

Investing in Youth Engagement and Advocacy: School-Based Partnerships with Youth M.O.V.E.

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A Shift in Perspective: Youth-Driven Change

More than ever before, there is recognition that youth must be authentically engaged in any efforts to create positive change in youth-serving systems. When youth who have lived experience with mental health challenges are involved in planning and decision-making, they can help to ensure that services and supports are designed to meet the full spectrum of their needs. Benefits to these youth include reduced stigma, a greater willingness to access mental health services and promote help-seeking among peers, and the feeling that they are valued by adults, all of which can enhance protective factors and reduce risk factors.¹

In the education system, empowering students with lived experience as leaders, peer supporters, and agents of change benefits everyone involved in the school, including faculty and staff, parents or caregivers, and the wider community. Research shows that youth engagement contributes to higher academic competency and motivation, improved graduation rates, and positive school climate. School climate is comprised of the norms, values, and expectations that support people in feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe.² Positive school climate has been linked to a range of outcomes that impact all members of the school community, including psychological well-being, academic achievement, bullying and harassment, and substance use.^{3,4}

However, partnering with youth is an ongoing challenge for many youth-serving agencies, including schools. At the system level, education agencies traditionally take a top-down approach in which adults lead, design, and are trained in programs, while students receive or participate in them. This approach of “doing for” youth instead of “doing with”/ “doing by” youth can result in missed opportunities to address the needs and concerns that matter most to youth.⁵ At the initiative or program level, youth are often involved only after program planning and development is complete, which can result in programs that increase stigma and tokenize youth. At the school level, it can be difficult for faculty and staff to recognize



youth as partners with valuable lived experience. They may struggle with sharing power and transitioning from a management role to a partnership or coaching role, a necessary step to move along the continuum from youth participation to youth leadership and engagement.⁶ For youth, new leadership roles and responsibilities can be challenging. Young people may be unsure whether or how to disclose their lived experience with mental health and other challenges. Their caregivers may also be hesitant about youth disclosing these challenges for fear of stigma or having their youth singled out within the school system.

A promising approach for authentically infusing youth voice, promoting youth leadership, and taking a comprehensive approach to engaging stakeholders is to partner with youth-led organizations. Youth-led organizations provide a forum in which youth develop leadership skills as they advocate for the changes that matter to them in ways that resonate with their lived experience. **Youth M.O.V.E. (Motivating Others through Voices of Experience)** is one such organization that is working with policymakers, grant programs, and youth-serving agencies nationwide to raise the collective voices of youth as self-advocates and equal partners in systems change. The Youth M.O.V.E. chapter network is comprised of youth and young adult-led groups that create change and promote youth advocacy at the state, tribal, and local levels.

Exhibit 1. Defining Youth Leadership

- Youth Driven: Youth have substantive, meaningful roles in leadership position, including governance and programming. YMN is youth driven.
- Youth Led: Youth are in all major leadership roles, with support from adult allies. Youth M.O.V.E. chapters are youth led.⁷

This Issue Brief is designed for Project AWARE grantees and other State and Local Education Agencies, school-based initiatives, and schools that have identified youth engagement as a priority, but who are struggling to achieve it. The Youth M.O.V.E. model is described in this brief, followed by the embedded frameworks and approaches that promote effective youth engagement. Considerations for the school context or application are described throughout this Issue Brief. We also provide action steps for partnering with Youth M.O.V.E. chapters or other youth-led organizations. Finally, several resources for promoting youth leadership and engagement are provided.

Overview of Youth M.O.V.E.

Youth M.O.V.E. National (YMN) is a youth-driven organization that strives to improve youth-serving systems and services by engaging the voices of those with lived experience in mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare, substance abuse, and other systems. YMN unites youth and young adults to empower them as agents of change and decision-makers at the individual, community, and system levels. YMN supports its chapter network through national leadership representing mental health and other youth-serving systems; providing a Youth Leadership program; developing training tools, guides, and other documents; coaching and providing technical assistance to chapters; and offering other supports to unite the voices of Youth M.O.V.E. chapters to inform programs and policies.

