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Sustainability Strategies for Youth Advisory Boards

A Symposium on
Youth Engagement

by Linda Baird

Introduction

New York City is home to nearly two million young people under the age of 18,¹ yet policy decisions that affect these young people's lives have traditionally been made without their input. Over the past 15 years, organizations across the city have sought to fill this gap by establishing youth advisory boards, programs that engage high school-aged young people in meaningful policymaking by bringing their informed voices to the table alongside those of traditional decision-makers. These youth advisory boards have generally been established by non-profit organizations engaged in policy work. Often, youth advisory boards provide youth input to the host organization while informing larger policy discussions.

This field recently entered an exciting growth period: in 2015, NYC Service, a city agency focused on increasing volunteerism and civic engagement, announced the goal of engaging 30,000 youth ages 14-21 on new youth leadership councils working in policy and practice or service by 2020. This initiative will bring the voices of young people into city agencies like the New

1 New York City Department of Planning. "New York City Population, Population Facts." NYC.gov. Retrieved from: <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/planning/data-maps/nyc-population/population-facts.page>.

York City Police Department, the Administration for Children’s Services, and the Law Department of Family Court.

With new interest in these programs at the city level, the Center for Court Innovation and Coro New York Leadership Center, organizations that have hosted youth advisory boards for more than a decade, convened adult leaders and youth members of New York City youth advisory boards at *Sustainable Strategies for Youth Advisory Boards*² to discuss the work, vision, and purpose of the programs. While youth advisory board programs have been running in New York City for over a decade and vary in focus and design, this convening marked the first time that leaders of these programs met to discuss their work and share successes, challenges, and strategies to meaningfully engage young people and elevate their voices in policy discussions. The W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation funded this convening in support of two of its grantee programs: the Center for Court Innovation’s Youth Justice Board and Coro’s Mayor’s Youth Leadership Council. Together, these programs have worked with over 300 young people over 15 years to bring their ideas into policy while developing participants’ leadership, civic engagement, and public speaking skills.

In recognition of the growing interest in youth advisory boards across the city, the convening was designed to foster discussion and generate ideas using the following questions as a starting point:

- What is the value of youth voice in public policy, and how can this value be measured?
- What are the collective challenges practitioners face in this work, and how can these be addressed?

² This event was held on September 23, 2015, at the Fund for the City of New York.

- What is the role of well-established youth advisory boards as the city seeks to expand programs that prepare and involve young people in local policy initiatives?

While each program is unique, those represented at the convening generally share the following:

- Operational for a minimum of three years;
- A focus on working with high school-aged young people;
- Rotating policy issues studied, with new topics generally selected on an annual basis;
- A program calendar following the academic year, with a 9-10 month commitment required from youth members;
- Regular weekly or bi-weekly meetings; and
- A non-profit host organization overseeing the program; most of these organizations are not focused exclusively on youth work.

Twenty-three individuals, including four young people, attended the “Sustainable Strategies” convening, representing 11 organizations (see Appendix for complete list of attendees). Participants began the day learning about the city’s new youth advisory board programs from Paula Gavin, executive director at NYC Service and the panel’s keynote speaker. Then youth and adult panelists shared different perspectives and approaches to the work of youth advisory boards. The group spent the rest of the day in discussion, using the above questions as a framework.

This document summarizes the key themes, challenges, and recommended next steps developed during the event. All ideas expressed in this document represent the attendees alone and do not represent the official policies of the Center for Court Innovation, Coro New York Leadership, other organizations present at “Sustainable Strategies,” or the Stone Foundation.

Key Themes

Three themes emerged as core issues for the group. Participants spoke at length about how these issues affect their work and shared strategies for addressing them. The themes identified were: *programmatically sustainability*, *operational sustainability*, and *youth voice and program authenticity*.

Programmatic Sustainability

Programmatic sustainability refers to the basic partnerships and operational structures that must be in place for a program to operate smoothly and consistently. Many common program outcomes, including number of youth recruited and number of youth successfully completing the program, fall under this category. Specific issues discussed under this topic include:

- Recruiting youth to participate in the program;
- Sustaining youth engagement throughout the program period;
- Finding adult partners who can serve as topic experts, participate in interviews, and guide the development of policy; and
- Evaluating the program.

