

Youth Summits: Capturing Youth Voices in Public Policy Debates

Jennifer Bloom

The Minnesota Youth Legislative Summit has a simple goal: If the state legislature is going to pass laws that affect youth, then it should ask youth what they think about those laws. Begun in 1995 as an effort to involve youth in public policy discussions, the Minnesota Youth Legislative Summit reflects a growing belief that young people need to be involved in solving society's problems. This belief acknowledges the unique and important expertise and energy young people bring to the table—as people who are sometimes at the heart of a problem as well as at the heart of the solution.

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Prevention through its Youth for Justice program, the Minnesota Youth Legislative Summit is an example of a “Youth as Resources” program designed to involve youth in public problem solving.

Definitions and descriptions of youth summits vary across the country. The Youth for Justice model gives young people a better understanding of law and equips them with strategies for active involvement in solving society's problems, particularly related to violence by and against youth. Other models look at topics ranging from teen tobacco use to improving education.

Common Goals

Although these models have a variety of names—summits, forums, etc.—they share the characteristics and goals to:

1. give young people the chance to speak out and be heard,
2. encourage conversations about serious issues within the age group that is involved and impacted, and
3. support youth and adults working together to solve problems through civic and political action.

The elements or needs essential for the healthy development of young people, particularly adolescents, have been described by Konopka (1973) and Pittman (1991). To grow and learn to optimum capacity in healthy ways and to function



successfully in the adult world, young people benefit from opportunities to: [among others]

- experience active participation, group membership and belonging;
- develop self-worth achieved through meaningful contribution;
- discuss conflicting values and formulate their own; and
- know that success is possible.

Summits provide these opportunities, emphasizing the important role young people play in defining, describing, and contributing to their own development.

Whatever model is used, youth summits give youth the chance to become involved and to contribute to their communities. Summits can enhance and support the development of some basic competencies that are the subject matter of positive youth development. Among these competencies are the personal and social skills that include communicating, cooperating, negotiating, being responsible, evaluating, making decisions, and problem solving as well as the citizenship competency skills of understanding personal values, moral and ethical decision-making, and participation in public efforts of citizenship that contribute to the community and the nation.

Characteristics of Successful Youth Summits

Summits throughout Minnesota and the nation have identified some best practices for youth participation. These include involving youth in the planning process, using interactive strategies to inform the youth about the topics, selecting topics that are interesting and immediately relevant to the lives of youth, involving decision makers from the community, and providing opportunities for celebration and recognition.

1. Involve youth in meaningful ways

Youth develop self-worth through meaningful contribution. Involving youth in summits in meaningful ways increases the impact the summit will have on the youth and the success it

will have at getting youth voices heard in the community. By giving them responsibility (personal and shared) for developing the summit's goals and designing and implementing the summit, youth will show greater dedication to achieving the goals of the summit.

Successful summits involve youth in a variety of ways:

- assisting in program design
- selecting themes and topics
- designing publicity and recruiting materials
- conducting surveys to get the opinions of other youth
- contacting policy makers and speakers
- debating, role-playing, and discussing during the summit
- facilitating and leading groups during the summit
- assisting in evaluation
- following up with communication at the summit's conclusion

The more meaningful the youth involvement, the more likely the contribution is critical to the success of the program. However, this level of involvement increases the risk attached to youth involvement. Plan for this by pairing youth and adults as partners so adults can coach youth along the way (see next section).

It is important to plan for *how* youth will be involved in the summit. Don't just add a repre-



Me	We	They
<p>Example: The event will take place at the county government center between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. to provide the most opportunity for participation by youth and key adult decision makers.</p> <p>All youth will ride the bus.</p>	<p>Example: The list of potential topics will include: . . .</p> <p>Final Celebration</p> <p>Information that needs to be on promotional materials</p> <p>List of possible guest speakers</p>	<p>Selection of the topic from the list of potential topics</p> <p>Title of the event</p> <p>T shirt design</p> <p>Selection of guest speakers</p>

The ME/WE/THEY chart helps youth and adults discuss responsibilities and agree on decisions.

When involving youth in designing and implementing the summit, allow plenty of time for discussion, questions, and decision making. Youth need to feel included and these feelings must be developed over time. Encourage diversity of participation, creativity, and consideration of everyone’s ideas.

