

| THE STRATEGY:

Create Meaningful Opportunities for Youth to Make a Difference

Is there a continuum of opportunities available and accessible to a broad diversity of youth that allows them to have an impact on important issues?

Keeping in mind that AYCE is not a program, how does a city begin to offer meaningful civic opportunities to its youth? Ultimately, AYCE would look like a system of opportunities throughout the community that connects young people to the work of local government. However, this does not happen overnight, and cities can begin their initiatives in many different places. Then, combined with a welcoming civic climate, strong adult allies and a functional and sustainable infrastructure, municipal leaders can eventually build a sound strategy into a long-term system for engaging youth.

With a fundamental understanding of an AYCE system, cities can choose the beginning or expansion points that meet their needs. The model below has been helpful to many cities in building that system.

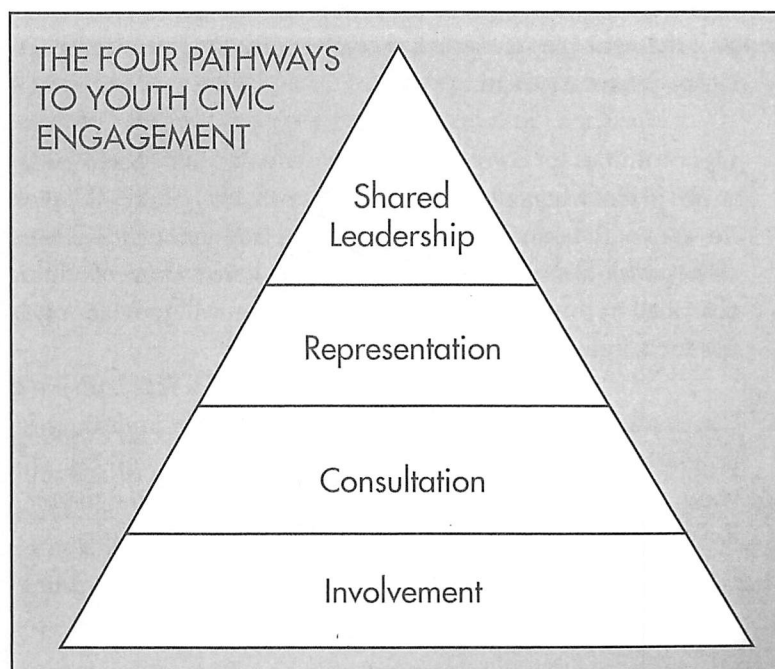
If an issue is important to youth, they will participate. Yet, just like adults, what young people do about that issue will vary depending on their interests, availability, skills or the issue itself. Like adults, many youth want active, hands-on activities that can be accomplished in short-term settings. Others are interested in longer commitments that provide increasing opportunity to share ideas and influence decisions.

To make the work of local government approachable for a broad diversity of youth, cities can create a continuum of opportunities for engagement that increase the extent to which youth share authority and accountability in policy, planning and decision-making. It is important to note that AYCE avoids “tokenism” in which one or two youth are consulted or invited with little expectation that anyone will heed their suggestions. Instead, it may be helpful to visualize a pyramid with four pathways of engagement:

The Four Pathways to Youth Engagement

Involvement: Youth actively participate in volunteer opportunities and meetings initiated by adults, and have input on the strategies and day-to-day operations, or take on projects within ongoing city initiatives.

Consultation: Adult officials create intentional settings, such as advisory groups, in which youth give input and advice



on important issues facing their neighborhoods, schools, community and local government, while the adults retain the authority to make the final decision.

Representation: Selected youth gain the opportunity to participate in ongoing municipal work on behalf of their peers, with the ability to help set the agenda and vote on a government-sponsored activity (e.g., through a city board or commission).

Shared leadership: Youth share positions of authority with adults as colleagues and share accountability for the goals and outcomes of the activity.

The AYCE pathways are positioned as a pyramid not to imply that any one has a greater value than another, but rather to demonstrate that activities increase in their depth and intensity as they move from the base to the apex. The pyramid also demonstrates that the potential number of opportunities and the corresponding number of youth involved tends to decrease as the type of involvement increases in its complexity.

Most cities already offer a number of opportunities within the Involvement pathway. AYCE encourages cities to build on the experience of involving youth to explore other pathways that create a permanent place for more youth to participate in city decision-making. Each of the following suggestions can be the basis for beginning the strategy or building on it.

What Can Municipal Leaders Do to Create the Strategy?

Use the four pathways of engagement to ensure a broad continuum of opportunities.

Cities can create activities for youth participation that will be meaningful for young people, relate to their interests and skills and have an impact on the city. In an AYCE system, one size definitely does not fit all. The broader the range of opportunities, the more youth will participate — particularly when young people can move easily from one type of opportunity into another.

Involvement strategies are a good first step to put youth in touch with municipal, school, neighborhood and community decision-makers. Some cities create a service corps, host public awareness events, sponsor government days and use new media to develop a variety of educational approaches that can strengthen young people's civic connection and expose them to the issues that local government faces.

Opportunities for consultation, representation and shared leadership will bring youth even closer to the places where planning and policy-making occur. The most common of these opportunities are youth councils or commissions, placement of youth on city boards and youth summits or other youth-friendly public meetings. However, a host of additional strategies, many of which are described in the Tools and Resources section, will provide youth with a real voice and opportunities for action.

City leaders can miss out on valuable input if they limit their expectations of the range of issues in which youth might be interested. In addition to working with the mayor and city council, youth can engage in numerous city processes, including master planning, neighborhood and land use planning and decisions about roadways and bike paths.