



University of Wisconsin-Extension  
431 Lowell Hall  
610 Langdon Street  
Madison WI 53703-1195  
6088-262-1221  
608-265-6407 (fax)  
800-947-3529 (TTY)

# **INVOLVING YOUTH ON BOARDS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS: Core Elements of Program Design**

**Jessica Collura and Shepherd Zeldin**  
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# **INVOLVING YOUTH ON BOARDS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS: CORE ELEMENTS OF PROGRAM DESIGN**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development has been taking the lead in helping counties engage young people on boards, such as city councils, county boards, and school boards. Concurrently, 4-H Youth Development staff have been learning from these experiences, identifying best practices in Wisconsin, and conducting research on national models.

Why so much effort? The answer is simple. Involving youth in governance initiatives helps: (1) promote positive youth development, (2) strengthen the ability of adults and organizations to work with young people, and (3) prepare the next generation of civic leaders.

The resource section at the end of this Practice Brief lists a range of research-based articles and reports that detail the positive impacts of youth in governance. For now, it is useful to highlight some key findings:

- When youth are valued members of governance initiatives, they begin to feel accepted, supported and respected by the community. They not only gain knowledge and leadership skills, but also become confident in their ability to contribute to their communities. Young people start to feel more connected to their community and they become part of larger networks.
- Elected officials also benefit. These adults experience satisfaction in passing along their experience and wisdom to the next generation. They develop a sense of mastery, a feeling that they have become better able to work with young people. Quite often, the elected officials become advocates for youth participation in other programs.
- Communities benefit from youth in governance. When adults see young people working with elected officials, their perspectives about youth begin to change. Residents start to expect youth participation in the larger community, as well as in government. People start to take youth voice more seriously, and this changes the content and quality of public dialogue.

Wisconsin 4-H Educators also emphasize that involving youth in governance can help them in their own jobs. For example, when Educators support youth in governance, they have the opportunity for increased “face time” with elected officials. This allows Educators to form and deepen working relationships with the officials, to highlight the array of 4-H programs available in the county, and to communicate commitment and enthusiasm. Further, in working with the elected officials, Educators have another way of keeping up on the news and political climate of the county, they learn about other organizations’ efforts, and have new changes to network with them.

## **PURPOSE OF PRACTICE BRIEF**

For many years, Wisconsin Educators have been engaging youth in the design and implementation of 4-H Youth Development Programs. Almost all Educators have worked with youth as partners on county youth development and prevention coalitions. And many Educators have worked with youth on nonprofit boards and on government advisory committees.

Engaging youth on boards with elected officials, however, is quite different from the above experiences. This is because city councils, county boards, and school boards operate under strict legal parameters. They are funded by public dollars and have public accountability.

It is often difficult for County Educators and youth to find a place within this mix. For this reason, many Educators are hesitant to get involved in youth in governance initiatives. At the same time, because there are many short and long term benefits to youth in governance programs, as outlined above, many Educators are involved, and many others are interested in becoming involved. But, they don't know where to start. This Practice Brief is written to address this need.

During 2008/09, we partnered with Kenosha County 4-H Youth Development to research the core design elements Educators can use to create a context that effectively brings together youth and elected officials. In order to identify these core elements, we conducted semi-structured interviews with program participants, including seven youth representatives, three county board supervisors, and two county staff members. We observed several committee meetings, as well as one youth meeting and an orientation. In addition, we reviewed program documents, such as the orientation manual and written position descriptions.

The research with Kenosha forms the foundation for this Practice Brief. At the same time, our work is informed by our previous research on this issue, as well as the research of others (*see Additional Resources*). The findings and core elements discussed in this Practice Brief reflect all of these sources of information.

## **FINDINGS AND CORE ELEMENTS**

Our research study in Kenosha, combined with the lessons of previous research, indicates that effective initiatives are characterized by five core design elements, as summarized below. Each core element can be implemented in different ways depending on local circumstances. In other words, County Educators have many options in terms of selecting those strategies that are consistent with the core design element. The bottom line is that it is up to each Educator to choose those options that will work best in their county. It is important, however, that County Educators strive to implement at least one strategy within each core element.

***Finding / Core Element #1: Role expectations are clear and explicit. Both youth and adults understand their responsibilities.***

Involving youth on boards with elected officials may be new to many program participants and therefore role clarity is critical. In order to ensure both youth and adults understand their purpose and responsibilities, we recommend implementing the following strategies:

- Develop a position description sheet that clearly outlines role expectations and responsibilities for both youth and adults. Be specific and concise. Program participants should all have copies and access to this document.
- Host an orientation for both youth and adults. During the orientation, discuss the role expectations and responsibilities outlined on the position description sheet. Allow time for participants to ask questions, express concerns, and clarify understandings. Since it may be challenging to find time for elected officials to meet, consider hosting the adult orientation prior to a regularly scheduled board meeting or seek permission to present during the meeting.
- Encourage youth and adults to talk to each other about their respective role expectations. By engaging in this conversation, both youth and adults will have a clear understanding of how best to interact throughout the year or term.

