

# **YOUTH IN GOVERNANCE**

**A GUIDE FOR INVOLVING  
YOUTH AS DECISION MAKERS  
ON BOARDS AND COMMITTEES**

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# INTRODUCTION

4-H provides young people with many opportunities to learn about themselves, their communities, and how they can partner with others to bring about change in the world. From local service learning projects to state and national events, 4-H'ers are involved in making a difference.

To be truly engaged as citizens in their communities, young people need to make their voices heard. This includes working as partners with others in the community to make decisions that affect their lives. Young people don't have to wait until they're "adults" to become actively involved in making decisions that affect organizations, government, and the lives of others. They are citizens **now**. As citizens, they have the right and responsibility to be involved and to have their voices heard at the local, state, and even national level. They have the talent and ability to be decision makers and change agents.



One way young people can be involved and have their voices heard is to serve on boards and committees for the government, organizations, civic groups, businesses, and other bodies. Whether on a county 4-H advisory committee, the Chamber of Commerce, or the school board, young people can have a great impact on and through a decision-making group. While working together, youth and adults each bring strengths to the table that make for effective decision-making.

This manual is designed to guide adults who are working in partnership with young people on boards, committees, and other governing bodies. The guide answers the following questions:

- **WHAT IS YOUTH IN GOVERNANCE?**
- **WHY BOTHER?**
- **WHERE DO WE START?**
- **WHAT DO WE DO THEN?**
- **HOW DO WE LEARN MORE?**

*Youth in Governance: A Guide for Involving Youth as Decision Makers on Boards and Committees* does not contain everything you need to know about youth in governance. In fact, it only touches the surface of something that can change your life and your entire community. Be sure to check out the Tennessee 4-H Youth Development Web site (<http://www.utextension.utk.edu/4h>) and the other resources on the last page for more information!



# WHAT IS YOUTH IN GOVERNANCE?

Does youth in governance mean involving young people in county government? Yes! Is it including young people on the boards of community agencies? Yes! Is it youth getting involved as decision makers in any committee, organization, or board? Yes, it's all these things, and more!

For many, *youth in governance* is a difficult term to define and an even harder concept to implement. Youth in governance occurs in a variety of settings—government, businesses, organizations, civic groups, and more—and the role of both youth and adult board members changes for each unique group. However, the basic definition remains the same.

## DEFINING YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

Youth in governance starts with young people and adults forming partnerships to address needs in the community. Let's first look at a definition for youth-adult partnerships, the basic element of youth in governance.



### YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

- Are cooperative efforts between youth and adults;
- Usually begin with a mutual need that impacts both youth and adults;
- Benefit both members of the partnership and the community; and,
- Are built on respect, communication, investment (training and development), and meaningful involvement.

## DEFINING YOUTH IN GOVERNANCE

**YOUTH IN GOVERNANCE** refers to those situations where youth work in partnership with adults to set the overall policy direction of organizations, institutions, and coalitions. Specifically, *governance* refers to the ability to lead and vote as a full, participating member in a board or governing structure. Young people may work on boards of directors, sanctioned committees, planning bodies, and advisory groups. The youth are voting members and equal stakeholders in all decisions that come before the group, including such issues as budget, staff, and strategic planning.

Youth in governance is also referred to as **YOUTH ON BOARDS** or **YOUTH AS DECISION MAKERS**. This includes a variety of efforts to engage young people in determining outcomes or decision making. Decision making can be related to an issue, a project, a program, or an organization.



## WHY BOTHER?

Changing anything—particularly an organization or governing body—is never easy, and forming youth-adult partnerships takes time, patience, and effort. So why should you dedicate yourself and your resources to restructuring your board or committee in order to involve youth in governance? Because the results are worth it!

### RESEARCH SAYS . . .

Researchers have studied the impact that youth in governance can have on adults, organizations, and the youth themselves. All three groups benefit when youth are utilized as decision-makers. Here is a look at some of the positive outcomes.

**ADULTS** who work in partnership with young people

- Witness the competence of youth and perceive them as critical to organizational improvement;
- Enhance their commitment to the organization;
- Feel more effective and competent in working with youth;
- Develop a stronger sense of community connectedness;
- Expand thinking both professionally and personally; and,
- Obtain an increased understanding of young people.



**ORGANIZATIONS** that involve youth as decision-makers

- Develop an expectation of youth involvement;
- Utilize young people to clarify the organization's mission;
- Become more connected and responsive to youth in the community;
- Place greater value on inclusivity and representation;
- Are more appealing to potential funders;
- Reach out to the community;
- Increase understanding of organization programs;
- Are infused with new energy and ideas; and,
- Develop resources for the future.

**YOUTH** serving in governing roles experience

- Increased self-esteem, popularity, sense of personal control, and enhanced identity development;
- Greater development of life skills including leadership, public speaking, dependability, and job responsibility;
- Decreased loneliness, shyness, and hopelessness;
- Less involvement in risky behaviors like drug use and juvenile delinquency;
- Better academic achievement;
- Increased safety;
- Exposure to diverse people, ideas, and situations; and,
- Introduction to more resources, support, and role models.



