

AUGUST 2017

# YOUTH IN GOVERNANCE

Review of Information of Youth  
Representation in Boards and Government



PREPARED BY: ANCHORAGE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT COALITION

PREPARED FOR: ANCHORAGE YOUTH ADVISORY COMMISSION  
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

## PURPOSE OF REPORT

The Anchorage Youth Development Coalition (AYDC) is a group of over 60 youth-serving organizations committed to promoting positive youth development so that all of Anchorage's youth thrive. In the May 2017 Full Coalition meeting, the Anchorage Youth Advisory Commission (YAC) presented on the topic of Youth Empowerment and also shared background on the Anchorage Assembly's consideration of adding a youth representative in a direct advisory role to the assembly. The Anchorage Assembly has tabled the ordinance in order to involve more youth and community partners in the drafting of a new ordinance for the assembly's consideration.

The YAC was established until 2012, and then was reinstated in 2015 by Mayor Berkowitz to include youth in decision making. This report is produced for the benefit of the YAC and to aid in their goal to have meaningful youth representation on the Anchorage Assembly (Municipality of Anchorage, 2015)

The AYDC full coalition and leadership team have identified this issue as a priority for the coalition. AYDC staff has created this synthesis of youth leadership in boards and government for the YAC's consideration. This report is not a recommendation to the YAC or the Anchorage Assembly, but serves as a source of information, best practices, and barriers for consideration from local and national sources.

## INTRODUCTION

Today, more and more youth are becoming involved in their communities. From after-school activities, programs, causes, and non-profits to local government, youth are finding a place for themselves wherever they are living.

In a study conducted from 1989-2000 by the Search Institute researchers found that youth who have more of the 40 Developmental Assets® are less likely to engage in problem behaviors and more likely to be well adjusted adults and have positive engagement (Alaska Association of School Boards, 2002). Part of the Developmental Assets® regarding "Empowerment" are to make sure that "youth feel that adults in the community value them" and that "youth are given useful roles in the community". In Anchorage alone, there are examples of youth in leadership in local non-profits and community councils, the school board, and in advising the mayor's office through the Youth Advisory Commission.<sup>1</sup>

Providing youth with meaningful and engaging experiences in our community help prepare them for well-adjusted adulthood. Developmental Experiences are designed to keep youth engaged and challenged, and provide learning opportunities. Two of the Developmental Experiences, "Challenge and Engage Youth" and "Connect Experiences to Real Life", can involve youth to become civically engaged in government (Stephie Malia Krauss, 2016). By

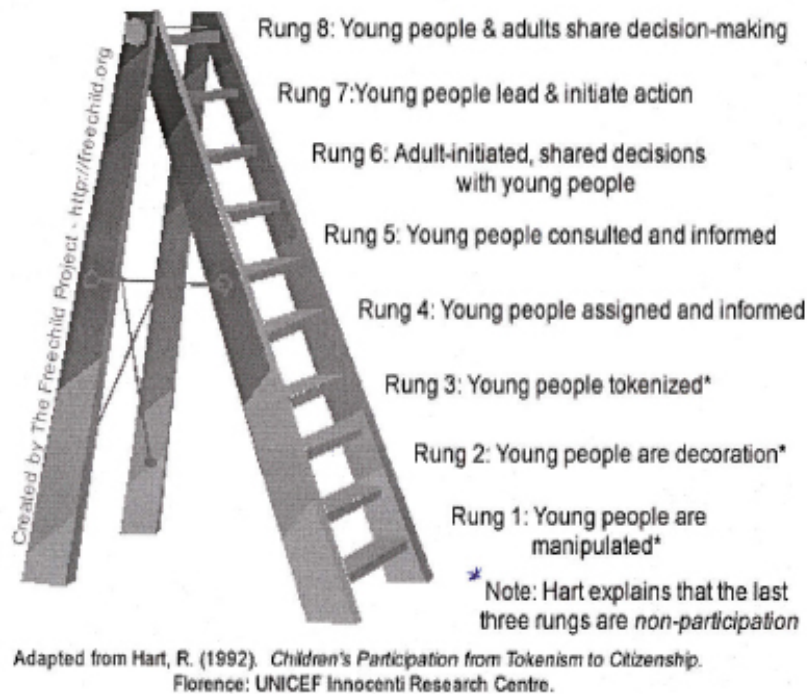
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<sup>1</sup> The Anchorage Youth Advisory Commission, reinstated in 2015 by Mayor Berkowitz.

giving youth the chance to have a voice in decisions regarding their community, youth grow into involved and caring adults, advocating for their beliefs in productive ways.

