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Big Idea: Youth Councils

By Thaddeus Ferber

The governor of New Mexico was faced with a tough decision. On the one hand, Governor Richardson was hearing from children’s advocates who wanted him to create additional school-based health centers. On the other hand, budget hawks were telling him that the state was already paying for community-based health clinics in the same regions as the schools – so wouldn’t this be a wasteful, redundant expenditure?

He needed to talk to someone who could give him unique insight into this decision. So, he turned to the Statewide Youth Advisory Council (the New Mexico Youth Alliance) created by the Youth Council Act, which he had signed into law in 2003.

The young people explained to him that in the small communities they lived in, they couldn’t go anywhere near the community-based health clinics without fear of rumors quickly spreading that they were pregnant or had an STD. So they and their peers avoided going to the community clinics even if their medical needs had nothing to do with reproductive health. As a result, they missed out on sorely-needed services.

The governor now had the information he needed to make his decision: he introduced legislation to increase the number of school-based health centers from 38 to 64, making at least one available in every county in the state. The legislation was passed in March 2005.

The governor of New Mexico is not alone in having access to young people who provide vital insights and perspectives into difficult policy decisions. At least 12 states¹ and hundreds of localities² have Youth Councils – officially sanctioned bodies of young people (often high school-aged, but sometimes including younger and older ages as well) who advise high-level policymakers. And with good reason. As the California Research Bureau (which provides nonpartisan research services to the governor and his staff, to both houses of the legislature, and to other state elected officials) found: “Adding young people’s voices to the policymaking process, and encouraging their participation in developing the policy that directly affects them, can result in more thoughtful and effective policy and programs.”³ In the survey the bureau conducted of state-level policymakers in 2007, the

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response was unanimous: 100 percent of respondents reported that youth either must or should be included in policy activities that affect them.⁴ It comes as little surprise, therefore, that in 2003 the California Senate passed Senate Concurrent Resolution 40 (Chapter 133/Chesbro), which “resolved that the Legislature encourage individual Members of the Legislature to include local youth in their policymaking efforts.”

At least 93 countries, spanning the alphabet from Anguilla to Zimbabwe, have National Youth Councils, including Australia, Argentina, Chile, Finland, Greece, Iceland, India, Korea, Mexico, and Thailand.⁵ Germany has the German Federal Youth Council. Norway has the Norwegian Youth Council. Peru has the National Council of the Peruvian Youth. South Africa has the South African Youth Council. The United Kingdom’s British Youth Council supports a network of local youth councils across the United Kingdom.

These National Youth Councils are convened in turn by a number of international groups.⁶ The World Assembly of Youth was founded in 1949 as the international coordinating body of national youth councils. Currently, 93 National Youth Councils are members of the World Assembly of Youth. The European Youth Forum (an independent, democratic, youth-led platform representing 99 National Youth Councils and International Youth Organisations from across Europe), perhaps the best-established regional structure for youth councils, works to empower young people in European institutions, the Council of Europe, and the United Nations. Other regional associations of National Youth Councils include the Asian Youth Council, the Caribbean Youth Forum, the Forum for the Integration of Andean Youth, the Pacific Youth Council, the Arab Youth Union, the Pan-African Youth Union, and the African-Arab Youth Council.

Given the ubiquity of national youth councils around the world, we can be assured that the United States’ federal policymakers have their own youth council, right? Wrong. The president doesn’t have access to a Youth Council to provide him the unique perspectives and vital insights necessary to make well-informed decisions. Nor do his secretaries. Nor does Congress. The United States does not have a National Youth Council, meaning that even the leaders of tiny countries such as Barbados and the Cook Islands have access to a critical perspective and vital insights that U.S. leaders do not.

It is both possible and advisable for the United States to create a National Youth Council. The federal government has a rich history of seeking the input of specific populations to gain insight for policy decisions. For example, the National Council on Disabilities was established in 1978 to advise the U.S. Department of Education and now advises the entire executive branch as well as Congress. In 1995, President Clinton created the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA) through executive order. PACHA directly advises the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, who then reports PACHA’s findings to the president. As recently as 2009, President Obama created the

Advisory Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. This council is composed of religious and secular leaders and scholars from different backgrounds and is charged with making recommendations to the president, through the executive director, regarding changes in policies, programs, and practices that affect the delivery of services by such organizations and the needs of low-income and other underserved persons. Building on these models to create a National Youth Council would be a landmark achievement.

