

A YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD HANDBOOK

Teen Activism, Mentorship, Empowerment, and Community Partnerships

“Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies.”

-Kofi Annan

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INTRODUCTION

Young people today navigate many different communities, large and small, each with its own influences and pressures. Families, classrooms, and myriad peer cliques form a diverse landscape of identities for youth. Equally diverse are the issues youth must cope with: sexuality, gang involvement, persecution, obesity, depression, relationship violence, and poverty are just a few examples. These issues affect not just individuals, but whole communities. Attempting to address these issues without understanding the context in which they arise can be futile. For instance, how do you tell a 14-year-old to stay away from gangs if their older brother who provides for the family is already in one?

Teenagers have the potential to be powerful activists with valuable first-hand perspectives, fresh ideas, and an understanding of the mentality of their peers. Unfortunately, today's youth are disenfranchised, feeling they cannot possibly make a difference or their lives are too dominated by their intense personal struggles to participate in any kind of activist effort.



This handbook shows how a community partner can provide guidance, leadership, and mentorship to a group of teenagers by creating a Youth Advisory Board (YAB). A YAB designs and pursues campaigns addressing the issues that affect its members. The handbook is based on the collaboration of material from various cities, agencies and organizations who have created a Youth Advisory Board and are still working with these individuals in that Board. The handbook will be of interest to any community leader, educator, or other partner interested in creating a Youth Advisory Board.

The first chapter discusses some important prerequisites to forming a new Board. The second chapter details a process that the YAB can use to design and implement a campaign for the issues most important to them. The third chapter discusses how to manage the Board and create an environment that will help the Board be successful using mentorship, empowerment, and other techniques. Finally, the handbook will discuss measures of success.



CHAPTER I – CREATING A NEW BOARD

Principles and practices in this handbook might be useful to existing youth groups, but the handbook assumes you are creating a new group. This chapter discusses key points and players for creating a sustainable and effective Youth Advisory Board. One of those players is the “sponsor,” which refers to the primary agency that supports YAB activities. The “staff” are the people who coordinate YAB activities; this handbook is intended primarily as a guide for YAB staff. A sponsor might be a school, government office, faith-based organization, business, or community organization. ***In the examples in this handbook, the sponsors are San Diego, CA District Attorney’s Office, the City of Boulder, CO, the City of Peoria, AZ and volunteers working through AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America).***

Identify a Target Community

Youth in the Board should share some common ground that ties them together. This may be the community they live in or the school they attend. For our YAB, the students all live in Las Cruces and attend a school within the Las Cruces Public School district. However, some Boards might have sub-groups that are built on non-geographical communities brought together by other factors. For instance, a sub-group could focus on issues of gender and sexuality and draw membership from an affected population in a much wider physical area. The Board’s mission and goals will be guided by the community’s needs. Las Cruces suffers from significant generational poverty, a high rate of truancy and the state of New Mexico has highest teen pregnancy rate in country, all of which may influence our Board’s actions and concerns.

Examples of potential YAB communities:

- Region – Residents of a community, school district, or county
- Institution – Members of a school, club, or congregation
- Interest – People interested specifically in health, the environment, or law

Establish Commitment from the Sponsor

The sponsor provides leadership and staff for the Board and is ultimately responsible for the Board’s sustainability. One of the first duties of the staff will be to establish a safe and consistent environment for discussion. The sponsor will also need to build relationships with other organizations in support of the YAB. Both tasks require a high degree of commitment

from the sponsor. It may take a great deal of time for a new Youth Board to become productive, so the sponsor must be willing to invest resources now and wait for results.

Unfortunately, many youth boards and youth councils have short life-spans. Sometimes organizers begin this kind of project without an eye toward the future and then lack the capacity to sustain the effort later. Starting a YAB only to have it disintegrate 12 months down the road may be worse than doing nothing because it teaches children that they cannot depend on adults to follow through on their promises. Developing a successful Board will be a complex, multi-year effort. The commitment must start at the sponsor's executive level and extend down through the staff who work directly with the Board to ensure effective capacity building and sustainability.

By supporting the Youth Board and its campaigns, the sponsor's relationship with the community that the Board serves will be strengthened.

