

Youth as Decision Makers



*STRATEGIES FOR
YOUTH ENGAGEMENT
IN GOVERNANCE AND
DECISION-MAKING
IN RECREATION*



*Prepared
for the
Laidlaw
Foundation*

SUMMARY REPORT



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PROVINCIAL CONSORTIUM ON YOUTH IN RECREATION

- Big Sisters of Ontario
- Boys and Girls Clubs of Ontario
- Laidlaw Foundation
- Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation
- Ontario Camping Association
- Ontario Physical Health and Education Association
- OPC (formerly Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse)
- Parks and Recreation Ontario
- Sport Alliance Ontario
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Introduction

The Laidlaw Foundation is committed to building better environments for all children and youth, particularly those who must overcome barriers to achieve their potential. The Foundation further believes that recreation provides alternative forms of learning for youth and opportunities for engagement that can ultimately lead to civic engagement and social cohesion.

This document represents a summary of the full report, *Youth as Decision-Makers in Recreation: Strategies for Youth Engagement in Governance and Decision-Making*, prepared for the Laidlaw Foundation and based on a study conducted in 2000.

In 1999, a series of consultations with representatives from the recreation sector identified a need for the study of youth engagement practices. Under the leadership of the Advisory Group, representing a broad range of groups interested in youth engagement, the *Youth as Decision-Makers in Recreation* study was designed and conducted by Susan Wright of The Randolph Group.

The focus of the study was on exploring approaches to youth engagement in governance and involved a number of tasks, including:

- review of literature on youth engagement in governance and a scan of the range of practice in youth engagement;

...continued



- the development of a framework for exploring youth engagement in governance;
- four case studies of youth engagement in governance in organizations having a recreation component – The Town of Markham Mayor’s Youth Task Force, the Memorial Boys’ and Girls’ Club in the City of London, the “Flipside” Mobile Skateboard Park and Youth Centre in the Town of Caledon; and the Regional Multicultural Youth Council in Thunder Bay (all located in Ontario, Canada); and
- identification of lessons learned and best practices.



For purposes of this study, “youth” is defined as between the ages of 12 and 29, with an emphasis on those under 20, and engagement as, “the state of being involved at some point along a continuum and implying dialogue: youth to someone; someone to youth.”

Who gets involved?

“The young people who volunteer the most quickly will tend to be the loudest, most assertive or most confident. To ensure equability in participation, you may need to go to other young people and find strategies that will give them the space, time and resources to participate.”

— *Australian Youth Foundation, Youth Partnership & Participation, 1998*

“The kids on the executive are all busy kids who are often spreading themselves thin... they are often involved in three or four other things at the same time.” — *Regional Multicultural Youth Council of Thunder Bay*

The findings suggest that there is a growing interest nationally and internationally in enabling meaningful youth participation in decision-making and that youth engagement provides numerous benefits – to youth themselves, to organizations and to the community. The study also found that if organizations are to successfully engage youth in governance and decision-making, it is essential that appropriate strategies and structures be in place. This summary outlines many of these strategies and provides advice for organizations interested in developing and evaluating youth engagement in governance.

The full report can be found at the Laidlaw Foundation Web site at www.laidlawfdn.org or through Parks and Recreation Ontario at www.prontario.org, or by contacting either organization as listed on page 15.





Why should youth be engaged in governance?

There are many reasons why organizations should consider engaging youth in governance. Organizations should consider which of these fundamental beliefs and purposes underlie their interest in youth engagement in governance.



◆ **Youth are affected by the organization.** The programs and services of the organization affect youth so they have the “right” to some say in their design, development and delivery.

◆ **Youth can develop critical skills.** By being engaged, youth can develop important social and leadership skills.

◆ **Youth offer a unique perspective and capability.**

Youth understand other youth and they offer fresh perspective, creativity and energy for action.

◆ **The organization wants to make better decisions.** The organization’s capacity to make good decisions and wise investments in programs and services related to youth can be strengthened by youth engagement.

