

THE SUPPORT:

Build Youth-Adult Partnerships to Support Engagement

Are there adults, within and outside of local government, who are willing and able to work as colleagues with youth and build bridges between them and the adult world?

Just about everyone knows the three fundamental criteria for success in the field of real estate are location, location, location. In the field of youth civic engagement, the mantra is: relationships, relationships, relationships.

The relationships between young people and adults, and among youth and their peers, are the single most influential contributor to the success of any youth engagement initiative. Youth may be attracted to the work of local government because of their passion for an issue, but they will remain engaged because of their relationships with adults and other youth they encounter.

Adults who work alongside youth in any type of social or community change activity are often referred to as allies. They build the bridge between young people and the adult world. In the hands of skilled and caring adults, youthful enthusiasm and ideas can be channeled into meaningful action.

The key to the youth-adult relationship is understanding partnership. In many such relationships, the adult either dictates the agenda and controls what occurs, or leaves the young people alone and abdicates responsibility for what occurs. In a partnership, the adult ally and young people work “shoulder to shoulder” sharing ideas and expertise, translating information about one another’s worlds, creating a mutual agenda and taking joint responsibility for outcomes.

Adult allies can play an essential role in supporting youth participation by:

- recruiting a diverse group of youth and helping them all feel welcomed;
- preparing them to participate through training and education;
- setting high expectations for what youth can accomplish;
- opening doors and increasing their access to decision-makers;
- assisting them in taking advantage of the ongoing opportunities within the structure that has been established; and
- supporting their efforts to create other youth-driven initiatives.