



LEARN AND SERVE
COLORADO
@ DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

SPECIAL POINTS
OF INTEREST:

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SL Quality Standard: Youth Voice

Service-learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing and evaluating service-learning experiences.

The instructor provides the framework within which service-learning activities will occur (so students will apply and practice what the teacher expects them to learn), but students should have as strong a role as possible in the project from preparation through reflection.

Indicators:

1. Service-learning engages youth in generating ideas during the planning, implementation, and evaluation process.
2. Service-learning involves youth in the decision-making process throughout the service-learning experience.
3. Service-learning involves youth and adults in creating an environment that supports trust and open expression of ideas.
4. Service-learning promotes acquisition of knowledge and skills to enhance youth leadership and decision-making.
5. Service-learning involves youth in evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the service-learning experience.

Why is Youth Voice Important?

When an organization is intentional and strategic about providing quality experiences around youth action and youth voice, there are positive benefits to youth and adults.



IT IS GOOD YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

In the last 20 years, discussions about what youth need and can do have moved from problem prevention to preparation; from preparation to participation; and from participation to power sharing:...Even preparation and development are not sufficient goals. Young people need to be fully engaged—in their own development, in organizations and in their communities.

YOUNG PEOPLE BRING ENERGY AND CREATIVITY

Authentically engaging youth in partnerships with adults can bring fresh perspectives, tenacity, and sometimes much needed creativity to the work. Research shows that working with youth enhances the commitment and energy of adults.

YOUNG PEOPLE CAN DIAGNOSE PROBLEMS AND PROVIDE REALITY CHECKS

With firsthand knowledge about their environments, they are the experts. They can enhance existing pools of data that inform policy decisions, and provide an “inside perspective” on problem-solving.



From Minimal Interest to Maximum Participation

Until just a few years ago, both young people and teachers at **Grand Junction High School** in Grand Junction, Colorado, had balked at the required 30 hours of service. Students were only barely meeting the minimum requirements. Virtually any form of community service was credited and only a brief reflection period was included. Few connections were made between what was being learned in the field and how that learning applied to students' daily lives and studies.

When Program Coordinator Judy Jepson took over the program in 1996, she looked to the students – both to understand their declining interest in community service and to find ways to shift to a service-learning model that would tie service work to the curriculum. A small group of student volunteers agreed to conduct surveys with peers and teachers. From their findings, these students developed what they believed would be an ideal service-learning program that met the needs of both students and community members. Jepson facilitated the process and acted as a team player, allowing students to shape the program for themselves.



The students devised three key components for the program. First, they envisioned a series of service-learning options for students in various fields of interest. Second, they recommended the formation of an executive committee of 20 self-selected members who would oversee operations. And last, they designed a “Bringing Standards to Students” program that would engage all students in learning about and participating in the school wide adoption of state standards.

As students began powering their own service-learning experiences, a dramatic increase occurred not only in the number of hours students participated but in the number of students who were eagerly engaged in activities. All 1,700 students now complete an average of 70 service hours each – 40 hours beyond the school mandate. A “Millennium Club” honors students who perform 100 hours or more by presenting them with special tassels to wear on their graduation cap.

The program also endeavors to include students who might otherwise feel marginalized in the school's academic climate. Students who are struggling academically – particularly those with limited English proficiency – are recruited and trained to become tutors for elementary school students. Both older and younger students find their grades and self-confidence grow as a result of this unusual partnership. The service-learning program now includes an annual day of service focused on a community issue, a grant-writing initiative, a student-published quarterly newsletter, the Youth on Board program in which students serve as board members in agencies funded by United Way, and the “Teen Court” collaboration with the city attorney's office in which students charged with a crime can be judged by peers instead of receiving formal charges. Other groups exist and new ones are developed as students create them. Students currently manage, track and document the program in its entirety through a comprehensive database.

Judy Jepson says that outreach is crucial. She reports that students are repeatedly invited to participate in service-learning activities from their first weeks at school. For example, older students host an annual “Youth Service Day” in which all freshmen work in teams of ten on various projects in the community. In another example, every student receives a booklet that lists service opportunities available that semester.



Jepson notes, “A youth-owned program enables all different types of young people to shift from one type of leadership to another as they seek and create roles that are of interest to them. You don't get that with an adult-driven model.”

