The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service

Six Practitioners' Perspectives

On

Building Civic Engagement

Prepared for
The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service

October 2003

Six Practitioners' Perspectives On Building Civic Engagement

What you are about to read is a quick glimpse into how six program leaders think about how their work advances the goal of active citizenship and civic engagement.

In planning for the Wingspread discussion, we were interested in bringing the voices of front line program practitioners to the table. We asked our writers to tell us how their work contributes to active civic participation. To explore the relationships among the different program strategies we asked them to relate their work to other efforts that share the goal of civic engagement. The three questions we asked them were:

- What role does your work play in cultivating active civic participation?
- Consider how what you are doing compares with other programs or efforts that share the same goal: civics education, organizing, service and volunteering, service learning, youth development and leadership development.
- Would it be helpful to your work to have a national leadership association bring organizations together that are working on different approaches to active civic participation?

Their responses were both thoughtful and exuberant. Each writer projects a different voice and perspective, and each has taken a different aspect of the questions for a focus. However, taken together, the six opinion pieces confirm that successful programs start with passionate leaders, provide structured opportunities for learning, and support individualized practice of civic skills. The pieces indicate that these program leaders have many opportunities to share and discuss their work with programs similar to their own – programs from within the "silo" of their civic engagement program strategy– but only one writer mentions having participated in an organized conversation that crossed several program strategies.

We are pleased to bring the voices of these six dedicated program leaders into our conversation about bridging the different approaches to active civic engagement.

Tina Cheplick
Project Editor

Content

Civics Education for Active Citizenship

By Cheryl Cook-Kallio

Cheryl Cook-Kallio, teacher and head of a high school social science department, is passionate about preparing today's students to make tomorrow's history, and sees that as the goal of civics education. In order to prepare students to participate as citizens, she believes schools need to provide opportunities and support for student-designed projects in the community.

Introduction

It might never have happened. That's among the most important lessons of history—and of life. There is so much around us that might never have happened were it not for a host of qualities called imagination, commitment, courage, creativity, and determination in the face of obstacles—that maybe most of all. ~David McCullough

How is history made? Who makes history? We all do. That is the connection students must make in order to see history as relevant. Every second history is made by all of us. How we make a difference is a matter of choice. If students can see that history was not something that just happened, but choices made by famous people, important people, evil people, kind people, most importantly, ordinary people, they will see a connection in the choices they make in their lives and see the importance of becoming a participant in our democracy. History matters. Our decisions make a difference. History is not inevitable. Students must see themselves as part of our history, not separate from it.

The great Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., wrote of the United States Constitution. "It is an experiment, as all life is an experiment." That is the genius of our government. James Madison was successful in his writing of the Virginia Plan because he understood that government was not finite but ever changing. It had to be approached with some pragmatism in mind. We take for granted the foundation of government set forth in the Constitution and often forget that it was created out of a failing government. The checks and balances, separation of powers and the protection of the Bill of Rights are lofty ideals until they are played out in history. From the peaceful revolution of 1800 to the election of 2000, our Constitution works. We learn this through the study of history. It is this creative genius that is a legacy to all of us.

Who is included? Who has membership in this American community? The definition has changed throughout history and continues to change. During the early republic we defined property ownership to be more inclusive. In Worcester v. Georgia we wrestled with the sovereignty of Native Americans. It took about seventy years from the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848 to the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 to provide for women's suffrage. And it took almost 100 years to legislate black voting rights from the time it was made part of the Constitution in 1865.

What is next? Largely that is in the hands of today's students. How we prepare them for that task is embedded in how we present American History and how we engage them in civics. It is imperative that teachers make that connection.

How Can We Teach Good Citizenship?

Participatory citizenship is essential to our democracy. How can we teach good citizenship? First of all, it is necessary to use curricular models that challenge the student and provide an

opportunity to apply the curriculum with current events. For years I have been connected to The Center for Civic Education's *We the People* program. It provides a thorough study and participation requires extensive knowledge and balance. It involves a competition that focuses on the United States Constitution and its application. Students not only have to know the Constitution but be able to discuss its relevance, citing courts cases and historical fact to support their assertions. The team is then grilled by a panel of judges, all of who have some expertise in the Constitution and its connection to current issues. Students are challenged to critically think while under a lot of pressure, not to mention the time constraint. The follow up questions are impromptu and ask students to delve into areas not explored by undergraduates in college, let alone high school seniors. The competition is fun and motivates the students, but the true reward is what comes after.

The competition gives the students a chance to build their own small community. This past year I had a Burmese student, new to the country, who struggled to be included. The night we realized that our school's team would not be advancing to the state finals the students were extremely disappointed. Zinn, my Burmese student, began to tell of his struggles and what the class meant to him. He captured the essence of community. Spontaneously the students surrounded him in a class hug. Later that evening, Zinn, up to this point a student who would never dream of touching a teacher, ran up to me, threw his arm around my shoulder and exclaimed, "Mrs. Cook-Kallio, this is my BEST day in America!" I knew it was the day he became an American. It was the moment the students understood the breadth of the community they had created.

At Irvington High School, we mandate service learning and community service because modeling good civic virtue is part of our job. It is essential in a participatory democracy. Although we do "require" volunteerism, we do so in order to model behavior we believe should be part of our community and behavior we count on to make sure our democracy survives. We teach this behavior by explaining the value of service and requiring that students demonstrate knowledge of what constitutes service.

We have seen students resist service and then become experts on it, once they have seen the value. I think Irvington High School goes one step beyond by requiring students to make connections between their learning and the outside world, which is the difference between knowing something in the abstract and understanding it conceptually. Is this our job? Of course it is. One of the things incumbent upon us as teachers is to graduate people who participate in our society. We want people to have a social conscience. Our government leaders, regardless of their political party affiliation, ask participation of us as residents of this nation.

Connecting Learning with the Community

Three times during a student's high school career at Irvington, each student must pass a benchmark project that connects learning with the community. It is one of the things that make Irvington unique. It is also one reason why Irvington has a strong sense of community. The crowning jewel of these three projects is the senior project called QUEST. This requires a student to form an essential question, identify a need, job shadow and then testify about what was learned in front of a panel that includes community members and a teacher. A student must pass the testimony, regardless of G.P.A., in order to earn an Irvington High School diploma.

The value of the program is quickly apparent to any who witness the testimonials. One of my first students at Irvington decided to do something in the medical field. Rahwa, whose name means freedom in Eritrean, had started an Eritrean Student Union a few years before. For her service she decided to try to get an ambulance donated. Getting the vehicle donation was the easy part. She then used the student union to organize fundraisers to ship the ambulance to her parents' native

country to help people during the civil war in Eritrea. She raised $10,000, which not only paid for the shipping but also filled the vehicle with medical supplies.

The beauty of the QUEST project is that it addresses the needs of all students as well as the community. Once I served on the panel of a student who was designated special education and had struggled through school. His essential question dealt with learning the copy trade. He spent time learning a software program and painstakingly made a flyer to help another group of students with their service. His smile filled his whole face when he held up the flyer he had made on his own. The culmination of his project was the proud announcement that Kinko's Copy Center had offered him a job upon graduation.

That same year, a student chose to shadow a paralegal. A member of her family was in jail and she wanted to do something connected to the legal system. The paralegal handed her a petition from a prisoner who had claimed that his civil rights had been violated when he was wrongly placed in solitary confinement and had nine months added to his sentence. The paralegal did not have the time to investigate the charges. The student took on the challenge and relentlessly investigated the charges. She was able to uncover evidence that facilitated the prisoner's release from solitary confinement, and he was given nine months of his life back.

None of these stories touched me more than Maria's. Maria was quiet and nervous as she began presentation. She spoke of thinking that perhaps she would just get a job after graduation. She felt forced into doing QUEST. However, she set something up with the bilingual teacher from her former elementary school. She tutored bilingual children four hours a week over six weeks. As she spoke about her connection to those kids, her voice got louder and her eyes started to sparkle. She finished by saying that the teacher refused to let her think that she would go to work right after graduation. The teacher encouraged her to think of the many opportunities available. This encouragement and her positive QUEST experience gave Maria ideas. At the end of her testimonial Maria said, "Next year instead of working at McDonalds, I am going to Ohlone Community College. You see, I have decided to be a bilingual teacher."