Youth involvement can be thought of on a scale leading to the most meaningful and empowering involvement. The Hart Ladder of Youth Participation identifies the levels of youth involvement or non-involvement in their community (Hart, 1992).

### Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



This ladder illustrates how youth can be valued as leaders in their community, and helps communities to understand if youth are being tokenized or if their voice really matters. Rung 1, 2, and 3 are non-participation levels, meaning that youth are not involved in their community or are involved in extremely negative ways. At rung 4, youth begin to have some role to inform decisions, but they are mostly soliciting youth reactions or revisions on adult-initiated topics. It is as rung 6 and higher that youth engagement is more meaningful and empowering. Rung 8 is the goal, so the board feels comfortable with the competence and ideas of the youth representative and includes voting rights (Association of Alaska School Boards, et al., 2005).

This ladder may be a tool to identify how youth are currently involved in Anchorage city government. By creating a youth-specific seat on the Anchorage Assembly, this creates more opportunities for Anchorage to move up as a youth-friendly and engaging city. If Anchorage wants to be a community for all people, it starts with meaningfully engaging youth.

Students who engage in government and board procedures feel more confident, learn how to communicate effectively, and relate to adults. Adults, in turn, learn how to respect youth and their experiences by seeing that youth have a lot to offer (Youth in Government, 2009). Youth

also bring different views to the table and are more likely to ask tough questions that expand the discussions. Finally, youth gain powerful networking skills with leaders in their communities, opening doors for further learning and experiences.

## BENEFITS OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP

In general, perspectives and input from young people are not included in public decision making. Without a clear way to make young people's views heard, they are not able to see how government works or gain political experience, and they also tend to feel adults do not value them. Moreover, communities also lose out on meaningful insight in forming policy for the community, including many policies and budget decisions that impact the lives of young people.

In 2016, Anchorage population estimates are at 298,192 people, with nearly 74,000 people (24.8%) of the population under the age of 18 (United States Census Bureau, 2017). These young people cannot vote on the assembly members or the mayor, but decisions made at the local level directly impact their lives.

When done right, youth and the boards find mutual benefit from youth representation. The University of Wisconsin-Extension office found through evaluations, focus groups, surveys, and interviews with youth involved in state city councils have found benefits of youth engagement in government include:

- Young people gain a public voice, feel civic responsibility, build life skills, develop networking skills, connect more youth to government, and become future leaders in their communities.
- Adults and the governing bodies gain new perspectives that bring new energy, idealism, and compassion to the board.
- Adults and youth also gain mutual respect and appreciation for your each other.<sup>2</sup>

This report contains a synthesis of models of youth involvement in governing boards and in civic government. The examples are meant to illustrate best practices and considerations for Anchorage stakeholders. Below are national and local programs that are putting youth in leadership positions on par with adults. Youth are excelling in these positions and learning more about their communities, while seeing the tangible difference they are making. Putting youth in these leadership positions benefits not only the youth but also the adults directly involved and the community as a whole.

## CIVIC BOARDS:

There are various examples of youth serving on county boards and city councils. Any model introduces a new generation of leaders to working in government and the nature of public

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<sup>2</sup> This information was gained from an interview with Victoria Solomon, Community Resource Development Educator for the Youth in Government Program, University of Wisconsin Extension.



office. Youth become highly visible for significant youth voice and representation. Youth input also provides new perspectives and information to influence decision making for the betterment of the community.

The following models represent a higher level of meaningful youth voice in decision making, then gradually reduce to a lesser extent.

