CENTER FOR COURT INNOVATION

Increasing the Voice of Youth

Strategies for New York City Teens Influencing Public Policy

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CENTER FOR COURTS AND THE COMMUNITY

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Acknowledgements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

This report describes findings from a study that sought to understand how young people can become important players in the policymaking process. Youth civic engagement literature shows that there are low levels of civic and political participation among American youth, in part because there are few policy structures to support youth in community governance. Many youth programs that work to influence public policy have been designed in response to this, but evaluation of these programs has focused on the impact of participation on the individual youth themselves – their knowledge of a particular issue, self-esteem, communication skills, and perceptions of self-efficacy – as opposed to measuring the impact that a particular youth campaign had on policy.

In an attempt to understand what the most effective strategies are for youth having a voice in public policy, the study focused on the supply and demand for youth input. On the supply side, we examined several New York City programs that work to increase the voice of inner city youth in policy in order to determine what have proven to be effective strategies for influencing policy. On the demand side, we sought to determine what policymakers want to know from youth and how the voice of young people can most effectively be heard and respected. The findings of the study will be used to inform the Youth Justice Board, an after-school program of the Center for Court Innovation, that seeks to influence public policy related to juvenile justice issues.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews with seven program coordinators and directors from five New York City youth programs that work with high school-aged students on policy issues were conducted. Interview questions for the program coordinators and directors focused on program operations and how policy issues are chosen, methods of advocacy, the structure of the youth-adult partnerships, what they have found to be effective strategies for influencing policy, and barriers the youth and programs face. Additionally, eight policymakers from several New York City and New York State agencies that focus on youth issues were interviewed to determine what types of information they want to receive from young people, and what needs to happen for youth-crafted recommendations to be accorded greater weight in the formulation of public policy. Finally, two focus groups with current and former Youth Justice Board members were conducted to learn about the young people's own experiences with policy advocacy and the challenges they have faced.

Findings

Key findings from the study fell into two categories: advocacy and program operations. Advocacy findings focused on "how to" strategies for influencing policymakers, including:

- **Building coalitions:** Collaborating with and building on the work of other youth groups – and with adult groups as well – is a necessary factor for success.

- **Identifying and understanding issues of power:** Youth advocates should be able to identify who has the power to implement their recommendation and direct their presentations at those people.
- **Authenticity of youth voice vs. professionalism:** When policymakers hear from teenagers, they want to hear about the youths' experiences as teenagers, not as "mini-adults." At the same time, some policymakers state that they want youth to come in and present in a professional manner, so youth need to find a balance between authenticity of voice and professionalism.
- **Personal narratives:** Personal stories can help make policy recommendations more compelling.
- **Methods of advocacy:** Teens' approach should vary depending upon the public status of the person advocates are trying to influence. The more public the figure, the more public the campaign to influence him or her should be.
- **Understanding implications:** Youth should make clear that they understand the implications of their policy recommendations, including why alternatives would not work, who would be affected by their recommendations and how, and what the fiscal impact of their proposals are.
- **Branding:** Policymakers want to hear from young people but often do not have access to them in the necessary timeframe. Therefore, youth programs should brand their groups as sources of trustworthy young people that policymakers can go to at any time for thoughtful youth input.

Findings related to program operations concerned structure, the types of barriers that staff and youth face when doing this work, and realistic measures of success:

- **Youth-Adult Partnerships:** Youth need to feel that they are driving the program and the advocacy work.
- **Defining Success:** Program staff need to identify realistic measures of campaign success that are achievable within the timeframe of their program, so as to maintain the young people's feelings of agency.
- **Barriers for Youth:** Young people have familial, educational, and recreational obligations that will restrict the amount of time they can work on a campaign. Combined with the limited timeframe of the program, this can be a barrier for developing a winning campaign.
- **Barriers for Programs:** Staff training on the policy issue being addressed is an essential component of the program so that program staff can best support the work of the youth. Additionally, because of expectations of funding agencies and parent organizations, programs are often limited in the types of advocacy they can engage in.

The findings of this study will hopefully be used to enhance the credibility of youth with policymakers and to produce civically engaged young people whose voices will be able to make valuable contributions to the formulation of youth-related public policy.

If the policies and programs don't work for young people, then we're doing the wrong thing.
                     - Deputy Commissioner, NYC Department of Youth and Community Development

INTRODUCTION

In the field of civic engagement, there is often a disconnect between theory and practice. Efforts to engage youth routinely begin with the ambitious intention to mobilize the youth perspective and transform it into concrete recommendations that exert a real influence on future policy and practice. However, advocacy work done by youth is complex, and such success is often difficult to attain, and just as difficult to measure. Youth civic engagement programs, therefore, generally end up focusing on the impact of participation on the individual youths themselves – their knowledge of a particular issue, self-esteem, communication skills, and perceptions of self-efficacy – as opposed to measuring the success of a particular campaign.