But we can even go one better. Because although a growing number of states and localities have youth councils, the vast majority still do not. In the United States, policymakers who have access to a youth council are the exception, not the rule. In one study, two-thirds of state policymakers described the current level of youth participation using terms such as “minimal,” “limited,” or “token.”⁷ If the United States were to not only create a Federal Youth Council but also create an infrastructure of effective state and local youth councils, that would be a true game changer.

Advancing Quality

Our need is not only for a system of youth councils; we need *effective* youth councils. The mere creation of a Youth Council doesn't ensure that policymakers will have opportunities for high-quality interactions with young people. Indeed, plenty of well-intentioned youth councils fall far short of the goal of providing unique insights and perspectives to inform critical policy decisions. So efforts to increase the quantity of youth councils must go hand in hand with efforts to improve the *quality* of youth councils.

What makes for a high-quality Youth Council? In 2007 the Forum for Youth Investment undertook a review of youth councils and identified the following elements of success.⁸

Sound financial and staff infrastructure. Successful youth councils have stable multiyear budgets (for transportation, training, staff, communications and outreach, and meeting expenses). They also have sufficient, consistent, high-quality staff. Running a Youth Council is a challenging job, requiring expertise in working with youth and in working with policymakers. Finding individuals with both skill sets can be challenging, but finding and retaining them is critical for success.

Diverse membership. The composition of successful youth councils reflects the diversity of the region, including a large number of young people served by government systems. Policymakers express concern that too often they “hear from only a few, perhaps unrepresentative, youth voices. Participation by diverse groups of youth (beyond the ‘class presidents’) is lacking.”⁹ Some councils reserve a number of seats for specific types of members (the Seattle Mayor's Youth Council, for example, reserves two slots for homeless youth), while others such as the North Carolina State Youth Council undertake significant outreach and marketing strategies targeting a diverse cross-section of their community.

Mechanisms to represent all youth. No group of young people, no matter how carefully selected, can claim that its views represent the views of all young people in a region unless the group has solid outreach mechanisms in place. Youth councils need to use multiple mechanisms (such as polls, focus groups, and convenings) to learn and document the views of all young people in their jurisdiction so they can adequately represent them to policymakers. As a state policymaker in California put it, the weight policymakers give to any individual young person's testimony "depends if the youth representing an organization has surveyed the members of the organization and then speaks from those results."¹⁰

Rigorous training. This is likely the most important element, and the most often underappreciated. As Rich Goll, former director of Alternatives Inc. in Hampton, Virginia, expressed it, "We never put a young person in a position to embarrass him or herself. If young people haven't been given the opportunity and/or training to be properly prepared for the tasks you are asking of them, don't ask."¹¹ Being on a Youth Council is not easy. Members need to develop new skills in outreach to solicit the views and perspectives of their peers. They need policy analysis skills to understand the decisions being made. They need social skills to present their case to policymakers in a compelling and respectful manner. Policymakers can see a clear difference between Youth Council members who have received significant training and those who have not. State policymakers in California, for example, found that "youth must be adequately prepared to participate effectively in policymaking. Specifically, they need to be familiar with the legislative process and know the policy area and its background to understand the context. They need to be trained in public speaking (to be clear and succinct) and understand the purpose of the forum, their audience, and time constraints."¹²

Authentic access to policymakers. Even the best staffed, most diverse, and most effectively trained youth councils will do little to assist policymakers with difficult policy decisions if they can't get a foot in the door. Interactions between young people and policymakers must be carefully crafted to ensure that the policymakers are truly interested in what the young people have to say, and must be artfully timed to coincide with a key decision-making juncture that the policymaker is facing. Youth councils have had success with a variety of different access structures. In Maine, the Youth Advisory Council includes four legislators as members along with the 18 young people. North Carolina's State Youth Council is structured similarly. In New Mexico, the Children, Youth and Families Department hired a "youth liaison" to help connect department officials to Youth Council members. The Missouri Youth Cabinet assigned members to work directly with the directors of 19 state departments. In Hampton, Virginia, the Youth Commission is charged with writing a component of the Hampton Community Plan; similarly, the Des Moines Youth Advisory Board is exploring spearheading a Youth Master Planning process for the city.