Youth M.O.V.E. has more than 80 chapters in 39 states and Washington, DC. These chapters are all youth and young adult-led, with YMN providing support for chapter development, youth leadership, professional growth, and other areas. In the chapter application, which must be written in whole or part by youth, potential chapters identify their youth focus population(s), mission, vision, plans for promoting youth voice in the community, and other key aspects. These components must fit within the larger YMN mission, but each chapter will be unique. For example, some chapters may be more focused on runaway or homeless youth, or on a smaller age range of youth. However, to avoid recreating traditional silos, YMN encourages and promotes youth advocacy in all social systems that serve youth and young adults between the ages of 14-29, regardless of each chapter's initial focus.

Exhibit 2. What Do Chapters Do?

Youth M.O.V.E. National identified these six youth-driven Purpose Areas based on the Youth M.O.V.E. chapters' scopes of work:

- Recreation and Peer Networking
- Community Involvement and Advocacy
- Social Marketing and Awareness Building
- Youth Voice Development and Leadership
- Personal Development and Empowerment
- Peer Service Delivery

For more information about these purpose areas, their potential outcomes, and example activities for each, see [Youth-Driven Organizational Purpose Areas](#).

Youth Engagement Frameworks and Practices

Youth M.O.V.E.'s approach is built on best practices for culturally competent youth engagement, empowerment, and leadership. In all of this work, it is important to recognize that "youth" is not a monolithic category. Youth, their caregivers, and their allies are culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse, and this diversity informs how they engage with youth-serving agencies and systems. Respect for the intersectionality of youth lived experience is critical to effective collaboration. The Youth M.O.V.E. approach includes the following best-practice frameworks within the context of culturally competent youth engagement.

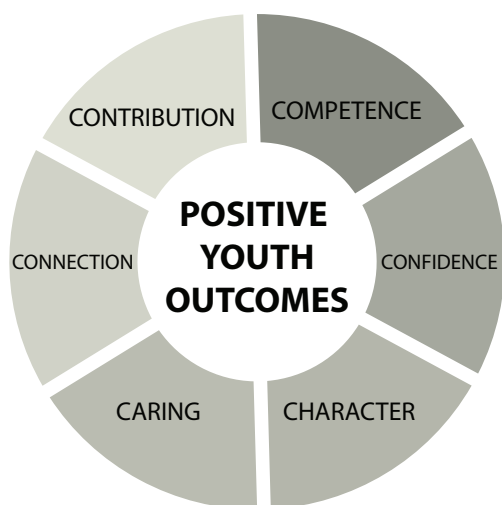
What Helps, What Harms. The YMN model stems from multi-system efforts, from the grassroots to national scales, to engage youth and young adults in improving systems to better serve them. Working with its Youth M.O.V.E. chapter network, YMN has distilled the voices of its members into the central themes and pillars that drive its policy initiative, *What Helps, What Harms* (WHWH).⁸ The three WHWH themes cut across all six areas of work (Education, Community, Mental Health, Foster Care, Juvenile Justice, and Employment):

- Peer Support – Youth Peer Support (YPS) and other peer-based models for positive recovery and transition to adulthood
- Cultural Competency – youth come from a variety of cultures that inform their own identity; youth culture as an essential component of cultural competency
- Youth Voice – "Nothing About Us, Without Us"

Youth Guided. Youth M.O.V.E. is committed to promoting youth-guided programming, services, and systems. Youth M.O.V.E., in conjunction with SAMHSA, developed a definition of "youth guided" that emphasizes young people's "right to be empowered, educated, and given a decision making role." A youth-guided approach recognizes the continuum of power between youth and adults, and promotes a strengths-based change process

that accords the youth more power and responsibility over time, based on the young person's own maturity and understanding. Younger adolescents will typically (but not always) need more support, guidance, and leadership from adult allies than youth who are transitioning into adulthood. Throughout this process, communities and adult allies provide continual support to youth and young adults as they "gain self-sustainability" to lead and make decisions. Youth are actively engaged, mentored, and supported in guiding the design of their support plans and the programs in which they participate.⁹ Adults have an important role to play in a youth-guided setting by sharing power, knowledge, and resources.

