



## Fostering Youth Voice

### A simple guide with tips and examples

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Prioritizing and including youth in community dialogues is about valuing and recognizing the immeasurable benefits youth offer to our whole community, adding a fresh and creative perspective to any process or decisions to be made. The following are tips on being an ally with youth, connecting with youth leadership, and tips on organizing a youth voice table at your community dialogue or candidate's night.

#### **Tips from Youth on Being a Youth Ally**

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When fostering youth voice, the key role of adults is to support and assist young people. When young people are given safe space and encouragement, they will thrive. The following are guidelines that have *come from young people* to help adults be helpful allies and to keep efforts youth driven.

- Have fun! You can get business done and have fun at the same time. Use interactive fun activities to get the group to get to know each other more.
- Value young people's ideas. They are the experts in their own experiences! Step back so they can step up and lead.
- Be consistent and committed. Things go well when they are based on caring, committed relationships. Remind young people they are important and that they add a lot to the group/efforts. Even when they don't show up, keep trying and let them know you value them.
- Your effort as a Youth Ally is extremely valuable. Remember that important things are happening, even if you aren't always able to see them.

#### **Connecting with Youth Leadership**

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Involving youth in a meaningful and fun way empowers youth and reminds them how inherently smart and powerful they are. Adult partners can create opportunities to support youth as they explore and clarify their own opinions on a path to independence.

- Partner with a student leadership group at your local youth center or high school or connect with a youth organizer or teacher to explore how to best connect to students.
- Host where the young people want to meet.
- Make meeting times as regular as possible so there won't be confusion about when you're getting together.
- Include Food! Ask members which snacks they would like.



- Open each meeting with an energizer or get to know you game and introductions.
- Group agreements. Creating them together with the group goes a long way. If short on time, come with a few examples and build consensus. Review at the start of each meeting.
- Follow their lead! Invite and ask youth to facilitate parts of the meeting. If you are committed to the group for longer term, the consistency will lend more opportunities for youth to fully organize agendas and facilitate the whole meeting.
- Take the last 10-15 minutes at the end of a meeting to close. Give each person a chance to briefly share what worked well and what didn't. Give appreciations and feedback to the group and to individuals.
- Enjoy! There is much inspiration and joy in working with youth, with much to learn.

## **Supporting a Youth Voice Table at Candidates Night**

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If you are looking to host a Youth Voice table at Candidates Night, there might be some initial resistance since youth are not yet able to vote. These are a few helpful insights to offer candidates and community members in exploring the benefits:

- As communities value youth and want them to be safe and prosper, this offers the opportunity to empower their voice and influence decisions made that affect them, their families, and their community.
- Youth offer a fresh perspective. They ask important, creative, and challenging questions.
- Including youth is a way to better engage and influence parents, who do vote.
- Research suggests the more youth are empowered to engage in their home community, the more likely it is that they will choose to live in that community.
- Youth participation increases their understanding of the public process, preparing them to be active citizens, vote, and maybe even run for office!

## **Case Example in Pittsfield, NH**

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Members of the Youth Organizing & Action Committee of Pittsfield Listens (change to PYViiT?) had a goal to learn more about local government. They wanted to explore how they could better collaborate with local decision makers to effectively make positive change in their community. They decided to host a series with local elected officials. Youth leaders connected with teachers in Social Studies, English, and Biology at their school to see if they could partner with them to host an event. They then reached out to the chairmen of the School Board and Board of Selectmen to invite them to come for an hour during the school day. Elected leaders were invited to share their own leadership story and experiences, how the boards work, and what keeps them inspired to be involved.

The youth leaders organized the schedule for the series and came up with an agenda that included a creative way for each person to introduce themselves, an activity to get people talking in pairs, and a way to harvest questions from students. In addition, members organized the first ever Youth



Voice table at the Pittsfield Meet the Candidates Night, to meet candidates running for local office and share their priorities for Pittsfield. They met 2-3 times in the planning process with a focus on what would lend to an effective youth table. They also planned for marketing- how to get the word out to other youth, i.e., school morning announcements, flyers, social media, and tips on how to talk with friends about the event.

Having a table reserved only for teenagers and an adult ally facilitator were two key elements they decided to include to help make space for their voice and perspectives, as well as ideas for snacks. They decided to volunteer to set and clean up for the event- this helped them feel more ownership of the event and the space, lending to feeling more comfortable. Their ideas were listened to about the scrumptious snacks to share. Throughout the evening, the adult ally would join the table just to listen and be present for support.

One candidate reflected on their experience, saying,

*"At first, I walked in (to Candidates Night) and thought 'what am I doing with all these high school students?' I have to tell you... I had more opportunities to reflect on comments from students throughout the next day at the polls to campaign, I got as much out of the young people present if not more. It was really an uplifting experience!"*