◆ **The community and society as a whole can be strengthened.** Youth engagement can lead to reduced conflict and mistrust through improved understanding of youth and reduced negative stereotyping. Youth are equipped to become more active members and citizens in their community.



The youth perspective...

"In discussions with youth in all of the (case study) organizations, it is clear that youth have a different time horizon from adults. They are very action-oriented – short term is almost immediately (i.e. within a few days or weeks) and long term is a matter of months (not years). Many indicated that youth have limited tolerance for talking about concepts at 'endless and long meetings'."

— Youth as Decision-Makers study

"Youth starts when you want to, and can, hang out without your parents around." — youth from study

"You are ready (to engage in governance and decision-making) when you decide you have an opinion, are willing to speak about it, and are willing to take action on it." — youth from study

Youth are often frustrated with adult inaction – "they talk about something forever and don't do it" – and by the unwillingness of some adults to take risks and to let youth make mistakes – "if they really want us to learn we have to see it and find out for ourselves." Some youth felt that adults don't always recognize and respect their strengths – "ask us more questions, we can mentor you too, we're out-of-the-box thinkers." Some youth felt that adults make things unnecessarily complex. One youth noted "Adults shroud stuff in complicated concepts – if they would just simplify it a bit, youth could make a better contribution." — youth from study



What kind of governance roles should youth play?

Youth can be engaged at a variety of levels in a variety of governance capacities. Organizations need to consider what kind of governance roles youth should play relative to their organization. It may be appropriate to involve youth in multiple ways within any one organization.

► **Youth on the Governing Body:** Some organizations have youth participate on the governing body (e.g. board) of an organization. In this case youth would hold one or more seats on a board. Organizations inviting youth to sit on their boards often do so to ensure representation of an important constituency. Youth representatives on governing bodies may be ex-officio members or full voting members.

The Memorial Boys' and Girls' Club in the City of London has youth representation on the Board, youth leadership development programs, and a youth-initiated and run drop-in centre known as The Zone.

► **Youth as Advisors to a Governing Body:** Many organizations have established advisory groups to inform the governing body about the needs and interests of youth (e.g. a youth group advising a municipal council). In this case, decision-making powers may be relatively limited (e.g. limited to the allocation of the advisory group's budget), but youth have the opportunity to influence future directions and policy.



The Town of Markham Mayor's Youth Task Force, in place since 1995, plans events that raise awareness of youth and helps address youth issues, such as a Youth Hotline, Youth Web site, Youth Week and Youth Violence Conference.



- **Youth-Governed Programs and Services:** Many organizations have youth-governed programs and services. In some cases these are the result of youth initiative and in other cases they have been nurtured by the organization. The distinction between a youth-governed program and other youth programs is that in a youth-governed program youth may be given one or more of the following governance powers: design of the program; development of policies and procedures related to youth participation in the program; involvement in raising and/or allocating funds; and involvement in hiring staff.

The Flipside Mobile Skateboard Park and Youth Centre in the Town of Caledon is an innovative response to the challenges of meeting the recreational needs of youth in a rural setting. Developed in 1998, youth are involved in the ongoing program management of Flipside.

A separate, but important group are youth-governed organizations that exist independently of adult-run organizations.

- **Youth-Governed Organization:** There appear to be relatively few organizations that are truly youth-governed. A youth governed organization is one in which all of the primary governance and decision-making powers rest with youth.

The Regional Multicultural Youth Council of Thunder Bay is a youth-governed organization, established in 1985, that provides services and programs to youth in Northwestern Ontario with minimal adult guidance.



What kinds of strategies and structures should be in place?

If organizations are to successfully engage youth in governance and decision-making, they need to put in place appropriate strategies and structures.