I believe that creating good citizens is a way to define patriotism, and it is that connectedness to the community that makes us Americans. We know this works. Our 2003 graduating class of 321 students did 33,000 hours of service learning and community service. This is a testimony to the connections we have helped facilitate.

What Other Organizations Can Do To Help

One of the ways outside organizations can be helpful to our school is to continue to be willing to have high school students job shadow, intern and volunteer for their institutions or companies. In order to provide the links for service learning and community service, we must have willing participants in the community. This often takes time and effort, which is sometimes more difficult to find than money.

Education is a prerequisite for democracy. So is civic virtue. Service learning and community service connect academics with real world learning opportunities. Civic education allows students to learn for the sake of learning. The desire to learn has transcended the need to know "the grade". It is the purest form of teaching.

Cheryl Cook-Kallio is a teacher and chair of the social science department at Irvington High School in Fremont, California.

Contact info:
Irvington High School:
41800 Blacow Road
Fremont, CA 94538
Telephone 510-656-5711 ext 46368

Military Service and the Larger Field of Civic Engagement

By Joseph Kopser, Captain, United States Army

Joseph Kopser is a Captain in the United States Army and instructor at the US Military Academy at West Point. He believes that the military represents the embodiment of the values of "volunteerism, service and civic engagement."

"To educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country; professional growth throughout a career as an officer in the United States Army; and a lifetime of selfless service to the nation."[1]

The Mission of the U.S. Military Academy

Introduction

While speaking to the Corps of Cadets at West Point in 1998, GEN (R) Colin Powell described the Military Academy as "the wellspring of my chosen profession - the place where the professional standards are set, the place that defines the military culture, the place that nurtures the values and virtues of Army service and passes them on from generation to generation."[2] Words like these, spoken by someone like Powell who exemplifies public service and civic engagement requires further explanation.

As the Grantmaker Forum examines it strategic vision, the United States military deserves a closer examination of best practices to serve as a role model for further endeavors. As mentioned in the mission statement above, West Point and the military as a whole, align very nicely with the values of volunteerism, service, and civic engagement.

Framework

This paper will highlight the best practices and institutional norms that already exist in our military profession today. Two basic assumptions must be made initially to be able to focus attention on the real contribution that the military makes in building stronger communities. First, through self selection, members of the military are the epitome of service. Their conscious decision to raise their right hand and swear an oath of service already demonstrates a willingness to sacrifice. The past days of "Go to Army or Go to Jail" have been over since the early 1970s when the military eliminated the draft and with it, mandatory service. Today, we are all volunteers. That leads to the second basic assumption, service to country today exists on a 100% voluntary basis in our armed forces. Leaders and scholars might argue all day about what incentives draw young people, but the fact remains that some sort of incentive draws them into **voluntary service**. These two characteristics form the first two components of the Grantmaker Forum's belief in the ethics and practices needed for strong communities.

---

[1] http://www.usma.edu/mission.asp
[2] http://www.usma.edu/publicaffairs/press%5Fkit%5Ffiles/two%5Fhundred.htm

The final ethic and practice to be discussed is the concept of Civic Engagement-- known by many different names such as political participation, civic participation, and many times used interchangeably.[3] While scholars debate precisely what is required for healthy civic engagement, this paper will focus on what the military is doing to reinforce and cultivate the knowledge, skills, and habits of good citizenship.

Discussion

If active citizenship is the goal to build strong communities, then closer attention must be given to the basic knowledge, skills, and habits of good citizens. As an institution, the military recognizes that high *esprit de corps* and cohesive units are a vital piece to the success of its units. The military, in its units and bases around the world, is in the process of building strong communities to support its men and women. Since deployments, training events, and the recent War on Terrorism remove the service member physically from his or her home community, the military has been forced in recent years to invest even more time and effort to prepare members of its community, the citizens, to engage in non-traditional ways. Institutional changes have occurred that are worthy of examination.

Knowledge. A community of informed citizens is better off than one of uniformed citizens. The Army in recent years has recognized the benefit of helping soldiers' spouses and families better understand how to interact with and draw support from their communities, both the military and civilian communities. The more a spouse knows about the military, the better off the entire family will be. As the soldier is away from the home, it is the spouse who must continue the mutual support networks, disseminate information, and handle the day to day crises that occur. Formally, the Army has captured that body of knowledge in a program called The Army Family Team Building program (AFTB).[4] Found on their website, their overview reads:

> "Army Family Team Building is a **volunteer**-led organization with a central tenet: provide training and knowledge to spouses and family members to support the total Army effort. Strong families are the pillar of support behind strong soldiers, and AFTB's mission is to educate and train all of America's Army in **knowledge, skills, and behaviors** designed to prepare our Army families to move successfully into the future."[5] (Emphasis Added)

The training consists of increasing levels of scope and responsibility. Throughout the program, the instructors and leaders are all volunteers. The resources for meetings, materials, classrooms, and logistics are provided by the local unit. Times of the training include day and night sessions to accommodate working spouses and their special needs. Level I classes focus on new members of the Army "community." It literally spells out the rank structure, customs and courtesies, and pay/benefits/compensation of military service. It enables family members and spouses to feel more confident and less intimidated while engaging in their community around them. For many young spouses who are often living away from their parents for the first time, it teaches a body of knowledge of life skills to include not just skills for inside the family, such as basic banking and bill paying, but also community skills and the ethic of civic participation that sometimes are not properly explained in the home growing up.

If Level I is focused on making people active participants in a community, Level II and Level III focus on developing the volunteer *leaders* in a community. The Army recognizes the very

---

[3] Mary Kirlin, The Role of Adolescent Extracurricular Activities in Adult Political Engagement, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement Working Paper 02. March 2003, pg 3
[4] http://www.armyfamilyteambuilding.org
[5] http://www.armyfamilyteambuilding.org/data/modules/pbm/rendered/overviewone.asp

important distinction between the leader and the follower. Unlike the scholarly material from academia that focuses on "participation" and "involvement," the Army puts a premium on leadership. Level II focuses on the specifics of communication, time management, conflict management, etc… It extends beyond knowledge and looks at the application of the knowledge.

Skills. For any amount of participation, there must be a certain set skills that volunteers and civic participants must demonstrate. While there is a wide range of discussion of civic skills, the most recent comes from a working paper from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). CIRCLE Working Paper 6, "The Role of Civic Skills in Fostering Civic Engagement" by Dr. Mary Kirlin examines the four basic skills required. The four skills identified are:[6]

1. Communication
2. Collective Decision Making
3. Critical Thinking
4. Organization

As if by design, the Army and its method of self-evaluation has already identified these same tasks as paramount to success in its leaders. In fact, Army regulation requires its leaders to be evaluated yearly on a set of core competencies. On the front page of its evaluation form, it lists nine leadership actions. In order, the first five are:[7]

1. Communication
2. Decision Making
3. Motivating
4. Planning (Defined as using Critical and Creative Thinking)
5. Executing (Defined in part as maximizing the use of available systems and technology)

With the exception of the missing component of motivation, there is almost a perfect alignment with the skills associated with civic engagement and the Army's evaluated leadership actions. The Army's constant pursuit of self-improvement leads to a culture where its members are constantly evaluating their leadership skills. Those same skills have been found to be important in promoting civic engagement. The military is a leadership laboratory producing more than just leaders on the battlefield, but also soccer coaches, reunion committee chairmen, church board leaders, and Scout leaders. More importantly, the skills transfer from military service is a near perfect match for the skills demanded in our civic society.

Habits. Finally, society must find a way to make civic engagement a *habit* rather than a one time occurrence. While the scope of this paper is not psychological examination of intrinsic motivation, there are some best practices to note. They include institutional recognition of the commitment and the resources.

Transactional leadership is required in any organization to draw people initially into a position of volunteerism and civic engagement. Institutionally, major Army commands have been known to require commanders to place local school PTA meetings on the unit's master training calendar. This mandate serves two purposes. First, it reduces the chance that a training conflict will be

---

[6] Mary Kirlin, The Role of Civic Skills in Fostering Civic Engagement. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, June 2003.
[7] From Army Form 67-9, Officer Evaluation Report, October 1997, ftp://pubs.army.mil/pub/eforms/pdf/a67_9.pdf

---

scheduled to prevent the soldiers from attending a meeting at their child's school. More importantly, though, it reminds the organization in obvious terms that the leadership values participation in the local community and makes an effort to support the soldier with time.

