



# Youth

YOUTH ON BOARD  
ELLSWORTH COUNTY

**EC** ELLSWORTH  
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Youth on Board Guide:  
Provided by Ellsworth County Economic Development

# WHY HAVE YOUTH ON YOUR BOARD?



Building our community means building our civic engagement muscle, and expanding the skills and capacities of those resources and assets within our community.

Youth on Board is an initiative created to open those doors to the youth in our community, and to allow them to engage, serve, vote, influence, and affect change. Youth representation on boards increases the relevance, energy, and perspective, and give youth an opportunity to advocate and grow their sense of connection to the community. It often can result in increased commitment to the board from current board members, who are more aware of their responsibility to model ideal board behaviors and processes. The synergy created from adults and youth working together can result in better programs and services, and more dedication to the mission and objectives. It also breaks down the barriers of intimidation and increases possible future civic engagement.

## ASSESSING YOUR READINESS

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

- Be flexible with meetings times and locations in order to accommodate school schedules
- Adjust their culture from doing things to and for youth, to working with youth
- Relax their expectations about efficiency while new members are becoming comfortable with the culture of the board and the use of Robert's Rules of Order
- Have clear conversations about the mission of the organization and how a youth can be supported in serving on the board
- Have a plan for onboarding the new youth board member(s), which may include having an adult mentor

The checklist on the next page shall be used as a guide for direction and clarification.

# YOUTH LEADERSHIP RESOURCE CHECKLIST



## DECISION MAKING

- ☐ We have identified the ways young people can be involved in our decision-making process.
- ☐ We know which decisions we want young people to be involved in.
- ☐ We have considered how we will make decisions so they are empowering to young people on our board.

## KNOWING WHY

- ☐ We know how youth involvement can benefit youth, adults, and our organization.
- ☐ We have a clear vision, goals, and objectives for youth involvement on our board.

## ASSESS YOUR BOARD

- ☐ We know how to build support for youth involvement with our board.
- ☐ Everyone is committed to successful youth involvement.
- ☐ Our board has the time and resources to make a commitment to effective youth engagement.

## ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS

- ☐ There are board policies or bylaws that support youth involvement in decision-making, either in an advisory capacity or a voting capacity.
- ☐ Terms of office and voting rights have been created for youth.
- ☐ We are willing to adjust our culture to make meetings more friendly to youth.

## LEGAL

- ☐ My board has reviewed state law, bylaws, and policies and has the structure in place to allow for youth to serve.
- ☐ My board is prepared to onboard the youth representative to any governance practices, such as Robert's Rules, Confidentiality Practices, Kansas Open Records Acts, and any internal policies that should be communicated.



# PREPARING YOUR BOARD FOR YOUTH



Once your board has decided it is willing to make accommodations for youth representatives, some of the following actions might be appropriate for your board to take:

- Identify the resources and ways you will recruit youth and alert them to the opportunity
- Have a vision for what the board could achieve or wishes to achieve with youth representation
- Help youth assess their own skills and abilities and motivations for joining your board
- Set meetings at times that will be convenient for youth
- Reduce the use of industry specific 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
- Set a clear role for the youth board member, including time to speak at board meetings

## BOARD BEST PRACTICES

- **RESPECT.** A culture of respect provides all participants with opportunities to speak and learn from each other. This is particularly important for youth to see and understand, and builds up their comfort to ask questions, make mistakes or ask for changes to meet their needs.
- **POSITIVE COMMUNICATION.** Youth are best heard when adults step back and listen to understand. Honest, positive, and on-going communication is needed for youth to come forward and explain their perspectives and ideas for board direction and decisions.
- **INVESTMENT.** Young people need access to ongoing information, training and support to be successful as full board members. Youth must be able to develop their own skills and practice them often to have the confidence to act and speak up in adult situations. Investing in youth on your board takes time and resources, but the results are worth it for the entire board.
- **MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT.** Youth roles and board responsibilities should be an integral part of the way the board functions.