Positive Youth Development. Youth M.O.V.E.'s model is grounded in the positive youth development (PYD) approach. In a traditional model of youth services, the focus is on preventing risky behaviors or negative outcomes, and youth are judged by what they have not yet learned to do. In contrast, PYD is a prosocial approach that focuses on protective factors and the positive outcomes that arise when youth are provided with trust in their capabilities, opportunities to lead, and guidance from adult allies. PYD promotes opportunities for youth to serve as change agents and leaders, which not only helps young people develop self-determination and leadership skills but also benefits the programs and systems that serve them.¹⁰ Traditionally, youth with or at risk for mental illness may be treated as "clients" in multiple systems, and may experience disconnect from their families, schools, and communities. When these same young people are involved in youth groups that share a PYD approach, they can instead experience a powerful sense of connectedness, self-esteem, and resilience.¹¹



Youth Peer Support. Peer support services are intentional supports delivered by individuals who have common life experiences, and can include such services as peer mentoring or coaching, peer recovery resource connecting, recovery group facilitation, and building community or peer networking. Peer support is an important pillar of the work of Youth M.O.V.E. chapters and aligns with YMN's vision

that there should be dignity, equity, and empathy in all helping relationships supporting youth and young adults experiencing mental health challenges. Peer services facilitate recovery and support both the individuals involved by promoting self-efficacy, fostering meaning-making, enhancing social connectedness, building self-esteem, and improving confidence.^{12,13} For more information and resources for establishing peer services, visit Youth M.O.V.E.'s [Youth Peer Support](#) page.

Youth M.O.V.E. Highlight

Youth M.O.V.E. chapters in [New Mexico](#), Alaska, and Mariana Islands are implementing Natural Helpers as a peer-to-peer program in schools. Natural Helpers provides training and leadership development opportunities to student members so that they can help and support their friends and peers, contributing to a safe and supportive school environment.

System of Care Values. YMN's work to engage youth with lived experience in leading systems change efforts aligns with the core values of systems of care. YMN was founded by youth leaders who represented multi-system involvement, and the goal of YMN is to serve the full range of youth experience and not mirror the silos created by separately financed service systems. At the same time, the mental health system has always been a key focus for YMN, and the importance of the system of care philosophy in Youth M.O.V.E. is evidence of this. A system of care is a spectrum of community-based services and supports for children, youth, and young adults with or at risk for mental health challenges. It is family driven, youth guided, culturally and linguistically competent, individualized and community based, and evidence based. In a system of care, developmentally appropriate services and supports are provided to facilitate the transition to adulthood and to adult-serving systems as appropriate.¹⁴

Decision Point: Finding Your Youth M.O.V.E. Partner

Given the evidence-based and best-practices infused in Youth M.O.V.E. for promoting positive youth outcomes, there is ample reason for youth-serving agencies like schools to partner with chapters on program planning and activities. There are multiple ways to initiate this partnership. For example, an agency might support the launch of a community-based chapter, partner with an existing community-based chapter, or even establish a school-based chapter.

Help to Establish a Community-Based Chapter.

Traditionally, Youth M.O.V.E. chapters have been community-based. This is in part because Youth M.O.V.E. focuses on a broader age range of youth through young adults, as well as because school-based programs tend to be faculty- or administrator-led rather than youth-led. In this option, a Youth M.O.V.E. chapter is established or already

exists within the community. It may be a standalone, independent group or a youth program within a hosting agency. If the school environment is not prepared to fully support ongoing youth leadership and engagement, then partnering with another host agency to develop a Youth M.O.V.E. chapter that would in turn offer programming in the school may help ensure a more supportive culture for current and future youth leaders. Based on the community, the host agency might also be supporting other culturally diverse groups, which may inform the focus of the chapter and the populations it plans to serve. The education agency will want to work with the newly formed chapter to collectively identify ways to get involved with school-based mental health issues and programming, and what supports the chapter might want from the school (e.g., meeting space, program funds).

