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YOUTH COUNCILS

Empowering Young People to Shape Local Decisions

Child-Centered Governance Research-to-Policy Brief Series



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When young people are engaged in decision-making, local policies and programs may become more equitable, effective and responsive to real-time issues impacting youth. Youth councils provide a structured way for local governments to include children and youth in governance. This brief highlights evidence on youth councils, their impacts on communities and young people and considerations for communities to implement or strengthen these councils.

YOUTH COUNCILS AT A GLANCE

Across the U.S., government decision-making affects children and young people every day. When youth perspectives are included in policymaking, programs and investments become more responsive, equitable, and effective. Centering young people's voices helps build policies that reflect lived experiences, strengthens trust in in public institutions, and fosters civic engagement.[1]

Youth councils are structured, ongoing opportunities convened by local or state government for children and young people to engage in civic life and inform government programs, services, policies, legislation, budgets and other decisions. They may take the form of youth councils, advisory boards, youth commissions, or other formal bodies. While membership, roles and authority vary, these groups connect young people with civic life and provide opportunities to inform government programs, services, policies, legislation, budgets, and other decisions that affect their lives.

IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

Emerging evidence from case studies and research indicates that meaningful youth participation contributes to a wide range of positive outcomes.

- More Child-Friendly Policies: Case studies demonstrate that when children and youth councils are given opportunities to meaningfully impact policy decisions, they can strengthen and improve outcomes for children. Across the country, councils have supported the development and passage of policies, including guaranteed access to legal counsel, inclusive urban planning, safer public transportation systems and increased access to health care.[2,3,4,5]
- Improvements in Child Well-Being: Research shows that when young people are meaningfully included in decisions that affect them, policies can become more equitable and effective, particularly for marginalized groups.[6] At the individual level, studies consistently demonstrate that meaningful participation in decision-making more broadly has a positive impact on children's mental health, well-being and academic performance.[7,8,9,10,11,12]
- Community Resilience: Research has found that children and youth participation can build resilience in communities, improving community disaster preparedness, and that increased civic engagement can help communities weather economic downturns.[13,14,15]
- Stronger Civic Identity and Leadership: Research shows that participation nurtures civic confidence and leadership among young people, contributing to enhanced civic engagement and strengthened democratic processes.[16]

"It felt good to leave my mark on the city that shaped me. It was about knowing that small actions can create real change."- Teen Leadership Team Member, Decatur, GA[17]

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KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Youth councils are most effective when participation is authentic, supported by trained adults and embedded in structured decision-making.[18,19] Thoughtful implementation builds trust, strengthens policy outcomes and supports youth development, while tokenistic or under-resourced councils risk limited impact and eroded confidence.

To improve effectiveness and implementation, communities should focus on factors like influence, adult capacity, resources, representation, and accountability that support meaningful youth engagement.

- **Authentic Influence and Accountability:** Research shows that youth participation only builds trust when it has real policy impact. Councils must avoid tokenism by creating clear feedback loops that demonstrate how youth input shapes decisions.[4,18]
- **Adult Capacity and Training:** Successful implementation depends on adults who are prepared to share power. Dedicated staff should be embedded within decision-making spaces and receive training on addressing adultism, practicing equitable engagement and fostering intergenerational planning.[18,19,20]
- **Resources, Incentives and Compensation:** Reimburse participation costs and consider financial or non-financial compensation for youth expertise and lived experience.[16] Consider involving youth in decisions about how compensation is delivered, ensure transparency and align practices with local laws.
- **Equitable Representation:** Go beyond traditional diversity metrics. Actively engage youth who are rarely invited into civic spaces and ensure they are compensated for their time and expertise, so participation is truly inclusive.[21,22] Consider alternative methods of participation to meet youth where they are, including online meetings and social media. Challenge assumptions about who is "ideal" for these roles.
- **Structure and Clarity:** One way to support continuity and increase transparency is to establish a clear annual calendar with defined goals, agendas and roles.[4]

YOUTH COUNCILS IN PRACTICE

Child and youth councils across the U.S. provide young people a structured way to influence local policies — from education and safety to recreation and mental health. The examples below showcase innovative approaches that amplify youth voices, shape policy, and foster civic engagement.

- **Denver Mayor's Youth Commission, Colorado:** Denver established the Mayor's Youth Commission in municipal code in 2012, creating a formal advisory role for young people to work alongside adult commissioners and advise the Mayor, city leaders and the Office of Children's Affairs on policies and programs affecting young people. The Commission also provides opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills and engage directly in civic life. Learn more here.

- **City of Houston Youth Ambassadors, Texas:** Launched in 2020 within the Mayor's Office of Education and Youth Engagement, this youth-led program amplifies voices and informs city initiatives. Fifty ambassadors are selected annually through a youth-led process, ensuring representation from diverse and underrepresented communities. They lead projects including developing a youth mental health guide, hosting podcasts, and leading surveys on emergency preparedness. Ambassadors are compensated and have flexible participation options. The program strengthens civic engagement, informs city policy and programs, and builds partnerships with local organizations to expand youth influence. Learn more here.

- **Youth Opportunities Advisory Board (YOAB), Boulder, Colorado:** Composed of 16 high school students appointed by the City Manager, YOAB ensures that youth voices actively shape Boulder's local government. Representing

the city's diverse youth community, the board works within the framework of UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative to promote inclusion, safety, and belonging. Members advise city officials on programs, policies, and planning, while leading initiatives to reduce bullying and recognize outstanding youth volunteers. Their work demonstrates how empowering young people as civic ambassadors strengthens community well-being and embeds youth perspectives in municipal decision-making. Learn more here.

GETTING STARTED

Interested in establishing or strengthening a youth council or other formal youth advisory structure in your community? **Start by mapping existing youth engagement structures, such as advisory boards, school programs, or community initiatives**. Even informal mechanisms can provide lessons on what works and what doesn't.

Engage children and young people from the earliest stage. This can be through consulting youth who are already advising locally or partnering with community-based organizations that have established youth networks. Identify key stakeholders — government agencies, community leaders and youth — and consider the training and resources needed for effective collaboration. Engage youth in planning how and when the council will meet to maximize participation from marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Start small with a pilot council or youth advisory process, focusing on inclusive, flexible and accessible participation. Establish feedback mechanisms, so youth see how their contributions influence decisions. Over time, trust, capacity and institutional support can grow, laying the foundation for meaningful long-term youth engagement.

To learn more about how to establish or strengthen child and youth councils, review UNICEF's Child and Youth Councils: Guidance to Support Meaningful Youth Participation.

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WHAT TO EXPECT FROM UNICEF USA

UNICEF USA partners with government leaders, youth and key stakeholders to advance child-centered governance—supporting communities to strengthen how decisions affecting children are made so that policies and systems consistently uphold children's rights and improve their well-being.

What's next: UNICEF USA will continue to roll out additional tools, guidance, research, and peer learning opportunities to support municipalities at different stages of their journey.

Sign up for our Communities for Every Child newsletter to stay informed about research, advocacy and child-friendly governance initiatives.

Learn more in our full Child-Centered Governance Research-to-Policy Brief series: Children's Budgets • Youth Councils • Child Impact Statements • Youth Ombuds Offices • Children's Cabinets

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