Another effective tool in the military to promote strong civic habits is to formally recognize civic participation. For instance, the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal is awarded to members of the military for the following criteria:

> Awarded to members of the Armed Forces of the United States who, subsequent to 31 December 1992, performed outstanding volunteer community service of a sustained, direct and consequential nature. To be eligible, an individual's service must (1) be to the civilian community, to include the military family community; (2) be significant in nature and produce tangible results; (3) reflect favorably on the Military Service and the Department of Defense; and (4) be of a sustained and direct nature. While there is no specific time threshold to qualify for the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal (MOVSM), approval authorities shall ensure the service to be honored merits the special recognition afforded by this medal. The MOVSM is intended to recognize exceptional community **support over time** and not a single act or achievement. Further, it is intended to honor direct support of community activities.[8]

The most important piece to highlight is the "support over time" phrase in the criteria. The Army is seeking to create strong community habits.

While the awarded medal above could be worn like any other medal such as the Bronze Star or Purple Heart, the Army is going for something much larger. Through time off for meetings and decorations for service, the Army strives for a more transformational leadership style that can motivate and influence the organization: people standing up to help others, not for credit, but the intrinsic value associated with community service.

Conclusion

By the very fabric of its existence, the Army is always moving. Literally and figuratively, it is moving and reestablishing new communities routinely. Whether it is a family move between Army posts in two different states, or a soldier deployed to a foreign country, the Army is always moving. For that reason, it cannot wait, like so many communities in the civilian world, for time to fuse together strong communities. The Army is proactive in teaching the necessary body of knowledge for its members. It briefs the location of the vehicle registration, the dog catcher, the polling station, and the local schools. It provides education to promote a common body of understanding. As a part of its mission of war fighting and leadership, it has a certain set of skills that transfer seamlessly into the arena of civic engagement. Communication, decision making, organization, and planning are all high prized and valued skills. The Army serves as a production line of future community leaders. Finally, the Army sets out to instill the values of strong communities and civic engagement through targeted and focused programs. Resources and recognition are applied directly to the members of the Army community who serve the larger good.

Like the mission of the United States Military Academy, service to country is a lifelong pursuit of the military. It is uniquely suited to recognize and develop those skills and attributes most needed in our society today.

---

[8] https://www-perscom.army.mil/tagd/tioh/Awards/MIL%20OUTSTANDING%20VOLUNTEER%20SERVICE%20MEDAL1.html

CPT Joseph Kopser is an instructor in the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. His classes include American Politics, the American Presidency, and Political Participation. Education includes a Masters Degree in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. CPT Kopser has served on active duty as an Armor and Cavalry Officer since graduation from the United States Military Academy in 1993.

Contact info:
Joseph Kopser, Captain, U.S. Army
Department of Social Sciences
Lincoln Hall, Room 121
U.S. Military Academy
607 Cullum Road
West Point, NY 10996
Phone: (845) 938-3044 Email: jj7012@exmail.usma.army.mil

Cultivating Active Civic Participation through Youth Volunteer Service

By Laura Lockwood

> Laura Lockwood founded the ManaTEEN Youth Service Club when she was twelve years old. Her passion is to mobilize youth to identity and address community needs and she does that by creating and structuring age-appropriate opportunities for young people to volunteer their time in the community.

I was 12 years old when I established ManaTEENs as a program of our local Volunteer Center. My only goal was to find and/or create opportunities for my friends and myself to volunteer in Manatee County, Florida. I never imagined that such a simple idea would become such a huge endeavor or make such an impact in the lives of thousands of youth and the beneficiaries of their service.

Now, at the age of 20, and more than 20,000 ManaTEEN members later, I realize that my goal remains constant even though the terminology is a bit more sophisticated. I work to mobilize youth and resources to identify and address community needs.

I encourage youth to participate in group volunteer projects managed by the Volunteer Center as early as the age of 8. These youth are considered "JR" ManaTEENs until they reach middle school and become official ManaTEENs. I match the JRs with ManaTEEN members as mentors/trainers for hands on activities that I host monthly. Some of these projects include: assessing the needs of senior citizens in their homes and delivering safety items such as smoke alarms, fire extinguishers, bathtub rails, and levered door handles; collecting donations of pet food and delivering the food to the homes of senior pet owners who cannot adequately feed themselves and their four legged friends; planting and maintaining butterfly gardens at local elementary schools; mapping and restoring county owned neglected cemeteries, etc. By volunteering with teenagers, the children are exposed to some terrific role models and the spirit of volunteerism is instilled at an early age.

When youth reach middle school, I encourage them to become mentors to JR ManaTEENs. I also begin to refer them for special events, short term projects and ongoing initiatives with the 505 local organizations registered with the Volunteer Center. The young ManaTEENs are encouraged to share their time and talents with several different agencies, benefiting a variety of causes including animals, the environment, people with disabilities, seniors, children and families. As a result, the middle school youth gain a real sense of the types of services provided in our community as well as possible gaps in service that could be addressed by an "army" of teenagers.

As ManaTEENs continue service in high school, they are afforded ample opportunities in leadership training to empower them as local decision makers. I refer teens (many with more than 1,000 hours of service by now) to local boards of directors and advisory councils. I support the older ManaTEENs in their efforts to establish programs to meet unmet needs. Examples include:

- *Bon-AppetiTEEN* – a ManaTEEN created this program after attending too many "rubber chicken" dinners to support not-for-profits. He utilized his skills in culinary arts to train ManaTEENs to prepare food and serve it, "at cost" for fundraisers in the community.

- *Carousel Kids Babysitting* – after answering the phone at the Volunteer Center for several weeks, listening to inquiries from families about whether we offered babysitting, this ManaTEEN began to facilitate a program to partner with the local American Red Cross chapter and hospitals to provide child care classes for ManaTEENs interested in certification. Upon completion of the class, the teens are added to our babysitting registry. Families interested in utilizing the service must complete a screening process to receive the list of sitters.

- *Operation Transportation* – ManaTEENs seek the donations of used vehicles, train other teens in basic auto repair, allocate up to $500 in parts to insure the drive-ability of the cars, and select teens who attend school full-time and work to support their families to receive the cars.

There are 28 other programs, established and sustained by ManaTEENs. Today, 74% of the local teen population is engaged in civic participation through ManaTEENs (10,789 members).

Relationships with Other Programs

We encourage youth to participate in school clubs, civic organizations, and faith groups. No one has to choose to be a ManaTEEN or a member of another organization. ManaTEENs is now considered the "umbrella" program for such clubs since the youth can report volunteer service contributed through scouting, for instance, to be documented in their ManaTEEN file at the Volunteer Center.

Service-learning is incorporated into every project and program we create, implement and/or evaluate. Many middle and high school social science departments now support our efforts by offering classroom credit and/or extra credit for ManaTEEN projects and incorporate the projects into curriculum.

Rather than "compare" us with similar efforts, I prefer to point out our uniqueness. While other youth organizations applaud volunteerism, many focus on a particular cause (ex: Hospice Teens), a mission (ex. church youth trips to Haiti), or school (ex: Manatee High Key Club). ManaTEENs, on the other hand, is community based and represented by youth, ages 12 – 18, from every public, private, charter, alternative and home middle school and high school in the county. We charge no fees for membership and no minimum amount of service is mandatory to remain a member. ManaTEENs allows teens an opportunity to work individually (ex: office assistant for YMCA); work in groups for events (ex: selling concessions at a local seafood festival); participate in leadership training (ex: Prudential Youth Leadership Institute); or to create and manage their own program under the ManaTEEN umbrella.

A Role for a National Leadership Association

We (ManaTEEN leaders, AmeriCorps members, and Volunteer Center staff) present at the National Community Service Conference (Points of Light Foundation and Corporation for Community and National Service) annually. We are on the host committee for the 2004 National Service Learning Conference (National Service Learning Clearinghouse) and present annually at that forum.

