

# WISCONSIN YOUTH FUTURES

Technical Report #12

## Youth Futures: Proposed Roles for Youth Involvement



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# Youth Futures: Proposed Roles for Youth Involvement

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*"The generation gap has always been bridged by the young in spirit of any age who continually restore their own confidence and creativity by paying attention to the thoughts, hopes and dreams of young people and not dismissing them with self-assumed superior wisdom" (The Spirit of Youth in the Royal Bank Letter).*

Youth Futures promotes the notion that youth should have a voice in finding ways to prevent the problems that young people face. But today's youth are usually excluded from participation in shaping community efforts to promote their wellbeing (Lofquist, 1988); consequently, many communities have little experience involving youth on adult committees.

This paper briefly explains the importance of involving youth in meaningful ways and gives strategies for ensuring that youth involvement succeeds. Four possible roles for youth participation in the piloting of Youth Futures are identified as well as several mechanisms for recruiting youth; local Youth Futures Steering Committees are expected to review these options and make their own choices about the most appropriate way to involve youth in their community.

## **The Benefits of Youth Involvement**

Youth involvement in Youth Futures is vital for four reasons. First, youth involvement increases the odds that Youth Futures will be successful. Second, youth involvement is consistent with some of the basic ideas undergirding Youth Futures. Third, youth involvement provides a meaningful, real-life learning experience for youth, and finally, adults will learn from youth about growing up in today's world. Each of these benefits will be discussed in detail.

### Benefits for the Program

First, youth participation in Youth Futures is expected to benefit the program in the following ways:

- Programs for youth have a better chance of success if youth are viewed as resources as well as clients or objects of the program (Lofquist, 1988). Marketing research has shown the vital importance of involving consumers in developing ideas about products they will use; youth involvement can make youth programs more relevant, credible, and attractive to young people (Chandross, 1987).

- Youth and adults each contribute unique strengths; working together, they can achieve results that may be better than either could achieve alone. Youth bring first-hand knowledge of problems that affect them, enthusiasm, new ideas, and idealism. Adults bring experience, stability, technical knowhow, and political realism (Chandross, 1987).
- The interpersonal relationships and dialogue that develop between youth and adults can (1) generate innovative perspectives on problems or prevention programs that might otherwise be overlooked, and (2) instill the energy and cooperation needed to carry out Youth Futures and other community efforts as well.

### Consistency in Program Theory and Practice

Second, youth involvement is also important for consistency between the theory that drives Youth Futures and its actual implementation; Youth Futures should model what it professes.

- One of the cornerstones of Youth Futures is involvement of anyone in the community who can access vital resources; young people have direct access to other young people, who have first-hand knowledge of the pressures they face, and whom the program is ultimately intended to benefit.
- Youth Futures professes that young people who are involved in meaningful roles in their communities are less likely to get involved in problem behaviors. Yet in contemporary society, youth are typically cast in a role as passive recipients of adult wisdom and receive little direct preparation for adult roles. Youth Futures itself is an excellent opportunity for youth to work collaboratively with adults to promote positive community change. These opportunities are not always forthcoming in the midst of a society in which young people increasingly spend more time with peers and less time with adults (Steinberg, 1989).
- Adults oftentimes develop youth program, "give" them to youth (Chandross, 1987), and express surprise or disappointment when they don't work. Youth Futures believes that successful prevention programs for youth rely on collaboration among parents, educators, young people, youth-service providers, community leaders and others involved in contexts critical for childrens' well-being. While it may be easier and less troublesome for adults to plan programs for youth solely with other adults, isolated from youth input, such an approach may be less effective in the long run (Chandross, n.d.).

### Benefits for Youth

Third, youth are expected to benefit by being involved in the following ways:

- Youth can gain skills and experience in communication and decision-making. Epstein's research demonstrates that when youth are given opportunities for communication and decision-making, they become more independent, show greater initiative, and earn higher grades than young people not afforded these opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

- Youth learn the value of commitment (Chandross, 1987) and civic engagement from the example provided by adults.
- Youth are involved in something they see as important which can make a difference in their lives.
- Youth involvement in worthwhile community issues sends an empowering message to youth--one of trust and a valuing of their opinions, abilities and contributions.
- Involvement in the process alongside adults demonstrates to youth that learning is a lifelong process that extends beyond school to solving real problems (Chandross, n.d.).