By supporting the Youth Board and its campaigns, the sponsor's relationship with the community that the Board serves will be strengthened. Board members can help the sponsor better understand the needs and realities of life for young people, and the sponsor may also be able to build lasting positive relationships with other community organizations, such as schools and faith groups.

Establish Crucial Partnerships

Some partnerships will be particularly fundamental to the Board's sustainability. For instance, building a relationship with the administration at Las Cruces Public Schools (the local High Schools) to operate there. It may take significant time and effort to build these relationships. Educators and other youth leaders are often, understandably, protective of the children in their charge, and need to be assured that the sponsor's involvement will be ongoing and serious. The partnership with LCPS will not happen overnight. We first need to show the school administration our office is committed to the effort.

Consider a Targeted Recruiting Strategy

Our partnership with LCPS is central to our recruiting strategy. Ideally, the Youth Board should be representative of the community it comes from, the Board members faced with the same challenges and difficulties as their peers. It is difficult to find this kind of membership using traditional open recruiting strategies like running a booth at an event, or posting flyers. Such tactics tend to primarily attract self-motivated, high-achieving students, possibly leading to a lack of diversity in the Board. Sometimes these tactics get little response at all. One way to avoid these scenarios is to hand-pick the initial membership and include, for instance, students who are struggling in school. Our office will attempt to do this kind of hand-picking, however our partners at LCPS are familiar enough with the students in the system to assist us in finding a diverse selection likely to benefit from our support. Attendance after the first

meeting was still voluntary, but many stuck around. It may be that the first meeting is enough to strike a spark with disenfranchised students who now find themselves with an opportunity for their voice to be heard.

CHAPTER II – CAMPAIGN DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Each Youth Advisory Board will be a little bit different; each community will have its own needs and challenges. This chapter of the handbook describes a process for identifying a specific need and building a campaign around it. The need might be something complex and societal such as racism, or something simple and concrete such as programs and activities for the teen population. The process described herein can be used to approach any community issue with a targeted, youth-driven campaign.

From this process the students will learn, first and foremost, how to work as a group. They will gain practical experience in project planning and will pursue a goal that matters to them. Depending on the nature of the campaign, the students may also have opportunities to develop other skills, such as public speaking.

Needs Assessment and Mission Statement

Before a newly formed Board dives into campaign development, it should spend some time considering its identity and goals. Toward that end, the crafting of a Mission Statement makes an excellent pilot project. Board members will have an opportunity to think about the community issues that are important to them and become accustomed to participating in group discussions.

The Mission Statement project can begin at the first Board meeting with an assessment of community needs. YAB members can provide a vital ground-level view of their community;

the needs they identify as most important may be considerably different from what their fellow board members perceive or the sponsor and staff were anticipating. The needs assessment can be approached as a group brainstorming session. A prompt can help ignite that brainstorming. For instance, we asked, essentially: “What are issues for teens in this community?” That is a general question, but you could use something more specific, based on the community the Board comes from. Take good notes on the students' responses because this information will be important later.

“The mission of the Parks & Recreation Youth Board is to educate and advise the community. We aim to spread general awareness about the needs and challenges of the youth, and pressing issues affecting young people in Las Cruces, resulting in a positive change throughout the community.”

After the Board has considered what issues are important to them, they should start generalizing those issues into goals and a mission. The intent of this process is to transform

the notes from the Board's brainstorming into a list of goals and a Mission Statement. Once the mission statement is finalized, you can attach it to all meeting agendas. When meetings are infrequent or attendance inconsistent, reading the mission statement at the beginning of each meeting can help keep everyone focused.

The needs assessment and mission statement project may take several meetings to complete and there may be significant disagreements to work through. Keep an eye on how the Board members interact during this process. Are some members dominating discussion? Are some not participating at all? While some people may need time to develop their self-confidence in a group setting, it is important that no one is shut out. For further tips on fostering healthy group discussion, see the "Creating a Productive Environment for Discussion" section, starting on page 8.