# WHERE DO WE START?

Before a board or committee can begin utilizing youth in governing roles, there are several factors that must be considered. Here are some steps for boards and committees that are seeking to involve youth as decision-makers.

## ASSESS YOUR READINESS

The board should be willing to have flexible meeting times; have the attitude of doing something *with* and not *for* youth; prepare to train youth members; and adjust how the board supports its members.

## PREPARE YOUR BOARD FOR YOUTH MEMBERS

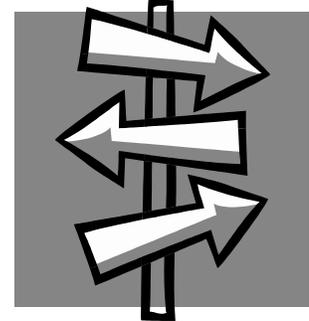
To prepare for the change on your board, create a vision for what you can accomplish with youth members, discuss the positive qualities of youth (versus stereotypes), and stay positive and resolute in your goal.

## CREATE A POSITION

The roles youth can fill on boards may be determined by how the members are chosen. Where possible, adjust by-laws to accommodate newly created positions.

## CHOOSE YOUTH REPRESENTATIVES/MEMBERS

Where legally allowable, youth members should be chosen in the same way as other board members, either by election or other method to best represent the board and its constituents.



## CONSIDER LEGAL ISSUES

If your board deals with confidential or sensitive issues, consult a lawyer to determine the appropriate level of youth involvement in these matters.

## RECRUIT YOUTH

Conduct a broad-based search and interviews to find youth with the time, talent, and inclination to join your board.

## SELECT QUALIFIED APPLICANTS

Allow your selection process to bring out the best in your applicants, rather than “weed them out.” Conduct interviews, ask for references, and look for diversity, a desire to advocate, and a confident voice.

## DETERMINE RESPONSIBILITIES

Find the right person for the board instead of for a specific task. After selecting the youth, the entire board should define the members’ responsibilities. Be flexible and allow the job to change with the young person’s growing abilities.



## WHAT DO WE DO THEN?

Once your board or committee has installed youth members, you shouldn't assume that they will automatically have the skills necessary to fully participate. All new board members—both youth and adult—need training. Here are a few training tips:

- Provide new members with the history of the board, previous issues, past actions taken, and other useful information.
- Give new members a copy of the minutes from previous meetings. This will acquaint them with the flow of your meetings and the intricacies of meeting procedures.
- Provide new members with a copy of the agenda and any needed materials before your meeting so they can review the information and be prepared.
- Be patient! New members have a steep learning curve and will need time to adjust.
- Make sure board members know one another on a personal level. This makes all members feel more comfortable with and connected to your board.
- Advise your board in advance of who the new members are and when they will begin attending meetings.
- Have an open dialogue about appropriate meeting dress. Will the new members need to dress up, or will the board move in a more casual direction?
- Establish board mentors for all new members. Also, provide on-going support for new members, maintain communication, and set up meetings with the executive director or committee chairs to ensure that all members are part of informal discussions that occur between meetings.
- Orient new members to board lingo.
- Hold meetings at times that are convenient to new members.
- Offer to provide transportation to meetings for new members.
- Connect with the youth members' parents and provide them with all the necessary information. Make sure that everyone feels supported and validated.
- Ensure that ALL members are trained in working with intergenerational relationships and diversity. Commit at least one board meeting to this training and 5-10 minutes at the other meetings.



Most of all, remember that all boards, particularly ones involving youth in governance, work best in an atmosphere of

**RESPECT**

**COMMUNICATION**

**INVESTMENT**

**MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT**



## HOW DO WE LEARN MORE?

Are you interested in finding out more about youth in governance and how you can play a part in shaping the future of your community? Visit the Tennessee 4-H Youth Development Web site at <http://www.utextension.utk.edu/4h> for more information on youth in governance. Also surf the Web to these other great resources:

At the Table	<a href="http://www.atthetable.org">http://www.atthetable.org</a>
The Innovation Center	<a href="http://www.theinnovationcenter.org">http://www.theinnovationcenter.org</a>
Youth as Resources	<a href="http://www.cyar.org">http://www.cyar.org</a>
Youth Engagement and Voice	<a href="http://www.youthengagementandvoice.org">http://www.youthengagementandvoice.org</a>
Youth Leadership Institute	<a href="http://www.yli.org">http://www.yli.org</a>
Youth on Board	<a href="http://www.youthonboard.org">http://www.youthonboard.org</a>
Youth Service America	<a href="http://www.ysa.org/yvi/index.cfm">http://www.ysa.org/yvi/index.cfm</a>



The material in this guide is taken from the following sources:

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Fredericks, L., Kaplan, E., & Zeisler, J. (2001). *Integrating youth voice in service-learning*. Denver: Learning in Deed.

Justinianno, J. & Scherer, C. (2001). *Youth voice: A guide for engaging youth in leadership and decision-making in service-learning programs*. Washington, D.C.: Points of Light Foundation.

\*\* This resource is also available at [http://www.ysa.org/pdf/files/YV\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.ysa.org/pdf/files/YV_Guide.pdf)

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Agricultural Extension Service, Charles L. Norman, Dean.