### Benefits for Adults

- Adults expand their perspective by rubbing elbows with youth and hearing what is going on in their lives. This insight becomes increasingly important in a society in which the experience of youth today may be vastly different from the experience of adults a generation or two ago.

## **Four Potential Roles for Youth**

Here are four potential roles for youth which can be considered individually or in combination. This list is not comprehensive but can be a starting point for those responsible for selecting the members of the local Youth Futures Committee. For each role, the method is described followed by the aim, success indicators, and potential advantages and risks.

### **Role 1: Developmental Opportunity for Exceptional Youth**

Method: Two to four young people are included on the Youth Future Committee as full committee members. Youth are selected who are competent, assertive, and have demonstrated leadership potential.

Aim: The Youth Futures process can be used as an opportunity to spur the development of a few select youth. Adult members of the committee will also develop respect for the concerns and competence of youth.

Success Indicators: Youth participate in the meetings and contributions to the planning group increase over time. Adults listen to youth and respond to their contributions at meetings. Enduring relationships grow between youth and adult community leaders. Youth are included in other community efforts and are granted increasing responsibility.

Advantages:

- Excellent opportunity for youth who show leadership potential
- Provides a mechanism for youth and adults to work together on an important issue

#### Risks:

- Implies that youth will be allowed to participate because of how young people will benefit from participation, not for what they have to offer
- Selecting this role in and of itself might be considered a mere "token involvement"
- Youth involved will probably not be representative of the at-risk population
- Youth may feel intimidated by adult committee members and reluctant to express their opinions.
- Adults on the committee may feel uncomfortable with youth present
- Adult committee members may not be willing to listen to or take seriously the concerns and opinions of youth.

#### **Role 2: Youth Feedback Groups**

Method: Create one or several focus groups of 10 to 20 youth each, to give feedback on proposals developed by the Youth Futures committee. Youth are not asked to identify priority problems or to invent from scratch a proposal for a multidimensional, community-wide plan that makes use of local and statewide resources (that is the committee's task). But youth are given some veto power over the ideas of the adult-led community group.

Aim: Focus groups of youth would serve as b.s. detectors for the adult-led community group. They would reject adult-identified problems or adult-developed comprehensive plans that are out-of-sync with the experience of youth, and which are therefore likely to fail. They would give corrective feedback to the adult-led planning process.

Success Indicator: Adult-led planning group does, in fact, modify its ideas in response to youth feedback.

#### Advantages:

- Keeps the work of the adults on track and ensures its relevance to perceived youth needs
- Youth will feel free to speak up in a group that consists primarily of youth; adult discussion may be less inhibited.

#### Risks:

- Could be viewed by youth as a "token" involvement since youth are not involved in selecting the priority problem or in formulating prevention plans

- Will be viewed by youth as an important and meaningful task only if the adults are willing to seriously consider their views and alter their ideas accordingly
- If youth veto an idea that adults believe is a good one, resolving the differences could be difficult since the youth and adults meet separately and have not had the opportunity to develop rapport.
- The youth will be at a disadvantage since the adults participate in training on human development and youth-at-risk issues as part of the Youth Futures process.

### **Role 3: Youth Implementation Teams**

Method: Once the planning group has identified the problem, youth are drawn into the planning and implementation of community responses. Some projects might be initiated by youth, some by adults, some jointly. Youth might be active delivery agents for programs such as peer education, Students Against Drunk Driving (S.A.D.D.), etc.

Aim 1: Youth have the opportunity to get involved in real issues with important consequences. Since youth will organize and do the project, they stand to progress developmentally, gaining skills and experience.

Success Indicators: (1) Youth-organized projects are established in response to the identified problems (e.g. a S.A.D.D. chapter is formed). (2) Impact is made on an identified problem such as lowered incidence of teen drinking violations.

Advantages:

- A valuable community resource is harnessed to help implement the community prevention plan.
- Youth will grow by being involved in implementing programs.
- Youth are involved in meaningful, not make-work, activities.
- Young people will volunteer if they view the identified problem as an important issue for youth; involving youth in planning the response should promote commitment and ownership.

Risks:

- Youth may be asked to work on problems or programs that they don't see as important.
- Youth may feel less ownership, connection, and commitment as a result of being involved so late in the process.

#### **Role 4: Representative Youth as Full Committee Members**

Method: A cross-section of 10 to 15 youth are selected to become full members of the Youth Futures Committee and ski arc in all goal setting and action planning. Young people's and adult's perceptions of the most pressing problems of young people in the community will be tallied separately and together; differences in the lists will be resolved through face-to face discussion and negotiation.

