

THE POWER OF AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

Exploring Youth Representation on Your Board or Committee



THE POWER OF AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

Exploring Youth Representation on your Board or Committee

This booklet was created by an Alaskan student for any board that is interested in expanding the representation of their board, “growing their own” board members for tomorrow and/or empowering the youth in their community. From Native corporation boards, youth serving organizations and faith groups, state and local advisory councils, to the state school boards association, Alaskans are witnessing a trend – Alaskans are committed to working with youth.

A greater number of Alaskan youth want to participate in the governance of their communities, despite traditional board membership being viewed by many youth as baffling, boring and/or burdensome. An increasing number of previously adult-only boards are soliciting youth involvement.

These Alaskan boards benefit from youth membership by youths’ creative thinking, different point of view, and direct questioning. If done correctly, youth gain leadership skills and valuable life experience. In order to be successful, young people cannot simply be “plopped” onto a board and expected to perform. They, like any new adult member, require training and mentoring in boardsmanship. It cannot be assumed that every new member understands how boards operate, the rules of the meetings, the culture of the board, how Robert’s Rules of Order work, public relations, politics of decision making and so on.

A young person who serves on a board, should be properly trained and mentored. We all benefit by having young people exposed to the “way things are done” in a democratic society. Isn’t it time for your board to “tap the power of youth?”

Youth who participate in governance roles with adults gain new skills, develop responsibility, learn citizenship, and acquire the Developmental Assets™ needed to succeed as adults.

This booklet lists some basic criteria for creating an effective intergenerational board. The ideas and experiences contained in this booklet have been collected from youth who serve on intergenerational boards, throughout Alaska.

Published: **First printing 2001, revised printing Sept. 2005**

WHY HAVE YOUTH ON YOUR BOARD?

- Adults who work with youth on boards gain insights about youth, broaden their own perspectives and have a more positive perception of youth.
- Boards that have incorporated youth membership are improved by youthful energy, perspectives and insights—programs and services are improved as a result.
- Adult board members can be revitalized and thus will increase their commitment to the organization and gain a stronger sense of community connectedness when serving with youth board members.



PREPARING YOUR BOARD FOR YOUTH INVOLVEMENT:

Assessing your readiness

Boards tend to work effectively with youth if, prior to including youth members, they are willing to:

- Be flexible with meeting times and locations in order to accommodate school schedules.
- Adjust their culture from doing things to and for youth to working with youth.
- Give up some time-related efficiency while new members are becoming comfortable with the culture of the board and the use of Robert's Rules of Order.
- Make some adjustments to the way the board supports its members. (i.e. paying young people in advance for their expenses, providing snacks at meetings and/or explaining the young person's role to parents.)
 - Advise your board in advance of who your new members are and when they will begin attending meetings.
 - Hold meetings at times that are convenient for your new members. Take into consideration factors such as school. Sometimes these times are not convenient for other board members, so try and reach a compromise.

PREPARING YOUR BOARD FOR YOUTH MEMBERS:

Once your board has decided it is willing to make adjustments and accommodations for youth representatives, some of the following actions would be appropriate for your board to take.

- Provide some research basis for why involving youth is important (e.g. helping kids succeed, learning leadership and life skills, improve decision making, improve school climate, increase youth engagement).
- Propose the idea of having younger members on your board. Remember change is often feared so be persistent and let the other members get comfortable with the idea.
- Have a vision for what the board could achieve by youth representation and share it with your board members.



- Give positive examples of youth action/activities in your community.
- Set meetings at times that would be convenient for youth to attend.
- Personally invite youth to come attend the meeting as a guest.
- Stay positive and resolute. Boards are often comprised of the busiest men and women in a community. Understand that any change in the culture of the board will cause shifts that will be uncomfortable for everyone involved. The youth will be more readily welcomed if less drastic changes occur.
- Reduce the use of acronyms or provide all members with a card of commonly used terms and acronyms.
- Reach out to other boards that have youth members to learn from their experiences.

