

What is Authentic Youth Engagement?

Ten Lessons from Ten Communities

Presented by Deborah Fisher
Search Institute/Vision Training Associates
October 14, 2010
IIRP World Conference

Greetings from the Pacific Northwest!



In today's workshop

- Defining authentic youth engagement *from the youth perspective.*
- Some of the research behind the approaches.
- Examples of different kinds of authentic youth engagement.
- Where to find out more.

The context for my perspective

- Grounded in research on positive youth development, especially Search Institute's framework of 40 Developmental Assets[®].
www.search-institute.org
- Working *with* youth and *for* them, not doing programs “to” them.
“Nothing about us without us.”
- Seeing youth as resources and being *intentional*.

What do young people say they need?

Three important strengths can make a big difference in young people's lives:

1. Their **SPARKS**, or deepest passions and interests
2. Their **VOICE**, or confidence, skills, and opportunities to influence things that matter to them
3. The **RELATIONSHIPS** that youth need to support them

See www.at15.com for study results

What is youth voice?

Youth need to be able to speak about and influence the things that matter to them using:

- Leadership
- Personal power
- Comfort using their voice
- Community problem solving
- Civic involvement

First, what is *not* true engagement?*

1. **Manipulation** – Adults use youth to support causes and pretend that the causes are inspired by youth.
2. **Decoration** – Young people are used to help or bolster a cause in indirect ways, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by youth.
3. **Tokenism** – Young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.

What does more authentic engagement start to look like?

4. **Assigned but informed (youth)** – Youth are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved.
5. **Consulted and informed (youth)** – Youth give advice on projects and programs designed and run by adults. The youth are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults.
6. **Adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth** – Projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with young people.

Ideal levels of authentic youth engagement

7. **Youth-initiated and directed** – Young people initiate and direct a project or program. Adults are involved only in a supportive role.

8. **Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults** – Projects or programs are initiated by youth and decision-making is shared among youth and adults. These projects empower youth while at the same time enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults.

1. Waupaca, Wisconsin

Ask youth what they want and then listen



2. YMCA, Victoria, Australia

Strengthen an existing program

Existing

- Positive adults invited to play team games with youth.
- Adult teams vs. youth teams.
- Adult groups visited only once.

Enhanced

- Youth took turns welcoming visitors.
- Sports teams mixed.
- Social element added.
- Youth took turns thanking visitors.
- Community teams invited to visit several times in a row.

3. Community service

Let youth lead

- Older youth mentoring younger youth
- Youth mentoring older adults
- Waiting-to-be-involved youth

4. Santa Clara County, California Bill of Rights for Children and Youth

- A public policy document describing a vision for healthy, supported children and youth.
- This becomes a communications tool.
- It also helps shape budgets.

Go to www.kidsincommon.org and
click on “The Children’s Agenda” to see one group’s *indicators*
based on the Bill of Rights

5. Allen Superior Court, Indiana

Increasing youth voice in juvenile court

- Motivating and equipping individuals and organizations by:
 - Training youth workers in strengths-based practices
 - Supporting youth-serving organizations
 - Creating house-hold recognition for strengths-based practices
- Partnership among courts, social workers, schools, foundations, and faith organizations
- Community-wide efforts, but from a family relations/court perspective

6. Bellevue, Washington Youth Council

- A youth leadership program sponsored by the city, parks and community service department and schools.
- Advises the City Council and City Manager on youth matters and programs and is authorized by the City to award funding for community youth projects.
- Every two years, they jointly put on the Youth Involvement Conference that leads to youth prioritizing top issues and concerns into the youth council's Action Agenda for the next two years.

“Adults have to be willing to hold youth with respect and really hear what they have to say.”

www.youthlink.com/mainpage.html

7. Essex CHIPS, Vermont

Put (all kinds of) youth in charge

- Tangible opportunities are offered for youth involvement.
- Adults listen actively whenever youth are at the table.
- Relationships are built in ways that work for youth.

www.essexchips.org

8. Wrangell, Alaska

Youth courts

- Youth ages 11 to 18 sentenced by peers for a variety of offenses.
- Benefits youth sentenced, volunteers, and community:
 - Wrangell reported that juvenile delinquency rates dropped 30% in a 4-year period.
 - Youth-court adjudicated young people did better in school.
 - Community-service hours went up significantly.
 - Youth courts involve lots of positive youth-adult interaction.

National Association of Youth Courts

www.youthcourt.net

9. St. Louis Park, Minnesota

Reduce risk by building relationships

- *Building Assets, Reducing Risks (B.A.R.R.)* program aimed specifically at students entering high school
- Uses positive youth-adult relationships to:
 - Increase individual strengths among youth
 - Decrease risk behaviors including disciplinary incidents, truancy, school failure, drug and alcohol use
- Skill building among adults *and* youth
- Asking youth what they want and then making it happen

www.search-institute.org/training-speaking/barr

10. Hampton, Virginia

Youth master plan

- A youth master plan seeks to effectively coordinate the services, supports, and opportunities youth need to thrive.
 - Policy development
 - Specific outcomes (example: children enter school ready to learn)
 - Where money will be spent
- The development of a youth master plan can also transform how the community perceives and works *with* and *for* young people.
- The Hampton Coalition for Youth is primarily responsible for oversight of the youth master plan in concert with city and community organizations actively engaged in implementation.

www.nlc.org/iyef

Teen Voice 2010 Report

How can adults improve relationships with youth?

- Look at us.
- Spend time talking with us.
- Listen.
- Be dependable.
- Show appreciation for what we do.
- Relax.
- Show that you're interested.
- Laugh with us (and at yourself).
- Ask us to help you.
- Challenge us.

Find out more

Learn more about positive youth development:

- Search Institute www.search-institute.org
- Forum for Youth Investment, particularly the Ready by 21 Initiative
www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

Learn more about authentic youth engagement:

- New guide by National League of Cities for municipal leaders
www.nlc.org/iyef
- City of Calgary *Guide to Youth Friendly Practices: Youth Engagement* (Google the title)

Contact me at deborah1701@fishernyberg.com

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