I serve on the Youth Service America National Youth Advisory Council. I serve on the Florida Youth Advisory Council. We are partnering with Florida Learn & Serve to host the 2003 Environmental Service-Learning Institute. I am an AmeriCorps Promise Fellow, sponsored by Volunteer Florida. Additional AP Fellows at the Volunteer Center are sponsored by Points of Light Foundation. Of course, we're all connected to America's Promise.

For these reasons, I feel we're "connected" (and maybe even saturated) with conferences, panels, and technical assistance at this time. The only forum missing to bring organizations together is one that is hosted, facilitated, and managed by youth! What a wonderful venue that could be!

Laura Lockwood is an AmeriCorps Promise Fellow and founder and director of the ManaTEENS Youth Service Club in Bradenton, Florida.

Contact info:
ManaTEENS
Volunteer Services of Manatee County, Inc.
5131 Manatee Avenue West
Bradenton, FL 34209
Phone: (941) 761-3207   Email: Manateens@aol.com

Cultivating Active Citizenship through Youth Organizing

By Andi Perez

Andi Perez argues that youth organizing is a strategy for both youth development and social justice because it provides young people with the skills they will need to be contributing members of their communities and to "create meaningful…change." She believes that her work would benefit from a national leadership association that would foster stronger connections between community organizing and youth development.

In theory, true democracy ensures that government acts on the will of the people and for the people. According to the recent report *Vital Voices*, "A democratic society provides the tools for constituents to participate in the public institutions that affect their lives." The report goes on to state that "the public school is a central institution in the lives of families and communities in America. Many people say that public schools are essential for the practice of democracy, and they play a pivotal role in the country's economic strength."[1]

Working under this assumption, how then can young people participate in the democratic process? What can be done to engage young people who attend schools that fail to provide the tools necessary for civic engagement and who live in communities where residents feel alienated from and let down by the existing government. How do young people without voting power fully engage in the democratic process?

Benefits of Youth Organizing

As defined in *An Emerging Model for Working with Youth*, "Youth Organizing is a youth development and social justice strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change in their communities." The impact of organizing on young people therefore, is multi-layered. It not only serves to fill the developmental needs of the youth leaders both individually and collectively, it provides young people with the tools to understand and participate in the institutions that impact their lives. The young leaders' efforts are aimed at changing the very institutions that, in spite of expressed purpose, have traditionally hindered the fulfillment of their personal goals. Their efforts also have a widespread, positive impact on the community of youth in their immediate environment and in turn on the general community.

Young people, in particular low-income and youth of color, face enormous challenges in an environment that is often at odds with their best interests. Institutions, in particular the educational system, all too often provide limited incentives, resources and support for healthy personal development. At Youth United for Change (YUC), we serve as a vehicle for change by

---

[1] Hirota, Janice M. and Jacobs, Lauren E., ***Vital Voices: Building Constituencies for Public School Reform***, a report based on conversations with seven grantees of the Ford Foundation's Constituency Building for Public School Reform Initiative and fourteen local activists who worked with them, co-published by the AED Center for School and Community Services and the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2003.

working to improve these structures and institutions while at the same time developing leadership qualities and an alternative space for youth.

Youth United for Change

Youth United for Change organizes and trains young leaders in Philadelphia so that they realize their power and ability to change institutions to better meet their needs and thus improve the quality of their education, and the communities in which they live. We do this through a process of institution-based, community organizing where a diverse group of teenagers come together to identify common concerns and take collective action to address those concerns.

Our institution-based model of organizing consists of:

- Recruitment - YUC organizes its members by inviting students to create a chapter, called a leadership team, at their high school. In doing this, students are able to establish relationships with one another within their own school and later with students in YUC chapters from other schools. Currently, YUC has five chapters in Philadelphia: one each at Kensington, Edison, Strawberry Mansion, Mastbaum and Olney High Schools. The chapters provide students the opportunity to take on leadership roles and become stronger participants in the overall school community by building their collective power.

- Listening campaigns - In keeping with democratic principles, we teach the members of YUC's Leadership Teams that, if they are going to act on issues that affect a large number of young people, then they are accountable to those young people. YUC members conduct 'listening' campaigns through a survey of the school's entire student population or through numerous classroom presentations.

- Research and Developing Issues – Once YUC members have listened to the student body, they pull together all the information and begin the research phase. It is in this phase that the Leadership Teams answer two essential questions: Why do the specific conditions exist? And, who has the power to change the existing condition, also known as the target[2]? For example, at one of the High Schools, students in a 10th and 12th grade English class spent the entire period each day playing dominos and cards in a storage facility that had been turned into a classroom. Research by the Leadership Team showed that the teacher was a long-term substitute and the storage room had been converted to deal with overcrowding in the school. They also found that the Principal had the power to change the existing situation. The students put together a plan that included moving the classroom, and changing the proof of residence requirements for school admission to address overcrowding.

- Holding district officials accountable and Negotiation - Once their research is completed, the Leadership Teams meet with the target[1] to present their research and a plan for change that the students have developed. The goal is to persuade the target to agree to their plan.

- Action – Actions consist of a school-wide assembly where the target restates everything that was agreed to in the negotiation. This serves two purposes: It makes public things that were agreed to in a private meeting, and it demonstrates to the student body that the Leadership Team has addressed their concerns and that students do have the power to create change.

---

[2] In this organizing model, the term "target" is used to refer to the person or person with the power to change the exiting conditions.

- Follow up - Once public commitments have been made, the Leadership Teams are responsible for making sure that the target fulfills the comment and that changes are made in a timely and effective manner.

- Evaluation – Evaluation is a built-in component of our organizing model. Leaders reflect on and evaluate their work after every listening campaign, meeting, negotiation, and action. They also evaluate the adult YUC staff after each training and again at the end of the school year.

In order to reach our organizing goal, Youth United for Change provides on-going intensive training in leadership and community organizing. Throughout the year, students are involved in monthly leadership training sessions, two weekend retreats and one annual weeklong Summer Leadership Training Institute. The institute is specifically geared to prepare YUC students to take on leadership roles in their schools for the upcoming year. Training topics include: basic community organizing skills such as public speaking, planning and running meetings; negotiating with public officials; working with the media; research and critical analysis; developing and implementing organizing strategies; and understanding the school system and the role of government in education.

Using our organizing model, YUC has become a strong voice on educational reform in the City of Philadelphia. At the same time, YUC students are developing a deeper, more sophisticated understanding of what successful high schools look like. We are in a position both politically and organizationally to impact a very much needed radical educational reform. Presently, existing chapters are tackling issues that include the development of small schools, zero tolerance and suspension policies, rostering, teacher vacancy, and bilingual education.

How a National Leadership Organization Can Help Our Work

Beyond the obvious need for funding, there are two ways in which a national leadership organization could be helpful to our organization:

- First, by facilitating site visits between organizations that do similar work. It has been our experience that site visits provide an intimate space where young people can talk to each other about the work that they do. It is in this space that young people share ideas on interests, strategy, and political analysis. Site visits also foster meaningful relationships and mutual support among organizations that can lead to collaboration on larger issues.

- Second, by fostering relationships between organizing groups and traditional youth development and service agencies. To fulfill the diverse needs of our youth membership, we often find ourselves acting as tutors and counselors dealing with family crises, child-care and welfare issues. We are not unusual in being a small staff that neither has the capacity nor the expertise to deal satisfactorily with some of these issues, which our members may confront daily. Sometimes the young people we refer to agencies get lost in the large bureaucracy. It would be beneficial for our organization to develop collegial, associative relationships with agencies that have the resources to deal positively with the problems and concerns of our youth. The association should entail regular, precise communications with regarding the progress, arrangements and outcomes of the services provided to our YUC members.

Youth Organizing and Democracy

Few would dispute the view that America's experiment with democracy is still in its developing stages, the biggest obstacle to a true democracy in the United States being the disenfranchising effect of a continuing history of racism and classism that permeates US institutions. As it exists today, educational systems in low-income areas and in communities of color fail to adequately provide the tools necessary for constituencies to actively participate in decision-making in meaningful ways. This is coupled with the fact that all too often, even the well meaning policies that exist at the national, state, and even district level do not trickle down to positively impact the everyday experience of the students in the schools that YUC serves. It is essential therefore, that young people be provided with a vehicle to fully participate in the democratic process and have a voice in the systemic change of U.S. intuitions. Youth organizing and thus, YUC is that vehicle.