Youth M.O.V.E. Highlight

[Youth M.O.V.E. Seminole](#) facilitates WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Planning) and girl and boy student discussion groups. Although they have no school-based chapters to date, they bring these trainings and peer supports to the school setting.

Partner with a Community-Based Chapter on Program Activities. An education agency may work with the existing state or local Youth M.O.V.E. chapter to provide trainings, school assembly presentations, awareness raising and stigma busting actions, group meetings, informal peer support groups, or other one-time and ongoing events that elevate youth advocacy within the school. For example, one Youth M.O.V.E. chapter conducted youth-created surveys of their peers to identify the most pressing issues to youth within the district (e.g., cyberbullying) and then conducted the survey in school classrooms to engage the broadest range of young people possible. This data was used by the chapter to guide future programming, but also shared with the school administration so that they had a deeper understanding of their student body. Other ways that schools may partner with community-based chapters include:



- Schools can serve as a referral source to a state or local Youth M.O.V.E. chapter. Work with the chapter to find out relevant information such as its mission and vision, contacts, and meeting times, and share this with faculty and staff to provide to students who may be interested.
- Allow the state or local Youth M.O.V.E. chapter to post signs and information about their group around campus. Schedule time for the chapter to come in and speak to a crowd to get them motivated to join.¹⁵
- Schools can offer a meeting space free of charge for youth groups and Youth M.O.V.E. chapters. This allows youth receiving services to participate in a positive, prosocial, peer environment in a location that minimizes transportation challenges.
- Project AWARE sites can market MHFA/YMHFA trainings specifically to Youth M.O.V.E. chapter members. Youth M.O.V.E. chapters may also be willing to further disseminate information about MHFA/YMHFA trainings in their networks, or advise project leaders on marketing the trainings. Additionally, caregivers of youth involved in Youth M.O.V.E. chapters may be interested in supporting MHFA/YMHFA training or implementation.

Youth M.O.V.E. Highlight

Youth M.O.V.E. Minnesota received a [\\$10,000 grant](#) from Ramsey County, MN, to train youth in high schools and youth transitioning schools on mental health, peer support, and advocacy topics.

Establish a School-Based Youth M.O.V.E. Chapter. A school or education agency could serve as the hosting organization for the chapter, which includes being responsible for Youth M.O.V.E. chapter requirements; dedicating staffing to the chapter (whether a new hire or current staff); hosting events, trainings, and activities of the chapter; and infusing the youth leadership of the chapter into the infrastructure of the host setting. This is an option that would work in the Youth M.O.V.E. model, provided that the chapter is youth-led; aligned with YMN's mission, vision, and approaches; and committed to supporting advocacy across youth-serving systems and avoiding silos. Examples of Youth M.O.V.E. activities that could be undertaken within the education setting may include: facilitation and support of a youth leadership council for the school district, informal peer support groups during or after school hours, training for educators on youth culture and mental health stigma, or development of a student-run council on school-based mental health services. Students in a particular school or district may have other issues that are important to them, such as ensuring that youth have a voice in Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Behavior Plan meetings. It is important that the Youth M.O.V.E. chapter is supported in working toward its own identified goals, and not limited to those that are initial priorities for the school, education agency, or grant program.