CREATING YOUTH POSITIONS:

Once your board has agreed to have youth representation, a few logistics are necessary. Of course each board culture will determine the extent of the youth's role and involvement. Here are some things to consider:

- If your board is a publicly elected board, for legal reasons you will need to limit your youth representation to an advisory capacity. If this is the case, insure that youth input is obtained and listened to (i.e. provide a mechanism for youth advisory votes, before the other members vote.)
- If your board is not governed by state or federal statute and is in control of its own by-laws, you can most likely invite a youth to have many of the same "member privileges" as the adults on the board.
- When creating youth positions you may need to adjust your by-laws or board structure to accommodate the newly created position.
- Consider having a minimum of two youth board members. This will avoid tokenism, increase diversity of opinion and make it more comfortable for youth to participate.

When deciding how the youth member(s) will be chosen, it is a good idea to consider the following questions:

- Is it legally allowable to have youth members chosen in the same way as adult members? (If this is possible it is probably best to have consistency in the way all members are selected.)
- Will the youth be representing a constituency on your board? If so, should that group select your new member?
- If you are a voting board, is it necessary to select two youth members in order to have an odd number of members on your board for voting?



CONSIDERING LEGAL ISSUES:

Looking at the issues and topics that your board deals with will help you determine many things, including the extent of youth involvement and where you should look for new members.

- If your board deals with liability issues, confidentiality, conflict of interest hearings, employee contracts and/or student discipline issues, it is a good idea for your board to have a conversation with a lawyer to determine the appropriate level of youth involvement in these sensitive matters. In many cases, the youth representative is excused from attending these portions of the meetings or hearings.

RECRUITING AND CHOOSING YOUTH REPRESENTATIVES/MEMBERS:

It is one thing to create the opportunity for youth representation on your board, it is quite another to find youth with the talent, time, and inclination to join your board. It is best to do a broad-based search and identify several candidates who could best serve your board.

Following an interview process, you can select the appropriate candidate.

- Make a list of youth whom you personally know through church, school and/or neighborhood. Invite each member of your board to do this as well.
- Consider asking the heads of youth-serving organizations to compile a list of recommended youth. (Examples are: recreation centers, cultural centers, faith communities, sports leagues and youth courts.) Ask the school counselors, administrators, teachers, club sponsors, coaches and PTAs for their list of recommendations as well.
- Create an application and ask questions that pertain to the issues of your board. Be careful not to make the application a barrier to recruitment. Understand that this will probably be the first application of this kind completed by the youth.
- Designate a contact person within your organization. This will help your board evaluate applicants and will allow consistency when dealing with the youth applicants.
- Make sure the process is open enough to attract a diverse group of qualified candidates. An easy way to ensure this is working with multiple schools from different areas of your community.
- Sell the benefits of involvement: a learning opportunity, a way to contribute to the community, “real world” experience and most importantly an opportunity to have a voice for their age group.

SELECTING QUALIFIED APPLICANTS:

If you want to select the best candidates, allow your process to bring out the best in your applicants, rather than “weed them out.” This will take some intentional effort, but you will be rewarded with a deeper understanding of each candidate.



- Conduct interviews with applicants. Make these interviews at youth friendly times and locations.
- Ask for references. A conversation with a parent, teacher or religious leader can help you evaluate the traits and qualifications of each candidate.
- Search for evidence of the positive contributions each applicant would make. Look for diversity, a desire to advocate and a confident voice.

DETERMINING RESPONSIBILITIES:

You may wonder why this category follows the section on selecting a qualified applicant, rather than precedes it. It is because too many times boards go searching for “that perfect match” rather than finding an “engaging youth” and working to accommodate him/her to the culture of the board. After selecting the youth, have a discussion with your board about the responsibilities of your new member. Consider this a continually evolving list because as your youth gains confidence and competence, the board will need to consider some adjustments.

Some possibilities for youth member responsibilities include:

- Place a member report at the beginning of each meeting. This will allow your youth members to share their involvement in board projects and report back from any other groups or subcommittees they may be a part of.
- Nominate youth to serve as co-chairs of your board and/or as members of your smaller subcommittees.
- Assign youth to meaningful, but needed tasks such as minute-taking and/or contacting other organizations for the board.
- Speak at events on behalf of the organization, be present and speak up when funding organizations come for on site meetings and reviews.