Participants cited challenges associated with these tasks. Recruitment, for example, is time-consuming, requiring staff appearances at fairs and other events, as well as outreach to partner networks. While this can be less challenging for an established program with partnerships in place, it is nevertheless resource-intensive for all programs. Recruitment also indirectly impacts youth retention, as having a larger pool of applicants allows staff to be more selective in inviting youth to join the program, which in turn means that the

youth invited may be in a better place to commit to the demands of the program for the full program period.

Participant retention is a challenge across the board for after-school programs serving high school-aged students, and youth advisory programs are no exception.³ Several convening participants shared stories about how the individual relationships their staff established with young people helped with retention; however the challenge persists as youth often leave the program due to personal and family issues outside the scope of the program. Further, because of the specialized training that youth in these programs receive related to their topic of study and the local policy landscape, the loss of any youth creates an unfillable hole—adding new students in the middle of the year is often not an option.

Convening participants also discussed at length the challenge of effectively evaluating their work and presenting the results. Programs face common constraints related to evaluation. First, many programs have little funding to perform robust evaluations of their work. However, the expectation is there, as both non-profit boards and program funders want to see the impact of projects, often setting their own metrics for how to measure success (e.g. number of youth served, average daily attendance, and number of interviews held). The other benefits of these programs, including personal and professional development for youth participants, are more difficult to quantitatively measure and account for, and yet several program leaders remarked that these are the outcomes on which they feel they have the greatest impact. As one participant stated, “a lot of what we do is... hard to measure.”

3 Pennsylvania 21st Century Learning Centers: www.21stccclc.org/index.cfm?pageid=5220. Accessed February 10, 2016.

Operational Sustainability

Operational sustainability refers to the structural elements of a program, including funding, topic of study, and staffing, that are necessary each year to ensure the youth advisory board's continued operation.

Specific issues discussed under this topic include:

- Program funding, particularly in the context of shifting program topics and funder priorities;
- Program time constraints;
- Building commitment to the program from all necessary partners, including organizationally, externally, and with youth; and
- Supporting staff training and managing staff turnover.

Participants noted that the small-scale operation of their programs limited their funding opportunities. Many after-school funders look first at the number of youth served when considering projects to support, often seeking those that work with hundreds of young people at a time. Youth advisory boards, however, intentionally engage a small number of young people with the goal of influencing policy that affects large cohorts. Further, youth advisory board programs frequently adjust their policy focus to align with current organizational, city, or legislative priorities; thus, topic-focused funding is generally secured piecemeal, year after year, instead of through a long-term commitment. A foundation focused on improving outcomes for youth in foster care, for example, may no longer be a fit if the program shifts its policy focus away from that topic.

The academic calendar these programs typically follow also presents challenges. Policy change doesn't often occur on a convenient school-year calendar, so programs need to create markers of accomplishment for participants within the program's timeframe. Further,

building an active coalition of youth, organizational, external and policy partners can be difficult to do within this relatively short period of time—this is part of the reason many programs work with the same adult partners on topic after topic. Given these constraints, program leaders commented it is difficult to take the time to reflect on and evaluate their work. One participant called the phenomenon “deadlines curtailing innovation,” meaning that there wasn’t opportunity to adopt and integrate new ideas within the existing program timeframe and structure.

Youth voice and authenticity

Participants spoke about the tension between showcasing young people’s ideas and helping them to shape those ideas into realistic policy goals. As adults who understand the policy landscape, program leaders shared that they often hear proposals from young people that they know won’t be implemented due to reasons outside of youth control and expertise (e.g. political climate or fiscal limitations). Participants questioned whether their role is to help young people shape their ideas into something more palatable for policymakers and therefore more likely to have an impact, or if they should bring young people’s ideas to the table, whatever they are, even if they are unrealistic. Similarly, when young people’s preferred methods of instigating change are at odds with the organization’s approach to policy change (e.g. protests versus coalition-building), what is the role for program leaders? The tensions between “authentic” and “informed” youth voice leave program leaders in a difficult position. Often, preparing policymakers for what young people have to say is as vital to the role as explaining the policy landscape to teen participants.

