

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT



PennState
PRO Wellness



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INTRODUCTION

Preface

Organizations such as schools, health departments, government agencies and nonprofits develop and implement programs, policies, research and other activities that affect youth. Including the youth voice in aspects of the design, implementation and evaluation of these practices can lead to overall organizational improvement (Zeldin & Collura, 2010). Youth have their own perspective to contribute and unique talents to bring to a collaborative workspace (Zeldin & Collura, 2010). However, properly engaging youth in different settings and within organizations with differing capacities can be a challenge (Zeldin et al., 2018). Organizations risk wasting their time and effort—and that of the youth they engage with—if they partner with youth ineffectively. Matching the organization's intentions and goals for engaging youth with its capacity to do so creates a recipe for authentic youth engagement.

Youth engagement can be defined as “the various ways that youth participate in organizational decisions and action” (Zeldin & Collura, 2010). There are many ways to engage the youth perspective for health and healthcare practices, programs and policies. These range from a one-time interaction to multi-year partnerships that include youth as leaders within the initiative. Regardless of the level, engagement is generally comprised of 5 components:

- Action required of youth
- Independence of decision making
- Background knowledge/interest needed
- Longevity of the engagement
- Benefit to youth

The purpose of this toolkit is to guide adults who wish to include a youth perspective in the development of youth health and healthcare practices, programs and policies by providing information on how to engage youth at different levels.

Terms Defined

Action Required of Youth:

This component relates to the type of activities youth participate in and amount of time each of those activities requires.

Independence of Decision Making:

The amount of independence relates to the degree of adult involvement compared to youth autonomy, along with availability of youth leadership opportunities.

Background Knowledge/

Interest Needed:

This component can include the amount of pre-meeting work required to fully participate in activities.

Longevity of Engagement:

The number of times youth are engaged and/or length of the engagement. This can include follow-up between meetings, such as reporting the impact of the activity, evaluating the program, and connecting after a project's conclusion.

Benefit to Youth:

The type and amount of benefit to the youth engaged, such as monetary compensation or college or career benefits (i.e., letters of recommendation, service hours). It could also include opportunities for networking, skill development and impact (i.e., policy, programming, research, advocacy).

INTRODUCTION

CONTINUED

Each component exists on a sliding scale, creating three “levels” of engagement that youth engagement activities may fall into – baseline, intermediate and advanced.



A note about navigation: Each section of the toolkit will guide readers through the three engagement levels followed by an example of a youth-engaging activity at each level. Each engagement example is centered around a core theme – HPV immunization for teens – which is built upon as the level of engagement increases.

A Note: The Public Policy Background Knowledge Gap

As previously noted, partnering with youth brings opportunities and challenges; however engaging youth in public policy discussions comes with a unique difficulty: overcoming the knowledge gap between policy makers (or those otherwise involved with policy) and youth. Even with a civics class under their belt, youth may not be knowledgeable about specific aspects of the public policy landscape, and without any (in)formal education on the subject, it can be easy for the operations of the government to go over anyone’s head.

It is important for any adult engaging youth in public policy decisions (at any level) to provide at least a basic overview of how public policy works in that adult’s/agency’s sphere of influence. Key pieces of information might include:

- Who is involved in the decision/policy making process
- The general timeframe over which change is made and
- Who can reasonably be expected to be affected by this policy



BASELINE ENGAGEMENT

This level of engagement is ideal for short term or even one-time interactions where adults engage youth. Adult leaders provide the topic and necessary background information, and the youth simply participate. Youth are not typically involved in the planning, implementation or evaluation of the engagement event, and there is limited follow-up. Youth may or may not need to represent specific demographics or have had relevant life experiences, but the “basic teenage perspective” is often accepted at this level. Focus groups or similar group feedback activities are often used at this level of engagement. Comments provided by youth are typically translated by adults and applied to the overall program or policy plan, as appropriate.

Example 1: A Focus Group Advising on a Social Media Campaign for Teen HPV Immunization

Component of Engagement	Baseline Engagement Level Example
Action Required	Attending focus group
Independence	No youth leadership
Background Knowledge	None required
Longevity	1 hour, once, email follow up
Benefit to Youth	\$10 gift card

In this example, a Department of Health (Department) is developing a social media campaign to raise awareness of and improve teen HPV immunization acceptance across the state. A one-time virtual focus group is held for youth to offer feedback on the proposed campaign. Youth are invited to participate through a local school district with diverse representation. Representatives from the Department provide an overview of their work and the proposed campaign, followed by a discussion about components of the campaign, such as messaging, images, platforms, etc. Youth are encouraged to provide individual feedback or to collaborate with each other in small groups. Adults participate in the discussion, actively listening and asking questions to elicit further conversation. Youth are compensated with a \$10 gift card for their time at the conclusion of the virtual focus group. The discussion guides elements of the social media campaign development and distribution. The Department follows up with the youth participants via email, informing them of the resulting campaign and how their feedback was used.

