involving a full-time staff member in the beginning just to lay the groundwork and establish the resources that will maintain youth involvement. As the project gets underway and a core group of involved youth gets established, more staff are involved as adjuncts and mentors, though often not on a full-time basis.

This process must involve youth from the get-go. "It would be much less time-consuming if it were adult-run," acknowledged San Diego's Nanzer, "since it means having extra meetings so youth can feel comfortable running them, and so on, but it's important to take that extra time. You have to start planning with buy-in from both sides about goals and responsibilities."

Are you working with out-of-school youth or those still enrolled?

"We're having a hard time involving out-of-school youth," says Nanzer, "but we need that older youth voice." The Ann Arbor team confirmed that this group was hard to find and reach, and face many more pressures than kids who are in school do, and may find it hard to participate due to family or work situations. "We try and explain this to other members. We are working on the logistics," says Cody, whose Ann Arbor organization has a flexible open-door policy. "You're on until you graduate from high school. Many drop in and out depending on their foster-care situation. We keep emailing them to let them know their spot is still there for when things get more stable."

Summing up the findings, Youth On Board's Karen Young noted that the key clearly lies in building relationships between youth and adults so they can talk openly about challenges. "We've all come together to form relationships built on a true level of respect," seconds Watson. "I have a passion for this work."