
I. What is a youth council?

A youth council is an advisory body composed of local youth (usually high-school aged). They provide advice and counsel to the local governing body and its affiliated advisory and regulatory boards, as well as other community organizations. Additionally, youth councils can implement and participate in a variety of youth-identified community initiatives.

II. Why create a youth council?

According to the Census Bureau, 24.6 percent of the U.S. population is under the age of 18. It goes without saying that young people are the future of our communities. Therefore, it is vitally important that they are vested with the knowledge, skills and abilities to be the next generation of local leaders. Youth councils are an excellent means of doing so because they promote regular and active civic engagement among youth.

Youth councils promote civic engagement among youth by:

- Giving them a formal role in local decision making
- Offering real-world experiences with elected and advisory bodies
- Teaching them about the role of councils, boards and commissions
- Providing them with an opportunity to develop leadership skills and learn how local government operates
- Increasing voice and communication between youth and adults, and among youth themselves
- Increasing youth volunteerism
- Enhancing classroom civic education

III. Who benefits?

Youth councils enable **young people** to:

- Communicate their concerns regarding local matters that affect them
- Directly participate in local government
- Make decisions and take action to potentially improve their community

Youth councils enable **local councils/commissioners** to:

- Be more representative of the community as a whole
- Gain insight regarding the community's "young," dynamic and/or progressive perspective
- Encourage youths to be more actively engaged in the political process
- Improve services that directly affect young people
- Be more sustainable

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IV. Is your city ready for a youth council?

The following three components serve as positive indicators that your city is poised to establish a local youth council:

- **Concern:** Local leaders recognize some degree of need for youth insight in public decision making
- **Trust:** Local leaders envision youth in a meaningful, visible and advisory role
- **Change:** Local leaders are willing to modify existing codes or adopt specific ordinances to promote youth involvement on councils, boards and commissions

V. Who creates and oversees the youth council?

It is up to the governing body to decide exactly who will create and oversee the youth council. In some communities, a Cooperative Extension (such as the local 4-H) is tasked with creating and maintaining the youth council. In others, a local department (such as parks and recreation) is given the task. In others still, a full-time city employee (such as the public information officer or assistant city manager) is vested with the task as part of his or her job responsibilities. Whatever the governing body decides, the youth council should be aligned with the manager's or clerk's office for the purposes of housing the council's meetings and funding various initiatives.

The important thing to keep in mind is that the primary purpose of the youth council is to advise local government officials. Therefore, it is important that the council is truly viewed as an essential part of the local government structure, and not simply relegated off to the side to one department or extension.

VI. Who serves on the youth council?

When thinking about the composition of the student component of a youth council, the following should be considered:

- Include at least one, and as many as four, representatives from all local high schools (grades 9-12)
- Include a representative for private, charter and home schools
- Include students from diverse backgrounds
- Consider minimum requirements in terms of GPA and number of unexcused school absences. (It is important to realize that oftentimes it is not the students with the highest GPAs and attendance rates that would benefit most from being selected for the youth council. Along the same lines, the city may benefit more from feedback not attained from the "highest" academic achievers.)
- Think about the geographic area from which you will be recruiting. If your city plans on recruiting through the schools, make sure you consider that not all students in the school district live inside the city limits. The important thing is that you are recruiting from a variety of geographic areas within your city.

- Potential council members should be students who have a proven record of leadership, goal-setting, commitment to community service and community values, and who want to create positive opportunities for other youth in the community
- Consider representatives from local youth organizations already in existence
- Consider students who are not necessarily “the usual suspects” – do not simply select all student government presidents

VII. How do you establish a youth council?

- A. **Make it official:** First and foremost, a locality should adopt a **resolution** or **ordinance** that establishes a youth council. The resolution/ordinance should include sections that specify the following:
- Establishment of the youth council
 - Membership composition (How many representatives should the youth council have? How many representatives should there be from each school? From each grade level?)
 - Appointment (What will the application process entail? Who will make the final selection of members?)
 - Length of terms
 - Member rights, powers, duties, authority, discretion and privileges
 - Compensation for the youth council liaison if not included in scope of work
 - Organizational structure
 - Meeting requirements and procedures
 - Fundraising

***See Appendix 1 for an example an ordinance establishing a youth council.*

- B. **Invest in the youth council:** Align your youth council with the manager’s or clerk’s office through provision of funding and staffing. Develop a thoughtful, inclusive and rigorous application process.

C. **Connect, publicize, recruit:**

Work with parents and schools to publicize the program:

- Send a letter to all parents/guardians describing the purpose and goals of the youth council, the application and selection process, and a contact person for further questions
***See Appendix 2 for an example of a parent letter*
***See Appendix 3 for an example of a youth council application form*
- Ask civics and economics teachers to share with students information about the purpose and importance of youth councils and details on applying for the local youth council
- Ask school counselors to actively solicit student applications for the youth council
- Have an elected official visit classrooms and clubs

- Request an assembly in which the youth council contact person can discuss specifics with potential candidates
- Develop posters or flyers for classrooms and counselors' offices
- Post information on Web sites that are visited frequently by high school students (e.g. school Web sites/Facebook/etc.)

Make efforts to advertise in the community (outside of schools):

- Contact supervisors of local youth programs/groups, such as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, church youth groups, recreation sports teams, etc.
- Partner with local youth outreach programs, such as the YMCA and 4-H
- Run an advertisement in local newspapers/publications
- Make announcements at youth conferences or summits
- Put flyers up in popular youth "spots," such as the mall, local record store, athletic fields, etc.
- Ask local radio disc jockeys (perhaps local NPR affiliate) to make a short plug on air

- D. **Make decisions:** Thoroughly evaluate applicants in a competitive process. You may wish to hold interviews, either in person or over the phone, to narrow down prospective candidates. You may also want to have a small committee of people, including youth, evaluate the final applicants.