**Looking for more resources to hold
your own youth focus groups?**

[Listen Up! Youth Listening Session Toolkit](#)

(hhs.gov, 2020)

INTERMEDIATE ENGAGEMENT



This level of engagement is ideal for activities that involve youth as equals or near equals to the adult programming and policy planners. Opportunities for youth will most likely be directed by adults, though youth leadership opportunities may exist. There would be frequent communication between the two groups across multiple planned interactions (i.e., meetings, surveys). Youth may complete tasks independently outside of planned interactions, needing basic knowledge of the topic and access to related learning material. Youth, and potentially adults, can also form subgroups that work similarly. The increased engagement in the topic allows these partnerships to exist over a longer period, reaching insights unlikely to be met through the baseline engagement level. At this level, most final decisions will be made by adult leaders, though feedback would be shared with participating youth regarding the outcomes (short- and long-term). Compensation may be provided monetarily or through opportunities for youth to network or gain relevant experience, such as through participation in public speaking activities or attending conferences.

The Pennsylvania (PA) Youth Advisory Council (YAC) exists to connect PA youth voices with Department of Health and other youth-serving agencies. The YAC provides fundamental feedback and youth representation to specific areas of interest in healthcare, practices and policies for the Commonwealth of PA.

Find out more here: [PA Youth Advisory Council](https://pennstatehealth.org)

(pennstatehealth.org, 2024)

INTERMEDIATE

ENGAGEMENT

CONTINUED

Example 2: A Youth Advisory Council Plans an HPV Immunization Education Program

Component of Engagement	Intermediate Engagement Level Example
Action Required	Multiple meetings, background research, presentation
Independence	Youth chairperson
Background Knowledge	Interest in/passion for topic, basic knowledge
Longevity	1-3 hours per month; follow up after initial planning period concludes
Benefit to Youth	Resume building, volunteer hours, networking

In this example, the Department is interested in designing a school-based health education program for teen HPV immunizations. To ensure the youth voice is represented throughout the planning, development and evaluation process, the Department establishes a youth advisory council (Council) that meets monthly. Staff from the Department plan an initial meeting with the Council where they provide an overview of key information about HPV and available immunizations in the state, along with goals of the program. They also collaboratively develop the roles, responsibilities and expectations of adults and youth involved in the council.

Over the course of one year, the council—through the collaboration of adult facilitators, a youth chair and other members—researches the topic, holds multiple meetings and develops the core structure of the program. This includes an implementation plan (timeline) and evaluation metrics. The Council presents the plans to Department leadership and continues to provide feedback, as requested, during program implementation. The Department reciprocally provides updates to the Council, describing how the youth voice was utilized. The Department continues to engage with the Council for one year after initial implementation to troubleshoot barriers and improve processes.



ADVANCED ENGAGEMENT

This level of engagement is ideal for youth passionate about specific topics, such that they would bring high levels of leadership and drive to the project. Adult leaders function as supporting agents and facilitate resources (i.e., financial, bureaucratic) and logistical considerations (i.e., meeting space, considerations for working with minors) as needed. Youth, as individuals or team members, provide leadership for the program design, planning for implementation and considerations for evaluation of the initiative. In some cases, youth lead communication efforts, closing the feedback loop themselves via outreach to the impacted community (i.e., peers, community leaders, legislators). Adult leaders provide support through active listening, conflict management and facilitation of appropriate non-youth audiences (i.e., community leaders, state agencies).

Timelines of youth-led activities are highly flexible but usually align with academic calendars. Youth may be intrinsically motivated to create change or respond to a request for youth leadership on a specific topic. Thus, compensation may be monetary or through opportunities for youth to network or gain relevant experience, such as through participation in public speaking activities.