***Finding / Core Element #2: All adults are responsible for creating a welcoming environment for youth representatives.***

In order to ensure youth participation, it is necessary for the young person to feel welcomed and valued in their new environment. Public boards should do the following to make sure youth feel comfortable:

- Every adult that attends or participates in board meetings should share the responsibility of welcoming young people to the board, helping them acclimate to the setting, and encouraging their participation. This includes elected officials as well as staff members.
- Assign a “mentor” or “go-to” person for each youth representative. Although it is important to stress that all adults are responsible for welcoming and assisting youth, it is necessary to assign one adult to serve as a safety net for the young person. This adult should be an ally for the youth and someone the young person feels comfortable approaching.
- Youth representatives should have a placard or name tent. This makes the youth feel like an official member of the committee and also allows the adults to learn the names of the youth representatives.

- Create a photo roster of program participants. A photo roster is a useful tool to assist youth in learning the names of elected officials, staff, and other youth representatives.
- Seating matters. Youth interact most frequently with the adults they are seated next to in meetings. Think careful about where the youth will sit and try to place them next to either their mentor or another friendly, helpful board member.

***Finding / Core Element #3: Adults use effective assistance strategies to help youth acclimate to the board and guide their participation.***

Young people may have many uncertainties and questions when they first join the board. In addition, they need continuous support throughout their term. For this reason, it's important that adults offer assistance. Elected officials and staff can guide and encourage youth participation by implementing the following strategies:

- Provide youth with any necessary background knowledge and information. In particular, young people need to learn parliamentary procedures and be briefed on current board issues. Visiting county, city or school facilities can also provide youth with valuable insight into how board decisions impact the local community and help them to more fully understand the oversight responsibilities of the board.
- Model proper board etiquette. Youth learn how to participate on the board simply by observing adult members; therefore it is important to model proper board behavior, such as following Robert's Rules of Order.
- Make time to engage with youth before or after board meetings. Youth may have specific questions about the meeting agenda, board issues, or basic terminology. Arriving early, or staying five minutes after the meeting, provides youth with an opportunity to ask any questions they may have. It also provides a brief opportunity for youth to engage in small talk and build rapport with board members.
- Solicit youth input and ideas during committee meetings. Young people may not initially feel comfortable voicing their opinion and offering ideas. Youth tend to participate, especially at first, if the chairman or other board members specifically ask for their opinion.
- Positively reinforce youth participation in both word and action. Youth are nervous to participate and are particularly sensitive to how adults respond to their input. Young people are encouraged by simple comments, such as, "thanks for your comment" or "that's good idea." This seemingly small gesture means a lot to young people and gives them confidence to continue participating.

***Finding / Core Element #4: The board, in one or more meaningful ways, is involved in designing, promoting or being responsible for the youth in governance program.***

Creating board buy-in and ownership is critical for the success of a youth in governance program. In order to create buy-in and support, we offer the following recommendations:

- Identify and support “champions.” Champions are elected officials that support the youth in governance program, advocate for its existence, and work to build enthusiasm for the program. In short, champions work to create board buy-in.
- Involve the board in the selection of youth representatives. In order to create board ownership, elected officials should be invited to participate in the selection of youth representatives. These individuals may review youth applications or assist in conducting interviews.
- The Educator consistently provides information to the board members about the youth in governance program. Board members need to be kept apprised of the program. They want to hear about success stories, application rates, and outcomes. The Educator should provide the board with this information, as well as respond to any questions or concerns individuals may have.

***Finding / Core Element #5: Allow time for relationship building. Youth need the opportunity to engage with each other and elected officials outside of the board setting.***

Creating opportunities for youth to engage in conversations and socialize with elected officials and youth representatives helps facilitate greater youth participation during board meetings. In order to create time for relationship building, we suggest the following:

- Hold quarterly youth meetings to allow young people to discuss their experiences on the board. Quarterly meetings are important for two reasons. First, it allows young people the opportunity to build relationships with each other youth and offer one another support. Second, meetings allow the Educator to learn more about the youths’ experiences on the board. It also is an opportunity for Educators to provide youth representatives with direct support.
- Host a meal for youth and adults before board meetings. Youth need time to engage with elected officials, and each other, outside of board meetings. Time is limited, however, and everyone has a hectic schedule. Hosting either a potluck or catered dinner once or twice a year prior to a board meeting provides an opportunity for youth and adults to socialize without requiring an extra commitment.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

While many Educators are comfortable with forming youth-adult partnerships in 4-H programs, on nonprofit boards, leader boards, and in community and government advisory councils, most are hesitant to design and help implement youth in governance programs with elected officials. This hesitancy is understandable. Elected officials and their boards have a different culture and accountability than the other boards with which Extension works. That being said, most elected officials are open to working with youth and with Extension. This Practice Brief was written to provide guidance to such work. By focusing on the core elements contained in this Brief, and by consulting with colleagues across the state, it becomes possible to implement youth in governance programs for the benefit of young people, the county, and for Extension.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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