Youth Councils in the Context of Youth Civic Engagement

To fully develop into successful adults, all young people need civic engagement opportunities. This need has been long understood (35 years ago, the National Commission on Resources for Youth called for “the involvement of youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs with opportunity for planning and/or decision making affecting others, in an activity whose impact or consequences extends to others – i.e., outside or beyond the youth participants themselves”¹³). And this need has been well documented by researchers (the National Research Council, for example, found that “to foster development,” young people need “the opportunity to be efficacious and to make a difference in their social worlds”¹⁴). While effective youth councils provide developmentally appropriate civic engagement opportunities for their members, these Councils, by their very structure, cannot by themselves meet the civic engagement needs of all young people in the country. As the National Commission on Resources for Youth found, “while the inclusion of representatives of youth on the policy-making bodies of organizations whose activities affect young people – for example, schools and school boards, welfare commissions, recreation commissions and hospital boards – is laudable, much needed and overdue, it is distinguishable from Youth Participation in that the participatory experience is usually limited to the representatives alone.”¹⁵

Thus, youth councils represent just one small component of a full system of youth civic engagement, which provides *all* young people with the motivation, capacity, and opportunities to engage in the civic life of their community and society. But youth councils are a critical component and one with the power to positively affect the climate for youth engagement in a community, which leads in turn to more opportunities for youth engagement overall. As the National League of Cities points out, while youth councils “by their nature only reach a small fraction of a city’s youth population, they make a powerful statement to all young people and adult residents that youth are full and valued members of the community.”¹⁶

Youth councils also are well positioned to help expand conceptions of what civic engagement looks like in the United States. As Michael Delli Carpini, a scholar of civic life and the dean of the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication, has noted, “Civic engagement has become defined as the one-on-one experience of working in a soup kitchen, clearing trash from a local river or tutoring a child once a week. What is missing is an awareness of the connection between the individual, isolated problems these actions are intended to address and the larger world of public policy.”¹⁷ Studies show that although young people are increasingly engaging in community service, they are participating less in other aspects of democracy, such as government and political processes, which are viewed by many young people as “ineffective” and “irrelevant.”¹⁸

Therefore, in addition to the positive impact youth councils have in helping policymakers craft effective policies, youth councils can also play an important role in providing young people with civic engagement opportunities. Not only do these organizations provide such opportunities directly to the young people on the youth councils, but they also help shift the wider context, broadening conceptions of youth civic engagement beyond direct service and into the public policy sphere, and building awareness of the powerful and positive roles young people can play.

Conclusion

As Jason Warren, a 17-year-old participant in Youth Force in New York City put it, “If you had a problem in the Black community, and you brought in a group of White people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously. In fact, there’d probably be a public outcry. It would be the same for women’s issues or gay issues. But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us.”¹⁹

Poignant and powerful. New? Hardly – Jason said that more than ten years ago, but it remains just as true today. That needs to change. And we know how to change it. Establishing a system of effective youth councils at the local, state, and federal levels is the game changer we need to ensure that all policymakers are afforded opportunities to gain the unique perspectives and vital insights into difficult policy decisions that only young people can provide.

Notes:

¹ S. Martin, K. Pittman, T. Ferber, and A. McMahon, *Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making* (Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment, 2007).

² We are not aware of any comprehensive listing of local youth councils, but the National League of Cities Web site lists more than 100.

³ L. Foster, *Preparing Youth to Participate in State Policy Making* (Sacramento, CA: California Research Bureau, 2007).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ List derived from the membership of the World Assembly of Youth, as provided on the organization’s Web site, <http://www.way.org/my>, on June 1, 2010.

⁶ For discussion of the role and need for youth participation in global decision making and international problem solving, see J. Wittkamper, *The Global Youth ACTION Network Partnership Initiative Concept Paper* (New York: Global Youth Action Network, 2003).

⁷ Foster, *Preparing Youth*.

⁸ Adapted from Martin et al., *Building Effective Youth Councils*.

⁹ Foster, *Preparing Youth*.

¹⁰ Foster, *Preparing Youth*.

¹¹ As quoted in Martin et al., *Building Effective Youth Councils*.

¹² Foster, *Preparing Youth*.

¹³ National Commission on Resources for Youth, *Youth Participation: A Concept Paper*. Report of the National Commission on Resources for Youth to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare Office of Youth Development (New York: National Commission on Resources for Youth Inc., 1975).

¹⁴ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth, Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer A. Gootman, eds., Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2002).

¹⁵ National Commission on Resources for Youth, *Youth Participation*.

¹⁶ *Action Kit for Municipal Leaders on Promoting Youth Participation* (2001). Washington DC.: National League of Cities.

¹⁷ As quoted in D. Bennett, *Doing Disservice: The Benefits and Limits of Volunteerism* (Washington, DC: American Prospect, 2003).

¹⁸ P. Levine and C. Gibson, *Civic Mission of Schools* (New York: CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003).

¹⁹ As quoted in Martin et al., *Building Effective Youth Councils*.