# CREATING YOUTH POSITIONS



Once your board has agreed to have youth representation, a few logistics must be resolved. Of course, each individual board will take its culture into account when determining the extent of the youth's role and involvement. Here are a few 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, create a mechanism for youth input to be obtained and heard.
- If your board is not governed by state or federal statute and is control of its own bylaws, you can most likely invite 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 bylaws, board structure, and policies 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 easier for youth to participate. Youth shall not be expected to speak for ALL youth, but rather to give their perspective on issues.

## CONSIDERATIONS

- Is it legally allowable to have youth members chosen the same way as adult members? If this is possible, it is probably best to be consistent in the way all members are selected.
- Will the youth be serving a constituency? If so, should that group select your new member?
- If you are a voting board, is it necessary to select one or two youth members in order to have an odd number of members for voting?
- If your board deals with liability issues, confidentiality, conflict of interest, contracts, or discipline issues, have you considered the appropriate level of youth involvement? Are there portions of meetings that youth should be excused from due to sensitivity?

# RECRUITING



- Create an application and ask questions that pertain to your board's issues.
- Designate a contact person within your organization or a panel to review applications.
- Consider whether an interview is necessary.
- Make sure the process is open enough to attract a diverse group of qualified candidates.
- Create a description of the roles, responsibilities, key commitments, and timing so youth can make an informed decision if this is something that matches their interest, schedules, etc.
- Promote the benefits of involvement.
- Ask for references.
- Search for evidence of positive contributions each applicant would make to the organization.

# EDUCATING YOUTH MEMBERS

- Familiarize new board members with your mission and services by giving them your website, mailing list, and marketing materials.
- Provide youth members with an "elevator speech" so they can advocate for the organization.
- Give them a personal tour of the facility.
- Provide all new board members with the history of the board, a list of all board members and their contact information, previous minutes, mission statement, policies, and bylaws.
- Be patient. The learning curve will be vertical.
- Get to know your youth members by engaging in board leadership activities and conversation.
- If there is appropriate meeting attire, be open and clear about those expectations.
- Identify a board member who can serve as a mentor. The mentor should meet with the new member before their first meeting and go over issues such as dress code, policies, expectations, what an agenda looks like, and the overall culture of a board meeting. Take the intimidation factor OUT of the board meetings.

# NEW YOUTH BOARD MEMBER CHECKLIST



- ☐ Am I aware of my job description and what the board expects of me?
- ☐ Am I aware of the roles this board plays?
- ☐ Has the board communicated the specific objectives they have for me as a youth representative?
- ☐ Do I have a mentor on the board?
- ☐ Do I have the abilities and knowledge necessary to make ongoing contributions to the board?
- ☐ Am I aware of the written and unwritten agenda and flow of the board's meetings?
- ☐ Am I willing to learn through open and positive conversations about my performance?
- ☐ Am I aware of the needs, public positions, and mission/values of the organization?
- ☐ Do I have the abilities and knowledge to take leadership roles on committees and/or the board?
- ☐ Am I willing to reflect on what I want to get out of this experience and am willing to share it?
- ☐ Am I willing to ask questions to give me a better understanding of board activities?
- ☐ Am I willing to give my time and attention to all board issues?

- Have confidence in yourself. It will take a few months to get comfortable in your position. In the meantime, just listen, watch, ask questions and learn.
- Find a guide or mentor, a trusted resource.
- Be a leader. You are in a leadership role – use this to advance your advocacy, and to demonstrate that youth are capable, intelligent, and mature.
- Stay interested and curious.
- Show up consistently and on time.
- Use the power you have. Speak up if you have ideas.
- Do something. You are busy and that is understood. You will gain respect by making contributions through action, even in small ways.
- Ask questions.
- Think about what you want to get out of the experience, and don't be afraid to articulate those desires.