



Youth on Boards Program:

Getting Started

Thank you for participating in the Youth First - **Youth on Boards** program. We are grateful that your organization has decided to participate in this exciting initiative.

Below you will find a brief overview of best practices when bringing youth members into the governance structure of your organization. As this program continues to expand and evolve, we look to you for feedback on what we can do to better prepare these new board/committee members and to support both them and your organization throughout the year.

We truly believe that your organization will benefit from youth membership on your board/committee. Youth are creative thinkers, they offer a different point of view and they are inquisitive. We know that youth board/committee members will develop leadership skills and gain valuable life experience through their service. In order to be successful, young people cannot simply be “plopped” onto a board/committee and expected to perform. Like any new adult member, they require training and mentoring in boardsmanship. It cannot be assumed that every new member understands how boards/committees operate, the rules of the meeting, the culture of the board/committee, how Robert’s Rules of Order work, public relations, politics of decision making, and so on.

A young person who serves on a board/committee and is properly trained and mentored can influence decision-making. We all benefit by having young people exposed to the “way things are done” in a democratic society. Thank you for creating this opportunity for our community and our future!

Please feel free to reach out to me at any time with questions or concerns. I will be checking in with the youth members throughout the year and welcome any feedback you have on the program as well. My contact info is:

Meleah Follen
Northfield Healthy Community Initiative
Youth Engagement Director
meleah@northfieldhci.org
612-220-5302 (cell)

We have outlined here some best practices for creating an environment that will effectively promote and include youth representation and participation. The list is not inclusive, but aims to give you a starting point from which to work.

Educating youth members:

- Provide them with the history of the board/organization, previous issues, past actions taken and other useful information. The more your new members know, the more they will be effective and thoughtful members of your board/committee.
- When you give the new members the information they need, include a copy of the minutes from your previous meeting. This will introduce them to the flow of your meetings and to Robert's Rules of Order (if used).
- Provide your new members with a copy of the agenda and any needed materials before your meetings so they can review the information and come prepared.
- Be patient. The new member's learning curve is probably straight up.

Welcoming youth members:

- Get the youth members' contact information and have a conversation with them about how the Board communicates. Preferred communication methods vary among youth and some are not as accustomed to using email as might be expected. Be honest with them about how your group communicates but also recognize that you may need to use various forms of communication with them.
- Make sure your new youth members know other members of the board/committee on a personal level.
- Assign an adult mentor to each new youth member. Ask this member to check in with their mentee after meetings and when the agenda is distributed for upcoming meetings. This connection will be invaluable for the youth member and help them to find their footing quickly.
- Ensure that youth members know the practicalities of the meeting: time, location, appropriate attire, when can they ask questions, when can they give opinions, and any assignments for work to be done outside of the meeting time? Again, a mentor will be invaluable in helping navigate these types of questions.

Determining youth member's responsibilities:

It is easy to assume that youth are too busy to be involved outside of board/committee meetings. However, making them full members of the board/committee and assigning them

responsibilities that match their abilities will help to fully engage them in your work. Some possibilities to consider:

- Place a member report sometime during your meeting. This will allow your youth members to share their involvement in board/committee projects and in the community at large. When your board/committee hears what is happening for youth currently in the community, ideas can be sparked.
- Place youth on subcommittees and, if appropriate, nominate them as co-leaders (with an adult member) of these subcommittees. Again this will help youth members connect with and be involved in the work.
- Assign youth to meaningful and needed tasks, such as minute-taking and/or contacting other organizations for the board/committee.

Questions to ask of your board/committee as you welcome and work with youth members:

- Does your board/committee culture promote open discussion?
- Are young people included in all issues, not just those affecting their age group?
- Is there time for all members (including youth) to speak at meetings?
- Do youth members have equal voting status and/or does your representative substantially influence governance of the organization?
- Is there informal time to network with other members?
- Are young people encouraged to take issues that arise back to their peers and gather a broader youth perspective?
- Is there a place or mechanism that young people can voice their concerns outside the meeting environment?
- Do adults ask the youth representative(s) how they can better work together and take the feedback seriously?
- If youth are confused about an issue, do you respond and guide them to the information they need?
- Is equal weight given to youth members opinions?
- Do you offer training for young people and adults on general governance skills?

Again, we know that this list is not all-inclusive, but we hope that it starts to lay the path for bringing on youth board/committee members. If you have ideas to share with other organizations welcoming youth into their work, please forward and we will distribute.

Again, thank you for commitment to Northfield youth!