Campaign Concept and Development

Once the Mission Statement is finished, the Board can reference it to find a central concept for their first campaign. Some communities want to focus on gang-related issues, but the YAB said that would be a non-starter. This is an example from the City of San Diego,

"The students were already inundated with messages on gangs and felt the idea was too narrow in scope. Instead, after many sessions of brainstorming and debate, our Board came up with an empowering message, "4 or 40: The Choice of Yours", the main idea of which is "The choices you make in 4 years of high school will impact the next 40 years of your life." The goal of our campaign was to get other students to think about the choices they make during high school and understand that those choices will impact the rest of their lives."

Other examples of campaign goals might be improving nutritional health, raising awareness about relationship violence, or getting a school to start recycling. It may take time to find a campaign concept that really fits the group's mission, so take extensive notes during brainstorming, and make sure you have that information available for review.

Whether the mission is to increase awareness, educate the public, change behaviors, or start a new program, the Board can structure a campaign around the idea. Campaigns might require different kinds of structure, such as writing proposals, designing curricula, or hosting events.

Inspirational Field Trips

Seeing how other institutions and organizations present information is a great way to inspire your Youth Advisory Board. After our YAB came up with the crux of the message they wanted to deliver, we took them to The Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. Movie exhibits there hit home with the Board members, and inspired them to create a short film around the "4 or 40" message. This kind of trip is also a good change of pace from sitting around a table and talking. Staff and Board members will have a chance to interact in different ways. The Board members may also encounter some powerful new ideas. It's a good idea to have a debriefing session at

the end of the trip or soon afterwards at a meeting, to record everyone's thoughts and reflections.

Marketing and Outreach

The professional field of marketing has extensively researched many of the challenges of campaign design. Advertisers should compete for initial attention and then make their pitch sufficiently memorable that it survives to turn into a sale; campaigns face similar obstacles. Together they can encapsulate the whole message into something memorable and visually appealing to the target audience. Students in the YAB can come up with the concept art for the logo and find a graphic design student to create the finished product. Use of the logo for branding t-shirts and pens, which have proven quite popular as giveaways at events.

Human memory is strongly associative. It is much easier for someone to remember a long presentation if they can associate it with a simple phrase or image. If information is provided on the internet, then someone need only remember enough to find the website. If you make branded shirts or similar, put the campaign's web address on it. That way, the recipient can easily get more information about the people that gave them their free swag.

Test the Campaign with a Focus Group

Once the Youth Advisory Board has figured out an objective, planned a campaign to pursue it, and designed some marketing for their campaign, there is one last step to consider before launching. It's hard to make big changes after a campaign launches, so take this opportunity to get some final review of the Board's plans. If possible, find a small subset of the campaign's target population willing to act as a focus group. Test run everything with the focus group and ask for their feedback. Were they interested? What worked and what didn't? What was missing? Once the "4 or 40" film was ready for final production, we connected with a classroom of students in another Southeast San Diego school, showed them the film, and asked them for feedback and thoughts. They could provide valuable critiques which we incorporated into the final version.

Get Visibility with a Campaign Kick-off Event

Particularly for a new Youth Advisory Board's first campaign, a large event can be a good way to start things off. The Board can invite all the community partners they want to engage and show those partners exactly what the campaign entails. Some legwork may be needed to promote this kind of kick-off event. Consider multiple avenues for approaching those people you want to attend. For some, face-to-face meetings are the best way to introduce yourselves, while others may respond to outreach through social media.

The nature of the kick-off event will depend on the particulars of the campaign. Since our Board was doing a film, their kick-off event was a premiere gala. Our staff visited schools,

community groups, and church groups to publicize the event. After airing the film, our Board members circulated through the audience to connect with people interested in having the YAB present for their group. From there, news of the campaign spread through word-of-mouth. Some other examples of kick-off events might be: some healthy food tasting for a campaign against obesity, a presentation by a guest speaker to kick-off a series of educational events, or a charity dinner and raffle.

The kick-off event has numerous positive aspects. It lets you reach out to numerous people at once. It creates a sense of excitement among the attendees. It can give community members who are interested in participating a better idea of what they'd be signing-up for. The event also gives the sponsor an opportunity to show their support for the Youth Advisory Board.

CHAPTER III – YAB MANAGEMENT AND GROUP DYNAMICS

YAB staff have several important responsibilities: they manage the Board's logistics, connect the Board with resources, and act as mentors. They create an environment that is conducive to discussion and sharing of ideas. They build a diverse group of youngsters into a functional team. This chapter will go over the most important aspects of these roles.