2. Let youth and adults work together

In designing the summit, plan to have youth and adults interact as partners in planning, implementing, and evaluating the program. Youth involvement might take more time than having adults alone plan the summit, but it will be more effective.

It is critical to plan for the adult/youth partnership by having adults and youth together decide who will be responsible for various decisions that must be made. Using the “ME/WE/THEY” chart, areas of responsibility can be discussed and delegated decisions agreed to. Honor the delegation of decisions. Failure to do so alienates those who have invested time and effort in making the decision. Adults must decide in advance if they can accept the decisions of the youth. If not, the decision should be made by the adults. It is important to remember that youth involvement in decision making is no substitute for the hard work that must go into the summit planning and development.

Plan for the adult/youth partnership:

1. Identify the areas of planning that adults must be responsible for (some logistics, actions with liability concerns, some budgeting, and issues concerning safety), “ME” decisions.

sentative or two to an adult planning team. To avoid tokenism, consider these suggestions for involving youth.

1. *Youth are active members of the summit planning team.* Youth must have significant voice in the planning process. To do this, balance adult and youth members.
2. *Youth advisory boards council the planning team.* These boards can be long-term, enabling the development of effective programs and providing youth with leadership experiences. Youth advisory boards consist of youth with one or two adult advisors.
3. *Youth organizations serve as partners.* These organizations not only provide opportunity for youth involvement, they can also provide systems for recruiting, information sharing, curriculum delivery, and fundraising.
4. *Youth serve in leadership roles at the summit itself.* Summit participants value receiving instructions and information from youth leaders. Youth leaders can facilitate small and large group activities, introduce speakers, and keep youth on task and on time.

2. Identify areas that can be shared equally by adults and youth (agenda design, some budgeting and fundraising, some logistics), “WE” decisions.
3. Identify areas that can be delegated to youth (topics, title, icebreaker activities, promotional materials, celebration activities, etc.) “THEY” decisions.

3. Focus on issues relevant to young people

Most youth summits engage youth in efforts to solve public problems either by discussing issues and evaluating solutions or by getting involved in the legislative process by focusing on actual proposed legislation. The selection of the issues can play a large role in the success of the summit and its value in building citizenship skills among the youth.

Principles for Authentic Youth Involvement

Engaging young people from across society requires the sharing of resources, power, and leadership between young people and adults. Youth involvement is best accomplished when we strive to:

1. **Reach out to ALL young people**
 - Being inclusive means recognizing diversity in ethnicity, religion, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, age, ability, etc.
 - Particular emphasis should be placed on engaging young people who have not traditionally been included in community youth development.
2. **Balance the distribution of power between young people and adults.**
 - Young people are seen as problem-solvers rather than problem-makers.
 - When young people are part of the process, they feel ownership, mobilize others, and become powerful role models.
3. **Create a safe environment in which all people feel valued to promote all levels of volunteerism, service, and social action.**
4. **Provide young people and adults with information, tools, and support to work effectively together as partners.**
 - Skill-based training (communication skills, teamwork, collaboration) for all participants is an excellent way to begin the process of working together.
 - Mutual mentoring provides a forum for stronger relationships between youth and adults.
5. **Recognize that young people and adults have equally valuable, but different, perspectives to offer. Each must be respected and heard.**
 - Adults offer skills, experiences, and access to resources.
 - Young people offer the ability to identify issues and possible solutions from a fresh perspective.
6. **Establish positions of authority and responsibility for all young people that allows for decision making on all issues and solutions.**
 - Youth have full participation and voting rights on boards of directors.
 - Staff positions for young people to ensure youth perspective on a daily basis within organizations.
7. **Continually reflect upon the roles of young people and adults while recognizing their contributions and impact.**
 - A key factor in effective leadership is the ability to learn from experiences through structured reflection.
 - The contributions of volunteers should be recognized to encourage on-going involvement and investment.

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Because young people might choose different topics than adults, it is important to include youth in the topic selection process. By giving youth a variety of issues from which to choose and agreeing on selection criteria, adults can leave the selection of the actual summit topic(s) to the young people.

Selection criteria might include

1. Is the topic of concern to all youth?
2. Is there some controversy or disagreement concerning the topic? Topics with at least two legitimate positions will guarantee interesting discussions and healthy debate.
3. Is the topic manageable? Will youth be able to understand it? Does curriculum exist to help youth prepare?
4. Is there opportunity for youth to have impact in the public policy sector? Will they see the impact of their efforts?