While traditional youth development, community service agencies and civics education may have positive effects on the lives of young people, youth organizing and YUC take youth development and service to another level. We bring together and train young people to alter power relationships and create meaningful institutional change. Throughout their lives, young people from low-income communities and communities of color will have to navigate U.S. institutions that do not meet their needs. It is the failures of these institutions that create the need for youth development and community service agencies. Through organizing, these institutions are challenged and changed by the very people who are directly impacted by them. Organizing, therefore, is the only way the United States will be pushed to reach its democratic goal.

Andi Perez is the associate director of Youth United for Change, a youth organizing program located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Contact info:
Youth United for Change
2801 Frankford Avenue, Rm. 111
Philadelphia, PA 19134
Phone: 215-423-9588   Email: andi@yucyouth.org

Cultivating Active Citizenship through Service Learning
By Fran Rudoff

Fran Rudoff believes that service-learning is a vital strategy for engaging young people in addressing important community problems, providing them with the knowledge and practical skills they require to be effective decision makers and advocates for better public policy. She would like a national leadership association to forge relationships among and between different organizations working on different approaches to civic participation.

For more than 10 years, KIDS Consortium has been working closely with school districts across Maine and New England to make service-learning an integral part of school life; more than 50,000 students have participated in KIDS projects. Our model of service-learning – called KIDS (Kids Involved Doing Service) as Planners - started around 1990 as part of a state-level program that required all of Maine's cities and towns to prepare plans for the future on a wide range of civic issues, such as capital improvements, protection of natural resources, transportation policies, affordable housing needs, etc. KIDS was created as a process to involve young people (who, after all, are going to be the future community decision-makers) in the development and implementation of these plans. By using the "town as text," and engaging students in local planning efforts, education grew beyond the confines of the classroom.

Today, KIDS as Planners is an award winning[1] model that challenges K-12 students to identify, research, design and implement solutions to real needs and issues in their schools and communities. KIDS has three essential components:

1. *Academic integrity*- The KIDS model is an instructional strategy that provides a method for teachers to link authentic student work on community needs and issues to multiple state learning standards and local curriculum and assessment requirements.

2. *Apprentice Citizenship* – KIDS views students as vital community members in training to become active participants in our democracy. Students partner with people in the community doing work that meets a local need.

3. *Student Ownership*- Using the KIDS approach, students are continually given decision-making opportunities, within groups, within the classroom and with adults in the larger community. Adults share in the learning, as partners and coaches not just as "experts". The commitment to student ownership is one of the elements that sets KIDS apart from other service-learning approaches.

KIDS projects have focused on a wide range of community issues and needs – identified by students working with community partners. Examples include: designing and building urban and rural trails; re-opening clam flats through water quality monitoring and testing; organizing and hosting a swearing-in ceremonies for new U.S. citizens; mapping and protecting vernal

---

[1] American Planning Association's National Planning Award for Public Education (1996); Renew America's National Award for Environmental Sustainability (1998 and 2000); Robert Rodale Environmental Achievement Award (2000).

pools; planning and receiving grant funds for a community youth center; conducting a traffic survey and securing speed limit changes for a neighborhood; designing, planting and maintaining a vegetable garden at a senior center; and designing and constructing a mobile fire safety demonstration house used for community training programs by a local fire department.

The civic outcomes associated with the KIDS model include:

- **Civic Skills**: critical thinking; conflict resolution; attentive listening; information-gathering; cooperation; decision-making; perseverance; problem-solving; and advocacy.
- **Civic Knowledge**: understanding of community (and often state-level) issues and needs, the types of services and programs provided by local (and state) government and non-profit agencies, and the process used by local government and agencies to make decisions.
- **Civic Efficacy**: knowing how to design a community project and influence local decision-makers.

Additional outcomes for students through KIDS service-learning include increased engagement in school as well as a sense of personal efficacy (confidence to take action and do well) and social responsibility (importance of becoming involved in community projects and issues).

Beyond student impacts, **teachers** report greatly increased opportunities for students to construct knowledge, engage in in-depth learning, develop communication skills and apply their learning beyond school in a way that can be assessed in relation to standards. For **schools**, KIDS provides meaningful ways for parents and community members to become involved as experts and mentors, and, in doing so, expands the resources available to students and teachers; provides teacher training in experiential learning and authentic student assessment; and, positively enhances school visibility within the community. **Communities** benefit from the real work that gets done by KIDS projects and by the process of involving the community in identifying and addressing community needs.

Relationship to Other Programs

In thinking about "civic education," we have found descriptions, such as the one included in the recent *Civic Mission of Schools* report (Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, 2003), to be helpful. The report talks about several categories of programs, curricula and materials:

- Instruction in government, history, law and democracy;
- Discussions of current issues and events;
- Opportunities to apply learning through community service;
- Extracurricular activities to get involved in school and community;
- Student participation in school governance; and
- Student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

In this broader context, we view our work as a critical piece of a larger "puzzle." Our strengths lie in the development of civic skills and efficacy, along with some aspects of civic knowledge. Depending on the nature of the service-learning project, there may also be rich discussions of current issues and events and/or opportunities to participate in real democratic processes (i.e., making a presentation before a town or city council). However, we realize that a more robust "civic education" should include meaningful experiences in all of the six areas listed above. The *Civic Mission of Schools* includes a useful chart (Figure 1) that identifies the benefits associated with each of these approaches.

FIGURE 1

SPECIFIC AND PROMISING APPROACHES IN SCHOOL-BASED CIVIC EDUCATION

"The following approaches (and sometimes combinations of them) have been adopted in many schools across the country, and research clearly demonstrates their benefits. Nevertheless, two caveats apply:

First, they produce different types of benefit, ranging from knowledge of politics, to civic skills, to willingness to volunteer…Second, specific programs or approaches may not always be what cause students to show higher levels of civic knowledge or engagement. Instead, students may have personal characteristics that lead them to choose a civic program… a "self-selection bias" that relatively little research has been able to measure….

<u>MOST SUBSTANTIAL AND DIRECT BENEFITS FROM EACH PROMISING APPROACH</u>

APPROACH	*DIRECT BENEFITS*				
	CIVIC AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE	**CIVIC AND POLITICAL SKILLS**	**CIVIC ATTITUDES**	**POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**	**COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION**
CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION IN SOCIAL STUDIES	X	X		X	
DISCUSSION OF CURRENT ISSUES	X	X	X	X	
SERVICE-LEARNING		X	X		X
EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES		X		X	X
STUDENT VOICE IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE		X	X		
SIMULATIONS	X	X	X		

Source: Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, *The Civic Mission of Schools,* 2003, p. 22.

Need for a National Leadership Association

It would be helpful to our work to have a national leadership association that would bring together organizations working on different approaches to active civic participation. But a completely "new" association may not be the answer for those of us out in the field. I personally feel overwhelmed by the many associations and listservs to which I already belong. From our perspective at KIDS, we think there are some fine organizations and associations already in existence that could be expanded or "tweaked" to help bring together those interested in civic engagement. For example, the National Center on Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States (ECS) is already developing national "scans," articles and materials on civic engagement. The newly formed National Service-Learning Partnership is also providing valuable resources to the field.

Looking ahead, the kinds of resources and assistance that would be helpful from these organizations or others include:

- Forums that bring together leaders from states and organizations across the U.S. who are implementing new approaches and ideas. The Educational Leadership Colloquium organized by ECS this past summer is an example of such a program. It was informative and inspiring to hear from a wide range of youth leaders, state legislators, members of the judiciary, representatives of non-profit groups, and educators. Equally important, however, was the opportunity to have in-depth conversations, meaningful exchanges of ideas and time to plan with others from my state. In other words, "traditional" conferences with panels of speakers would be much less helpful than sessions geared toward helping leadership teams from states and school districts/communities who could then engage in real planning activities around civic education.

- Similarly, we think it is important to focus on how we help school systems assess their overall strengths and weaknesses in all of the civic education areas outlined in the Carnegie Report – and then develop a plan of action to broaden and deepen what they offer to students. At KIDS, we have created a process and a set of tools to help educators and community partners create a climate of support for service-learning – including leadership, professional development, integration into curriculum, instruction and assessment, local policy, and community involvement. A similar approach that looks more broadly at all aspects of civic education would be valuable.