Challenges and Strategies for Success

Many adults see the need for meaningful youth engagement in organizational policymaking and decision-making. Young people clearly want and need more significant involvement in community building endeavors. Why is the process, then, often a difficult one?

The majority of challenges facing youth and adults alike are related to the relative newness of the concept. On a large scale, youth voice and decision making are still in the experimental phase. Hesitation and fear of failure from both parties can make the implementation process tentative, poorly structured or indefinitely delayed.

Issues such as recruitment, logistics, buy-in, and other concerns certainly surface and are important to resolve. Yet the root cause of many of the challenges faced by educators, community members, young people and others in implementing youth voice centers on the philosophy and commitment of those parties involved. Listed below are five challenges and suggested strategies for success.

Challenge: Not everyone shares the same definition of “youth voice.”

Strategies: Hold a program or organization wide meeting with young people, adults, parents and others to discuss, develop consensus around and define “youth voice.”

Explore with meeting participants examples of youth voice that exist already within the community and nationwide.

Prominently feature the definition and role of youth voice in trainings, materials and the mission statement. Decide how it will be addressed among partners and with the community.

Take it from the first step of talking about it and defining it to implementing it within the organization. Provide frequent opportunities for reflection and feedback among young people and adults.



Challenge: Adults and young people have preconceived notions about one another’s understanding of and capacity for a truly successful youth voice component.

Strategies: Map out the needs and assets of all youth and adult participants so that the scope and limitations of everyone involved is clearly outlined and understood.

Establish ground rules that promote trust in the abilities and skills of one another, e.g., treating each person with respect, being open-minded, listening without interruption and sharing ideas and resources.

View one another as assets, not as problems or obstacles. Provide and accept meaningful roles for one another.



Adapted from the Education Commission of the States, Learning In Deed issue paper ,
Integrating Youth Voice in Service-learning, 2001

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Download this guide developed and written by youth
about Youth Advisory Boards

<http://www.cdphe.state.co.us/ps/adolschool/healthyyouthcolorado/files/YPHGuidebookFINALVersion2.pdf>

Challenges and Strategies for Success

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Challenge: Youth voice often becomes merely the “tokenizing” of young people.

Strategies: Be extremely thoughtful about how and why the organization wants young people involved.

Truly commit to listening to young people. Receive their recommendations and insights and give them equal consideration as those of adults.

View young people as equal partners in significant and substantial ways right from the beginning. Asking for their contribution after decisions have been made or simply as a gesture will be unsuccessful and may damage the potential for a working relationship between adults and young people in the future.

Trust that young people are not going to make “bad” decisions. By giving them parameters for decision making, they will act as checks and balances with each other.

Challenge: The teacher, educator or other adult has difficulty relinquishing decision making responsibilities to young people.

Strategies: Encourage the adult to start from a point of personal comfort when giving young people the “power” to impact important decisions or initiatives.

Have adults define an area of their work or role where they feel comfortable letting go. As they adjust to the shift in control and gain confidence in young people’s skills, they can relinquish more of their reach.

Provide ongoing support, peer mentoring or professional development for adults who will be working with young people in a youth decision making capacity.



Challenge: Not everyone in the organization buys into the concept or practice of youth voice or wants it incorporated into the organization’s structure.

Strategies: Start small. Gain support from a few key players to lay the foundation, and then utilize their endorsement for wider buy-in.

Build support from all angles. Garnering support from the staff, local community members, school officials, parents and young people will lend a stronger argument for the case for youth voice.

Provide ongoing training and support for all those who will be involved in the process.

Carefully schedule adequate and realistic staff time for manning or overseeing the youth voice component.



West Student Wins National Volunteerism Award

SUE McMILLIN THE GAZETTE: Colorado Springs, February 20, 2010

Nearly three years ago, Kara Zehner started helping at a therapeutic riding program. A few months later, she got involved with a program that raises money to train dogs to detect land mines. Never did she imagine that those two things would lead to an unexpectedly exciting trip to the principal's office at West Middle School.