This report describes findings from a study that sought to understand how young people can not only develop skills that will stay with them throughout their lives but change the lives of others by becoming involved in the policymaking process. The study adopted a two-pronged approach focusing respectively on the supply and demand for youth input. On the supply side, we examined several New York City programs that work to increase the voice of inner city youth in order to determine the most effective strategies. On the demand side, we sought to understand what policymakers want to learn from youth, and what they look for when evaluating recommendations and policy ideas formulated by young people. By understanding what policymakers want to know, youth can become more tactically effective, combining their unique insights with an approach that will truly resonate with their target audiences. Finally, by showing instances of youth as thoughtful contributors to policy formation, the study seeks to encourage policymakers to look at young people as a genuine resource whose input is necessary and invaluable.

This report begins by summarizing some of the key literature related to youth civic engagement and advocacy. The report then describes the project methodology and key findings related to youth advocacy and programming. We conclude with a discussion of implications for youth civic engagement programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth Civic Engagement

After-school civic engagement programs have been developed in response to low levels of civic, community and political participation among today's youth (Putnam 1996, 2000), particularly among poor and minority youth (Jankowski 1992, 2002). These programs have also been driven by young people's desire to challenge the view that they are "future citizens" and not "present civic actors." Adolescents have few channels for political participation (they are not old enough to vote), and they have been traditionally marginalized in the policymaking process. In the United States, public policy has often tended to pathologize and blame urban youth for social problems (Garabarino, 1995). This pathologizing fosters a negative perception of urban youth (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997), hindering efforts to recognize theirs as a valid voice in efforts to solve the real problems that

affect them. Furthermore, critical stories in the media have emphasized the deficiencies and disengagement of young people, thereby reducing their potential influence and their ability to be active participants in the policymaking process (Checkoway et al, 2005). As Dick Hebdige (1988) notes, "youth is present only when its presence is a problem, or is regarded as a problem."

As Camino and Zeldin (2002) as well as Flanagan and Faison (2001) have shown, there are few contemporary policy structures to support youth in community governance. Most often adults are making decisions about and for young people, with the young people themselves having little opportunity for participation or input. The formal institutions of public life "either ignore young adults and the issues that matter to them or are ill equipped to attract young adults and provide them with meaningful opportunities to participate" (Delli Carpini, 2000).

Three main theoretical rationales have been advanced for involving youth in public policy decisions: 1) ensuring social justice and youth representation, 2) building civil society, and 3) promoting youth development (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). Some youth programs work to encompass all three in their programs using a social justice youth development model.

Social Justice Youth Development

There is a growing movement of groups who embrace a social justice youth development model, which encourages youth to challenge and respond to the injustices they face; to become assets to their communities *and* agents of social change. The social justice youth development model (SJYD) extends positive youth development work to include critiquing power, promoting systemic social change and encouraging collective action (Ginwright & James, 2002). Through analyzing power and how it is organized in society, students begin to understand institutional inequality and social stratification (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970).

SJYD programs focus on the issues young people identify as crucial to their own lives. Steeped in the teachings of Paolo Freire, SJYD programs believe that critical reflection without action is what Freire calls "verbalism," while action not grounded in critical reflection/perception is "activism" (1970). Reflection and action must go together.

While research has been done on SJYD, in terms of explicating the theoretical models behind it and what the practice looks like (see Ginwright & James, 2002; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006), there is no available literature about how effective high school-aged students have been in their advocacy and what successful strategies look like. Evaluation of these programs has been shaped by funders' desires to know the impact of program involvement on the individual participants, using quantitative measures of youth development such as involvement in risky behaviors, academic performance, and positive use of free time. In short, the measured outcomes of the work are evaluated at the individual psychological level. Mesolevel and macrolevel outcomes (Watts & Guessous, 2006), such as perceptions of collective efficacy, empowerment, and civic engagement, not to mention actual results in terms of social policy change, are often ignored in the formal evaluation process, not necessarily due to lack of interest but often due to a lack of capacity to undertake this work.

Empirical Results

One study that has tried to address this gap in the literature is Kirshner and Geil (2006), in which the authors examined access points, defined as "organized encounters between young people and adult policymakers in which young people share their views on policy issues." They found that youths' performance in the access points influenced how their messages were received. Youth who appeared comfortable speaking in a public environment (looked up, made eye contact while speaking, did not stumble over words) were received better than those who read off a script, did not make eye contact, and mispronounced words. Youth were most persuasive when they departed from scripts and responded flexibly to the situation, having the ability to use three rhetorical moves: (1) acknowledging policymakers' comments, (2) introducing new points in response, and (3) framing the discussion in terms of a moral issue on which both youth and adults could agree. This study, however, was limited because it was based solely on observations but did not include post-encounter interview data from either the youth participants or the adult policymakers. Hence, the study constituted an empirical, observation-based analysis of youth-policymaker interactions but did not ultimately reveal whether those interactions had concrete policy effects.

In their article, "Sociopolitical Development: The Missing Link in Research and Policy on Adolescents," Watts and Guessos (2006) describe the need for young people to feel a sense of agency in their work, and perceived success or "wins" in youth-led campaigns contribute to that sense of agency. This makes it important for youth programs doing policy advocacy to clearly lay out realistic goals for the campaign, and focus on achieving them, in addition to the individual-level indicators of success that programs measure for funders. Part of this includes providing participants with a range of possible roles that confer real power and do so with a balance between freedom and structure. But Watts and Guessos draw a distinction between leadership skills and agency. While youth development programs may provide leadership opportunities for teenagers, this is not synonymous with agency, where the youths have real impact on policy and therefore feel that they have the ability to effect social change.