Logistics and Capacity

Managing a group of students can require considerable administrative resources. Keep this in mind when recruiting, to ensure you have the capacity to sustain the Board. Below is a description of various administrative tasks that may need to be fulfilled for sustainability:

- **Arrange Meetings** – Ensure a room is available, inform all staff of meeting time and location, acquire healthy refreshments, and contact YAB members to determine who is attending. On the day prior to any meeting or event, students should be reminded again of the time and location, with phone calls to everyone if necessary.
- **Write Meeting Agendas** – Use previous meeting minutes and any business items that have come up since the last meeting to set an agenda for each meeting. Staff should discuss the agenda before each meeting.
- **Take Meeting Minutes** – Document the proceedings of each meeting, taking special note of action items.
- **Track Attendance** – Create a sign-in sheet for each meeting and event to keep a record of who attended, and how long the meeting or event was. Many students need documentation of community service hours they have performed, and you will also want to have a good idea of who has been active and consistently participating.
- **Arrange Transportation** – Staff may have to provide transportation for most events, except long trips with a lot of people where we have used buses. They have also transported students to meetings, and often to the students' homes after meetings, which removes a significant

barrier to participation for some students. Be sure that there is enough vehicle capacity for any given meeting to handle this task. Do not allow transportation to be barrier for participation.

- Coordinate with parents and with schools – For students to participate in any events that take place during the school day, you will need to work with the schools to make sure the students can be properly excused from classes. For general participation, and for any events requiring transportation, it is also very important to get written permission from students' parents or guardians.

Creating a Productive Environment for Discussion

Group decision-making can be chaotic, but one of the educational goals for this endeavor is to teach Board members how to work collaboratively and make decisions as a group. Staff face the challenge of moderating discussion without shutting anyone out.

Students may have personal experience with the issues that interest the group, but may be hesitant to share their views until a certain level of trust is established. This will be even truer with issues such as violence and persecution. Thus, YAB meetings need to be a safe place for communication and sharing. The students will need to know that not only is their input valued, but they won't be judged or ridiculed for sharing.

Even if the trust barrier for your YAB is not so large, establishing a productive environment for discussion is a complex endeavor. We have found several helpful practices and principles:

Show your Commitment through Consistency

The single most important requirement for success is to keep showing up after the first meeting. It may take time and patience to impress upon the students that you are serious about this effort and are there for the long haul. Some of the students may not have many stable relationships in their lives, particularly with adults; your dedication and consistency will speak to them.

Understand that this may be a lengthy, multi-year endeavor. It took us almost a year simply to develop an invested core membership. This is another reason why the sponsor's commitment is so important: you need to be able to honestly say you will still be around a few years down the line, which you can't do without the sponsor's patience and support.

Particularly at the beginning and after any new recruitment drive, attendance at meetings may be very inconsistent. Reading the Board's Mission Statement and reviewing the previous meeting's minutes at the beginning of each meeting will help when the attendees of one meeting are very different from the attendees of a previous meeting. You should eventually see a consistent core group materialize, but, to work through the interim time, staff will need to establish their own consistency.

Empower the Board

We asked our Board members why they kept coming to meetings. One of their responses was that we listened to their input. Young people often feel that their opinions aren't valued and often they are right! However, a Youth Advisory Board relies on its members' ideas and experiences. Emphasizing this dependency may help the Board members realize how important their input is.

Staff should try to leave the decision-making and most of the execution for campaigns to the Board members, while providing training and resources where necessary. For instance, we've offered our Board members lessons in public speaking to prepare for presentations, and have coached them on drama basics while they were practicing a skit, but our staff took, at most, very small supporting roles (e.g. handing out shirts to the audience) in the actual presentations and performances. Some students need encouragement and guidance to develop self-confidence, but they also need the pride that comes from being directly responsible for good work.

Empowerment can be particularly important when any of the Board members are caught in the cycle of lowered expectations that often comes together with generational poverty. The cycle comes when students are not expected to succeed and those students then internalize that lack of confidence, coming to believe they are incapable. In those circumstances, an earnest voice of confidence can be powerful.