✓ **Recognizing the diversity of youth.** Effective youth engagement initiatives recognize that:

- The needs and types of youth, like adults, cannot be generalized;
- Different groups of youth have their own “culture”, issues, and ways of communicating, so no single engagement method can be expected to cover all youth interests;
- Alternative structures may need to be established to represent the diversity of

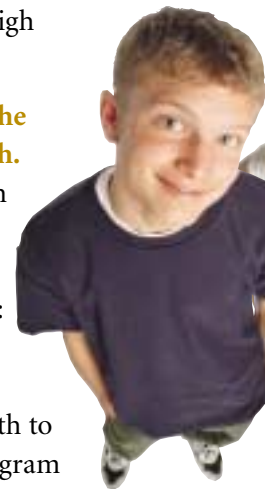
youth interests and to ensure that youth voices are heard;

- High achieving youth may not be representative of the “consumers” of an organization’s programs and services; and
- Special efforts are needed to attract and support youth who are not the traditional high achievers.

✓ **Recognizing the stages of youth.**

Effective youth engagement initiatives recognize that:

- It may be difficult for younger youth to govern a program



on behalf of much older youth, as younger youth may lack the personal self-confidence and possibly the respect of older youth;

- Youth need to have developmental opportunities to develop the skills necessary for effective engagement.

✓ **Being responsive to youth time horizons.** Effective youth engagement initiatives recognize that:

- Youth have a very different time horizon from adults.

For the youth consulted as part of this study, short term is a matter of days or weeks, long term is a matter of months;

- Youth have a strong interest in seeing immediate action and their tolerance for long, drawn-out planning processes may be limited.



✓ **Avoiding tokenism.**

Effective youth engagement initiatives recognize that:

- If youth are to be represented “at the table” on predominantly adult structures, it may be necessary to have at least three or four places at the table (to ensure a strong voice and to provide a group of peers).

✓ **Clarifying expectations regarding the scope of “governance”.**

Effective youth engagement initiatives recognize that:

- It is important to be very clear about whether or not youth are “at the table” to represent the views of the youth constituents served by the organization. If youth are there as representatives, then the lines of communication and accountability to and from youth constituents need to be clear; and ...continued





Strategies and structures (continued)

- The scope of decision-making powers of youth must be clearly defined (e.g. voting rights, budgetary responsibilities etc.) to avoid conflict and frustrations.

✓ **Providing effective orientation and learning opportunities.** Effective youth engagement initiatives recognize that:

- Youth orientation and training is an ongoing investment due to constant turnover among youth leaders;
- Youth may need an orientation to “the ways that organizations work”;



- Adults may need an orientation to “what youth think” and how they develop; and
- Youth need developmental opportunities to develop and fine-tune key skill-sets (e.g. communications, planning, priority-setting).

✓ **Providing ongoing staff support.** Effective youth engagement initiatives recognize that:

- Dedicated staff support is critical to provide continuity, mentoring and essential knowledge of how organizational and community systems work;
- Staff should ideally be relatively young, or at least have the demonstrated capacity to relate effectively to youth; and
- Staff should have a high

comfort level in enabling youth to take safe risks.

✓ **Tailoring the time and place to youth needs.**

Effective youth engagement initiatives recognize that:

- There are many constraints on youth time (due to school, part-time jobs, etc.);
- Meetings should be held at a time and location that is convenient for youth and that youth are often reliant on public transportation to get to and from meetings; and
- Meeting places that are extremely formal and intimidating are unlikely to create an atmosphere that encourages effective engagement.

✓ **Recognizing the contribution of youth.**

Effective youth engagement initiatives recognize that:

- Youth should receive public recognition of

their efforts; and

- Youth are most likely to be motivated and get involved if there is an incentive to work toward (e.g. the opportunity to travel to a conference to represent their organization).



Why engage youth?

The motivations for engaging youth are highly variable and include:

- skill development for youth;
- better organizational strategy and implementation;
- reduced conflict and mistrust; and
- a more civil and participatory society.

“We want to get involved, learn new skills, meet new people.”

— youth from study



Is your organization ready?

Organizations are ready to engage youth in governance when they can answer the following questions with a yes.



- We are clear on why youth engagement is important to our organization.
- We believe that youth have a legitimate place in the governance of this organization or program.
- We are willing to develop and invest in the necessary structures and strategies to effectively engage youth in governance.



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