

# prACTice MATTERS

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## Strengthening Youth Involvement

by Jutta Dotterweich

One of the key strategies of positive youth development has been youth participation or youth involvement. This means that young people and adults enter a mutually beneficial partnership by contributing and accepting expertise unique to each group and making joint decisions that affect others. What exactly does that look like? Do young people have to be in power or leadership positions—on steering committees or boards? There are many ways young people can be involved in planning, implementing and decision making within an organization or a community initiative. (Please see the diagram on page 2).

Influence on organizations or initiatives increases from involvement in projects to consultation to shared leadership. Young people will choose levels of involvement that match their skills, interests and situations. Over time youth might move into different roles, and some might choose committee or board positions.

*ACT for Youth*, an initiative to promote positive youth development throughout NYS, has challenged community partnerships to increase youth involvement in their communities. Community partnerships have embraced this challenge but have struggled to successfully involve young people in meaningful, decision-making roles. This report will take stock of the past three years and describe challenges and promising practices.

### ★★Commitment to Youth Involvement★★

One of the early lessons learned was that successful youth involvement, be it a youth adult community council or a youth advisory committee, requires **serious adult commitment**. Adult partners had to make changes to their day to day business practices. Meetings times were moved to after

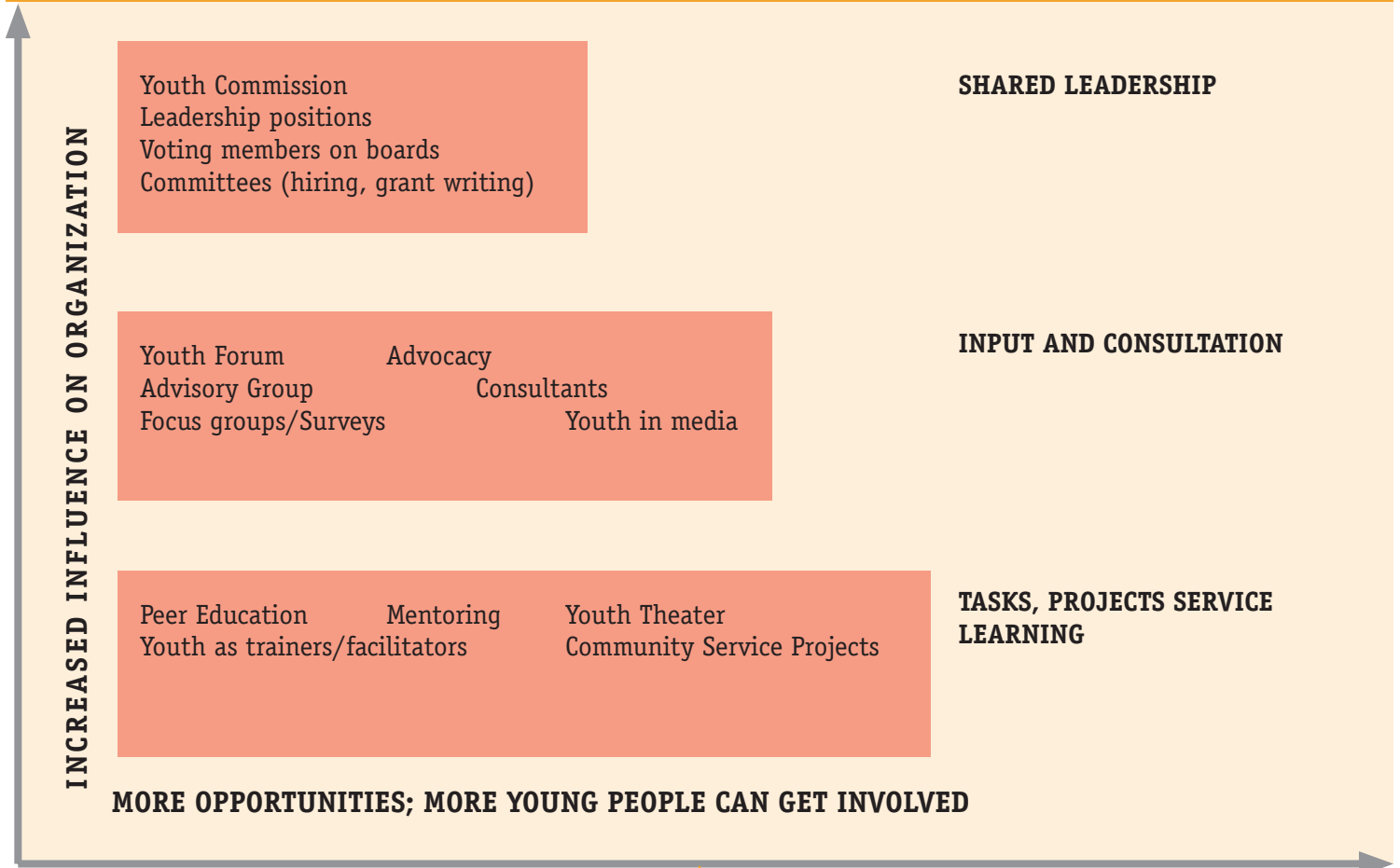
## Welcome Readers!