**Youth serve on county boards or city councils:** Generally, youth representatives participate in discussions and cast advisory votes. They may represent districts or be selected at-large through an application process. Board members may become a specific mentor for youth.

**Youth-adult partnership on city or county government committees:** Generally, youth members may be regular voting members of a citizen advisory committee. Committee of elected official limit youth to an advisory vote. This may depend of local statutes.

**Youth advisory group or youth commission:** A youth-driven group with adult support provides advice to government and may undertake initiatives. Some communities combine this group with representation on other government committees. The advisory group serves to support the committee members and provides opportunities to gather input from a broader group of youth. A formal connection to decision-making bodies is needed to ensure opportunities for input.

**Youth input:** This includes strategies to obtain youth input from the public, including through public forums, surveys, and opportunities to present youth views. Decision making and action is dependent on others and does not lie with youth. As a stand alone strategy this provides limited opportunity for ongoing youth participation.

The examples listed below illustrate the highest level of youth engagement with representatives that serve on county boards and city councils.

### BRODHEAD, WISCONSIN

The City of Brodhead partners with the University of Wisconsin-Extension office to provide a “Youth in Government” program. Brodhead has only 3,500 residents, but it allows for youth seats on their city council. Youth have an “advisory” vote on the main council and on the committee they serve on. Advisors from the University of Wisconsin support youth even if the youth are not in college yet. There are currently 6 adult members of the council and 4 youth members.

Young people are nominated by adults in the community and then invited to apply. Students are interviewed by a City Council committee, and then are recommended to the council for approval. When youth are selected they receive a training by the University of Wisconsin-Extension program covering government, bill procedures, professionalism, and common terms

used. Then, during their year of service, youth are paired with a city council member as a mentor. Ideally, the youth sits next to their mentor during city council meetings to ask questions as needed (Solomon, 2017).

This program has found not only benefits for the young people directly involved, but also for parents and families of the youth on the city council. The families become more involved in politics, watching debates, and voting more regularly. Youth have expressed that having a “dictionary” of terms would be helpful. City Council members have expressed excitement and shock at how well the youth members fit into the role and how fast they are at learning.<sup>3</sup> Since the youth on the council have an advisory vote, they are asked to vote first in order to have their voices heard by the city council members before the official vote takes place (University of Wisconsin Extension, 2017).

### FAYETTEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

Fayetteville, NC, has a population of over 200,000 people. They have a youth council (Fayetteville-Cumberland County Youth Council) and received a permanent seat on the city council, ordered by Mayor Nat Robertson and supported by many of the council members. There are 9 members of the city council, and one youth representative. The youth representative serves as an advisory member, with no voting abilities (Youth Council Gets a Seat at Council Meetings, 2017). The Youth Council selects a rotating member to sit in on each city council meeting.

### GOSHEN, INDIANA

Mayor Jeremy Stutsman added a youth advisory, non-voting position to the Goshen City Council. The youth member is selected through the votes of local high school students (Kline, 2016). Goshen, IN, has a population of about 35,000 and a council of 7 people (City Council, 2017). In Indiana, there is a state statute that allows for the mayor of a town to appoint a non-voting youth member to the city council. Mayor Stutsman took advantage of this opportunity and appointed a youth who was elected by the high school.

The election was run by the county Department of Elections and youth who wanted the position campaigned for 2 weeks inside the high school. Mayor Stutsman then elects the youth voted on by the high schoolers. The youth who are selected serve 1-year terms, and the community is now working to create a full youth council to regularly meet with city leaders. Mayor Stutsman expressed no challenges other than the want for a compensation for the

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<sup>3</sup> This information was gained from an interview with Victoria Solomon, Community Resource Development Educator for the Youth in Government Program, University of Wisconsin Extension.

youth. He did say that having a youth on the council has proven to be beneficial to all youth in the high school, as civic engagement interest has since risen.<sup>4</sup>

### DOUGLASS COUNTY, WISCONSIN

Three youth and three alternate representatives are selected through an application and appointing process. The three youth representatives sit on the county council for two years and cast advisory votes. The three alternates sit on the standing committees and cast advisory votes, also serving terms of two years. These youth cast votes before their adult counterparts, giving adult members to chance to hear their voice before the adults cast their binding votes. Youth are given a small stipend for their service. Youth give monthly reports, attend committee meetings, and work with a mentor (University of Wisconsin Extension, 2017).