- An on-line "catalogue" of various civic education programs and ideas organized by major categories – i.e., service-learning, instruction in government, materials to facilitate current events discussions, simulation programs, etc. - with a brief synopsis, contact information, web site link. This would be invaluable for state and local educators working to pull together the best suite of programs to meet their needs.

- Outreach to a variety of content area professional associations (i.e., science, math, language arts) to create "civics across the curriculum" approaches much like "writing across the curriculum" efforts. For example, "civics" does not need to be taught only in social studies or history classes – it can be woven as a theme into other subject areas as well. Models and examples of exemplary programs would be helpful.

- Outreach to national organizations representing state and local governments, including the judiciary, to encourage involvement in civic education programming. The National Council of State Legislature's "Back to School" initiative for state legislators is one example. The Michigan Legislature and the Utah Courts also have interesting new efforts to engage youth in civic institutions and democratic processes. It would be helpful for our work in Maine and New England to know about other examples of these kinds of activities and to encourage new ideas to take root.

- Another critical area is pre-service training for educators. A national association could advocate for expanded programming in civic education, including service-learning, for the next generation of teachers. Although KIDS Consortium has had some success working with Colleges of Education in New England, a national spotlight on this issue might encourage additional campuses to examine their programming.

Fran Rudoff is the executive director of KIDS Consortium, a statewide service learning organization in Maine.

Contact info:
KIDS Consortium
215 Lisbon Street, Suite 12
Lewiston, ME 04240
Phone: (207) 784-0956   Email: frudoff@kidsconsortium.org

The Role of Youth Programming in the Development of Civic Engagement

By Dorothy Stoneman

Dorothy Stoneman is the founder and CEO of YouthBuild U.S.A. in Somerville, Massachusetts. She sees youth service as the most prevalent form of youth civic engagement that exists. Youth service, according to Stoneman, takes advantage of everyone's desire to "make a difference."

One day on 109th Street in East Harlem I encountered two small girls. One of them, about four years old, approached me waving the front page of the New York Times. She asked if I would like to buy it for 10 cents. I asked why she was selling it. She said, "My sister and I want to go back to Puerto Rico. There's nothing to do here on the street."

"There's nothing to do here on the street." This phrase rang true and deep as the cause of so many problems for young people and society. This same perception had caused me to organize teen-agers on their own blocks in the late seventies. I reasoned that if adults wanted to organize teenagers we should gather them where they were, where they lived, where they already had friends but where they felt bored and powerless. We should invite them to create wonderful new things of their own invention, with their friends, or to solve problems that were bothering them on their block or in their schools. It seemed to me that an enormous energy could be liberated: the energy hidden in boredom, in powerlessness, in drifting, in using drugs; the energy that lies below the surface in young people yearning for a way to become and express their best selves.

I have spent the last 23 years working to liberate that energy. It turns out to be very accessible. It is linked with a great and surprising force of love. As soon as adults really pay attention to what young people think, and help them actualize their best visions, the young people feel a huge sense of appreciation and a desire to give back.

Starting with a few small groups of teenagers on the blocks where they lived in East Harlem, and spreading across the country, my colleagues and I have enabled over 40,000 young people to do various forms of community service, rebuild 7,000 units of dilapidated housing, and get involved in community affairs to the extent they are interested. This initiative was started at the Youth Action Program of the East Harlem Block Schools; it spread across New York City in the Coalition for Twenty Million $, City-Works, and the Young Adult Learning Academy; and then swept across the country in the form of YouthBuild. It merged with many springs joining into the torrent of national youth service.

The torrent was caused by hundreds of millions of dollars that have poured into youth service as an organized activity fueled by major foundations and the federal government and championed by the President of the United States. Other forms of civic engagement have had no such fuel, which is part of the explanation for why youth service is the most common form of civic

---

engagement for youth at present. It takes a deliberate consistent effort to organize any group of people into any form of civic activity.

In comparison to their engagement in service, young people are not involved in politics in large numbers, either as voters or in campaigns, because they do not perceive that they can make a difference, on the one hand; and on the other hand, nobody has organized, persuaded, funded, and led them to be involved.

Motivation for Civic Engagement

It seems to be part of human nature to want to be important in some way to somebody. Most people have a desire to improve the world in some way, small or large. All my experience with low income disenfranchised youth indicates that underneath the cynical passivity lies an inherent motivation for wanting to make a difference. I have seen disengaged depression replaced by enthusiastic, caring, involvement thousands of times. When the right conditions are present, young people of all backgrounds will get involved.

The fundamental questions that have to be answered in the affirmative for an individual to become active in the body politic are, "Can I make a difference? And do I care to make a positive difference?" Family experience and beliefs obviously influence the answer to these questions.

Ideally, schools would provide experiences and instruction enabling a young person to answer these questions, "Yes. Everything I do has an impact on other people. I can make a positive or negative difference. I choose to make a positive difference."

Most schools are not taking widespread responsibility for engaging young people in the larger society, or even in creating a positive sub-culture within the schools themselves. As a result, the job of teaching young people, "Yes, it matters what I do," resides largely in religious organizations, parents, and youth programs.

Most young people, rich or poor, do not believe they can make much of a difference as long as they are young. Working with low-income young people in the United States, I find they are deeply conditioned to believe that it doesn't matter at all what they do. It makes no difference. Nobody cares. Perhaps they can have a negative effect, but not a positive effect. They view themselves by and large, as irrelevant, just as most of the rest of society views them.

I have taught not only that every individual does make a difference, but that they can make the biggest difference if they act together. The more people who act together, the bigger the difference they can make. This, clearly, is community organizing. Trying to teach the attitudes and skills of civic engagement to young people has worked best for me in the context of organizing youth to take charge, to help govern the organizations they are in, and to create new organizations and community improvement projects of their own design. They respond to the vision of community development and social change, of solidarity in collective action, with greater interest than to the moral idea of individual responsibility to be a good citizen.

Community-based youth programs have enormous flexibility regarding their role in encouraging community engagement. They do, however, have one important inherent limitation. They cannot, as non-profit organizations, be involved in partisan politics. If young people are to get involved in the democratic electoral process, the political parties will have to make a much larger effort to engage them. This will go against the current trends in political activity.

There are, however, more forms of civic engagement than community service and electoral politics. Youth programs can go far beyond community service without treading down partisan paths. The primary modes of non-partisan civic engagement beyond participating in existing community service programs are:

1) project creation;
2) institution governance;
3) issue-based advocacy.

All these are of great interest to young people. They also lay the foundation for participation later in electoral politics and all other levels of citizenship. Once young people have created a project they care about, and have participated in its governance, they are more interested in issue-based advocacy to protect that project or extend their impact. Once young people learn through organizational governance and issue-based advocacy how policy decisions are made, they become interested in sustaining an influential role.

I have approached these activities as "leadership development" instead of "citizenship education," or "civic engagement," for several reasons:

1) It is inherently more interesting to most young people to wonder if they might become leaders than to think of simply becoming a good citizen.
2) Society needs more ethical and effective leaders at all levels.
3) Every youth program and school would itself be improved if governed with real input from young people; governance is a leadership role.
4) The challenge of leadership roles can engage young people intensely and deeply, liberating their best energies.
5) Real decision-making responsibility can heal two very deep wounds of young people of all backgrounds: a) low self-esteem due to consistent invalidation of their intelligence; b) feelings of powerlessness, and its companion anger, due to being raised in a thoroughly adult-dominated world which has not listened to the ideas of young people.

Civic engagement for young people can be viewed not only as leadership development, but also as a form of liberation. Approaching it from this point of view makes a difference in the conceptualization and actualization of an approach.

Young people can be seen as an oppressed minority in society. They are almost always subject to the control of adults. They can be punished, insulted, and disrespected in myriad ways by the adults with authority over them. Their daily lives are planned and directed by adults. Their ideas and opinions are rarely taken into account in shaping the institutions that relate to them or in making the critical decisions that affect them most deeply and constantly. They are, in other words, consistently disrespected and marginalized. (Bell, 48)

When being young is coupled with being poor, the powerlessness is usually greater. When the young person is not only poor but also a person of color in the United States, the internalized racism adds another layer of complexity and powerlessness to the picture.