This is the first issue of prACTice MATTERS, a new series designed for practitioners who work with youth or oversee youth programming. Our hope is to bring you “how to” information about the application of youth development principles drawn from our experience in the field.

This issue focuses on Strengthening Youth Involvement within an organization or community initiative. We report on ACT for Youth’s experience promoting positive youth development, and lessons learned in the following areas:

- ★ Building commitment to youth involvement
- ★ Recruiting young people
- ★ Preparing young people for their new roles
- ★ Keeping young people involved

## MEANINGFUL ROLES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



school hours or weekends. They had to work out issues of transportation and limited resources. Transportation in particular has been a critical issue—in both, urban and rural areas. Creative solutions included hiring a limo service, partnering with other community agencies that have vehicles, and providing gas reimbursement for parents. Making arrangements for young people to participate or present at events involved detailed negotiations with school officials and parents.

In addition, adult partners had to take on the role of a **supportive coach**. Throughout adolescence young people are facing frequent challenges in their social and emotional development. If they are feeling stressed and in crisis, adults need to be able to respond to them and to listen to their concerns. Establishing a strong supportive relationship with at least one adult staff person who is able to provide this type of case management is crucial. Successful youth participation projects dealt with this by giving out staff home phone numbers or establishing regular after hours conversations via instant messenger. In short, adults need to be serious about youth involve-

ment; they need to be willing to commit time, effort and resources beyond their traditional 9 to 5 work practices.

### ★★Recruiting Young People★★

Community partnerships struggle with recruitment issues, especially in regards to representation and diversity. If the initiative is county wide, how do we recruit young people from all municipalities and various ethnic and cultural groups? Attempts to bring together young people from a range of different backgrounds often fail—young people, taken out of their social network, do not connect with each other, and they feel disconnected from the project. Successful partnerships have recruited young people from existing youth groups such as a 4H club or school club and expanded from there. One ACT partnership established several youth adult community councils, each with a local school district as geographical unit. Each council developed its own purpose, vision and goals centered on its respective community. With a sense of direction, purpose and connectedness, young people then became involved in recruitment by reaching out to acquaintances and friends as well as organizing

community activities that attracted more young people to the project (i.e., a “Battle of the Bands” resulted in new members). Once several community councils were established, county wide representation and perspective were gained by gathering representatives of each council to monthly meetings.

Similarly, outreach to diverse groups can be part of ongoing recruitment efforts once the partnership is underway. One issue which frequently surfaces is that projects limit recruitment to honor students and high achievers. Given the full schedule of many of those students steady commitment is often difficult to obtain. Successful strategies to recruit “at risk” students or “the silent majority” have involved connecting with school personnel to identify students that might be interested, enhancing service-learning projects, partnering with youth services that provide support services to young people “at risk,” partnering with community centers or after school programs involving middle school students, or talking to young people at “hang out” places and identifying policy issues with which they are concerned (i.e., city ordinances or relationship with police department).