EDUCATING THE YOUTH MEMBER:

- Familiarize new board members with your services and issues by giving them your web site and putting them on your list serve, or mailing lists.
- Prepare brief talking points for board members about your services so they can advocate for the organization.
- Take a tour of the organization’s facilities with an elected official or other board member.
- Provide all new board members with the history of the board, 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.
- When you give your new member the information they need, include a copy of the minutes from their previous meeting. This will acquaint them with the flow of your meetings and the intricacies of Robert’s Rules of Order, if you use them.
- Provide your new members with a copy of the agenda and any needed materials before your meeting so they can review the information and become prepared.
- Be patient. The new member’s learning curve is probably vertical.
- Make certain your new members know members of the board on a personal level. This simple action will make youth members feel much more comfortable and connected to your board.



- Have an open dialog about appropriate meeting dress. Will the new members dress up, or will the board choose to move in a more casual direction?
- Identify a board member who would be willing to act as a mentor. Ideally this would be a person in a position of leadership, (to add credibility), and be in a position to advocate on the behalf of youth members.
- Certainly it would be nice for a “mentor” to meet with youth/new members before the first meeting, to go over issues such as appropriate dress, issues on the board agenda, etc.

COMPLETING THE DETAILS:

- Provide transportation to and from your meetings for your new members if they need it. A car ride or bus, cab and airfare should be provided if needed.
- Call the parent/guardian of your new member to compliment them on their son/daughters perceptions. Answer any questions they may have. This is an excellent time to build the important link to the home. Provide the parents with all the necessary information including name and phone numbers of your organization. Make sure that when you hang up the phone everyone involved feels supported and validated.
- A representative from your board should contact the school and workplace to inform them of the student’s selection and any absence that will occur as a result. These telephone calls are an excellent opportunity to ask people to congratulate the students for their selection.



ORGANIZATIONAL ADULT CHECKLIST:

(Adapted from 14 Points by Youth on Board). Adults can use this checklist to assess your board's ability to have meaningful youth representation. This tool could help everyone involved comprehend the necessary adjustments and to measure their commitment. It is important to note that we are not implying that every board meet all of these criteria.

Key

1. Yes = We do this already – no need for further action.
2. To Consider = We think we need to consider this or have further questions.

1. 2.

- Does the board have the time and resources to make a commitment to effective youth representation?
- Has the board amended the by-laws or created policies stating that young people will be a permanent part of governing your organization?
- Is the board clear about why it is involving young people in governance?
- Is the board willing to adjust its culture to make meetings youth-friendly?
- Has the board outlined recruitment criteria for new members? (e.g. motivation, diversity, competence, quality of past experiences, etc.)
- Is there a mentor or coaching system in place?
- Does the board have a system in place for youth members to train new youth members?
- Are young people included in all issues, not just those affecting their age group?
- Does the board's culture promote open discussion?
- Is there time for all members (including youth) to speak at meetings?
- Are young people's terms of office equal to those of adults?
- Do young people have equal voting status and/or does your youth representative substantially influence governance of the organization?
- Do young people have access to the resources needed to participate in your board's work? (e.g., long distance phone cards, faxes, computers, and copy machines)
- Is there informal time to network and build relationships with other members?
- Are young people encouraged to keep in touch with their peers about their governance role?
- Is there a place where 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 these recommendations seriously?
- If youth are confused about an issue, how does the board respond and guide them to the information they need?
- Is equal weight given to youth member opinions?
- Do board members take the initiative to get to know all the members (including youth) of your board on a personal level?
- Does the board provide training for young people on speaking up in adult groups?
- Do you offer training for young people and adults in general governance skills?
- Are youth members briefed ahead of time on how to read a financial statement?

