

Youth in Governance

A Youth Guide to Becoming a Decision Maker in the Community

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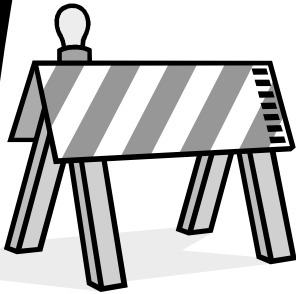
Welcome!

Welcome to *Youth in Governance*—your guide to making your voice heard through boards and committees at the local, state and even national level.

Have you ever felt that young people in your community are to “be seen and not heard”? Do adults (teachers, school boards, elected officials, the Chamber of Commerce and others) make decisions about the issues that affect young people without asking the youth what they think? Have you been told, “You’re just a kid; you don’t know what you’re talking about”?

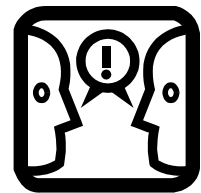


Would you like to work *with* adults to make a real difference in your community? This guide can help you make that happen!



Barriers are never easy to deal with, and sometimes the toughest walls to climb are the ones put up by adults. They have years of experience and knowledge, and often they think it’s easier to tackle a problem, project or new program alone, rather than involve young people. But when they do that, they are missing out on the great ideas, enthusiasm, energy and resources that youth have to offer!

As a young person, you have a lot to contribute to your community. You are a citizen *now*. You don’t have to wait until you’re “an adult” to have your voice heard. By working in partnership with adults on boards and committees (such as the city government, local organizations, civic groups, the school board or other groups), you can be actively engaged in making the decisions that affect your community. This is called **youth in governance**.



More specifically, youth in governance refers to young people’s ability to lead and vote as full, participating members of boards and governing bodies. Working together, youth and adult board members make decisions about such issues as budget, staff, strategic planning and more.

Are you ready to participate in governance? Read the next few pages and find out how you can work in youth-adult partnerships to make a real difference in your community!



Get ready!

So you want to be involved on a decision-making board or committee in your community? It's not a good idea to just show up at a meeting and demand to join the group. There are some steps you need to take first.



The first step is to work with your fellow 4-H'ers, agents, volunteers, parents and other caring adults to identify the issues that affect young people in your community. What do you care about? What do you want to help with? Write your ideas here:



The next step is to research which groups in your community are dealing with this issue. Talk to other young people, neighbors, elected officials, teachers, your parents and others to find out which boards, committees, organizations, agencies or civic groups will be making decisions about this issue. Use this space to record what you find out. Also, be sure to mark if they already have youth involved in governance roles.

Board/Committee/Organization/Group

Youth in Governance?

Yes	No
Yes	No
Yes	No
Yes	No
Yes	No



Be prepared!

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Once you have identified the community issues that concern you and boards or committees that are dealing with those issues, it's time to prepare "your case" for getting involved in a governance role. In the space below, write out the reasons you want to be involved with this board (why you care about the issue) and what you think you can contribute to its work. How can you be involved?

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Next, work with your adult partners (volunteers, agents, parents and other caring adults) to identify people currently serving on the board or committee who will advocate for youth members. This may include teachers, church leaders, your parents' friends (or your friends' parents!), youth workers, neighbors and other community members who care about young people and believe in the power of youth. These "youth advocates" will work with you to secure youth representation on the board or committee.



Be effective!

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The result of steps 1 through 4 should be youth members serving on local boards and committees. Both the youth and adult members will need training in working together, so they can build an environment of respect, communication, investment (training and development) and meaningful involvement.

Remember these tips to help you be an effective team member.

- Find a guide (mentor)—someone on the board who has experience and is willing to learn alongside you.
- Be confident. You have been selected for this board and you belong there. It may take some time to adjust, but just watch, listen and learn.



- Ask for training and support. Don't be afraid to ask questions about policies and procedures. Someone once said that the only dumb question is the one asked three times. If you have so many questions you might slow the flow of the meeting, write them down and ask during a break.
- Be a leader and speak up. If you have thoughts, ideas or concerns, share them. But remember that you are an equal member, so your ideas are considered to be as valuable as all the others, not more so.
- Stay interested and curious. Some issues are boring for everyone, but the work of a board is to do all the work for which it is responsible. It is up to you to take responsibility for your learning and to contribute.
- Be responsible. Show up for all meetings and fulfill the tasks for which you are responsible. Follow through and hold yourself—and all the board members—accountable.
- Develop an adequate and structured reflection process for yourself and the other board members. (*See pages 6 and 7.*)
- Document your involvement using photos, journals or other methods. This allows you to see your success and learn from your challenges. Documentation is also a great way to receive recognition for your work and to recruit other young people to participate (Bernard, 2000; Fredericks, Kaplan & Zeisler, 2001).