Start Meetings with a "Check-In"

One of the most successful practices we implemented was to begin each meeting with a "Check-In". When the Board is in its infancy, this is an informal process: a round of introductions followed by asking the Board how they've been and what's happened since you last met. As the group develops a level of trust and familiarity, Check-Ins grow in scope. Eventually each person can do their own Check-In, talking briefly to the group about whatever is new in their life, without interruption from anyone else. This practice has numerous positive impacts:

- Prevents distractions that might come up later in the meeting. If somebody has something occupying their thoughts, whether it's good or bad, they'll be more productive if they have a chance to talk about it before the meeting proceeds.
- Gets everyone accustomed to speaking with the group. Even if they're not saying very much, the simple act of addressing the group is important to establish, and will make people more willing to participate in other discussion. For this reason, it's important to let each person oversee their own Check-In, creating a space exclusively for them to speak.

- Helps create a sense of family and a strong group bond. People will share as much or as little as they are comfortable with. As the group bond develops, check-ins also help keep everyone up to date with what's going on in each other's lives.
- Makes a good vehicle for integrating new members and staff into the group. Sometimes new group members feel too intimidated to contribute when the group is driven largely by people who have been around longer, but with check-ins they will get to know each other more quickly and will already be speaking at every meeting.

Teach the Board to “Step Up, and Step Back”

One tool to offer the Board for improving group discussion is the maxim “Step Up. Step Back.” The idea is simple: If you find yourself speaking a lot, consider stepping back to give others time and space to participate. If you find you aren't speaking at all, consider stepping up and adding your voice to the discussion. Hearing this maxim helps people become more self-aware of how they act in a group, learning to pay attention to how much they are dominating discussion or how little they are participating.

Mentorship Opportunities

Mentorship is an important aspect of the relationship between YAB and staff. YAB members at our office often described the group as a second family. The Check-In process has fostered this dynamic, but the sense of family is also built on a foundation of mentorship.

Finding opportunities to interact outside of regular meetings can be crucial to building the mentor-mentee relationship. Students may be willing to discuss topics one-on-one or in small groups that they are not comfortable talking about with the whole Board. Some good opportunities for this type of interaction are:

During Field Trips

In addition to their value to campaign, development of field trips are also an excellent time to split into smaller groups and have more personal interaction with Board members. Also, not all field trips need to be work-oriented. It's good to have a few “for fun” group activities and trips during the year.

Staff should Check-In as well. Staff should lead by example in this by being very open with the Board. This has helped build trust with the students, some of whom now feel comfortable doing the same.

Hosting Christmas parties, bonfires, and a Challenge Obstacle Course trip (which was focused more specifically on team-building among old and new members). In addition to being rewarding for everyone involved and strengthening group ties, these are all excellent opportunities to interact with Board members one-on-one.

In Transit

Our staff frequently provide transportation for Board members to and from meetings and events. Car trips have a sense of privacy that sometimes creates a good environment for one-on-one discussion.

Through Social Networking

Facebook has been valuable to us for organizing meetings and getting in touch with members, but social networks also present good opportunities for out-of-band communication with members, particularly for staff who may be busy during the working day. Social networks may also be helpful for staying up-to-date on Board members' lives. Just as with Check-Ins, it's good for staff to be participatory here as well.

Find out what social networking tools Board members use and consider creating accounts on them. Do educate yourself on your organization's policies for the use of these websites and on privacy. Frank communication is valuable, but one must be careful about anything posted on the internet because information tends to be more widely accessible than anticipated.

Ideally, the YAB staff should be diverse. Different types of students will connect more readily with different types of staff. For instance, our younger staff have more in common with Board members and tend to develop sibling-like mentor relationships, while our older staff tend to be authority figures. Diversity can exist in many other factors beyond age, such as ethnic and cultural background, gender and sexuality, educational background, and even hobbies.

Another aspect of the mentor-mentee relationship is the sharing of knowledge and resources. Getting to know the students will help staff to better understand what will be most helpful. We have directed our Board to a wide breadth of resources, from family cooking nights that teach about preparing healthy meals, to financial literacy training, to scholarship opportunities. This works in both directions; the Board members may also share resources and events.