In short, there is a rich literature on the need for youth civic engagement programs, on the need for opportunities where youth are supported in participating in public policy debates, and on the theoretical models of Social Justice Youth Development that underlie these programs. Yet, there is scant research on what success looks like in the actual practice of youth working to influence policy. What follows is an attempt to unite theory and practice in order to inform and improve advocacy by young people and by the youth programs that support such work.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

This study involved reaching out to youth organizations in New York City (NYC) that focus on youth advocacy. Seven program coordinators and directors from five NYC youth programs that work with high-school aged students were interviewed.[1] These programs were identified using a purposive, non-random sample design. The sample was

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[1] These organizations/programs were: Make the Road NY, Global Kids, Coro Leadership NY, Citizen's Committee for Children, and Center for Court Innovation/Youth Justice Board.

purposive in that organizations with a focus on youth-led policy change that work under a youth social justice framework were targeted for participation. A sample of this nature was valuable for two reasons. First, these organizations were more likely to understand the language and field of youth-led advocacy, helping to facilitate the flow and inclusion of accurate information. Second, these organizations were far more likely to identify with the project's goals, making them more likely to participate, take interest in, and potentially use and implement the study's findings and recommendations. These programs varied in terms of their methods of advocacy and policy issues, with some focused on more formal research and presentations, others focused on direct action and organizing, and one focused on arts and education campaigns.

In addition, eight policymakers were interviewed to understand, from their perspectives, how youth can be more effective advocates: two NYC Council members, three policymakers from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), two from the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), and one from the NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS).

Field research data was collected in two ways: semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Program coordinators and directors (subsequently referred to as program staff), and policymakers participated in semi-structured interviews where the conversation was guided by relevant questions, with probes used to encourage the expansion of important ideas, enabling a dialogue between interviewer and interviewee that afforded flexibility and expansion on the issues raised (Patton, 1987). Interview questions were primarily open-ended, and sequencing flowed logically from one set of ideas to another (Kvale, 1996). All interviewees consented to have the conversations audio-recorded and transcribed.

For program coordinators and directors, the questions focused on:

- How much decision-making power the youth have in choosing policy issues to address and methods of advocacy;
- The structure of their youth-adult partnerships (i.e., youth as research informants, youth as research assistants, or youth as research partners; see Kirshner, O'Donoghue, and McLaughlin, 2005);
- How best to support the youth in their work;
- What they perceive as the barriers to giving youth a meaningful voice and influencing policy; and
- What they see as the most effective strategies in guiding youth-led policy change.

For policymakers, the questions focused on the following issues:

- How they work to involve the affected communities in their policy decisions;
- How they regard youth-led recommendations, as compared with recommendations from adults;
- What they look for when determining the credibility of recommendations;
- Which presentation formats they respond to and find most effective;
- What were some examples of their interactions with young people around policy issues, and why those interactions did or did not influence them;
- How young people's language and style affect the policymakers' views of the recommendations; and

- What approaches would promote confidence in youth groups as credible sources of information for policy.

Finally, two focus groups with current and former Youth Justice Board members were conducted. The Youth Justice Board is an after-school program of the Center for Court Innovation in which 15 to 20 teenagers from different schools, neighborhoods, and experiences within NYC come together twice a week to study and devise policy recommendations on a specific juvenile justice issue, and to advocate for the implementation of those recommendations. Past issues have included school safety, juvenile reentry, and increasing youth participation in Family Court hearings. The first year is devoted to researching a policy issue and forming policy recommendations and the second year to advocating for and pursuing implementation of the Board's recommendations. This current research project was undertaken to help build the capacity of the Board to successfully influence public policy in its action year.

Focus groups were used with Youth Justice Board members, because they allow for understanding the collective experiences of the young people. Moreover, focus groups are unique in that they use group interaction to produce data (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998), and the collective responses encouraged by a focus group setting will generate different data than would come from individual interviews (Glitz, 1998).

There were two types of focus groups conducted with both program participants and alumni. The first helped to specify the focus of the interviews with policymakers (learning what the young people wanted to know from the policymakers and what information would be most useful to them). The second group focused on determining what the youth found to be the most effective strategies for influencing policy, what barriers they encountered, and how they overcame these challenges.

All qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. All focus group and interview protocols are included in the Appendix to this report. Each interview/group was open-coded for conceptual categories with the previous interview/group coding in mind.[2]

OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

Key findings from the study fell into two categories: advocacy and program operations. Advocacy findings focused on "how to" strategies for influencing policymakers. Findings related to program content concerned program structure and the types of barriers that programs and youth run into when doing this work; knowing what these obstacles are in advance can help inform the way the program is organized.

Program directors found that, for the most part, policymakers are not patronizing to the youth and do take them seriously, and interviews with policymakers underscored this same point: age is not an important factor in how youth advocacy is received, as long as the young people are informed and have done their research. More important is the actual content of their presentations and policy recommendations. Because of this, some of the advocacy findings, while youth-related, were not youth-specific.