But that's exactly what happened last week when Kara, 13, learned she was one of two Colorado winners of the 2010 Prudential Spirit of Community Award. The award honors 102 students — including one middle schooler and one high schooler from each state and the District of Columbia — for their volunteerism. The winners were announced Tuesday. Each winner gets \$1,000 and trip to Washington, D.C., in May for several events.

"I went in and everyone is in there clapping for me and saying I won," she said. "It was just amazing. I was about to cry." Kara shared the news with her family, but they had to keep it secret until the announcement this week.

She said she was excited about the trip because she loves history and Washington D.C. The money, she said – and mom Julie concurred – goes straight into the college fund. "We're really proud of her," said Julie Zehner. "These were things she came up with on her own and she was doing them without looking for any recognition."

Kara said she's ridden horses since she was a tot, so when she heard about the Colorado Springs Therapeutic Riding Center at Mark Reyner Stables she decided to volunteer. She helps clean up after the horses, gets them ready for riders and leads them while therapists work with riders.

"What I really like best is watching the kids and the horses have a good connection," she said. She was in sixth grade when she joined the Children Against Mines Program (Champs), which raises money to train dogs to detect land mines left around the world. She now heads the West Champs club, which has raised a few thousand dollars toward the \$20,000 needed for one dog. The group sells T-shirts, runs concessions and does other activities.

"I love animals and I love helping people," said Kara, who will attend Coronado High School next year and wants to become a teacher. "Winning an award for doing that is even better."

Why is Youth Voice Important?

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IT PROMOTES LEARNING AND LONG-TERM GROWTH

Youth provide a new generation of leadership; opportunities for youth voice builds their capacity for critical thinking, leadership and organizational skills, while promoting practical civic education. These experiences provide young people with the tools they need to be current and continued active members of their communities.

YOUNG PEOPLE WIDEN THE SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

Young people have a great deal of influence on their extended families. They can speak "their truth" to media and decision makers in a different way than paid professionals.

ADULTS IMPROVE & ORGANIZATIONS IMPROVE

Recent research found that some adults unknowingly buy into stereotypes about youth; however, through firsthand experience with competent youth they begin to perceive young people differently and also experience a stronger sense of community.

Partially adapted and/or excerpted from Youth Activism.org and *At the Table: Making the Case for Youth in Decision-Making*



Making Youth Voice Work!

Recommendations for Youth

These suggestions come from young people:

- Don't wait! Young people have the ability to make a difference now. They have the right to advocate for participating in community and state decision making processes, particularly when centered on issues that affect or are important to young people.
- Speak up! Explore with your service-learning coordinator the roles young people can play within the program's design and management. Adults may think young participants are not interested in or capable of handling these areas. Discuss what responsibilities are available to young people and how you might orchestrate a shift in their control.
- Ask for training and support as you adopt a leadership role in the decision making process. Don't be afraid to ask questions about policies and procedures you do not understand.
- Follow through, and hold yourself – and adults – accountable. Assuming an equal voice in leadership means assuming all the responsibilities that accompany the role.
- Document your involvement as a practitioner of “youth voice” using photos, video/audio, journals or other methods. One of the most common requests that service-learning organizations receive from young people is visual presentations that show other young people in action.



Recommendations for Adults

Most service-learning initiatives would benefit from adding a youth voice component. Many program coordinators, however, stress the importance of preliminarily assessing whether the organization is truly interested in working with youth as equal partners; has the staffing, resources, and capability needed; and has a clear and agreed-upon understanding of the definition of “youth voice” and what it will look like within the organization.

Following are some recommendations:

- Identify and make clear what is expected from the adults and young people involved in the program. Provide parameters and guidelines, as well as an assessment process that can be used on a regular basis as a measurement tool.
- Look to other organizations for examples, best practices and advice, but tailor the youth voice to meet the needs of your organization or program. Other models may be impressive and successful, but youth voice only works when it meets the needs of the organization at hand.
- Be creative and flexible. Be willing to make mistakes and share those with young people. Part of treating young people as equal partners is admitting that one individual may not have all the answers. Utilize the assets of young people by drawing from their unique perspective and experience.
- Allow young people to fail and trust that they will find a workable approach, even though it may not be the “best” or the “quickest.” People learn by doing and take tremendous pride in accomplishing things that may have proved challenging at first. Overcoming obstacles and earning success are what foster and sustain an involvement in service or civic engagement.