ORGANIZATIONAL YOUTH CHECKLIST:

Youth can use this checklist to assess your ability to provide meaningful youth representation. This tool could help everyone involved comprehend the necessary adjustments and to measure their commitment. It is important to note that we are not implying that every board meet all of these criteria.

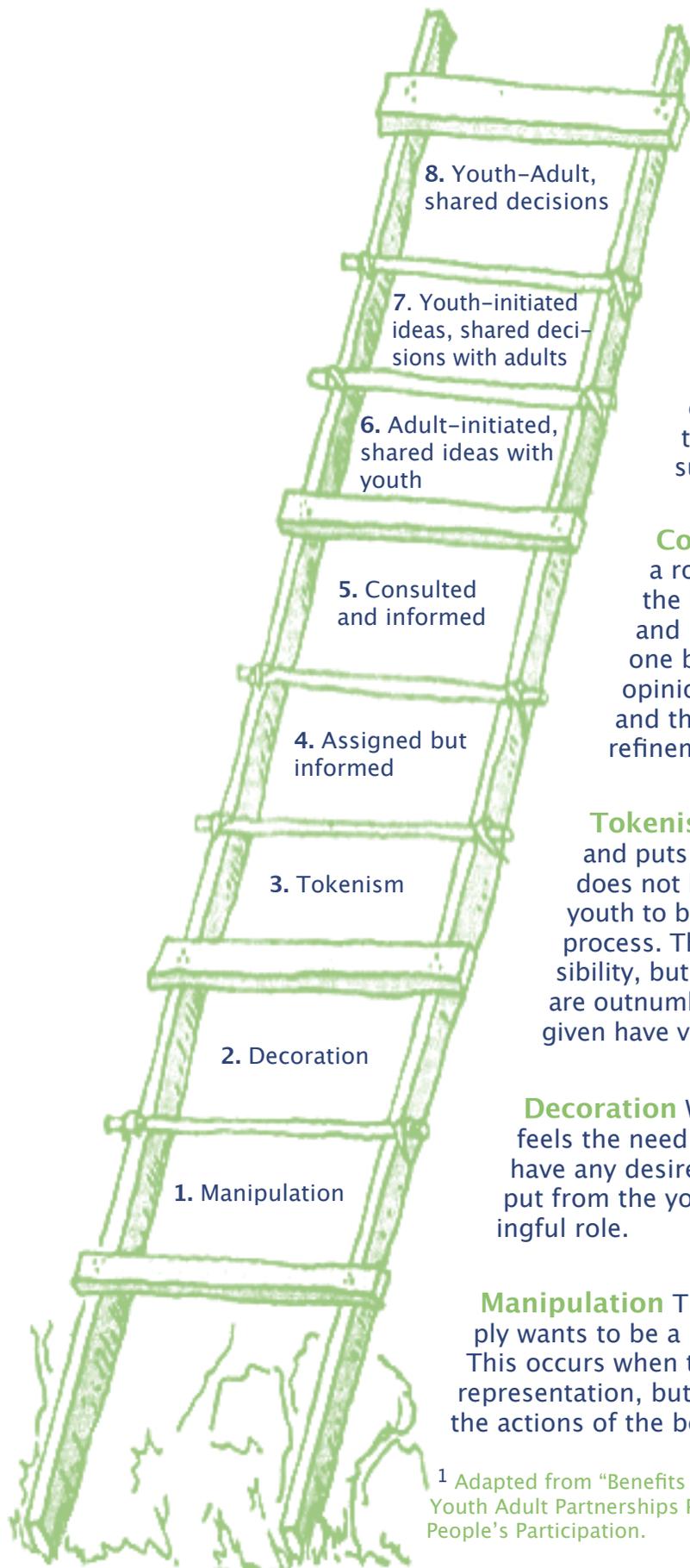
Key

1. Yes
2. To Consider

1. 2.