CHAPTER IV – MEASURES OF SUCCESS

The Board should reflect periodically on their goals and mission, and consider their progress toward those ends. Some goals might be measurable themselves, qualitatively or quantitatively. The Board may have created new institutions, such as a local recycling program. For any outreach effort, one can consider the number of people the effort has reached. City of San Diego measured their success in hits to the website (the “4 or 40” page is the most visited on the entire San Diego DA website), in requests for presentations, and in the number of people we have presented to. We’ve also been asked to return for follow-up presentations.

The Staff should further consider the personal growth of the Board members. To give a few examples, we have had members who went from struggling “C” or “D” students to confident and high-performing “B” students. Some of our Board members are now the first in their families to attend college. Most have gained considerable confidence speaking in public and group settings.

For the sponsor, a further measure of success can be found in the strengthening of community relationships. The sponsor should now have increased awareness of community needs through the Board's work. The sponsor also gains recognition for its association with the Board's campaigns and has many opportunities to create partnerships with other community.

Personal Stories:

When evaluating the success of a program like this, one should never discount the personal stories of growth and transformation from the people involved. Below are some of the thoughts and reflections our students had on their YAB experience.

Thelma, Grossmont High School Class of 2011

“YAB is a group of Lincoln/Morse High School students who meet up a couple times a month to advise the District Attorney’s office about issues that bother us in the community. As a board, we have managed to accomplish many amazing things. We created an Emmy award winning movie called ‘4 or 40: The choice is yours’. This is a movie that talks about how important choices are in your life. The message says your 4 years in high school or college can influence your next 40 years in life and more. This movie has truly helped me in all aspects of my life. It has shown me the importance of the choices we make and how they affect us.

I have been a part of the YAB for 4 years now. I joined this group as an insecure and underdeveloped girl and I am now a high school graduate who is moving on to the big opportunities in my life. Being a part of this group is like being with another family. The DA's office has truly taken their time out not only from their work lives but their personal lives as well. They just don't treat us like another high school group but like we're their own children. Being a part of this group has truly molded me into the mature and goal oriented young woman that I am today. I will be attending Howard University this fall

as a political science major to become a lawyer and the DA'S office has truly has given me the inspiration to become a prosecutor. YAB is not only just a teen group to me but it's my FAMILY."

Cydnee, Class of 2014

"My thoughts on YAB: I've been apart YAB since the beginning of my ninth-grade year and since then I think YAB has helped me step out of my comfort zone and it has allowed me to be a lot more outspoken. YAB is a great program built for anyone, especially warm hearted people who love to change lives and give their peers and elders a better outlook on things."

Mia, Class of 2012

"There is something about fighting against social injustice along with emphasizing the value of decision making to youth that fills a void in my heart. Working with the Youth Advisory Board, has allowed me to share this message while also learning a great deal about various members of the community, and what aspects of the city they feel have room for improvement. I became a member of the board during my sophomore year. Initially, I was hesitant, being that I was not familiar with any of the other members. However, they surely embraced me which gained my comfort as a member of the Youth Board. After growing acquainted with each other we began working on community projects to inform adolescent members of the Community that each choice they make will affect their future. As we continue to convey this message to youth, I am continuously blessed by their eagerness to hear what we have to say. The Youth Advisory Board has embedded something in me that may not be rebuked; throughout my life I will continue to work closely with young people and encourage them to conscious of the power they hold over their future."

Falmata, Class of 2012

"The Youth Advisory Board has been one of the biggest inspirations in my life. The way we could collaborate with students from different schools made it all that much better. Although I was skeptical when first joining the group, my heart told me to continue coming because it knew that only good things would come out of being a part of the YAB. I never really cared much about the kids that surrounded me. In fact, I use to have absolutely no sympathy for them because I really only cared for myself. In a way, I was a bit self-centered. However, after continually attending the group meetings, I grew to realize that the kids around me, and even the teenager my age and older, were in dire need of people who knew the problem and had a solution; people like the Youth Advisory Board. Over the course of 3 years, I slowly began to understand the true problems, and that is what helped me to contribute to the group and help come up with ideas to help the community. Without the Youth Advisory Board, I believe, I wouldn't nearly be who I am today. It has been a great Success (with a big "S")."