4. Involve youth from all walks of life.

It is easy to think that all youth share the same opinion about an issue. “How do the youth feel?” we ask as if there is a single viewpoint. By involving a diverse youth population in the summit, youth and adult participants grow to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives. They develop a deeper understanding of the problem and the issues around it. They also learn that democracy is messy when people from all walks of life participate—viewpoints are diverse, the process is not easy, and the outcomes are not predictable.

There are some challenges when summit participants come from a variety of backgrounds. Curriculum-based learning must be designed to accommodate a variety of experiences and learning abilities, and the day must be organized to build in opportunities for the youth to create a sense of community with other participants. It is important to avoid stereotyping and selecting

issues that encourage “us” versus “them” debates by providing common experiences and a common set of problems/topics.

5. Give youth a chance to speak out and be heard

Young people want to be taken seriously. Although they value the opportunity to exchange views with their peers and discuss important and controversial issues, they also want adults to listen to what they have to say. This means more than adults attending the youth summit and participating in discussions with the youth. It also means adults keeping youth viewpoints in mind during future consideration of the issues.

Adults working with youth should take steps to increase the likelihood that youth voice will have an impact in public deliberations and search for solutions. If youth participation has no impact, then youth learn a lesson in alienation: “Why bother, they never listen.” This doesn’t mean that the youth must get their way, only that their suggestions be taken as seriously as the suggestions of adults participating in the public discussions.

How to do this? First, youth must “take stock before taking sides.” People listen when they believe the speaker knows what he or she is talking about. This is true for adults as well as youth. Youth who have done their homework can support their positions with facts and earn the respect of both adult and youth listeners.

Many schools and communities conduct preliminary forums to involve more youth and provide broader youth voice in the process. Youth are often selected at the local forums to represent their community or school at the summit. To familiarize youth with issues and proposed solutions, youth summit models often include pre-summit activities including lessons, surveys, and background research. These activi-

ties help youth study the topic thoughtfully and comprehensively and prepare them for the summit discussions.

Youth should also receive guidance on how to present their ideas in understandable and persuasive ways. Involving actual policy makers in planning the summit will help to insure that this important step is not overlooked.

During the summit, provide youth with the opportunity to form their own values and beliefs, draw their own conclusions, be free to express their opinions, and understand and respect the values and beliefs of others. Remind participants that there are no clearly right or wrong answers. Encourage everyone to participate and acknowledge everyone's point of view.

6. Present ideas to policy makers

Youth summits encourage youth to consider public problems and public policy regarding solutions to the problems. By involving policy makers, youth summit participants have a chance to present their ideas and opinions to those in positions to make changes and see themselves as members of a process that can influence law, government, and the way things are done.

Policy makers might include state and local elected officials (city council, state representatives), leadership of major corporations and foundations, nonprofit organization executives, and citizen action group representatives. By identifying all "stakeholders" around the

topics/issues selected by the youth and recruiting their participation, the summit will present a more comprehensive and thoughtful consideration of the problems. Participants (adults as well as youth) will learn the value of listening to the viewpoints of all citizens in the effort to create the "best" solutions.

Through youth summits, policy makers will see young people as part of the solution. They will keep youth viewpoints in mind during future discussions, capturing youth voices in policy debates.

7. Provide opportunities for recognition and celebration

Summits are excellent opportunities to get media attention for youth efforts. Use the media to recognize youth rather than focusing on the adults involved. Ask young people to develop action plans; it encourages them to remain involved and provides materials for news stories after the summit.

All youth need to feel recognized for their contributions. Use special ways to congratulate youth at the end of the summit. Designing this celebration is one task that is often best accomplished by youth involved in planning the summit. They will most certainly make sure that it is fun.



Minnesota Youth Legislative Summit Principles

- Youth voice is important.
- The world is run by those who show up.
- Controversy is good; it means that people have strong feelings about something.
- Democracy is messy. When people from all walks of life participate, viewpoints are diverse, the process is not easy, and the outcomes are not predictable.
- Youth are part of the solution, not merely part of the problem.
- Every one is respected and respectful.