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[2] This study received approval from the Center for Court Innovation Institutional Review Board on November 1, 2007. All informants were asked to sign a consent form before the interview, and for those under the age of 18, parent/guardian consent forms were obtained as well.

KEY FINDINGS: ADVOCACY

Advocacy findings related to the following themes:

- Building coalitions/collaboration/collective action
- Understanding power/jurisdiction
- Balancing authenticity of voice vs. professionalism
- Including personal narratives
- Effective methods of advocacy
- Understanding implications of policy recommendations
- Building the brand of a youth organization

Building coalitions/collaboration/collective action

One of the most important factors for success that was identified by program staff and policymakers alike was collaboration. Programs that have successfully influenced policy said that working together with other youth groups -- and also with adult groups -- was a necessary part of that success. Framing the issue within a larger context, and connecting with other advocates in that larger context (e.g., on a state or national level), is also a strategy recommended by both program staff and policymakers. Without collaboration it is hard to create winnable campaigns from scratch, and oftentimes other groups are already working on the same issue; therefore, youth have a greater chance of winning, especially in a limited timeframe, if groups build on the work that is already being done. The more people that are involved, the more power that is mobilized and the stronger the likelihood that the coalition will be influential. As one program coordinator said when discussing what made their campaign to allow undocumented immigrants to get in-state tuition at the City University of New York (CUNY) successful: "The coalition: the coalition was incredible. We were strong in our numbers and pressure on Pataki … we joined forces with other groups that were doing work on it." This coalition included immigrant's rights groups, CUNY professors and students, and adults and youth from approximately twenty organizations.

Another program director stated that all of their campaigns are done with other groups, and that working together brings the power and numbers needed to influence policymakers. "One thing that's fundamental to our model is the idea of power and people coming together. In this neighborhood, people don't have the power or money or influence necessary so when you come together and act collectively, you have more power." When discussing their victory in keeping a Bushwick (a neighborhood in Brooklyn) outreach center open for teens, she stated that the youth organized with teachers and students alike. The need to have a critical mass of people working for the desired change was emphasized in other ways as well. One program director whose program takes a more formal approach to advocacy than the two groups discussed above stated that the youth "have to organize around 25 percent of their school community to be involved in working on [the] project."

Additionally, policymakers have said that hearing the same recommendation from several groups makes them take it more seriously, and young people should prove that they represent a larger group (e.g., doing a survey of a large sample of young people and reporting on those results). Youth advocates should try to prove they have larger public support. As one City Council member stated, "What happens is if we start to see a pattern

… in constituent complaints, [my staff will] say we should address or think about legislation." A Deputy Commissioner at the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) emphasized the importance of popular support: "If they're picking something that has no support, it's not going to go anywhere."

Power/Jurisdiction

The theme of power came up in numerous ways. One of these was increasing power for youth and communities who have traditionally not had the power to influence policy. One program person from a youth organization stated: "It's not always about a specific policy and changing it, it's about increasing power for communities and also stepping to people in positions of power or institutions with power … holding people accountable." One way of gaining this power is, as discussed above, collaboration.

The other aspect of power that came up had to do with the target audience: program staff stressed that it is impossible to win a campaign or influence policymakers if you cannot specifically identify the person who has the power to implement the recommendations and what gives that person that power. Because of this, recommendations also have to be specific to the policymaker's jurisdiction. As one program director stated, referring to a campaign against gentrification that has yet to have success: "When something has a target that's not a single person or an entity that's easy to influence it becomes very difficult … to address it." Alternatively, when discussing a winning campaign, she said, "There was definitely a clear target … you identify a target, and the target is a person. So first you have a problem … and then you see if you could turn it into an issue … it's an issue if you can identify a person who can fix it and if it affects a lot of people and you know when it's fixed." This idea of targeting power was emphasized by other program staff as well.

Policymakers reinforced this finding in another way, stating that many youth and other advocacy groups have come to them and given strong, well-researched presentations or recommendations, but they often are misdirected because they are beyond the jurisdiction of the policymaker. The groups have clearly identified the problem, but failed to show that the solutions are something the policymaker has the power to do something about. One ACS official said that "[The youth's] recommendations make a lot of sense, but it's something that you just don't have control over." A City Council member stated that recommendations from young people, or indeed anybody, should show that the advocates have "identified a problem, the solutions are both within the jurisdiction of the Council and also would have a concrete result." Additionally, sometimes the recommendations simply aren't feasible because of budgetary constraints, and the policymaker lacks the power to do much about it. These issues should be researched by the young people in advance of the presentation.

Authenticity of Voice vs. Professionalism

An interesting finding was that policymakers are weary of adults using young people to get their own message or recommendations across. When policymakers hear from teenagers, they want to hear about young people's own experiences and recommendations; they don't want them to parrot the adults. One City Council member stated that she wants "to hear from the youth and hear what their actual experiences … on a day-to-day basis are," while another policymaker said that, "You want to make sure that you don't have adult voice influenced on or sort of in or thrown into a young person's mouth." When one ACS

official was discussing a presentation from a youth leadership group, he identified one of the challenges he faced in interpreting what the youth were saying: "One of the biggest issues I struggled with was really figuring out, 'is it their voice or are they trying to make young people mini-adults and trying to present it in a language we're willing to receive it in?' As opposed to the language that a lot of young people speak in." A policymaker at the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) spoke to this point when she said that it was important that people saw that the "young people are speaking with their own voices, we haven't co-opted them," because "they really are an independent, important and credible voice."

