STANDARDS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

ENGAGING THE FUTURE OF COLORADO

INTRODUCTION

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is an evidence-based approach that sees young people as resources to cultivate rather than problems to be fixed. It supports young people being at the center of identifying solutions to the issues they face, rather than merely the recipients of adult decisions. With young people at the center, it is critical that the adults and organizations that serve them have the ability and willingness to ensure that the environments, practices, programs and policies are conducive to authentic engagement.

Youth engagement doesn't happen haphazardly or through one-time events and opportunities. Youth engagement is dependent upon the on-going, long term and intentional weaving of practices into the environments and relationships where young people exist. Through this approach young people can experience a sense of belonging, hope for the future, opportunities to identify their "spark", and develop their self-efficacy.

The challenge of youth engagement is less often recruiting young people to come to the table; but is in keeping them involved and present. Retention is often linked to the following strategies linked to a PYD approach:

- ★ Focusing on the positive outcomes of youth: this includes working towards what we want for young people, rather than directing our resources solely towards what we want them to avoid.
- ★ Ensuring quality experiences for youth: quality experiences are often more important and influential than the content taught.

In order to effectively engage young people as partners, we must be intentional with how our programs seek to involve them and incorporate standards to ensure common practice and sustainability of those practices.

The purpose of this document is to help align best practices by creating common language and a shared approach across and within youth groups, councils and classrooms. These standards raise the expectations for the opportunities and experiences that adults working alongside youth, provide for young people across our state. How these standards are implanted will vary according to each organizations structure, activities, goals, staff interest and experience.

Engaging young people effectively creates opportunities for programs and organizations to have a greater and more meaningful impact on positive youth outcomes. Young people who are engaged in programming and opportunities are more likely to remain involved and to meet or exceed high expectations than youth who are not engaged. When young people are succeeding, the organizations that serve and partner with them benefit. When programs and organizations have engaged, successful participants they are able to increase program completion rates, overall staff satisfaction and the number of referrals.

The following Youth Engagement Standards have been developed by young people, following the extensive analysis of survey responses of more than 200 Colorado young people ages 12-20. The survey sought out the experiences and opportunities that youth identify as critical to their personal investment in youth serving organizations. In addition to survey findings, these standards were informed by best and promising practices for engaging youth.

THE STANDARDS

YOUTH NEED THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE, DISCUSS AND REFLECT ON THEIR IDEAS.

Research shows that when young people are given the opportunity to express their opinions they not only have an increased investment in the program or initiative, but also higher confidence in their own voice.

HOW TO:

During classes and meetings encourage youth to reflect and think critically about the topics and materials. Provide time in the schedule to have open discussions, utilizing various learning methods, including visual documentation. Be open to hearing and taking each person's ideas seriously. Identify the resources and opportunities available for implementing/integrating youth ideas and recommendations. Be clear about the roles of youth and adults in each setting so that there is an understanding of how power will be shared.

> "It's nice to be able to share true experiences and ideas in a safe place and be able to dialogue with others while having an open mind set around sensitive issues like good vs. bad relationships..."
>
> - YOUTH FROM PROJECT PAVE

YOUTH NEED THE OPPORTUNITY TO EMBRACE CREATIVITY.

When provided with the opportunity to express themselves creatively, youth have enhanced mental health and increased growth and development. ,

HOW TO:

Allow youth to express personal vision and ideas through different mediums such as the arts, advocacy and community action. Organizations should schedule adequate space and time in meetings for young people to be creative.

YOUTH NEED THE OPPORTUNITY TO FOSTER AND NURTURE CONNECTIONS

When given time specifically to cultivate connections with both peers and adults, young people expressed greater bond and sense of community.

HOW TO:

Opportunities should be given for young people to build and form relationships with each other as well as with adults. Intentionally create an environment conducive to building caring and supportive relationships with both adults and peers. Allow time at the beginning of meetings and classes for youth to participate in team building activities. Celebrate the successes and milestones of individuals as well as the group.

Youth need the opportunity to create a lasting impact within their community.

When young people are involved in community activities they experience improved mental health, are less likely to consume alcohol, and have increased physical activity as an adult.

HOW TO:

Encourage young people to pursue their passions by providing them with opportunities to positively contribute to the community. Support youth in selecting-tasks that they find interesting and meaningful, as well as those that meet the greater needs identified by the community. Help them to identify the resources needed to accomplish the impact desired.

> "TEENS, Inc. helped us build a graffiti wall. We had to navigate town government, find contractors and decide where the wall was going to go."
>
> - Youth from TEENS, Inc.

Youth need the opportunity to be compensated for their contributions.

Just as contractors are paid for their services, youth deserve to be compensated for their expertise on youth culture. Compensation adds value to young people's expertise.

HOW TO:

Decide which form of compensation meets both youth needs and the organization's capacity. Examples include: stipends/consulting fees, learning and practicing skills to prepare for professional work experience, food and travel reimbursement, community services, school credit, letters of recommendation, job experience and personal development.

