

STUDENTS: Youth Development and Partnering with Youth

YOUTH INPUT AND DECISION MAKING

Youth are engaged in the design and implementation of the program; they plan, lead and run many program activities. The after school program and activities have adult-youth shared partnership.

Engaging older youth is particularly challenging, given the competing priorities of work, care-giving duties of younger siblings, and socializing with peers. Given this, how do after school programs recruit and retain youth?

A key feature to retaining youth is to provide multiple leadership opportunities for all young people. When older youth gain leadership experience including planning, decision-making, and executing activities, they are acquiring skills relevant to their future after high school.

Stu Semigran of EduCare Foundation, one of the community partners of Los Angeles Unified School District's Beyond the Bell Take Action Leadership Campaign, describes effective strategies that EduCare has employed with 2,000 youth in 29 Los Angeles high schools:

Listen intentionally to your youth. Youth will tell you what they want and will vote with their feet. Older youth gravitate towards activities that are of most interest to them, and will spend the time to design, plan, and execute those activities. Asking youth what they want and need is a great way to identify the student leaders who are interested and motivated enough to shepherd the activities along.

For instance, at one local high school program with a majority Latino population, Mr. Semigran discovered youth wanted a Korean Club. When he pressed the kids further to assess how committed youth were to starting it, he discovered they wanted to learn the language for gaming purposes, and encouraged them to find a willing teacher and recruit youth for the Club, both of which they did.

Step Up, Step Back. Program activities should be youth-centered, not directed or controlled by program staff. The guideline to "Step Up, Step Back" can be applied to you and your youth in the program. Once you've given youth the tools to lead, have them step up to the challenge of facilitating, while you step back and let them take on leadership responsibilities. As Mr. Semigran stated, "When you continually raise the bar on youth, they not only rise up to meet you; they far surpass anything you thought imaginable."

Continually build youth leadership skills. Don't just give training to youth at the beginning of the year and let them fend for themselves afterward. Providing continual training, feedback, and opportunities to refresh and develop skills are great ways for youth leaders to continually learn and build skills. The Take Action Leadership Campaign provides ongoing trainings throughout the year, including 1:1 coaching, trainings on classroom management, and team management skill building workshops to support youth to be successful leaders in their after school programs.

Try this Tip!

Offer continuous training, coaching, and mentoring to youth to help them develop new skills. Don't stop training your youth after the beginning of the year. Provide youth ongoing training and feedback- these are great opportunities for youth to refresh, build on, and develop skills!