Adults of all races and classes believe it is their duty to educate, direct, control, discipline, and entertain young people. Much more rarely do adults think it is their duty to listen to young people, learn from them, and give them the resources to help create the world the way they

envision a better society ought to be. It's always seen as a marvelous innovation when adults give young people a place at the table. It's even more unusual when adults give young people access to resources with which to implement their best ideas.

It has enormous power when adults play a facilitative, respectful, liberating role rather than a controlling, limiting, disciplinary role. This role is one that takes concentration, practice, and, oftentimes, training. It is opposite to the most typical adult role. Adults in youth programs often have more flexibility than adults in schools to play a facilitative role, following the interests of the young people to get involved in very real projects and issues in their own communities.

Below I have given a practical description of the adult role in helping young people create their own community improvement projects, participate in governance, and mount an issue campaign.

I.   Project Creation

Most national and community service programs entail young people volunteering in existing projects. This is real engagement, and it is valuable.

The process of creating service and community improvement projects of their own design is engagement at an even higher level. The learning involved in deciding what community service one would like to do, and then developing a project to fulfill it, in partnership with an adult organizer, is profound. (Stoneman, "Element Seven," 37)

The YouthBuild program started this way. A group of teenagers were invited to define their own project. They decided they wanted to renovate an abandoned building on their block, learn the skills, and get ownership of the building to provide housing for homeless people. This was an enormous project which took the initial group of teenagers five years to complete, with the back-up of an adult organizer named David Calvert who negotiated the city systems and obtained all the professional support while maintaining the youth as an expanding organized group. The fourteen year old, who organized her friends to do this project, Chantay Jones, is now 36 years old and is the assistant director of a drug rehabilitation program in New York City. She says, "I only have a GED, but I am assistant director because I learned how to think, how to solve problems, overcome obstacles, understand that I could make things happen when I was a teenager in the Youth Action Program. It's my attitudes and thinking they are paying for, not a degree." These skills and attitudes are lasting.

Developing youth-designed community improvement and service projects is a key role for community-based non-profit organizations. It unleashes enormous positive energy and teaches complex skills to the next generation of community-based leaders. ("Youth and Social Capital," 61) However, the process must be funded by government or private foundations because it takes on-going adult staff support and leadership.

II. Institution Governance

This is a key method of building youth engagement. Governance is qualitatively different from the "participation" that is often encouraged by managers of youth-serving organizations. The most typical way that managers have encouraged youth involvement is by forming committees that are charged with planning entertainment for other youth, or committees that determine penalties for other youth who have broken various rules. These are marginal activities that support the adults but do not encroach on their territory of control. Very rarely does one find organizations in which young people are included in hiring staff, setting budgets, raising the

funds, and setting policies that adult staff must follow. (Perkins) Yet these are the areas in which youth involvement will generate the greatest benefit. The benefits are not only to the youth, but to the organization, which will be more finely tuned in its ability to engage and serve the youth if the young people have themselves helped select the staff, and decided priorities for use of resources.

Even in cases where the adult managers are urged to include youth in actual governance, there is a deeply engrained reluctance to share authority on this level. However, asking young people for their ideas counter-acts powerlessness and passivity and is the first of several steps toward encouraging youth civic engagement.

The fundamental understanding for these steps to work is the balance between staff role and youth role. This balance is critical. Failing this balance is the usual problem of adult staff: they often either over-control, or they abdicate a guiding and helpful role in the name of youth empowerment. Youth civic engagement does not happen by itself; most of our institutions are set up in a way that suppresses youth involvement. Adults must take the initiative both to change the institutions and to activate and train the young people. In order to do this, training for adult leaders is usually needed.

The key element in success of youth participation in governance is the participation of the lead administrator. Without deep buy-in and attention paid to the process from the director or CEO, efforts to include youth will typically fade out over time. It is unfortunately counter to our culture to share power systematically with the service receivers of any social or educational program. This is one reason so many of our social and educational programs don't work as well as they could.

I had been trained as executive director of the East Harlem Block Schools how to organize and empower low-income parents as my board of directors. The same process was effective with youth. At the original YouthBuild program in East Harlem, for 10 years I met weekly with whatever group of teenagers had been elected by their peers as the policy committee. They were part of every important decision, and my job was to share all important information on which the decision might be based and draw out everyone's ideas, or train a youth chairperson to do the same, in a way that would enable us to reach thoughtful consensus. No staff member was hired without the policy committee's agreement after extensive group interviews and reference checks. They reviewed the performance of staff, set policies governing all aspects of the program, and reviewed the budget before it was finalized.

For most of those years, they also had to approve the decision to fire an individual staff member. While I do not recommend to other directors that they give the firing decision to the young people, since it delayed my being able to act decisively at times when I needed to, we certainly had many exciting dramas that taught the governing youth enduring lessons. Periodically I suggested to them that perhaps they would like to give the firing power back to me in order to avoid the enormous pressure of making decisions affecting staff they cared about. The answer would be, "somebody has to do the dirty work. Why should you have to do it alone?" The young man who spoke those words in 1987 when he was 18 and chairman of the policy committee is now a police officer in New York City who spent 6 weeks working 18 hour days at ground zero in September and October. He continues to do the dirty work, with others, serving the greater good.

III. Issue-Based Advocacy

Community-based youth programs can organize young people to articulate their views on policy issues, to study whether their ideas are likely to work, to communicate their recommendations to legislators and influence leaders at all levels, and to organize other youth to join them in doing so. (Halperin, 25)

This form of civic engagement is of great interest to young people. They have many ideas about how their communities and the nation and the world as a whole should be different. They have very fresh and accurate ideas about how the schools, job training programs, foster care programs, prisons, and health centers they frequent could do their jobs better. In my experience, the young people are always about three years ahead of the adults in understanding what is actually going on among their peers. They see and feel the new trends. They know about the latest dangers long before they hit the newspapers and journals.

When helping a group prepare for policy input, the following steps are usually included:

1) *Initial brainstorming:* Gather a group, help them select the issues that are of greatest concern, and ask for their ideas about causes and solutions. Record their ideas.

2) *Preparing the Document:* Organize the brainstormed ideas, in writing.
   Present the written version of their ideas back to the group and get their additional ideas, elaborations, and edits. Modify this document over and over again until it is complete, and perfect from their point of view, in terms of the accuracy of their ideas, as well as from your own view of what is presentable to the intended audience. Facilitate the discussion and modify the document until you have gathered all their related ideas, talked them through to consensus and internal consistency, eliminated ideas that they can't agree on or that are peripheral to the main arguments, and edited every word to express their own sense of how it needs to be understood. Edit every sentence to make sure it is grammatically correct and well communicated, using your own skill on this front.

   The blending of the youth ideas with the adult ability to present the ideas in writing - especially when working with under-educated youth - is a most delicate process requiring time, patience, respect, great skill, and abiding humility. Every reservation or idea expressed by every youth must be plumbed to its depth to find the kernel of truth that should be added to the document. By going through this process, a very intelligent document can be produced, one in which the young people have a deep investment. Even though you have done most of the writing, and you have done the facilitating, they will embrace it as their own, because they have done the thinking, the discussing, the editing, and reaching of agreement. Left to themselves, they will not have the patience and the respect to reach complete consensus; they won't even know this is possible, because they have not experienced it elsewhere.

   Providing deep adult support for this process is not condescending. When professional staff serve influential adult groups of decision-makers, the process is similar. Documents that require the consensus of a "commission" or "task force" appointed by mayors, governors, and presidents are usually carefully written by professional staff and edited with the input of the decision-makers.

   If the adult professional staff require the under-educated youth decision-makers to write the document, it is combining two unrelated skills, thereby undermining the young people's intelligent ideas by their lack of education. It is also treating the group members with less

respect than an important adult decision-making body would normally get. Our role is to engage the young people's intelligence in affecting public policy, and whatever support is needed to do this is appropriate.

3) **Perfecting the document**: Once the young people have agreed on ideas and presentation, ask them to suggest readers from different walks of life and political persuasions who may have different perspectives and who could review the document and give feedback on whether there are any ideas or turns of phrase which could offend the target audience. Get the document reviewed by those individuals and edit it one more time with this new information in partnership with the youth.