Youth need the opportunity to have emotional safety.

Environments where youth report feeling psychologically safe, promote continued participation and positive development. Qualities of these environments include those of which are perceived as relaxed and where young people feel respected and able to be themselves.

HOW TO:

Create an environment that is conducive to feelings of love, admiration, respect, open dialogue, making mistakes and problem solving. At the start of any opportunity to engage youth, develop group norms to establish a safe and open environment. Expectations should be set that members are respectful of each other, define what that respect looks like, and welcome the sharing of ideas, questions and opinions.

THE STANDARDS

YOUTH NEED THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE SUPPORTED IN MAKING GOOD DECISIONS.

During adolescent years, young people develop stronger logical and moral thinking. At the same time they are craving independence and responsibility . Caring adults can create environments that promote critical thinking and leadership opportunities, allowing youth to develop prosocial skills such as empathy, and practice decision-making and time management skills.

HOW TO:

Provide opportunities for decision-making and prosocial interactions accompanied by clear messages regarding rules, norms, expectations and discipline. For example, discussing expectations and creating group norms together can promote more thoughtful decision-making and encourage youth to be empowered and aware of the impact their actions have on others.

"Environmental Learning for Kids (ELK) is...dedicated to connecting youth to resources and tools they need to succeed! We provide resume and mock interview workshops. Every year we take students on college campus tours to expose them to higher education, and connect them to resources on those campuses, such as advocacy groups and tutoring centers."..."

- ADULT FROM ELK

YOUTH NEED THE OPPORTUNITY TO GAIN ACCESS TO RESOURCES.

By providing young people with opportunities to develop professional skills organizations and agencies can engage youth and increase their potential for growth and provide them with quality feedback.

HOW TO:

Ask youth what resources and roles are relevant to their needs and interests. Provide trainings, opportunities and connections to resources on topics related to both personal and professional development.

YOUTH NEED THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE HELD TO HIGH EXPECTATIONS (WITHIN REASON).

Studies have shown that youth feel more valued and engaged when they participate in equitable partnerships with adults. By setting high expectations and providing challenging work, adults express a trust in the work and opinions of young people.

HOW TO:

Include youth in a variety of areas of the organization and provide training and support to enable them to ultimately participate in non-traditional youth roles such as designing surveys, developing requests for programming, interviewing potential staff members and defining funding requirements.

YOUTH NEED THE OPPORTUNITY TO MEET AT TIMES AND LOCATIONS CONVENIENT FOR THEM.

Young people have many activities they are involved in. Hold them accountable but be respectful of their other commitments by not competing for their time.

HOW TO:

Choose times after school and on weekends when young people are most available. Choose locations that are easily accessible by members. If travel is involved, provide reimbursement or opportunities for carpooling.



WHERE TO USE THE STANDARDS

Youth engagement happens in a variety of settings throughout Colorado, such as schools, youth-serving programs, youth boards and councils, and education and treatment groups. These standards should be incorporated into the regular practice of any organization that seeks to involve or positively impact the outcomes of young people. Examples are included below. When implementing these standards, remember that multiple standards can be met at one time.

WHERE TO APPLY THE STANDARDS

- When hiring youth members for state and local community staff.
- On youth advisory boards and councils.
- As a training tool for staff to enhance their youth engagement strategies
- In a classroom or after-school setting.
- With your grantees, to promote a standard practice of youth engagement.
- When engaging youth in leadership positions, such as co-chairs for action or planning teams.

MEETING MULTIPLE STANDARDS

- Providing educational trainings to youth partners can offer access to resources and serve as a form of compensation. (Standards 5 and 9).
- Providing time during each meeting to discuss personal issues can foster friendships and build a stronger team. (Standards 3 and 6).

WHO SHOULD USE THE STANDARDS?

YOUTH-SERVING PROFESSIONALS

These standards can be utilized by individuals working directly with young people to enhance their skills related to youth engagement, by informing the approach that staff take when preparing environments and activities for engaging young people in their programs and groups.

FUNDERS

These standards can be integrated into Request for Applications (RFA) and can guide grantees towards a common language/approach when engaging young people as an expectation for funding. In addition, these standards can inform site visit tools, specifically helping funders note how and where these standards are being accomplished.

POLICY AND DECISION MAKERS

These standards can be a tool for developing policies that involve young people and to increase knowledge of all employees within any particular agency and organization.

They can inform hiring committees as to candidates who are most likely to be effective in engaging young people in their programs. In addition, legislatures can use these best practices to inform how they read, edit and approve/deny policies.

EXPERIENCING ROADBLOCKS?

Are you in need of additional coaching to assist with the integration of these standards?

- ★ Contact CO9to25 at www.co9to25.org
- ★ Click on the "Positive Youth Development" tab
- ★ Enter your information on the "Youth Engagement Standards Coaching" tab

HOW TO MEASURE SUCCESS

An evaluation is being created to assist programs in identifying their success in implementing these standards.

Sign up for the CO9to25 monthly newsletter for updates on CO9to25!

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