The need for authenticity of voice, however, can complicate the idea of professionalism when making presentations to or interacting with policymakers. For some policymakers, the dress and language of the youth have an effect on how their words are received. One City Council member stated, "Somebody who comes in, you know, looking professional and ready for business will be taken more seriously." On the other hand, an ACS administrator said that while he once looked for professionalism, now it doesn't mean as much to him. "If a young person is dressed in a certain way, it could speak to a lot of issues in different ways, it could speak about poverty, that doesn't make your voice any less meaningful … If you really want to find out what's the most important thing for young people and how we're failing young people, I just can't support, I just can't say that you have to come in a three-piece suit. It just can't be that way."

Personal Narratives

One way to potentially overcome the dilemma of finding a balance between authenticity of voice and professionalism is through making the issues at hand personal. Almost all the policymakers said they were highly influenced by narratives of youth experiences, particularly regarding foster care, and think that young people speaking from personal narratives offers more compelling narratives that are more likely to influence them and make them listen to the policy recommendations.[3] As one OCFS official stated, "It really helps advance a policy message if you have the human face, the voice, the individuals who are impacted by that policy." When presenting illustrative examples, it is important to connect those stories to those with similar experiences, so policymakers can start recognizing patterns in service or how their policies affect people. This will help show that the recommendation addresses a systemic problem, and not just an individual one.

This doesn't mean that anecdotes from one or two young people are all that is needed, however. One City Council member underscored the need to have hard data as well: "Presenting a story to highlight what the facts show is good, but to try to appeal to me simply on … an emotional level without the facts will fall flat." Another Council member reinforced this point: "I need to have some facts if it's going to be addressed at a bigger citywide or district level meeting ... but real life anecdotal experience of how this has affected them or other people is helpful."

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[3] At the same time, however, advocates must be careful that they are not exploiting the stories of an already vulnerable population.

Methods of Advocacy

While knowing what to include in policy recommendations is important, how it is presented is critical as well. Some program staff said that the way to influence the person or people in power varies depending on their status or position. The more public the figure (e.g., the mayor), the more public the campaign should be. One program director discussed a success her group had:

> We had a tactical success; we chased the Mayor [Bloomberg] with a video camera because we wanted to ask him why is he going to spend all of this money on juvenile jails. And we got him, this is an example of 'they're adorable, let me just stop and talk to them, I'm probably smarter than all of them, I'll be fine,' so they asked, he asked, we asked all of these questions and he just answered like, he gave the most inane answers and we made a videotape about it, and then started circulating it, made a flyer quoting him on everything ... And then we got the money taken out of the budget ... It was 64 million that was supposed to create 200 new spaces.

Because the mayor was a public figure, he was more vulnerable to embarrassment.

If the person who has the power to make policy change is not a public figure, the methods of advocacy might be more traditional (e.g., presenting survey data). Program staff agree that for a campaign to be successful, multiple methods must be used: letter-writing, formal meetings, speaking with the press, writing editorials, making documentary films, peer education, doing radio spots, conducting formal research (surveys/interviews) and presenting findings, petitions, lobbying, protests, etc., because success will not be achieved from one interaction with the policymaker alone. "Using different methods of advocacy and strategy is certainly key," said one program coordinator. A DYCD Deputy Commissioner noted that getting media attention and coverage is very important.

Understanding Implications

In addition to having hard data backed by personal narratives, policymakers state that any good policy recommendation from young people must incorporate four specific elements. First, the presentation must consider the counter-argument. Youth groups should not just state their policy recommendations and why they're good, but also raise possible objections/alternatives and show why those wouldn't work (e.g., "The obvious objection to policy A is B, but this is why B wouldn't work…"). As one of the City Council members noted, "If somebody comes in and they just tell anecdotes about a problem and they don't consider the specific consequences of taking whatever action it is they're proposing, I can't really take it too seriously … if you come in with an argument and where you want to go but also an appreciation of, or even a raising of, the counter-arguments, I give that a lot of credibility."

The second necessary element is for the youths to demonstrate that they understand who would be affected by their recommendations. Youth should demonstrate that they understand how their recommendations will affect all parties, not just those who are involved on the surface. Who might gain, who might lose? If their recommendation goes through, is it at the expense of someone else? If they are recommending that money be given to a certain program, will that money have to be moved from a different program? How will that affect the participants of that other program? The policymaker must know

that these issues have been taken into consideration when the youth formed their recommendations. One youth program coordinator said that policymakers had given him this advice in the past, and now when his participants are creating their recommendations, he asks them, "Did you think about it impacting these people in this way?"