Several projects have been successful in recruiting young people at the middle school level, capitalizing on the passion of young adolescents. Twelve to fourteen year old adolescents represent a group with great potential for involvement. Developmentally they feel strongly about social justice and fairness; they tend to be more outspoken and are less absorbed by school and relationship demands. The additional advantage is that adolescents of middle school age might stay involved for a longer period of time.

The key messages here are to start with existing groups of young people, develop a clear purpose for their involvement, get their buy in from the start, and then develop recruitment strategies that address representation and diversity.

### ★★Preparing Young People for their New Roles★★

Young people need to understand what the expectations and responsibilities are. They need to be clear about the purpose of the project and their involvement. If they are joining a board of directors they need to learn about

the board’s functions and practices. If young people take on formal responsibilities, written job descriptions and applications are helpful. This does not have to happen all at once. Long training sessions tend to discourage youth from participating. A more effective strategy is to plan and do at the same time. Training can be offered when needed. It is even more effective when coupled with coaching or mentoring. This makes young people feel comfortable asking questions when they arise.

Working through the preconceived notions both young people and adults have about each other is one of the biggest challenges community partnerships have encountered. For adults it has been a struggle to hand over responsibilities to young people. Adults sometimes worry about whether young people are capable of taking on the responsibility, whether they will be reliable, or whether they will overstep acceptable boundaries.

Our experience suggests that young people often assume adults to be too old to understand their generation and unwilling to respect and listen to them. This can also be addressed by strengthening communication and team-building skills. For example, include brief energizers and teambuilding activities in every meeting, or plan intergenerational social events that allow young people and adults to interact informally and form personal relationships.

In general, projects have learned that meetings or work sessions had to be restructured to accommodate youth participation. Meetings had to be interactive, young people needed to feel comfortable enough to actively participate, and they needed to have fun!

### ★★Keeping Young People Involved★★

Making meetings more participatory will help keep young people involved. Adults need to listen to them and they need to show respect. Young people in all projects have expressed this over and over again. They have their own unique perspectives and are ready to make contributions. They want to be taken seriously and they want to matter. For adults, this means that it is important to closely examine their own attitudes and behaviors, especially the way they talk to young people. The statements they make, the way they make them, and the body language that accompanies them, all have a tremendous impact on how likely youth are to stay involved.

### **Examples of successful strategies:**

— Young people have meaningful roles and responsibilities within the partnership:

In one project site, young people and adults are co-chairs of the community council. In other projects, young people have assumed the training and orientation of new youth members. In these projects, youth advisory boards were youth led; elected youth representatives attended project steering committee.

— Young people are recognized for their contributions:

Several projects have handed out special awards and certificates to young people or recognized youth in public forums. A few projects issued stipends to youth in leadership roles.

It is also important to keep in mind adolescents' developmental needs. Young people need to see that their efforts have consequences. It is crucial to plan and act at the same time. Projects that started with a long planning process (i.e. many meetings and many dis-

cussions have been less successful in retaining young people for long periods of time). Successful projects were able to combine planning and strategizing with concrete action such as community mapping, resource assessments, video production about the project, planning community events as community education strategies, or community improvement projects.

### **★★Conclusions★★**

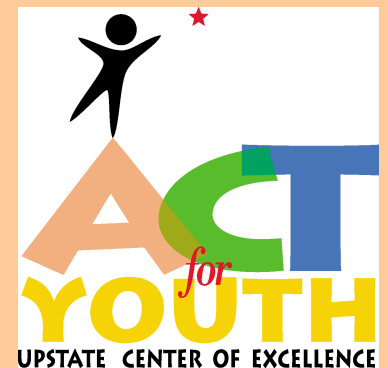
There are several take away lessons:

- ★ Adults need to be serious about youth involvement – they need to respect young people as partners and need to be willing to change their work practices to adjust to adolescent needs.
- ★ Young people need meaningful roles and responsibilities and need to be recognized for their contributions.
- ★ Adults and youth need to engage in activities that enable them to learn more about each other and connect with each other.

The Upstate Center of Excellence invites you to visit the ACT for Youth website at:

<http://www.human.cornell.edu/actforyouth>

Additional copies of this newsletter and many other resources in the field of youth development are available in "pdf" format on the ACT for Youth website.



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