The first meeting reviewing the results of the TAP survey and the background on youth development will be held separately for youth and adults. Three advantages of this approach seem apparent:

- The presentation of the localized data can be tailored to the age of the audience, taking into account that adolescents often over-estimate involvement in problem behaviors, adults may under-estimate youth involvement in these behaviors.
- Adults can be oriented on the value of youth input and ways of working effectively with youth: conversely, youth can be oriented on how to work with adults.
- Teaching techniques can be used that are more appropriate for younger and older audiences.

The remaining meetings would benefit from a joint meeting of youth and adults; young people would obviously be more knowledgeable about some aspects of the community's support for youth such as the school experience, recreational opportunities for youth, and meaningful roles for youth. The development of the multi-dimensional action plan would also benefit from joint youth-adult participation.

Aims: Youth are viewed as vital resources to the success of Youth Futures. Involving young people from a variety of backgrounds will help ensure that the committee doesn't waste time and effort on programs well-intentioned adults or the "good kids" think would be best. When differences arise between youth and adults, they can be discussed openly, perhaps resulting in innovative solutions that might not otherwise have surfaced. Youth participants also lend credibility to- the work of the committee among youth audiences whom the programs are intended to serve.

Success Indicators: (1) A cross-section of youth, including some at-risk youth, are represented on the committee and participate fully in its planning and implementation. (2) Youth and adults are willing to openly discuss differences and compromise. (3) Youth and adults develop good working relationships which continue overtime. (4) The committee's prevention programs are well-attended and achieve the desired impact upon the identified problem. (5) The idea of youth and adults working together spreads to other groups in the community.

Advantages:

- Youth involved from the start are more apt to feel a sense of ownership and commitment to the problems and the proposed solutions.

- Youth and adults involved in genuine partnerships encompass the strengths of each. Youth bring vitality and first-hand knowledge of youth problems and pressures; adults bring experience and political savvy.
- If youth and adult perceptions differ, a forum is available for resolving differences; consensus will be easier to reach when youth and adults know each other and have a history of working together. Youth and adults are on equal footing since each have been involved in Youth Future's educational process.

Risks:

- If the problem and or solutions identified by youth differ from those identified by adults, reaching consensus may be difficult.
- May not succeed without training and orientation of youth and adults. Youth, in particular, need training due to their lack of skills and experience in serving on policy boards; adults need training on taking into account and acknowledging the contributions of youth.
- Adults must be willing to give up some power and control; the decisions will not necessarily coincide with those that adults would make without youth input.
- The committee would be larger and more difficult to convene and facilitate.

### **Making Youth Involvement a Positive Experience**

The long-standing pattern of excluding youth from involvement in policy-setting boards means that adults are not used to working with youth in this setting, and youth lack skills and experience. Youth/adult partnerships may take some adjustment on the part of all:

It is difficult for adults to accept that there are occasions when their ideas and opinions should not prevail. And young people who have not dealt with adults as partners, often lack the confidence to work at their side without feeling inferior (Chandross, n.d.)

Placing young people on policy-making boards with no prior preparation sets them up for failure. Insufficient attention to training, support, and recruitment does youth a disservice (Chandross, 1987); each of these dimensions will be considered in turn as it relates specifically to Youth Futures.

### **Training Youth and Adults**

Youth will need training in such areas as the goals and activities of Youth Futures, the benefits of youth involvement, the nominal group process, problem-solving, the role (and acronyms) of youth-serving agencies and organizations in the community, listening, giving feedback, resolving conflicts, working with adults, commitment and follow-through. The leadership training process can also help young people representing different segments of the community, who may not know each other, get to know and feel comfortable with each other.



Programs that have successfully involved youth on policy-making boards train youth for up to a year before placing them in their positions (Chandross, 1987); some of the training was provided by youth. Leadership training is ongoing because membership replacement occurs as students graduate from high school. Written contracts and job descriptions are used to ensure that youth are fully aware of the commitment required, and to help ensure their involvement over time.

Adults will need training on the importance of the youth voice to the success of Youth Futures, how to work with young people, effective listening, techniques for soliciting youth input, mentoring and other means of supporting youth involvement.