The third necessary element is for the young people to show they have some understanding of the fiscal impact of their proposal. One policymaker at OCFS stated: "You want to change a regulation or a policy. Here's the process and here are some of the realities of the fiscal impact, who else it's going affect in terms of providers, counties, courts. Look at all the stakeholders that are affected by any policies that we make, change or laws that we enact." Sometimes youth have strong recommendations, but fail to understand what the monetary cost will be, and fail to identify where the money to fund their recommendations will come from. One City Council member said that recommendations have to take into account budgetary needs and where the money is going to come from in order to be considered for implementation. One policymaker, discussing an instance in which her agency increased the clothing allowance for children in foster care because of the advocacy work of a group of young people, identified the attributes of what influenced her: the presentation was well-researched, creatively presented, included the cost of the policy change, and had comparison financial data.

Finally, because of the complexity of the issues that each proposal must address, some policymakers think that youth should limit the number of recommendations they make: "Target some of your priority issues and try to make one or two of those things happen, and still work on the other ones," says one policymaker.

Branding

Doing advocacy work around certain issues that youth are passionate about is important, but one of the ultimate goals is for youth to become permanent players in the policymaking process. Indeed, one program coordinator stated that this is the real goal of her program:

> I think actually our primary measure of success … is … demonstration that the [program] as an entity is seen as a resource for policymakers … being asked for presentations, being asked to consult, being asked to have the youth write articles, being asked to present at conferences. None of which in and of itself is 'we like your recommendation, and we're going to implement it.' I mean, that would be, that is a huge win and a huge measure of success, but I think it's not as realistic.

Youth policymakers do want to hear more from young people, and some are already involving teenagers in the process. "We try to always ensure that there is a youth voice in the design, in the early stages of the design of the programs so that we can meet the needs of young people," said a DYCD official, and a director of policy and planning at OCFS said that they have identified youth who they go to when they want to run a focus group or need youth advisors. "The youth would be at this table in the development of how we address a policy. It's not in a vacuum, we don't say, 'well let's try to dig up a kid to comment on it.' They're at the table with the dialogue."

One of the reasons this doesn't happen as often as it should with all policymakers is because of access to those young people. Although one administrator at ACS stated that he thought it was up to policymakers to reach out to ensure that youth voices are heard before

the policy is developed, he thought it would be more likely to happen if they knew of reliable youth groups they could reach out to and consult whenever relevant decisions are being made. Policymakers recommend that youth advocates make themselves known as a group, in a sense "selling themselves" as a ready advisory group of teenagers who would be interested and available to participate in focus groups, etc. As an ACS official put it: "I don't think policymakers are against consulting youth, I think what has to happen is there has to be a body that's ready, willing, and able earlier, that policymakers know they can contact the Youth Justice Board, they can contact people, whatever entity it's going to be, like youth policymaking group, saying 'okay, well this is worthwhile.'"

For a youth program doing advocacy work, this translates into trying to brand the program as a source of trustworthy young people who can think critically about policy issues and clearly articulate their views. One OCFS official said that teenagers should try to identify policymakers who are interested in youth voices and get on their radar as potential advisors, making themselves visible. This might include, for example, knowing about and going to relevant conferences or open meetings that the policymakers might attend. "Kind of build up their own branding, so that people know this is a group that they can go to and get real voice."

Building a brand and forming relationships with policymakers is important, as is maintaining open communication even when there is not a specific "hot" issue at hand. One City Council member says, "You get good feedback if you maintain that open communication when you're there when there's no problem, then when there is a problem they feel comfortable telling you everything there is and how it affects them." Additionally, OCFS officials said that it was important for youth groups to not just complain or advocate, but to point out what's good, too. Doing so will help build the relationships necessary for policymakers to see a particular youth group as one to go to for policy recommendations and advice.

KEY FINDINGS: PROGRAM OPERATIONS

Findings related to program structure and operations fell into four categories:

- The structure of youth-adult partnerships,
- Defining success and its relationship to funding,
- Barriers for youth, and
- Barriers for programs.

While discussed separately here, the four themes are interrelated in ways that have implications for programming.

The Structure of Youth-Adult Partnerships

While it is necessary for the youth to have adult allies who support their work and help them to gain access to key figures, the issue of whether youth advocacy can succeed if the youth have not chosen the policy issue to be advocated for is a contentious one. Because meaningful change will take time and hard work, much of which will not be glamorous or fun, young people have to be fully invested and inspired, which some interviewees believed could only be sustained if the topic was chosen by the youths themselves. This raises many

issues for program structure. Whereas some of the programs in the study let youth choose the topic so as to ensure passion, other programs have staff choose it beforehand, because of time constraints. As one program director stated, "To choose the issue in and of itself can take all summer."

Adults choosing the issue beforehand allows them to save time and have the participants jump into the work once they start as opposed to spending weeks or months choosing an issue. According to these program directors and coordinators, choosing the issue does not ignore the voice of youth, but allows for recruiting youth who are interested in that issue and who have a personal tie to it. These staff believe that if time is spent on choosing an issue democratically (e.g., by voting), there is the risk having some youth whose issue was not chosen being unhappy with the program. The best ways for youth to feel invested is either to choose the issue by consensus, or to recruit towards an issue that the youth knowingly opt to address. [4]

Not all programs agreed with having the adults pre-select the issue. Indeed, even one policymaker who funds youth programs maintained: "We insist that the providers that we have selected in the RFP build into the design of the program youth voice, because it doesn't work if the adults pick the project. Then it's just busy work." Some interviewees stated that because advocacy is difficult, it needs young people who are dedicated, and to achieve that necessary devotion youth have to have a strong voice in choosing the issue, as well as have the responsibility for coordinating much of the project. Everything from facilitating their own internal meetings to designing and conducting the actual research to choosing the advocacy strategy will give them greater ownership of the project, increasing their commitment to seeing it through. One director stated:

> We see this with different sorts of kids but making social change isn't always going to be the glamour and the glory of running about and holding placard signs. It's going to be coming in here every single week and going through our Gant chart on which we have tasks, support, who did it, who didn't, if you didn't what's going to happen. We have our notes, did you copy, did you follow up, did you make this ... in addition to having your vision and being passionate, it's like getting the details done.

