

Youth Engagement Recommendations for Planning of a Learning Annex

In order to better understand youth engagement strategies, an environmental scan of organizations supporting youth in skill building and education was completed. The focus was primarily on local service providers. However, organizations outside of Hamilton who have notable youth engagement experience were also contacted. These included Fusion Youth Centre in Ingersoll, the City of Toronto's Youth Equity Strategy, and Winnipeg's Aboriginal Sports Achievement Centre. Interviewees were asked to identify particular strategies they found helpful in engaging youth in their work. They were also specifically asked about reaching out to vulnerable youth. Recommendations were further informed by a literature review of youth engagement.

I. Build Trust

Youth, in general, initially have a mistrust of service providers. It takes time and the expertise of caring staff to create a secure and accepting environment. Therefore, it is important to create partnerships with organizations that already have developed trusting relationships with youth. Adult allies within these organizations can champion ideas and bring youth to the table. Local organizations who have successfully built trust include Hamilton Youth Poetry Slam, NGen Youth Centre, Empowerment Squared, Street Youth Planning Collaborative and Living Rock. Partnering with these organizations will give the initiative credibility with youth.

II. Allow youth to have genuine ownership of projects

True youth engagement must allow for youth autonomy. Successful youth centres such as Fusion Youth Centre and NGen Youth Centre have youth guide decisions about program content and organizational policies. Youth then feel they have authentic roles and that their work has a purpose. This does not mean that they are left to face problems without adult support. Instead, adults provide guidance, expertise, and connections to necessary resources. Many organizations pair youth with adult mentors. For example, the Street Youth Planning collaborative has an adult mentor attend meetings. Fusion Youth Centre has also partnered with local business people who can offer expertise and equipment for youth-led graphics design and media projects.

III. Use youth to attract youth

The most commonly cited way to have youth learn about initiatives was through word of mouth. Therefore, it is imperative to have youth actively reaching out to their peers to recruit. They are in the best position to know where young people gather and how to best approach them. For example, the City of Toronto paid researchers, aged 18-30, to learn about ways to more effectively engage youth in city planning. The youth researchers elicited youth input through creative media such as video and art projects. Their ability to access youth in diverse settings allowed them to gather data in a very short time period. Many organizations such as Hamilton Youth Poetry Slam and Empowerment Squared have past attendees return as mentors for

current youth. Others use university students as volunteers in their homework clubs. They serve as role models but also as peer support.

IV. *Use incentives /Remove barriers*

Youth must feel that their time is valued if they are to participate in programs. Most organizations offered an honorarium ranging from \$15 to \$25 per meeting. All providers felt that free food at meetings was a major draw. Barriers to participation, including transportation costs and parenting responsibilities, must also be addressed. Most organizations offer free bus tokens. The Toronto Youth Equity strategy also provided childcare to young parents who were attending meetings. Finally, youth appreciate having recognition for their work. This can simply be a volunteer appreciation night, a special field trip, or gift certificates. For example, the Winnipeg Aboriginal Sports Achievement Centre attracted youth by offering free rock climbing after a meeting. Their partnership with local professional sports teams also provides free tickets to sporting events. This is an incredible draw for many vulnerable youth who would not normally have the opportunity to attend a professional sporting event. More locally, the Threshold School of Building holds a graduation ceremony and gives a cash bonus upon successful completion of their program.

V. *Make it fun – Use recreation and the arts*

Although youth are intrinsically attracted to programs about future employment and education opportunities, they do not want it delivered in a classroom-based format. There must be an element of fun and some hands on experience. It is not surprising that many of the most successful youth programs have a recreational component. The Winnipeg Aboriginal Sports Achievement Centre organizes a number of teams that get support from local professional and university sports organizations. Empowerment Squared fields an under 18 male soccer team, comprised of players who must commit to attending a homework club two days per week. Youth are also drawn to the arts to express their voice. The Toronto Youth Equity Strategy hired various arts groups to help youth develop art as part of their final report. All the films, poems, photographs, and graphic design that comprised the report were done by inner city youth. Hamilton Youth Poetry Slam also uses the spoken word art form to promote youth expression and literacy. A number of Fusion Youth Centre's most popular programs have an arts focus. These include a drop-in arts space, a free open jam and recording studio, radio broadcasting, digital game development, and graphic design.

VI. *Consider the brand*

The optics of a program are important. If a program is seen as "uncool" it is destined to fail. Therefore, care should be taken in framing and titling an initiative. This should ideally be done with youth input. It helps to have a youth leader that can then promote the initiative so it is seen as youth friendly. Partnering with popular media personalities and youth leaders is also effective in promoting brand development. For example, Hamilton Youth Poetry Slam recruited Shane Koyczan, Canada's most well-known spoken word artist, to perform at their launch.

Empowerment Squared has players from the McMaster University soccer team help out with practices. Design of program spaces also further promotes a program's youth friendly image. When St. Joseph's Hospital decided to open an off-site centre addressing youth mental health issues they recruited a youth committee to find and design the space.

VII. *Be transparent*

Youth are aware when they are only being used for token consultation. From the start, organizations must be genuine and clear about their idea. They must present what they want from youth and what they are offering in return for their participation. The expected level of involvement must be clearly stated. Questions they may ask include:

- Am I going to be on the planning committee or just part of a focus group?
- What is the time commitment? Will I get paid?
- Will I develop skills through my involvement? Can I put this on my CV?
- If this is a youth led initiative, what are the parameters?

Youth are also action-driven and results-oriented. They want to see the tangible outcomes of their input. If their input is not taken into account in the program development, trust will be lost and further involvement unlikely. Essentially, organizations must genuinely *listen* to youth. At Empowerment Squared, staff members sit down with youth twice a year to get feedback on the program. When they were told that Wednesday was not a good day for tutoring sessions, the organization responded promptly and switched days. The youth felt they were heard and truly had a voice in shaping the organization.

VIII. *Be flexible*

Typical adult forms of participation might not apply to youth. For example, youth may not feel comfortable attending formal board meetings so more informal processes may have to be engaged. Some inventive ways of doing this include:

- Running a "parallel" meeting, separating adults and youth into two groups. Each group discuss first then comes back together to voice opinions and reach consensus. This permits both groups to discuss in their most comfortable formats. This strategy is effectively used by the city of Hampton, Virginia, considered a leader in youth engagement.
- Have a youth chair or co-chair meeting.
- Use photo voice, documentary film, speaker's corner or other arts based media to elicit youth input.

- Create non-board opportunities for youth input. These can include ad hoc committees, advisory groups, or workshops.

Being flexible also means an organization must be prepared to go off topic at times. Rene Reid, youth advisor for the City of Hamilton, felt that being too tied to process was one factor in the demise of the Hamilton Youth Advisory Council. She mentioned something as small as requiring the application be dropped off as a hard copy to City Hall, rather than being submitted on-line, was a deterrent to participation. She also noted that recruitment was not youth-friendly, as it was done through advertising in the Hamilton Spectator. As a result, they attracted high achievers and not a representative sample of the city youth.

In summary, the success of the proposed learning annex lies in engagement of the youth it is trying to serve. The above best practices offer an approach to making the learning annex a truly youth-led initiative. Hamilton is fortunate to have a number of organizations that already are effectively engaging youth in their programming and development. The learning annex committee can draw on their expertise as it moves forward. By collaborating with other youth organizations, we can share resources and coordinate services to best serve Hamilton youth.