### SUPERIOR CITY, WISCONSIN

Two youth and two alternates are selected by an application process. Similar to Douglass County, the two youth representatives sit on the city council, with an advisory vote that is cast before adult representatives. The two alternates sit on standing committees and cast advisory votes also (University of Wisconsin Extension, 2017).

### VILAS COUNTY, WISCONSIN

Two youth representatives are selected via application and appointment process and are selected for a one-year term, with a possibility for a second term if agreed upon by all parties. The two youth representatives serve on a committee along with the full county board, and have an advisory vote on both. “Youth who have served in these roles have found their experience to be very valuable and educational. County board supervisors support this initiative and recognize the value of having the voice of young people on the board” (University of Wisconsin Extension, 2017)

### WASHBURN COUNTY, WISCONSIN

Washburn County selects two youth representatives via an application process. These youth are in 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, or 11<sup>th</sup> grade and serve one-year terms. The youth representatives have advisory votes on the full County Board of Supervisors and on the committee on which they serve. Youth sit among elected members, receive per diem, and cast advisory votes (University of Wisconsin Extension, 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> Most of the information was gained from an interview with Mayor Jeremy Stutsman of Goshen, Indiana.

## SUMMARY OF CIVIC BOARDS

Different models of youth serving on county boards and city councils all have the same goals of introducing a new generation of leaders to government and public office. Youth voice provides new perspectives and informs decision making leading to better outcomes in the community.

This table shows the similarities and differences in the cities that are successfully getting youth involved in local government. While all have their pros and cons, all cities shared that youth representation has vastly improved youth civic engagement and provided much-needed perspectives to the adults sitting on the city councils.

	<b>Goshen, Indiana</b>	<b>Brodhead, WI</b>	<b>Fayetteville, NC</b>
<b>Term Length</b>	1 year	1 year	1 meeting (rotating members)
<b>Selection Process</b>	Election by High School peers	Nomination, application, and interview	Selected randomly from Youth Council
<b>Mentorship</b>	Support from all city council members	Training provided by University of Wisconsin, mentorship with 1 city council member, regular meetings with high school civics teacher	Support from adult member of Youth Council

## NON-PROFIT BOARDS:

### CAMPAIGN FOR A PRESIDENTIAL YOUTH COUNCIL

This is a national campaign supported by over 50 senators, 200 organizations, and 5 state legislatures (Presidential Youth Council, 2016). This would create a Federal Youth Advisory Council housed in the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency started in the 1990s (CNCS). By being housed in the CNCS, it would allow the council to have bi-partisan support and the ability to seek private funds, eliminating the need for federal funds. There would be 24 members, all would be under the age of 24. They would be nominated and appointed by both Democrats and Republican legislators. Their goal is to increase youth involvement and youth belief that their voice matters (only 29% of youth believe that they have a say in federal matters) (Presidential Youth Council, 2016).

## YOUTH ADVISORY CABINET, CAMP FIRE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Camp Fire is a national organization that provides out-of-school care for youth. It has a Youth Advisory Cabinet with 17 members from all around the United States. Members give youth voice to policy and decisions within the Camp Fire organization. The board of trustees selects and then works with this cabinet to make sure that youth input is heard, valued, and incorporated into decisions (Youth Advisory Cabinet, 2017). Members are 16-21 and make a 2-year commitment. Youth represent Camp Fire at national conferences and presentations. The chair of the Youth Advisory Cabinet also has full voting power on their Board of Trustees on every decision, representing the Youth Advisory Cabinet and youth in Camp Fire as a whole.

## DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOOD EMPOWERMENT

This is a department in Los Angeles that has a specific section of their site with neighborhood councils that teens can run for, and boards that allow teens to sit on (Youth Seats, 2017). This website does not create seats for youth in Los Angeles, but allows youth to see what options are available to them. Many neighborhood councils in Los Angeles allow people under the age of 21 to sit as full members of the neighborhood council, if the person meets residency requirements and is either elected or selected, according to the neighborhood bylaws. This website also shows city boards that youth can sit on, and if those boards have positions open. This is not an actual council that youth can sit on, just a resource for youth who are looking to be involved.

## SOUPER BOWL OF CARING

Souper Bowl of Caring is a national non-profit that focuses on getting youth to give back to their communities during the Super Bowl season. The service includes community clean up, food and clothing drives, pet services, and money donations. In this year so far, 2017, they raised over \$10 million in donations. Souper Bowl of Caring has a board of directors with 16 members, two of whom are youth, both in their freshman year of college (Souper Bowl of Caring, 2017). These youth are full voting members of the board, with responsibilities and voices like the rest of the members. These two youth members are selected from their Youth Advisory Board, which also has 16 members from around the country.

## CORPORATE BOARDS:

### STATEFARM YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

StateFarm™ insurance had a national Youth Advisory Board that focused on service learning projects. The board consisted of 30 students that served 2-year terms, ages 16-22, with 15 graduating members and 15 new members each year. This board ran for 10 years before transitioning the money to a youth-support program in Atlanta, Georgia. The youth advisory board received \$5 million in grant money each year, and they received about 800-900 grant

applications from around the country (Youth Advisory Board, 2013). The board gave money to service learning projects created by teens and for teens. The youth on the board had total control over the money, and no adults made decisions about what grant applicants received money. During the running of the program, the full \$5 million was never given out. Students who served on the board also received scholarships as compensation, had mentors and liaisons and had the opportunity for internships within the StateFarm™ corporate offices.<sup>5</sup> While this program does not exist in the same capacity anymore, it creates a precedent for youth being financially responsible for substantial amounts of money. Kelsey West, who was a former member of the board, explained that the opportunity taught her a lot about grant programs, working as a team, and how to help a board be successful, which has helped her in her future career.

## LOCAL EXAMPLES

### YOUTH ALLIANCE FOR A HEALTHIER ALASKA

The Youth Alliance for a Healthier Alaska is a group of youth ages 14-18 from across Alaska that advise the Department of Health and Social Services Adolescent Health program of the Division of Public Health. These teens provide feedback and guidance to improve the lives of adolescents in Alaska (Youth Alliance for a Healthier Alaska, 2-17). Past members express a sense of belonging, resiliency, and compassion, and many of them entered public health or medical fields. Members are selected through a recruiting and application process, which includes an interview.

This is an effective program for the department. Some challenges remain in achieving statewide representation from remote locations, making it difficult to communicate clearly and regularly. However, youth engagement has grown because the teens are a big part of spreading the word.<sup>6</sup>

### ANCHORAGE YOUTH COURT BOARD OF DIRECTORS

This is a local non-profit that gets the teens of Anchorage involved in the justice system. Teens who commit small misdemeanors are referred to the Anchorage Youth Court. The youth offenders are represented, prosecuted, and judged by a team of their peers, and are generally assigned restitution and community service. If the youth are not charged with another crime,

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<sup>5</sup> This information came from an interview with Kelsey West, former Youth Advisory Board member and current community outreach advisory for StateFarm™.

<sup>6</sup> This information came from an interview with Jennifer Baker, Adolescent Health Project Coordinator, and Adult Lead for YAHA Alaska.

the offense is wiped off of their record. But not only are youth involved in the judicial process, they are also equal members of the board of directors.

The Anchorage Youth Court board of directors has 24 directors, 12 of whom are youth. These youths are selected by their peers in the program and 3 serve as co-chair, co-secretary, and co-treasurer with adults. The rest of the youth are full voting members of the board of directors, who help guide the organization in financial and future directions.