Another director said that, "It has to be around stuff they are directly affected by and/or passionate about."

Though there is disagreement about who should choose the policy issue, everyone seems to believe that passion and agency are important, because of the difficulty in having real victories in influencing policy. "Putting the agency in the hands of the youth is very important." As one youth stated, "The more involvement the youth have, the more power they have. I feel like the more the adult dominates, it makes it feel like, it can't be run by youth."

While the role of the teenagers vis-à-vis adults was discussed in terms of choosing the advocacy issue and leading the program and campaign, some also made it clear that this did not mean that adults should completely take a back seat. Indeed, because of the nature of the work, the adult staff members must be working on the issues when the program is out of session in order for there to be movement. "The adult staff have a big role to play in the advocacy in that … they usually do the first establishment of a relationship, and it could

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[4] One program director stated, however, that with one of their winning campaigns, the issue was chosen by consensus, and though it took up time, it was worth it.

either be that we're approached because someone has heard of us and is interested and so we follow up and set that up, or we do the initial outreach." As the director of one youth organization states, "I think it's weird sometimes the way adults work with youth in trying to support youth leadership and be like, 'I will be silent, I will not share my experiences.' I don't think that's very helpful either. It's not a secret that someone's an adult and has done stuff."

Defining Success and its Relationship to Funding

Part of the existing vacuum in the research on youth civic action is having a clear definition of success. There seems to be a general consensus among program staff that there are two main measures of success: one utilizing hard data which proves invaluable for securing funding, and one utilizing soft data which focuses on anecdotal information focusing on "success stories" for the individual youth. Hard data focuses on the statistics of the individual youths while in the program, recording details on indicators of positive youth development and school success. One program director stated that "the successes with our kids is clear…when you see their growth and development in terms of their confidence, their ability to be articulate, in public speaking, their critical thinking." But she went on to explain that with each successive year of the program they need to be able to track this data in a more systematic fashion. But even these anecdotal stories are measures of participant growth (individual-level successes) and not the collective impact of the advocacy work of the youth (policy successes).

Often, there are clashes between the goals of the funding organization and the ability of non-profits to evaluate success. A deputy commissioner at DYCD acknowledged this difficulty when discussing a program his organization funds: "The focus for evaluation….is really about positive outcomes for young people who enroll in it. That's our main [goal]. Hopefully the projects that [the group does] have an impact as well, but with the money they have for evaluation they [have] to evaluate 41 initiatives, there is only so much they can do. I feel sorry for the evaluators." As another program coordinator pointed out, "Any non-profit engaged in this kind of work has to play that game. Because we are non-profits, because we secure funding sources and because we do our good work by building those types of measures," programs have to focus their limited resources on individual-level indicators of success.[5]

In addition to having to navigate the tension between youth development goals and advocacy goals (and between the demands of funders for data and non-profit capacity for evaluation), staff have to be careful in how they define success. One program coordinator recognized the difficulty in actually influencing policy in discussing how her group chose to look at disproportionate rates of AIDS transmission among African-Americans; while recognizing this as an important issue, she added, "Actualizing that into something they can really do is just a hard process." As Watts and Guessos (2006) discussed, winnable campaigns are necessary for young people's sense of agency. One program director suggested a shift in focus to smaller-scale victories: "We're not measuring our success as the City Council passing new policy, because we're looking at this on a more microcosmic

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[5] Interestingly, the one program in this study that takes an activist and direct action approach to youth advocacy has fewer problems with funders because of the types of funding it gets, and therefore, as the director said, she doesn't have to choose between youth development goals and advocacy goals: "we value them both really highly."

level." She went on to describe several changes her program youth produced within their schools and the positive impacts on student life. By focusing on realistically scaled success relative to the timeframe of the program, number of participating youth, and available advocacy methods, program directors can create the ability to build on past small-scale success with each successive cohort. As one program coordinator emphasized, it's important to let the students know that "there is success you can see now, and there might be success you can see later," so that participating young people do not become disillusioned over a perceived lack of immediate impact of their advocacy efforts.

Barriers for Youth

Age in itself does not appear to be a barrier in terms of legitimacy and access. However, program staff believed that the constraints of working with a teenage population create other barriers. In particular, developing a winning campaign often takes many years, but the available timeframe is generally limited (e.g., three months, eight months, one school year).[6] As one program director noted, "It's like you can do a whole year just on the implementation. And we could have a whole year just of asking survey questions." How can a winnable campaign be created, with all the research and work that needs to go into it, over the course of just one program cycle? As another coordinator put it:

> I think one of the primary challenges is that we have the youth and the program for a finite period of time. And how can we get the most out of that time? Versus in a sort of professional world where, like, you know you could be working on a project for a year, 'oh it suddenly takes two years,' - then it takes two years. 'Oh, we have a six month delay,' - we have a six month delay. You can't do that when you're also running it as a youth program.