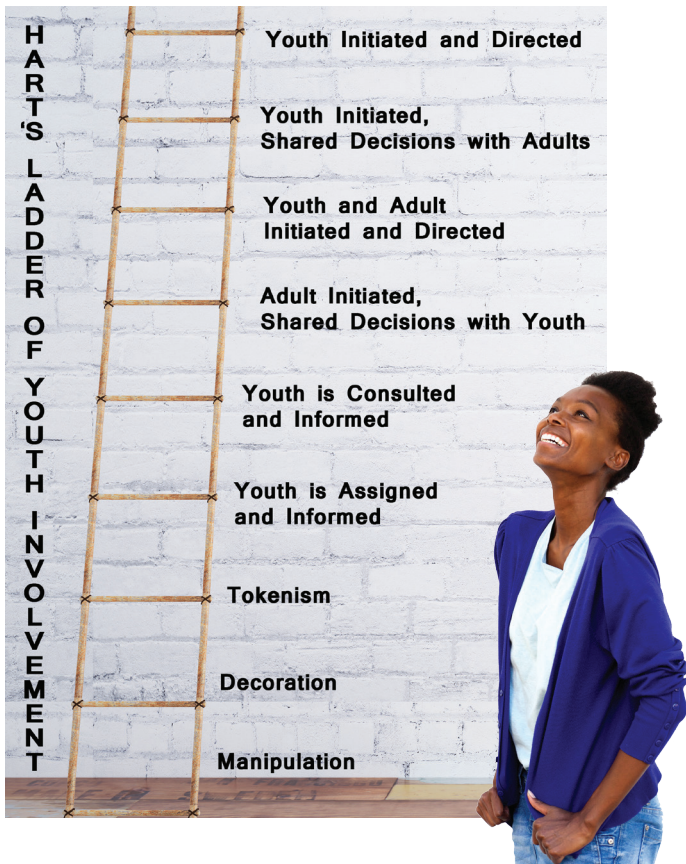
Integrate Youth M.O.V.E. Chapter Members as Leaders.

For programs that have stakeholder engagement and cross-systems leadership requirements, Youth M.O.V.E. chapter leaders can be highly motivated change agents. Leadership and advisory positions may include participation on a State or Local Management Team, a Youth Advisory Board (YAB), or a school's advisory council or wellness committee. If your program is working with chapter members as youth advisors, council members, or Management Team members, take care to recognize and value their input as you would an adult expert or stakeholder. Schools often offer volunteer credit or service hours for these kinds of positions; stipends or other compensation are also as important for youth as for adult stakeholders.

- [#Things2Consider: Creating a Youth Advisory Board:](#) this YMN one-pager explains Youth Advisory Boards and highlights key considerations for establishing them.
- [#Things2Consider: Stipending Youth and Young Adults:](#) this one-pager describes why youth and young adults should be compensated for their time and outlines how to put stipends in place.

Youth M.O.V.E. Highlight

The [Student Campaign for Suicide Prevention](#) (SCSP), an emerging Youth M.O.V.E. chapter in Stokes County, NC, was founded as a youth-led initiative and is a school-based organization. As the only youth initiative for suicide prevention in the county, its youth leaders have actively partnered with community organizations, created the program website, and run awareness events. In addition, because the school is in a rural area, the SCSP has developed innovative ways to overcome transportation barriers through virtualizing the group and its resources.



Next Steps: Creating a Rewarding Partnership

Partnering with a Youth M.O.V.E. chapter for youth mental health can take many forms, with more or less structure depending on mutual needs and interest. Consider the following steps as a flexible model for initiating your program or agency's work with a new or existing Youth M.O.V.E. chapter in a school or community setting.

Assess Your Needs. Actively reflect on what your program or agency is seeking to achieve in partnership with a Youth M.O.V.E. chapter. For example, is there a need for increased individual youth advocacy in your schools (e.g., in IEP plans and meetings)? Do you want to actively engage youth voice in order to identify unmet student needs or shed light on a particular program challenge you are facing? Do you want to identify youth who will be interested in promoting mental health awareness in your specified schools or communities? Are there specific youth leadership roles or opportunities you would like to fill with youth advocates with lived experience (e.g., a Youth Advisory Board)?

Ensure Fit with Youth M.O.V.E. Review the Youth M.O.V.E. resources linked within this document and from the Youth M.O.V.E. website, and/or reach out to YMN, to determine whether your program goals and needs will overlap with YMN's mission and vision. In most cases, there will be good fit overall, as long as your goal is to work with the chapter in such a way that benefits both groups and all youth you serve. Throughout this process, understand that a key component of the Youth M.O.V.E. philosophy is that each chapter's activities are driven by the youth in it, so there may not be an identical fit between your program goals and the goals of the chapter with which you work.