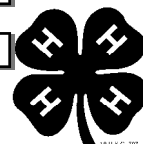


Check it off!

This is a simple checklist you can use to assess your ability to provide meaningful youth representation on a board or committee. This tool can help ALL board members comprehend the necessary adjustments and measure their commitment. If you check "to consider" on some items, it doesn't mean youth members can't or shouldn't serve on the board. It just shows you things to work on!

	Yes	To Consider
Do I have the motivation, ability and knowledge needed to make a contribution to the board?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Am I aware of my job description and what the board expects of me?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has the board communicated the specific objectives it has for me as a youth member?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have I either identified or been assigned a mentor for my board role?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Am I aware of the unwritten agendas and flow of the board meetings?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do I demonstrate my willingness to learn through my words and actions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Am I aware of the needs, public positions and opinions of the group(s) I represent?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do I have the motivation, ability and knowledge to correspond with my community and the group(s) I represent about my governance activities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do I have the motivation, ability and knowledge to take leadership roles on the committees and/or board when possible?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Am I willing to ask questions that give me insight and understanding of the board's activities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When receiving feedback, information and answers to questions, do I recognize the expertise and experience of the adults on the board?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Am I willing to give my time and attention to all board issues, rather than just the ones that affect me and those I represent?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do the adult members of the board hold any stereotypes about young people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do I hold any stereotypes about the adult members of the board?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have board members received training about working in youth-adult partnerships?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Am I mentoring potential youth representatives who may be future board members?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(Bernard, 2000; Fredericks, Kaplan & Zeisler, 2001)



Reflect!

Serving in a governance role builds your citizenship skills. Citizenship includes things such as identifying situations where you can make a contribution to your community (step 1), learning about the community (step 2), volunteering (step 3), exploring outside your own family or group (step 4) and civic responsibility (step 5).



While you are going through the process of becoming and serving as a board member, it's important to think about what you're doing, how it affects you and what you want to do in the future. Take some time to answer these reflection questions.

- What have I learned about my community?
- What have I learned about my role as a member of my community?
- What is the greatest challenge I have faced in the youth in governance process? How did I overcome it? What did I learn from it?
- What is the best thing about serving on a board/committee?
- How am I sharing with others what I have done and learned in my governance role?
- What can I do now to continue my work on this issue or with the board/committee?
- What other things can I do to be involved and make a difference in my community?



The following resources were used in the development of this guide:

Bernard, H. (2000). The power of an untapped resource: Exploring youth representation on your board or committee. Retrieved March 4, 2004 from http://www.aasb.org/publications/untapped_resource.pdf.

Fredericks, L., Kaplan, E., & Zeisler, J. (2001). *Integrating youth voice in service-learning*. Denver: Learning in Deed.

Justinianno, J. & Scherer, C. (2001). *Youth voice: A guide for engaging youth in leadership and decision making in service-learning programs*. Washington, D.C.: Points of Light Foundation.

** This resource is also available at http://www.ysa.org/pdf/files/YV_Guide.pdf

The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, National 4-H Council, National Network for Youth, Youth Leadership Institute. (2003). *Youth-adult partnerships: A training manual*. Chevy Chase, MD: Author.

Points of Light Foundation. (n.d.) *Moving young people from participants to decision-makers*. Washington, D.C.: Author.



Learn more!

Are you interested in learning more about youth in governance and how you can play a part in shaping the future of your community? Visit the Tennessee 4-H Youth Development Web site at <http://4h.tennessee.edu/ythgov> for more information. Also, surf the Web to view these other great resources:

At the Table	http://www.atthetable.org
The Innovation Center	http://www.theinnovationcenter.org
Youth as Resources	http://www.cyar.org
Youth Engagement and Voice	http://www.youthengagementandvoice.org
Youth Leadership Institute	http://www.yli.org
Youth on Board	http://www.youthonboard.org
Youth Service America	http://www.ysa.org/yvi/index.cfm

Visit the Tennessee 4-H
Youth Development Web site at
<http://4h.tennessee.edu>