Youth leadership is key in higher levels of engagement. Review this resource to identify strategies for encouraging youth leadership in your program and policy development: [Youth Leadership Toolkit](#)

(thenationalcouncil.org, 2012)



ADVANCED

ENGAGEMENT CONTINUED

Example 3: A Youth Leadership Network Partners to Improve Teen HPV Immunization Uptake

Component of Engagement	Advanced Engagement Level Example
Action Required	Regular; weekly to monthly meetings, depending on the state of the initiative; possible community events
Independence	Multiple youth leadership roles
Background Knowledge	Highly knowledgeable, highly passionate youth
Longevity	Variable, a few months to a few years
Benefit to Youth	High engagement, youth empowerment

In this scenario, a youth leadership network advocates to improve HPV immunization uptake for teens. Youth leadership networks promote self-advocacy and self-awareness for youth and young adults, and they carry out activities through meetings, events and social media, with groups of youth often working collaboratively to accomplish these goals. As this group’s mission aligns with the Department’s goal to increase HPV immunization uptake through increased youth programming, the Department reached out to this network to identify opportunities for synergy and collaboration. The Department provides resources (finances, state-level data, infrastructure expertise) and other support to the existing network, allowing them to advocate and support the cause in alignment with the Department’s strategic plan. The youth leadership network uses these resources to design, implement and evaluate one or more initiatives as dictated by youth-level data, working with the Department as an established partner when needed for organizational support. Members may act as individuals or work together as a team. The youth leadership network provides evaluation data and other metrics to the Department, as requested.

Depending on the funding resources available, the Department may take on a more active role in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs, as contracts/grants require. The programs created through this type of collaboration can exist at multiple levels of public health, from the individual to schools to communities, all the way up to policy change.



ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Sample Engagement Strategies by Level

Level/Component of Engagement	Baseline Engagement	Intermediate Engagement	Advanced Engagement
Action Required of Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A single focus group ■ Multiple, unrelated focus groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Multiple, potentially varied interactions (surveys, meetings, research) ■ Near continuous engagement via communication and tasks outside of planned meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Community outreach and other forms of collaboration ■ Active participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of the activity
Independence of Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Entirely adult directed ■ Youth leaders would still serve under an adult, the position(s) may be temporary/one time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Leadership opportunities exist, though final decision making is done by adults ■ Adults supervise; may or may not direct communication/tasks outside of planned meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Minimal guidance by adults ■ Adult role is supervisory only, there to offer support when needed
Background Knowledge/ Interest Needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ All information is presented during planned meetings ■ Minimal prework is required (~30 minutes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Some training is required of participants ■ Youth involved are somewhat passionate about the topic area/scope of the activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Youth are energetically involved ■ Youth are experts in the field of work
Longevity of Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Minor time investment ■ Minimal to no follow up after interactions ■ Meetings are 30-60 minutes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Multiple hours per week and/or month ■ Meetings can range from 60 minutes to half-or full-day planning meetings ■ Some follow up is provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Major time investment, though timeline is flexible given other youth commitments ■ Regular involvement in overall project goals, rather than one element ■ Meetings can range from 60 minutes to half-or full-day planning meetings
Benefit to Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Limited benefit beyond unique experience ■ Potential for impact is largely unknown to youth ■ Possible monetary compensation, though minor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Adult directed networking and skill building ■ Compensation could be offered for each interaction ■ Youth receive updates about project progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ High potential for youth to network, learn new skills and move forward in a defined career direction ■ High engagement can be its own reward, given the passion behind it ■ Compensation commensurate with activities

ENGAGEMENT READINESS

QUESTIONNAIRE

Use the questions in this section to identify your organization's capacity to engage with youth. Your answers will help you to identify the appropriate youth engagement level described in earlier sections of the toolkit.

Action Required of Youth

- if an activity involves meetings, how long are they, how frequent are they and how much participation is expected?
- Are youth involved in the design of the activity, its implementation or its evaluation?
- Will youth have action items between meetings?

Independence of Decision Making

- How do youth interact with project leadership?
- Who has final decision-making power in this initiative?

Background Knowledge/Interest Needed

- What topics are covered, and what is the project's potential reach?
- How will you prepare youth to understand the project's purpose?
- How will you prepare youth to participate in the required activities?

Longevity of Engagement

- How will you provide updates to the participating youth about how their engagement and feedback was applied to the project?
- What sort of connections are maintained after a program's conclusion?