4) **Presenting the Document**: Once the document is prepared, extensive rehearsals of how to present it must be organized. Effective speeches take a long time for young people to prepare. When 4 young people came to me to present a 30-second statement to the Democratic Platform Committee in 2000, each one of them rehearsed his or her statement for about 2 hours, until it was perfect. When the YouthBuild Young Leaders Council presented its Declaration of Interdependence to an audience at Ford Foundation, we spent one whole day rehearsing the presentation with expert coaches.

5) **Arranging to Present the Document to the Target Audiences**: Once it is done, finding the maximum number of venues in which the young people can present the document is a staff role. This is the place where staff often tend to slack off. It is as if the preparation of the policy paper, and the presentation of it in one venue to one audience is sufficient. In fact, to affect public policy, the follow-up, the persistence, the repetition, and the visibility are crucial, and these usually depend on adult connections and savvy.

6) **Gaining Access and Sustaining Participation in Advisory Groups**: There are various committees on which young people can serve in an advisory capacity, such as the new youth councils for the WIA, local community planning boards and councils, the State Commissions for National and Community Service, the national youth council for the Department of Justice, and various advisory councils for mayors, governors, private foundations, and youth organizations. Many of these groups have difficulty both recruiting youth and sustaining the participation of their youth representatives.

Once a group of young people have been activated to communicate their policy ideas, getting some of them appointed to on-going groups to continue making their voices heard is not difficult, if the adult guide will make the contact and open the door. However, once appointed, the young people usually need on-going support from outside the council. The councils themselves often treat the youth as tokens, treat a single representative as the total voice of youth, fail to educate the youth representatives to the total mission and context of the council, or otherwise neglect to make it a successful experience.

The adult guide can do a number of things in this supportive role: arrange for several youth to be on the council so there is a subgroup instead of an individual representative; offer to act as a support person for the whole group of youth; ask to attend the council meeting with the youth representative; invite a report-back from the youth after each council meeting; help the youth think through what s/he is hearing and learning, and how s/he wants to and could influence the decision-making.

The more experience the young person has had on a policy-making council or board of directors within his or her youth program before being placed on an external council, the

better s/he'll be able to sustain the role without enormous support. Two young people from YouthBuild who have sustained themselves on their local youth councils - Cesar Garcia in San Diego and Crystal McConnell in Indianapolis - first served for two years on the National Young Leaders Council of YouthBuild USA, and before that on the youth policy councils of their local YouthBuild programs.

Young people who have successful policy-making experience often become permanently involved in community leadership. One of my favorite examples is John Rivera, who was one of the first chairpeople of the youth policy committee at the Youth Action Program in 1980, when he was sixteen. Now he is chairman of the Community School Board in East Harlem.

7) ***Building Drama or Press Around the Policy Recommendations:*** There is a kind of street theatre that can be built around some policy recommendations. Making the process of communicating dramatic, visible, fun, creative, and in the public eye, takes a special extra twist. Helping the group think about how to achieve this, and implementing the vision they have, is part of the fun. In 1985, when we were demonstrating at City Hall for more jobs for youth, 20 different youth programs from around the city joined us at City Hall at their appointed time and put on a series of performances. Whether a song, or play, or dance, or march, it had pizzazz! Soon the Councilpeople were on the steps observing and enjoying.

8) ***Persisting to Change the Policy According to the Ideas of the Young People***
It's one thing to get a perspective expressed. It's another thing to get a policy changed. Building organization, endorsements, persistence, figuring out what it will really take in this case to get the policy changed or created, and doing it over a sustained period of time, persuading the people with the power to make the changes: this is what it takes, and this usually requires skilled and committed adult support. If young people already knew how to make changes, they would do so. For that matter, very few adults know how, or, if they do, have the patience to help young people do it. What the adults may also not realize is that young people are the best communicators about their own reality and then, for change. (Hoose)

This type of support for youth engagement in policy development is an appropriate and important role for non-profit organizations, funded by private foundations.

In Summary

Civic Engagement for young people is a desirable activity that will strengthen our society and prepare youth to be good citizens in the future. More than that, we desperately need the energy and intelligence of youth plugged in to action that will improve society now. Young people often have a perspective that is fresh, new, and accurate in certain respects that adults cannot see.

Every aspect of society that affects young people directly is experienced very differently by the young people than by the adults. If this is so, then the decisions guiding those aspects of society would be much better informed if young people participated in making them. This applies to schools, foster care, criminal justice systems, juvenile detention facilities, youth programs, drug education and prevention programs, children's health care, pregnancy prevention, parenting training, after school programs, and others.

Imagine how different all of these institutions would be if children and youth had a voice in shaping their policies. They would be better. They would meet the needs of the children and youth better than they do now, and they would have a creative edge to them that does not usually exist.

Then imagine how differently the young people who helped to govern these institutions would relate to their own democratic responsibilities as they got older. Their skill and confidence would be at an entirely different level.

We not only need the input of young people in these decisions, but we also need young people to be developed as ethical, skilled, highly committed young leaders willing to take on all levels of local and national responsibility for building the best possible society. This will require a deliberate effort by adults, who can provide incentives and consistent support throughout the process. Good leadership is sorely needed at all levels of society.

Bibliography

Armistead, P. Jefferson and Matthew B. Wexler. *Community Development and Youth Development: the Potential for Convergence.* Community & Youth Development Series. New York: The Ford Foundation and International Youth Foundation 1997.

Beacons: A Union of Youth and Community Development. Community & Youth Development Series. New York: The Ford Foundation and International Youth Foundation 1997.

Bell, John. "Adultism," *Leadership Development: A Handbook from YouthBuild USA and Youth Action Program and Homes, Inc.* Somerville, MA: YouthBuild USA 2000, 48-55.

Cahill, Michele. *Youth Development and Community Development: Promises and Challenges of Convergence.* Community & Youth Development Series. New York: The Ford Foundation and International Youth Foundation 1997.

Halperin, Samuel. *A Guide for the Powerless – And Those Who Don't Know Their Own Power; A Primer on the American Political Process.* Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum 2001.

Hoose, Phillip. *It's Our World, Too! Stories of Young People Who Are Making a Difference.* Boston: Little, Brown 1993.

Lakes, Richard D. *Youth Development and Critical Education: The Promise of Democratic Action.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1996.

Lavelle, Robert and the Staff of Blackside. *America's New War on Poverty: A Reader for Action.* San Francisco: KQED Books 1995.

Leadership Development at a Youthbuild Program. YouthBuild USA under contract with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. Somerville, MA: YouthBuild USA 2001.

Making Connections: Youth Program Strategies for a Generation of Challenge;

Commendable Examples from The Sar Levitan Youth Policy Network. Marion Pines, ed. Baltimore, MD: Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies, The Johns Hopkins University 1999.

Perkins, Jeffrey, Jr., Ph.D. *The Evolution of YouthBuild USA: A Case Study of Organizational Innovation and Growth in a Changing Social Policy Environment.* Doctoral Dissertation. Pittsburgh, PA: Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh 2002.

Schorr, Lisbeth B. *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America.* New York: Anchor Books 1997.

Some Things DO Make a Difference for Youth: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum 1997.

Stoneman, Dorothy. "Element Seven: Organizing to Have an Impact on the World," *Leadership Development: A Handbook from YouthBuild USA and Youth Action Program and Homes, Inc.* Somerville, MA: YouthBuild USA 2000, 135-161.

Stoneman, Dorothy. *The YouthBuild Story of Thanks: Rebuilding Our Communities and Our Lives.* Somerville, MA: YouthBuild USA 1999.

Sum, Andrew, Stephen Mangum, Edward deJesus, Gary Walker, David Gruber, Marion Pines, and William Spring. "A Generation of Challenge: Pathways to Success for Urban Youth; A Policy Study of the Levitan Youth Policy Network." Baltimore, MD: Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies, The Johns Hopkins University 1997.

"Youth and Social Capital," *Better Together: The Report f the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America.* Cambridge, MA: John F. Kennedy School of Government 2001, 60-69.

Dorothy Stoneman is founder and CEO of YouthBuild U.S.A. in Somerville, Massachusetts.

Contact info:
YouthBuild USA
58 Day Street
P.O.Box 440322
Somerville, MA 02144
Phone: 617-623-9900 Email: ybinfo@youthbuild.org