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Millennium Youth Challenge Writing Contest

Changing Centuries

by Erica Whisney

The dawn of 2000 inspired me to consider the changes time brings, not only in my life, but also during the last 100 years. For example, during my lifetime, technology has exploded. When I was in kindergarten, home computers were becoming a trend in rural areas. Ten years later, nearly all homes have computers, printers, and Internet access. In fact, families can shop for nearly anything online.

When my Great-grandma Helen was a little girl in western South Dakota, her life was drastically different from mine. She was born in 1890 and lived until 1994, so she observed nearly all the great advances of the 20th century. If I had asked her what her life was like as a teenager, this is what she may have said:

“Well, Erica, when I was a young girl there were no indoor toilets or running water. We didn’t have electricity until after I was married. I got my first car, a Model A, in 1925.”

“Grandma, how could you live without the technology we have today?” I asked.

“In those days we had no idea what the future would bring. Today I really can’t imagine going back to the way things were, but at the time we thought they were fine.”

“So how was your life affected by the lack of technology?”

“Since we traveled by horse and buggy, we didn’t go far, and when we did, we took trains. I delivered all of my children at home instead of in a hospital like you someday will.”

“No, I don’t want to ever have children, Grandma!”

“Oh, Erica, when you get older, you may change your mind. For one thing, it is much safer for you to have children. I have three children, but I was pregnant five times. I had a miscarriage when I was knocked around by a horse.”

“I am sorry, Grandma. What did you do for fun when you were young, Grandma?”

“We played cards and visited neighbors, and my mother taught me to do needlework when I was very young. Later I also learned to crochet.”

“What’s that??”

“Oh, my. I sometimes wonder if the past will ever be remembered. Here, I have been meaning to give you this afghan. Before you ask, the holes in it are not going to let the heat escape! Afghans are actually quite warm.”

“Cool! Thanks, Grandma. I want to know what your job was.”

“Most women didn’t have jobs, so families were supported by the men. Your Great-grandfather Raymond was a rancher. He used real “horse power” instead of tractors to do field work. Women’s main responsibility was to attend to their children and homes. I liked school, so I attended high school and a two-year bookkeeping school. I then worked at a department store until I met Raymond.

“Thank you for telling me so much, Grandma! Are you ready for a nap now?”

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“Oh, Erica dear, when you start getting into triple digits, you are always ready for a nap.”

Young people’s lives today vary greatly from the lives of youth during my grandma’s era. I attend school in an interracial environment; races were separate in the early 1900s. Great-grandma Helen attended school in western South Dakota at a time when drugs and alcohol were not an issue for teens. Today, in southwestern Minnesota, the pressures to use marijuana or drink beer are a major problem in our schools.

Another big difference was the way society viewed children. As a teenager, grandma was expected to be gracious, kind, and ladylike. Today, I am expected to be strong, smart, and hard working. Grandma said she was often reminded that, “Children are to be seen and not heard.” Youth are viewed much differently in the twenty-first century! We are considered the bridge to the future. I would describe today’s attitude toward youth by saying, “Youth are expected to get an education and to make a difference in the world.”

As I left my Great-grandma Helen to nap, I went to find my mom and grandma. I told them that visiting with great-grandma had helped me to realize all the advantages I have today. The biggest advantage is the information available to us through technology. The Internet allows college visits without leaving home. Chat rooms let us talk to people from other countries. Television shows places we may never visit. We can even find long-lost friends through the Internet.

Our ability to acquire knowledge on nearly any topic is unbelievable. If knowledge is power, the potential to influence the future is even greater now. What that future will be seems impossible to predict. Great-grandma Helen had no idea how different the world would be during her lifetime. I know that I am unable to predict the future successfully, but I will do my best to impact the future in a positive manner.

I asked my mom to tell me more about her grandma. She said that no matter what the new technology, great-grandma was willing to try it. She saw that new inventions were more convenient and saved time. She converted to running water, indoor toilets, telephones, automobiles, and even flew on a plane in her seventies.

As a teenager at the turn of the millennium I feel the challenges I encounter are not all that different from those of my great-grandparents. All youth are faced with difficult moral, ethical, and personal decisions during their journey to adulthood. The surroundings and decades may be different, but the same basic questions teenagers encounter will always be the same.

Erica Whisney
Age 16