### **Supporting Youth**

Young people often lack transportation, have limited incomes, cannot leave school without permission, and are accountable to parents for their time and activities. For youth involvement, arrangements may need to be made for transportation and transportation expenses may need to be reimbursed. Letters explaining Youth Futures can be sent to schools and parents emphasizing the importance of youth involvement, the requirements of this commitment, a calendar of events and activities, and suggestions of ways in which parents and schools can assist and support youth participation in the program (Chandross, 1987). Parents can be invited to attend some of the training sessions and contact can be maintained with them by telephone and written correspondence. Schools may be willing to give credit or some type of reward for student involvement in Youth Futures (Thorp, 1983). Press releases announcing youth appointment or letters to the editor of the local paper provide recognition.

By assigning youth an adult mentor, some of the needed support may be provided informally (Thorp, 1983).

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment is important because the success of the program depends in part on the young people selected to participate. The criteria for selecting youth depends on the role that youth will play in Youth Futures; the more central youth are viewed to the ultimate success of Youth Futures, the more important each characteristic becomes. Characteristics consequential for Youth Futures include:

\*Maturity - The ability to think abstractly, imagine long-term consequences, articulate one's thoughts and feelings, and be accepting and understanding of the value of individual differences seem especially consequential. This maturity is most apt to be displayed in youth 16 and older although younger adolescents may also possess these characteristics; youth representatives should still be in high school so that they are viewed as peers by the junior and senior high school students that they represent.

\*Representativeness - For most roles, youth that represent a cross section of interests, abilities, and the socio-economic make-up of the community may provide the best feedback; at-risk youth may provide a needed and valuable perspective.

\*Interest in Leadership - Interest may be more important than skill since skills can be learned in leadership training. Young people interested in working on community issues and learning leadership skills will find the Youth Futures process more engaging and rewarding.

\*Willingness to Make Commitments - The ability to make commitments and follow-through is essential.

The best recruitment approach depends upon the specific role youth will play in Youth Futures; several strategies are given below which may be used individually or in combination.

1. Select experienced youth who are already active in the community

Opportunities:

Valuable contributions can be made with less training;

These youth are easily identified and recruited

Risks:

Views may be less representative of the diversity of youth in the community

Fewer youth benefit from involvement and training

These exceptional youth will probably be overextended.

2. Use existing social studies classes in the school

Opportunities:

Random selection allows for good representation

Social studies classes could apply to be in the program; thus, being a part of Youth Futures would be a special project for 1 or 2 classes.

Risks:

Students may be less interested and willing to make commitments

Ask for volunteers for leadership training as a prerequisite to membership on the committee

3. Ask for volunteers for leadership training as a prerequisite to membership on the committee

Opportunities:

Everyone has an equal opportunity for involvement

Risks:

At-risk youth may be less willing to volunteer

Other youth in the community may not view these youth volunteers as representative of their interests

4. Voting by the Student Body

Opportunities:

Fair—everyone has an equal voice

Determined by youth, not adults

Risks:

May over-represent some peer groups in the school such as jocks, populars and normals and under-represent others such as druggies, gearheads, party-ers and geeks

Students in elected positions such as student council are elected to focus on internal school events not community outreach;

Why should student members be elected when the adults are appointed

5. The Steering Committee or a Separate Youth Steering Committee Identify a Cross-Section of Youth

Opportunities:

The steering committee can include someone from the school or someone actively involved with youth in the community who can identify youth from different peer groups in the school who: (1) have leadership potential, and (2) who are respected by others in their peer group as being representative of their views. Youth can be approached to ensure their interest and willingness to make a commitment before being appointed to the committee.

Risks:

Could be viewed as being adult-directed unless some youth are included on the steering committee

6. Representation Drawn From Different Youth Groups/Organizations in the Community

Opportunities:

Could be representative because attention would be given to identifying youth from many youth-serving organization such as 4-H, Scouts, theatre groups, church groups, Decca, and FFA. Special attention will need to be given to those organizations in a community that are especially appealing to at-risk students, which varies substantially from community to community.

Would be viewed as peer-directed

Would generate interest and perhaps involvement in Youth Futures from a broad cross-section of the community

Risks:

May not be representative if at-risk students in the community are less likely to be involved in clubs

Even if a club consists of primarily at-risk youth, the leader of the club may not be

### **DECISIONS EACH COMMUNITY MUST MAKE**

Youth are a vast resource in preventing the problems that young people face, and thus, youth involvement is central to the success of Youth Futures. County faculty, the local steering committee and campus faculty need to:

1. Determine the specific role youth will play in Youth Futures in their community
2. Select a strategy for recruiting youth
3. Plan for training
4. Provide for ongoing support

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