- Do I have motivation, ability and knowledge to put in the time to understand the issues of the board?
- Am I aware of my job description and what the board expects of me?
- Has the board communicated the specific objectives they have for me as a youth member?
- Have I either identified or been assigned a mentor for my board role?
- Do I have the motivation, ability and knowledge needed to make a contribution to the board?
- Do I work to know individual board members on a social level?
- Am I aware of the written and unwritten agenda and flow of the board meetings?
- Do I demonstrate my willingness to learn through my words and actions?
- Am I aware of the needs, public positions and opinions of the youth I represent?
- Do I have the motivation, ability and knowledge to correspond with my community and the group(s) I represent about my governance activities?
- Do I have the motivation, ability and knowledge to take leadership roles on committees and/or the board when possible?
- Am I willing to ask questions that give me insight and understanding of the board's activities?
- When receiving feedback, information and answers to questions, I recognize the expertise and experience of the adults on my board?
- Am I willing to give my time and attention to all board issues rather than just the ones that affect me and those I represent?
- Do the adult members of the board hold any stereotypes about young people?
- Do I hold any stereotypes about adult board members?
- Have the adult board members received training that allows them to consider their assumptions about "kids these days?"
- Does the board show its appreciation for the good work that you are doing and have done?
- Am I mentoring other potential student representatives who may replace me?

LADDER OF YOUTH REPRESENTATION ON BOARDS: ¹



Youth/Adult Shared Decisions

This is the goal. The board is comfortable with the competence and ideas of the youth representative and grants them full voting rights. The entire board works together, equally implementing youth or adult ideas.

Youth-Initiated Ideas This board is progressing and allowing the youth to get an idea and then act upon it. The board sees it as the “youth thing” which is different from the “adult thing.” And, although the adults provide assistance, guidance, and support – it remains the “kid’s thing.”

Consulted and/or Assigned The youth has a role on the board and is kept informed on all the issues. But the youth is treated as a “kid” and not a member. In the consulted role, at least one board member asks the youth for his/her opinion. Basically on this rung, adults propose and the youth provide reactions, revisions, and refinements.

Tokenism The board wants youth representation and puts the youth in the spotlight a great deal, but does not have the time, skills, or culture to allow the youth to be an active participant in the decision making process. This is when youth are given a role or responsibility, but they have little power, either because they are outnumbered, or because, the roles they have been given have very little influence.

Decoration While more than a gimmick – your board feels the need to have youth representation, but does not have any desire to get anything more than insignificant input from the youth. Youth are not allowed to have a meaningful role.

Manipulation The most base level – where your board simply wants to be a part of the youth representation movement. This occurs when the board’s image benefits by having youth representation, but the youth is only there to “rubber stamp” the actions of the board.

¹ Adapted from “Benefits of Youth Partnerships” by the Seven Circles Coalition Youth Adult Partnerships Project in Sitka, Alaska, from Hart’s Ladder of Young People’s Participation.

FOR YOUTH BOARD MEMBERS:

The essence of local decision making is based upon civility, personal relationships and respect. Once the adults on the board reach out to the youth, it is up to us (the youth) to reach back – and really stretch in order to make the connection. Here are a few things for us to consider when being selected to be on a board:

