Youth Driven Space (YDS)

Increasing Teen Involvement and Engagement in Out-of-School Time

Objectives: To build leadership opportunities that increase the engagement and skill development of older youth during out-of-school time through training, coaching, and technical assistance.

THE CHALLENGE

Over the past decade, communities across the country have come to understand that out-of-school time “spaces” such as teen centers and afterschool programs can positively impact young people’s development. Participation in organized activities outside of school can enhance academic, social, emotional, civic, and health outcomes and reduce risk behaviors. Further, these organizations can play a critical role in helping youth develop 21st century skills that are essential to college and career readiness. Programs that successfully retain and impact older youth are intentional about creating opportunities for youth voice and leadership at multiple levels. They reflect adolescents’ needs for efficacy, responsibility, and agency, and actively engage them in both organizational and community leadership. Despite growing national interest in increasing out-of-school time opportunities for high school students, opportunities for meaningful and developmentally appropriate engagement remain few and far between. As a result, many programs struggle to attract and retain teens.

THE YOUTH DRIVEN SPACE INTERVENTION

The Weikart Center partnered with the Neutral Zone to develop the Youth Driven Space (YDS) project. YDS is designed to support out-of-school-time programs that serve older youth implement a range of structures and strategies that foster 21st century skill-building and meaningful civic engagement. Out-of-school time programs that adopt the YDS model learn to utilize the actual operation of their organization as an opportunity to build youth skills and increase participation and engagement. The time is right for an explicit and developmentally appropriate approach to skill-building for older youth during OST given the drop off in participation that programs face nationally as well as increasing recognition of the importance of workforce preparation opportunities that prepare young people for participation in today’s labor market.

YDS is designed to transform existing youth programs into youth driven spaces through four key areas:

- **Structural changes.** A youth advisory council is established and meets regularly to make and offer guidance on decisions about program offerings and organizational operation;
- **Changes to program design and implementation.** Youth members take on facilitation and other roles that adults typically take in a youth program, leading meetings and activities with their peers;
- **Revisiting adult roles.** Helping adults learn to build strong adult/youth partnerships is critical. Adults in YDS don’t simply step down and let youth lead, rather, they play an active supportive role in helping youth be successful;
- **Building sustainability.** Organizational changes are sustained by infusing YDS principles across the organization, with attention to governance and mission statements and by establishing deliberate support across administration, staff, and the broader community.

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3 The Neutral Zone in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is one of few teen centers in the country in which youth decision-making and involvement successfully permeates multiple levels of organizational governance and functioning. This “youth-driven” engagement is determined by youth interests, ideas and roles and supported by genuine adult-youth partnerships. The roles and experiences of teens at the Neutral Zone help to authentically build the development of 21st Century Skills.
PROVEN RESULTS

An evaluation conducted by Michigan State University’s Community Evaluation and Research Collaborative showed that the YDS intervention produced powerful impacts on youth, staff, and organizations with just one year of direct work with pilot agencies\(^5\). The results indicate that YDS had substantial effects on the development of youth partnerships and opportunities for involvement as well as on youth program engagement, peer relationships, and 21st century skills. The data also suggest that staff became more sensitized to opportunities for youth involvement and revised their understanding of youth decision-making and responsibility to reflect a more critical definition.

Organizational Outcomes

- Youth reported significantly stronger opportunities for involvement, adult support, and youth-adult partnerships.
- Staff and administrators reported significantly more youth responsibility for decision-making in activity and organizational management.
- All groups became more critical about how they defined meaningful youth involvement and responsibility.

Youth Outcomes

- Youth reported significantly greater sense of community and engagement in the program and felt less socially excluded.
- Youth reported significantly more opportunities to explore their identities and reflect on who they wanted to be in the future.
- Youth reported significant gains in a wide variety of 21st century skills, with the greatest changes in problem solving, organizational skills, management skills, creative thinking and innovation, goal setting, group process skills, and linkages to community.
- During youth-adult meetings, youth were more likely to generate solutions, provide information, identify problems, and evaluate information.
- Youth, staff, administrators and coaches described YDS benefits for youth communication, critical thinking, and self-regulation skills.

SUPPORTS

Intervention components include:

- **Training**: Teams of teen and adult staff/volunteers from 5-6 youth-serving organizations attend a 2-day Youth Driven Space Institute. The goal of the Institute is to support site teams to: (a) better understand the principles of youth-driven practice; (b) reflect on program and organizational strategies that support youth-driven practice; and (c) make plans for organizational and program changes to support youth-driven practice when they return to their program. The Institute is designed to model and foster youth-driven practice and to provide both teens and adults new skills and ideas that can be applied in their settings.

- **Coaching and Technical Assistance**: Coaches tailor technical assistance to meet the needs of individual sites. Coaches support: (a) development of structures and youth roles related to: visioning, values, mission, hiring and staffing, organizational design, budgeting and fund development, community relations, outreach and partnerships; and (b) training in positive youth development to support youth leadership in program offerings.

- **Site Visits**: An experienced YDS coach visits each site to assess progress. The visit includes observation and reflection, assessment, and a planning session. Coaches will conduct an assessment with the site team, debrief progress with site teams, lead mini-trainings or review of content covered at YDS Institute and work to plan for development of the teen advisory council.

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