Brian from Nancy

WISCONSIN MODELS FOR YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKING

Matt Calvert, UW-Extension Youth Development Specialist

A. YOUTH SERVING ON COUNTY BOARDS, CITY COUNCILS, AND SCHOOL BOARDS

Youth participate in discussions and cast advisory votes. They may represent districts or be selected at large, generally through an application process. They may be linked with specific board members for mentorship.

Examples from Wisconsin

Douglas County youth have served on both city council and the county board in non-voting positions for several years. Youth give monthly reports, attend committee meetings, and work with a mentor. More information is available at: http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/douglas/4h/index.html

Washburn County: Three youth representatives have been attending the monthly county board meetings and have participated in discussions with the adult supervisors. Youth sit among the elected members, receive pre diem, and cast an advisory vote. See: http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/washburn/4h/CountyBoardYouthRepresentatives.html

Potential Benefits

- *Strong civic development potential:* Introducing a new generation of leaders to the workings of government and the nature of public office is a primary motivation of adults who implement this model.
- *Possibility for significant youth voice and representation:* Youth are highly visible in these roles and have opportunities to discuss issues and relate to public decision-makers.
- *Possibility for community improvement:* Participants report areas in which youth have provided new perspectives and information that influenced decision-making.

Other Considerations

- *Supporting positive youth development:* Quality of the experience for youth depends on the board's commitment to making space for relationship and skill development. Care should be taken in preparing youth and adults and examining the process of meetings to maximize opportunities for participation.
- *Representation issues:* Communication about issues with the broader youth population may be difficult for representatives. Recruitment and selection requires careful planning to ensure an ongoing and representative pool of applicants.
- *Equitable treatment:* Even without an official vote, youth voice will have more influence if they can participate on the board as equally as possible.

B. YOUTH/ADULT PARTNERSHIP ON CITY OR COUNTY GOVERNMENT COMMITTEES

Youth members may be regular voting members of citizen advisory committees depending on local statute; committees of elected officials limit youth to an advisory vote.

Examples from Wisconsin

City of Waupaca: Youth are appointed as full voting members to 7 city council committees by statute. City council has a spot on their agenda for youth. Youth have used this opportunity to advocate for policies that expanded space, equipment and programs at both the recreation center and library.

Jackson County trained and added five youth to the Extension Education Committee where they provide input to county board members.

Potential Benefits

- *Strong community improvement potential:* Participants report some areas in which youth have provided new perspectives and information. Youth have also served as advocates for specific projects.
- *Strong positive youth development potential:* Where youth have been successfully involved, they have developed strong and supportive relationships with adult community leaders and have increased skills and a sense of identity as leaders and change agents.
- *Strong civic development potential:* Introducing a new generation of leaders to public office is a primary motivation of adults who implement this model.

Other Considerations

- *Ensuring youth voice and representation:* Connection to the voices and opinions of a broader group of youth is difficult to establish.
- *Recruitment:* Matching youth with roles that will be interesting to them requires careful planning to ensure an ongoing and representative pool of applicants.
- *Relevance:* Though youth have a stake in many issues, committees that address youth issues may be most able to engage youth effectively.
- *Controversy*: Highly charged issues may lead to public questions over the appropriate role of youth, especially if they may have a deciding vote.
- *Logistics:* Meeting times may be difficult for youth in school.

C. YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP/YOUTH COMMISSION

A youth-driven group with adult support that provides advice to government and may undertake initiatives. Some communities combine such a group with representation on other government committees, with the advisory group serving to support committee members and provide opportunities to gather input from a broader group of youth.

Examples from Wisconsin

Ozaukee County: Port Washington Saukville United for Youth is a youth-adult group working on improving relationships with local law enforcement, providing input to youth member of park and recreation board, business improvement district and chamber of commerce.

In Waukesha County, Muskego youth worked with local service clubs to draft a proposal that would involve youth in citywide decision-making. The youth created a board with at least one representative from each middle and high school in the city.

The City of Waupaca's library has an older youth advisory board. This group raised $25,000 funds to expand space and equipment in the library.

Potential Benefits

- *Strong community improvement potential:* Many youth commissions undertake community change, service, and advocacy projects.
- *Strong positive youth development potential:* Ongoing, youth-driven agendas and youth ownership of programming can be maintained.
- *Strong civic development potential:* Fosters experiences of active citizenship and public contribution.

Other Considerations

- *Youth Voice and Representation:* Advocacy potential is strong, but a formal connection to decision-making bodies is needed to ensure opportunities for input.

D. YOUTH INPUT

Many strategies, including public forums, youth-led research, surveys, and opportunities to present youth views, have been used to give youth input into public decision-making.

Examples from Wisconsin

Burnett County Extension facilitated a county board strategic planning process coordinated with three civics teachers in the schools, surveying 160 youth and ultimately becoming the largest single group to provide feedback to the strategic plan committee

Florence County students engaged in the debate over school funding continue to play an active public role. One youth participated in the "First Impressions" program; 3 adults and 3 youth participated in the Advancing Rural Wisconsin State Policy Forum. This group is organizing a community youth-adult forum on community needs of youth and families.

Potential Benefits

- *Strong youth voice and representation potential:* Forums, surveys, and other strategies can represent the opinions of large and diverse numbers of youth.
- *Strong civic development potential:* Provides symbolic and actual example of broad citizen input and methods of expressing opinions.
- *Opportunities for skill development:* Youth involved in facilitating public discussions, designing and conducting research, and speaking in public can develop many important skills.

Other Considerations

- *Community improvement role may be limited to input:* Provides input into community decision-making, but action dependent on others.
- *Limited ongoing positive youth development:* As a stand-alone strategy, provides little opportunity for ongoing youth participation that contributes to developmental outcomes.

SELECTED RESOURCES

For more information on University of Wisconsin-Extension's Youth in Governance efforts, see http://www.uwex.edu/ces/4h/yig/. You can also contact Matt Calvert, UW-Extension Youth Development Specialist at 608-262-1912 or matthew.calvert@uwex.edu.

National League of Cities has publications and web-based information about youth leadership in municipal government:
http://www.nlc.org/iyef/networks assistance/7164.cfm

Michigan Municipal League highlights models for youth commissions and service on government boards and committees
http://www.mml.org/library/information/Youth/youth_and_local_government.htm

San Francisco, Multnomah County (Portland), Oregon, and Hampton, Virginia have long-standing youth commission models:
http://www.ci.sf.ca.us/site/youth_commission_page.asp?id=11324
http://www.hampton.gov/youth/abouthyc/whoweare.html
http://www.ourcommission.org/youth/mycindex3.shtm

For a comprehensive description and analysis, see: Sirianni, C. (2005). Youth civic engagement: Systems change and culture change in Hampton, Virginia. CIRCLE working paper. Accessed online at:
http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP31Sirianni.pdf.

Other countries have a much more systematic approach to youth participation in government and tend to operate from a youth rights perspective. One example from the United Kingdom:
http://www.crae.org.uk/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=201&Itemid=145

Youth on Board's publication, "14 Points: Successfully Involving Youth in Decision Making" has practical advice for creating youth board positions and advisory boards with youth. For ordering information: www.youthonboard.org

Schools are an important venue for youth voice. The "Washington Youth Voice Handbook," by Adam Fletcher includes practical principles and training examples. It can be downloaded or ordered from: http://www.commonaction.org/publications.htm