#### YOUTH IN GOVERNANCE, UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS EXTENSION

The Alaska 4-H program, in conjunction with the UAF Cooperative Extension, offers two different “Youth in Governance” programs for current 4-H members. The first program offers teens ages 14-18 from around the state the chance to travel to Juneau for a week in February/March. These teens have the chance to observe state legislative proceedings and ask questions. If students have already completed the first program, they can complete the “Youth in Governance II” program, which has the youth follow the state Representative and Senator from their district for 2 days each. They shadow legislators around Juneau, learning all about the process of each legislator. Once the youth returns home, they also shadow their legislators around their district to see the at-home work that the Representative and Senator do. This program can be subsidized but most youth owe between \$200-\$1000, because the \$200 registration fee does not cover transportation to Juneau, which can be a barrier to underprivileged youth (University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension, 2017)

#### STUDENT ADVISORY BOARD, ANCHORAGE SCHOOL BOARD

The Anchorage School District contains 45,000 students, and has a school board of 7 members. The school board created the Student Advisory Board with the goal of gaining youth input on issues affecting students. These students are from all over the district, with a maximum of 2-3 students per middle and high school. Students who are interested volunteer and meet once a month with other students from the district, called delegates. There is also a student executive board, that create a system of checks and balances between the delegates and executives. There are 6 members of the executive board; president, vice president, secretary, parliamentarian, student rep to the school board, and student rep to the school board elect. After serving as delegates for a period of time, students can be elected to the executive board. The student advisory board discusses social and educational issues that occur for students in the district. Students vote on changes within their jurisdiction, and vote on what issues to send to the school board for discussion. The executive board can veto delegate votes but the delegates can overturn the executive board with a  $\frac{3}{4}$  majority. Students can then give those recommendations and discussion topics to the actual school board, who take their

opinions into account as they vote on policy changes. There are 5 permanent committees and any ad-hoc committees necessary that youth can serve on<sup>7</sup>

## SUMMARY:

Throughout Alaska and the country, youth are highly capable and driven members of society. Youth are held to high expectations in having fiduciary responsibilities on non-profit boards and meaningful advisory roles on governing bodies. Cities and organizations are giving youth experiences and opportunities that develop their communication skills, professionalism, social involvement, financial responsibility, leadership skills, and positive adult relationships. By creating a youth seat on the Anchorage Assembly, it will give tens of thousands of teens the ability to have a voice in a youth representative who speaks specifically to their concerns.

Recommendations from other cities and programs are vast but many tell the same story: youth cannot just be placed on a board and expected to perform, but they need support and structure to truly become a community representative for youth. Youth who are selected need mentors and training from experienced professionals. They need to feel like they are important and matter to their community. Giving youth the ability to be a leader in the community is a citywide effort, calling for collaboration between many different entities. In Anchorage, some stakeholders to engage in the crafting of a youth representative may be the Anchorage Assembly, Anchorage School District, University of Alaska, and other organizations. The goal is for youth and adults to thrive, and not just survive in their position.

The quality of the experience for youth depends on the board's commitment to making a space for relationship and skill development, cornerstones of positive youth development. Often even with an official vote, youth voice will have more influence if they can participate as equally as possible on the board.

Some challenges may include finding ways to sustain youth involvement, though there is already a significant interest in Anchorage. Youth also seem to communicate better via text or email that they can access with their phones. This is something to keep in mind as a program is built in Anchorage, as some communication tools and training may need to be provided. Finally, the other thing to make sure of is that youth feel like they are representative of their population. Providing them the chance to meet with other youth from around the city to hear their ideas will give the position more weight and will make youth in the community feel like they have someone that is dedicated to listen to and advocate for them.

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<sup>7</sup> This information was gained from an interview with Kern McGinley, ASD staff in charge of the Student Advisory Board.



It is important to ensure policies in Anchorage are build around youth empowerment. Just creating a seat on the Anchorage Assembly does not give the young person the involvement they need. Looking back at the Ladder of Participation, if a token seat is created, without any support or real value to the seat, it moves Anchorage lower down the ladder. By intentionally creating a system of mentorship, training, and consistent learning and opportunities, youth will see that Anchorage is a place where their voices matter and they are valued.

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