Once decisions have been made, the youth council liaison should return to schools to acknowledge the selected members, send acceptance letters and/or make congratulatory phone calls. Additionally, the decision should be honored through a formal vote by the council/commissioners.

Likewise, a polite letter should be sent to all applicants who were not selected, encouraging them to apply again in the future.

VIII. Now what?

First Meeting – Orientation

Once youth council members have been selected, the first order of business should be to hold an "orientation meeting," to establish the youth council as a safe, fun forum that members will look forward to attending. The initial meeting should essentially be a "get to know you session" where youth council members have an opportunity to learn more about each other and the youth council liaison. In order to do so, students can participate in an "ice-breaker" activity and a variety of team-building exercises.

The orientation meeting also should have an informational component where members learn more about the specific purpose and mission of the youth council, and discuss some of the member/meeting

requirements. Of course, youth council members should be able to contribute their own ideas regarding the purpose, mission and requirements of the youth council and its members. The first meeting should last about two hours, setting the standard for time requirement for future meetings.

Second Meeting – Swearing In of Council Members

After the orientation meeting, youth council members should be required to attend the next scheduled city council/commission meeting. At the meeting, the youth council should be welcomed as an official advisory board and youth council members should be sworn in by the local government officials (youth council facilitators will need to get this on the meeting agenda in advance).

***See Appendix 4 for an example of a youth council oath of office*

Third Meeting – Team Building and Bylaws

The next youth council meeting should begin with some additional icebreaker and team-building exercises, followed by member creation of their own “youth council bylaws.” Have members consider the following topics when discussing and codifying the bylaws:

- Purpose/Mission/Goals
- Membership and membership requirements
- Member at large requirements
- Meetings (structure, length, frequency)
- Attendance requirements
- Officers/Roles (members are likely to need to be placed in additional representative capacities such as voting seats on advisory boards)
- Parliamentary Authority (the procedural rules for the conduct of meetings)
 - ▶ You may want to ask a member of your locality’s governing body to attend this meeting and present a workshop regarding parliamentary authority as it pertains to meetings in your local government. Students can use what they learn to establish their own procedures based on the actual city council procedures
- Quorum (the number of members that must be present in order to conduct the business of a meeting)
- Subcommittees
- Programs and activities

***See Appendix 5 for example of youth council bylaws and procedural guidelines.*

***See Appendix 6 for example of a mission statement.*

Additional note: The bylaws members create may require amendments to the city’s resolution/ordinance.

Fourth Meeting – Additional Team Building and Action Plan

Begin the fourth meeting with a team-building activity. Next, discuss with council members issues they want to address and goals they wish to accomplish as a council throughout the year. Use the information to create an “action plan,” which will help in planning “topics” for future meetings. You will then be able to coordinate activities and guest speakers accordingly. For example, if students are interested in discussing the issues of teen drug and alcohol use or gang violence in schools, you can schedule a law enforcement officer specializing in one of these areas as a guest speaker during the appropriate meeting. Or, if students express interest in the locality funding the development of a new park, you can schedule a parks and recreation employee and/or a local developer to discuss implications and costs to the locality.

IX. What should the youth council do?

Aside from advising local government officials, youth councils can implement and participate in a variety of activities. Some of these activities may include:

- Conduct a youth forum for all local high school students on topics of concern for youths
 - ▶ Raising Student Voice & Participation (RSVP), a student engagement program sponsored by the National Association of Student Councils and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, provides a format for student lead youth forums; information is available at http://www.nasc.us/s_nasc/sec.asp?CID=1266&DID=55678
 - ▶ The North Carolina Civic Education Consortium has a Community Forum Toolkit that can be tailored for youth council use. It is available at <http://www.civics.unc.edu/civindex/aboutforums.htm>
- Create a youth council publication to be distributed at local middle and high schools or as a leaflet in local newspaper
- Organize community service projects such as:
 - ▶ Stream and/or highway cleanups
 - ▶ Senior center volunteering
 - ▶ Tutoring or mentoring youths (e.g. “Big Brother/Big Sister programs”)
 - ▶ Organizing drives (e.g. for food, clothes, school supplies, holiday gifts, etc.)
 - ▶ Adopt-a-pet
 - ▶ Volunteering at a food bank or shelter
- Lead a citywide educational or advocacy campaign addressing a youth identified issue of concern (i.e. water conservation; global warming; school bullying/violence; reduce, reuse, recycling (RRR), etc.)
- Conduct interviews of local government officials and city staff to be aired on local public access channel

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- Advocate for particular development projects on behalf of local youth (for example, building a skate park or athletic field)
 - Plan and organize fundraising events for youth-related development projects and/or charitable causes
 - Job shadowing day with city elected officials and department heads
 - Organize a “Careers in City Government” career day at local schools
 - Act as liaisons between city council and local youth through school announcements
 - Promote civic involvement of other local youth by spearheading civic-minded clubs/organizations in schools
 - Attend city council/commission meetings (perhaps one member should be present at each meeting and report back to the youth council on topics covered)
 - Maintain a local youth council Web site that provides relevant information to local youth
 - Attend professional development workshops on leadership, goal setting, public speaking, etc.
 - Attending or hosting city forums, conferences and events in order to represent youth perspective

For additional ideas, go to http://www.nasc.us/s_nasc/sec.asp?CID=164&DID=5356. While these ideas are tailored to school’s student governments, many ideas can be replicated at the communitywide level with your youth council.