Identify Existing Resources. There may already be a state- or local-level Youth M.O.V.E. chapter that would be interested in working with your program. State Youth M.O.V.E. chapters focus on network building across systems, organizations, and regions, with a focus on state policy. Local chapters work with the state chapter but are smaller in scope and focused more on community concerns and policies. If a chapter does not currently exist, look to the organizations in your state or community that are already youth-driven or are engaged with youth who have lived experience and whose cultural perspectives reflect the diversity of your student body. Some examples of entities that host Youth M.O.V.E. chapters include state systems of care, county behavioral health administrations, and parent/family organizations or family mental health advocacy groups. At the school level, there may be clubs for mental health, civic engagement, social justice, or similar topics. Youth leaders in these school groups may be interested in moving to the next step of advocating within youth-serving systems.

- [Find a Chapter](#): a listing of the current Youth M.O.V.E. chapters, with contact information.

Plan to Partner. Once you have identified existing needs and resources, practical considerations for planning to work with a Youth M.O.V.E. chapter may include:

- How will you fund the Youth M.O.V.E. chapter? The chapter application includes required dues, which differ for state and local chapters; some state chapters may cover or supplement the dues of local chapters during the initial set-up period. It is also important to consider stipends for youth leaders and advisory board members, depending on their involvement in the grant. Ultimately, however, the largest cost will be the group's activities, and these will depend on each chapter's focus areas. Project AWARE grantees should discuss with their GPO whether costs may be billable to the grant.
- Who will be the point person(s) or adult ally/allies in your program or agency who will work with the chapter? Consider whether you are working with the chapter at the state, tribal, or local level; whether there are staff persons who are a natural fit (e.g., youth coordinators); and with what activities you hope to engage the Youth M.O.V.E. chapter (e.g., State Management Team, local outreach).
- What processes will you put in place to ensure that youth are informed and engaged partners in their interactions with your program or agency? Decision-making processes should be transparent and accountable, and youth should be positioned to provide well-informed consent in how they are involved.

Develop a Relationship with the Youth. Present your program and the needs you have identified to the youth group or existing chapter with whom you hope to partner. If you are working with an existing chapter, discuss their current program mission, vision, and activities, and then collectively identify areas of overlap where you could fruitfully collaborate. Address whether the community-based chapter will provide offerings in schools, and if so, how you can facilitate this. If you are partnering with a group of youth to form a new chapter, give them the opportunity and a safe space in which to frame the topics on which they wish to focus. The issues that youth identify are often the same as those identified by the administration (e.g., stigma, bullying), but viewed from the different – and valuable – perspective of lived experience. Regardless of setting, be sure to discuss the benefits this partnership will offer for the Youth M.O.V.E. chapter (e.g., membership, funds, meeting space, a voice in school or district policy), not just for your program.

- [A Guide to Youth Recruitment](#) provides reflection questions and guidance for recruiting and sustaining the involvement of youth advocates.

Support the Application. If you plan to use program resources or time to help establish a new chapter, the prospective youth group will need to apply for chapter membership. If the chapter will have to meet certain administrative requirements to work with or in a school, support the chapter in overcoming these barriers. Note that YMN encourages groups to have youth leaders from the proposed chapter complete the entire application, and some questions must be completed by youth (rather than supportive adults). Supporting youth in planning the direction of the Youth M.O.V.E. chapter from its initial inception will help to ensure that the group is youth-led.

- The [Chapter Readiness Checklist](#) is a planning guide for completing the application.
- The [Youth M.O.V.E. National Chapter Application](#) includes the national mission and vision, a guide to chapter benefits, and more information.

Implement Your Partnership. Once the youth group or chapter is established, work together on activities that support the goals of the youth and of your program. Bring the Youth M.O.V.E. leaders into the process by helping them understand how their activities and consultation support the overall goals of the project or initiative. Support opportunities for the Youth M.O.V.E. members to take ownership or leadership roles in program activities that are designed to engage youth, such as awareness events, social marketing campaigns, or participatory research and evaluation. As you work with the chapter, provide structure and support for the youth to offer feedback on how the partnership is working, what strategies or activities might be most effective with youth, and whether they feel their voices are being heard.