1. **Have confidence in yourself.** By whatever means, you have been selected, appointed or voted onto the board, you belong there. Sure, it will take you a few months to get comfortable in your position, just listen, watch, ask questions and learn.
2. **Find a guide.** There is an old saying that you can't be a guide unless you are on the journey, so find a guide, coach, or mentor with whom you feel comfortable, someone who has experience with the board and who is willing to learn alongside you.
3. **Be a leader.** You are now in a leadership role – use this role to advance the fact that youth are capable, intelligent and mature. People are watching you and you are now seen as an example of all youth. This does not mean that you have to be all nervous and change your whole personality. It does mean that you will be held to a higher standard than some of the youth who are not at the table.
4. **Stay interested and curious.** Sometimes the issues that a board faces are not that interesting – to anyone. However, the work of a board is to do all the work it is responsible for and it is up to you to take responsibility for your learning and contribution. If you look bored, the adults will have a difficult time taking you seriously.
5. **Show up.** If you want the board to invest in you, take the time to invest in the organization and board with your time. Attend all meetings, confirm the dates, times and locations. Mark them in your calendar.
6. **Use the power you have.** Speak up, if you feel like you have some ideas about how to improve the flow of the meeting, the dialogue between members and the agenda topics. Use your politeness skills to not offend members and they will listen. It is also important to know that you are one of many people, don't expect the board to do everything you say. To be treated like an equal means that your ideas are considered to be as valuable as all the others, not more so.
7. **Do something.** Of course you are busy. School, extracurricular activities, work, family obligations, other service commitments – your schedule is packed. However, if you want to be a leader, you will have to take on some projects and deliver what you promise through action. Get on a working subcommittee, take on a project, do some in-depth investigation of an issue or two for the board. The bottom line is that you get respect by making contributions through action.
8. **If you have a question, it is likely that someone else has a similar one.** Becoming a decision maker is complex. Learning leaders ask questions. Asking questions gets it out of the negative and sets a positive tone. So, feel free to ask questions. In case you have so many questions that you would actually slow the meetings down to a crawl, jot your questions on a note pad and get your answers during the breaks. The board members will expect you to learn the lingo –so make certain that you are learning as you go. Study their language, use their language and soon it will become second nature for you as well.

RESOURCES:

Youth/Adult Partnerships

Provides information and consultation on getting youth and adults to work together in meaningful ways in Southeast Alaska.

Seven Circles Coalition, SEARHC

Sitka, AK 99835

(907) 966-8753

National Center for Nonprofit Boards

Dedicated to increasing the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations by strengthening their boards of directors.

1828 L Street, NW, Suite 900

Washington, DC 20036-5104

(800) 883-6262

<http://www.ncnb.org>

The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development

Provides resources and training to organizations and communities to increase youth-adult partnerships in creating a just and equitable society.

6930 Carroll Avenue

Suite 502

Takoma Park, MD 20912

(301) 270-1700

<http://www.theinnovationcenter.org>

Community Partnerships With Youth, Inc

Offers a training curriculum and provides training to young people about their role as trustee, or as partners in the governance process.

6744 Falcon Ridge Court

Indianapolis, IN 46804

(317) 875-5756

<http://www.cpyinc.org>

Youth on Board

Provides consultation, and publications to involve young people in decision making.

58 Day Street PO Box 440322

Somerville, MA 02144

(617) 623-9900 x 1242

<http://www.youthonboard.org>

Resiliency, Youth Development Program

Division of Behavioral Health

3601 C Street, Suite 934

Anchorage, Alaska 99524

(907) 269-3425

<http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dbh/prevention/programs/resiliency/default.htm>

A printable version of this publication may be downloaded from the Association of Alaska School Boards web site at http://www.aasb.org/publications/untapped_resource.pdf.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hans Bernard was the longest serving youth representative to a school board in America. His three consecutive one-year terms on the Anchorage School Board is unprecedented. Hans has presented at three National School Boards Association conferences and spoken to several Association of Alaska School Boards statewide audiences. Hans was a full voting member and subcommittee chair of Alaska's state Adolescent Health Advisory Committee for three years. Hans graduated from Chugiak High School, Eagle River in 2001 and from Willamette University Salem, Oregon in 2005, with a degree in Political Science. From 2003-2005, Hans served as a legislative aide to the majority leader of the Oregon State Senate.

Photo attribution: National Wildlife Foundation, Alaska Youth Environmental Action Advisory Board develops their strategic plan.



Association of Alaska School Boards
1111 West 9th Street
Juneau, Alaska 99801
Phone: (907) 586-1083
Fax: (907) 586-2995
Website: <http://www.aasb.org>



Division of Behavioral Health
3601 C Street, Suite 934
Anchorage, Alaska 99524
Phone: (907) 269-3425
Fax: (907) 269-3786
Website: <http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/>



Initiative for Community Engagement

Alaska Initiative for Community Engagement
1111 West 9th Street
Juneau, Alaska 99801
Phone: (907) 586-1486
Fax: (907) 586-1450
Website: <http://www.alaskaice.org>

Contact AASB with any questions or comments.