Benefit to Youth

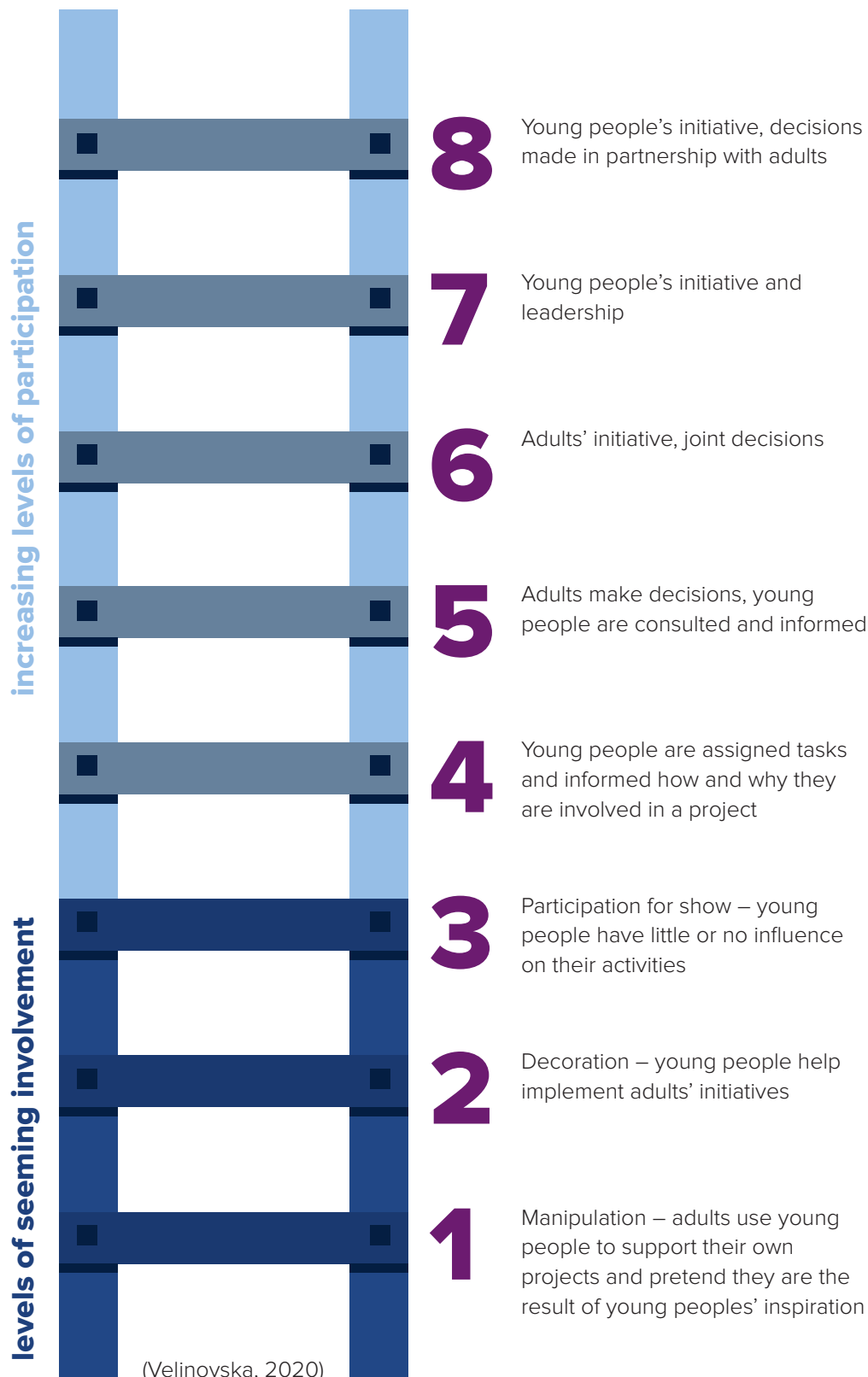
- Does the program offer resume building, networking, or career/skills development to youth?
- How will youth be compensated?



WHAT IS NOT ENGAGEMENT?

As you navigate levels of youth engagement, it's important to acknowledge what does **not** constitute engagement. Roger Hart's earlier research to describe the Ladder of Youth People's Participation (Hart, 2008) cataloged three examples of non-engagement: tokenism, decoration and manipulation. In each of these examples youth are still involved, but not truly engaged.

While few may set out to include youth in egregious ways, effort must be given, and planning must occur to ensure actual youth engagement occurs when involving youth in process, program and policy planning. For example, adult guidance plays an important role in engaging youth effectively but should not drown out the youth voice. Similarly, engagement should never simply "take". Every opportunity to engage youth should also include a viable plan to utilize their input and provide feedback on how their input was utilized, or a reason why it wasn't.



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