- [#Things2Consider: Measuring Success](#): this one-pager from YMN provides tips to help programs (including Youth M.O.V.E. chapters) assess whether they are reaching their intended audience and making the intended impact.





Exhibit 3: Tips for Meaningful Youth Engagement

Do	Do Not
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be willing to listen and learn.• Be mindful of how much adults are talking compared to youth.• Be open to new ways of doing things.• Be transparent about what is possible.• Share power with youth, as partners, but also provide mentorship.• Create a safe space for youth to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts.• Allow youth to facilitate and co-facilitate, and provide opportunities for them to lead both youth and adults.• Support and invest in youths' ideas for system reform.• Provide resources and strategies for youth on if, when, and how to strategically share their lived experience to advocate for change.• Support youth to be effective leaders, not just another voice at the table.• Acknowledge and respect youth experiences, expertise, and insights.• Educate youth on how policy and practice works in your organization, project, or field, and who the key stakeholders are.• Provide incentives and compensation for youth.• Acknowledge that there are age gaps between youth and adults and find meaningful ways to engage both sides in conversation.• Recognize that "youth" or "students" are a very diverse group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assume you know what youth want.• Create a space where adults set the agenda and youth are only there to provide advice. This creates an atmosphere for "tokenism."• Treat the goals that youth develop as secondary to those of your program.• Disrespect youth or their ideas.• Simply "assign" tasks to them. Give youth the opportunity to take ownership of projects.• Underestimate the capabilities of youth. Youth development should take an assets-based approach.• Pander to youth or become overly permissive. Even highly motivated and capable youth benefit from support and guidance as they develop as leaders.• Over-promise on what is possible – e.g., level of funding, activities, ability to change policy.• Include youth as just another "agenda" item.• Use the stories or lived experience against them, or share their stories for them or without their consent.• Shut youth out from important information, conversations, or decision-making processes.• Expect one youth to be the voice for all youth.• Dismiss youth based on stereotypes.• Limit yourself to the "way things are always done."

Adapted from "[Do's and Don'ts for Meaningful Youth Engagement](#)," Annie E. Casey Foundation

Conclusion: Working with Youth Works for Youth

A youth-led group such as a Youth M.O.V.E. chapter can be a powerful ally for effecting change in mental health services and systems. Youth with diverse cultural backgrounds and lived experience across systems offer a unique perspective for program and policy development. Their leadership can improve the sustainability of initiatives that impact youth by ensuring that their needs and concerns are prioritized. Making conscious choices to empower youth leadership through partnership with a Youth M.O.V.E. chapter can substantially benefit the youth who are engaged, their adult allies and partners, and all youth who are involved in the program or services.

More Resources to Promote Effective Partnership

The [Strategic Sharing Workbook: Youth Voice in Advocacy](#) from the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health and Pathways RTC is designed to help youth advocates learn how to discuss their lived experience in ways that avoid re-traumatization.

The [Youth Leadership Toolkit](#) from the National Resource Center for Youth Development, in collaboration with FosterClub, is a set of strategies and best practices for engaging youth leaders. The toolkit was created out of the belief that youth should be involved in the design and implementation of programs, policies, and practices that impact them.

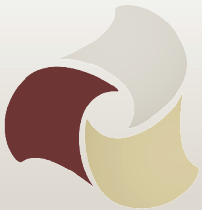
[SAMHSA's Youth Engagement Guidance](#) specifically addresses youth involvement in federal government-sponsored meetings and events, but it also includes a wealth of strategies and tools for supporting youth engagement for positive youth development.

The [Engaging Youth in Community Decision Making](#) toolkit from the Center for the Study of Social Policy includes a variety of useful activities, strategies, and tools for engaging youth, as well as helpful grids contrasting traditional youth participation practices with newer engagement frameworks.

[Sustaining Youth Engagement Initiatives: Challenges and Opportunities](#), from The Finance Project, focuses on acquiring funding for youth engagement initiatives, planning for sustainability, and bringing together youth and community stakeholders to champion the initiative.

Citations

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