In addition to the restrictions of time as well as meeting only for a certain number of hours each week, the youth are also restricted in what they can do outside of the regularly scheduled meetings. One coordinator stated that her participants have been asked to make presentations to policymakers, but most often the times conflicted with the times they were in school so they could not attend/participate. This issue relates to the earlier discussion about defining success, and helping the youth understand what realistically can be accomplished in the time they have. Said one staffer:

> We want them to build schools in Bushwick. The likelihood is you could work on that for four years of high school and never see it. And by the time it's built, you've moved or something ... I think that oftentimes around June when we've been working on things since September, there's like a feeling of 'what are we doing?'"

How do program staff keep youth engaged during periods where they see no success? How do they help the young people to avoid feeling that all of their work has been for naught?

Time matters in another way, too; young people are pulled in many directions and have many responsibilities, and the advocacy work that they are doing is just one of many commitments. How do young people keep focused when they have other responsibilities?:

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[6] This is because youth programs often seek to engage youth for a short period of time, and also youth move on to other programs that may be more relevant as they get older or change schools.

"Kids got sports. They got drama. Mock Trial. This class trip. They're doing this thing with their friends. They gotta go baby-sit. They're working after school with their parents. All these things, and then it's like, 'oh yeah, and then [program name] on Wednesday.'"

Barriers for Programs

Program staff identified lack of resources (money, staff, time) and lack of staff training as particular problems. The staff training becomes important if the selected issue changes with the program cycle, as it does with most of the programs interviewed in this report. "I think staff training required way more time than we gave it, like we assumed that all staff kind of got it in a way they didn't," said one program coordinator, whose program chose very different topics over the course of three years, with the same staff. Another staff member underscored this point: "Part of it is just staff development. Like, when we choose a new topic every two years basically we have to become experts on that topic all over again." When asked about what she thought the biggest challenge in doing this work was, yet another program coordinator stated: "I think more than anything it's adult preparedness and capacity to support [the youths'] efforts. The biggest barrier, individually but also organizationally."

If adult staff members are to support the youth, they need to be well-informed on the relevant issues. At the same time, because they run after-school programs with youth development goals, they need to be trained in how to support the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of the young people in their program as well. This too is related to how the program defines success, because, as discussed earlier, programs usually do not have the capacity to measure the success of the campaigns/advocacy, leading them instead to focus on the improved development of the individual program participants. This often means that staff cannot sufficiently focus on the advocacy/campaign work as its own entity, which could be a factor in an unsuccessful campaign.

Staff may also be restricted in the types of advocacy work they can do because of either the expectations of their funding agency or the political stance of the parent organization. As one organization stated, "There's not been a lot of direct action because … the battle has not been fought yet here internally, but it can and will one day I'm sure." Some programs have found success with direct action (e.g., one program challenging the mayor into making a decision in their favor), but other organizations could not use that method of advocacy, even if it might be the only avenue to success for getting a particular recommendation implemented. As one program coordinator whose program uses a more traditional style of advocacy (e.g., presentations to policymakers) noted, her program seeks to create change by working "within the system"; her youth know from the very beginning they will not be participating in marches or protests, but will try to get meetings with key policymakers. Despite this, she noted that there is real value in drawing media attention to an issue. Again, this finding is related to success. If programs know that some methods are effective but cannot use them, their chances of achieving meaningful policy influence are reduced.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that, in principle, policymakers are receptive to meaningful, thoughtful input from youth on matters of policy. Organizations working with

youth can increase their effectiveness by adopting a number of concrete strategies and tactics. In particular, young people doing advocacy work and adults who are supporting them will have more success if they work together with other organizations working for similar change. Additionally, they should clearly identify who has the power to make that change and address those people with policy recommendations that are within their authority to impact, striking a delicate balance in making a professional presentation that does not sacrifice their own perspectives as teenagers. Policy recommendations, which should be limited in number, should address counter-arguments, and young people should demonstrate that they have knowledge of the implications of their recommendations, including the fiscal impact. Finally, youth should work to "brand" their program, so that policymakers view it as a resource for soliciting the voice of youth whenever new policies are formulated.

On the program operations side, youth programs should be sure that their youth-adult partnerships are structured in such a way that the youth feel they are driving the program and the advocacy work. Additionally, program staff need to identify realistic measures of campaign success that fit within the timeframe of their program, so as to maintain the young people's feelings of agency, and to be clear as to what is needed to achieve long-term success. Finally, recognizing ahead of time the barriers that the young people face in terms of time commitments and outside-of-program responsibilities, as well as barriers that the program itself faces related to staff development and limitations in types of advocacy strategies, will help shape the definition of success for the youth.

The findings of this study will hopefully be used to enhance the credibility of youth with policymakers and to produce civically engaged young people whose voices are heard in public policy.

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