Areas for future work and inquiry

With these common challenges defined, the discussion turned toward approaches to solve some of these issues and on how long-term practitioners and leaders in the field could make the most substantial contributions. Each organization represented takes a slightly different approach to policymaking, whether by running on a shorter or longer calendar, engaging more in direct action than behind-the-scenes work, or focusing on unique policy issues. But differences aside, participants agreed that looking to develop the professional landscape for youth advisory board leaders was a logical next step. The group laid out the following topics for future inquiry:

- **Defining the field** – The term “youth advisory board” is one of many being used to describe similar work; the new programs run by NYC Service, for example, are called “Youth Leadership Councils.” The programs represented at the symposium focused primarily on policymaking around systems-level issues, but some youth advisory boards may exclusively meet with non-profit boards of directors, while others focus on funding and grant-making decisions. Clarifying the definition, goals and objectives of a “youth advisory board” program would help to ensure that, going forward, staff from these programs are using consistent language to talk about their work with potential partners, funders, and other supporters. Defining the scope of the work would help participants feel more united in their purpose and mission going forward.
- **Informing and nurturing the growing field** – As the number of youth advisory boards expands in

New York City, and with it, the number of youth engaged in policymaking and the number of organizations newly tasked with incorporating youth ideas into operation, it is vital to consider the quality and sustainability of programs and the role for veteran programs in this landscape. One participant summarized the issue in this way: “There are larger concerns about what we would do, how does our work related to a larger field, and how we connect to each other.” In response, participants suggested offering trainings, mentorship and resources to newer programs. Overall, participants expressed a desire for collaboration as opposed to competition, even as young people can be more selective about which youth advisory board to join. Ultimately, this approach would benefit teens and programs alike, as young people will be able to find a program that most closely aligns with their goals and interests, and would help raise the profile of these programs among policymakers.

- **Building coalitions** – Underlying the conversation was the question of how practitioners can work together to address some of the previously mentioned challenges. For example, perhaps there is the potential to secure joint funding, thus increasing the important metric of “number of youth served,” and helping boards to articulate their collective value. Another possibility is working together on some of the more time-consuming, but necessary aspects of the work, including recruitment, funding applications, and curriculum design. This last suggestion points to the possibility of more professional development opportunities for staff, something participants felt would help with staff retention.

Proposed next steps

Attendees ended the day by discussing actions that the group can take to move this work forward. Most critically, the group agreed on the value of collaboration, and many members expressed interest in future group meetings to continue the discussion and develop short- and long-term goals with specific action items. Several participants have continued to meet monthly since December 2015, and an email list-serv was established following the event so that the group can remain in contact between meetings. So far, these meetings have focused on addressing some of the above questions related to the development of the field and considering the role of established programs in supporting and mentoring newer local youth advisory boards. Meetings such as this allow for established programs to engage in bigger-picture strategic thinking, something many practitioners say is vital to the success of their programs—and their performance—but is often not possible due to tight scheduling constraints.

Further, the group expressed interest in learning from youth advisory boards in other cities about their approach to the work, and how they have addressed some of the common challenges programs face. Perspective from outside of New York City would also be beneficial as the group turns its attention to other challenges members expressed interest in addressing, including funding, evaluation/measuring impact, and staff development. The coalition coming out of the first advisory board meeting is well-positioned to continue this line of inquiry.

Appendix: List of Attendees

Center for Court Innovation

Linda Baird, *Associate Director, Youth Justice Programs*

Elissa Gelber, *Director, Staten Island Youth Justice Center*

Dory Hack, *Director, Youth Justice Capacity Building*

Mary Walle, *Associate, Youth Justice Programs*

Lisa-Marie Williams, *Coordinator, Youth Justice Board*

Children's Aid Society

Brianna Scott, *Director, Bronx Youth Council*

Alister Stevens, *Associate, Bronx Youth Council*

Citizens' Committee for Children

Laura Jankstrom, *YouthAction NYC Program Coordinator*

Coro New York Leadership Center

Chris Neal, *Senior Director of Youth Programs and Initiatives*

Maisha Sebastiany, *Program Director, NYC Youth Council*

Generation Citizen

David Pachefsky, *New York City Site Director*

New Yorkers for Children

Catherine Hilyard, *Youth Program Coordinator*

New York City Department of Youth and Community

Development

Tracy Garcia, *Director of Service Learning*

Office of the Mayor – New York City Service

Chelsey Clevenger, *AmeriCorps Vista*

Resilience Advocacy Project

Jenna Frasier, *Program & Communications Associate*

Brooke Richie, *Executive Director*

Youth Development Institute

Sabrina Evans-Ellis

Youth Participants

Alex

Bernadette

Levi

Stephanie

Center for Court Innovation

520 Eighth Avenue, 18th Floor

New York, New York 10018

P. 646.386.3100

F. 212.397.0985

courtinnovation.org