



NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES
Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

*What Makes Youth Civic Engagement Authentic: Listening to the Perspectives of Youth and
Municipal Leaders*
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Sumbul Siddiqui, former member, Cambridge Kids' Council, Cambridge, Mass.

ANDREWS: Good morning and good afternoon to everyone. Welcome to the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families monthly audioconference call. Today's topic is on youth civic engagement: "What Makes Youth Civic Engagement Authentic? Listening to the Perspectives of Youth and Municipal Leaders."

The National League of Cities, in October of 2008, launched a new initiative through the support of the Surdna Foundation that sought to develop a framework to help cities increase meaningful opportunities for youth to influence public policy and planning, and to assist decision makers in crafting effective policies in building the next generation – cultivating the next generation of engaged and productive citizens. Through the yearlong initiative, the Institute has been focused on learning from former youth leaders within local government as well as senior municipal staff that are currently engaging young people, innovative leaders in various communities engaging youth, and as well as those within academic and other national organizations.

This has been an opportunity for the National League of Cities to uniquely partner with the City of Hampton, where we've been working closely with Cindy Carlson – who is the director for the Coalition for Youth, a city agency within the City of Hampton – to learn from Cindy's experience – the work that Cindy's been able to do over the last 20 years on youth engagement within the City of Hampton – but also being a national example of effective youth civic engagement within local government. And through that partnership, the National League

of Cities has also had an opportunity to work on developing a framework that allows us to have a better sense of what sustainable systems look like for meaningful opportunities for young people.

So at this point, I'd like to introduce Cindy and have Cindy share with you some of the initial thinking that we've been able to pull together through the work, and then I'd like to really just open it up into a discussion. Cindy will be fairly brief in just giving you some--a basic framework. And then, we'll have Councilmember Larry Campbell from the City of Olathe, Kansas and Sumbul Siddiqui. Did I say that correctly, Sumbul?

SIDDIQUI: Yes.

ANDREWS: Who is a former member of the Cambridge Kids Council in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And we're hoping to have a good discussion on what authentic youth civic engagement means. And we'll really go from there and open it up for you guys in the audience to begin engaging us in a discussion. So, at this point, Cindy, can you help us set up the discussion?

CARLSON: I'd be happy to, Leon. Thank you and welcome and hello to everybody across the country. It's just so exciting to think that so many people are excited about engaging young people in municipal government, and to think about all of you in these towns and cities across the country of varying sizes doing a lot of exciting things for young people. So welcome to everybody. And thanks, Leon, for introducing me.

I'll just say a couple of words about our project we've been involved in. It's been a very interesting process. We started out by interviewing people who are experienced in conducting youth engagement activities at the local level. We've talked to young people, elected officials, academics, folks from all over the country inside and also partners of local government. And we've seen a lot of consistent themes coming out of these discussions. We've seen some differences, some varying ideas. But, I think that there are some common things that we can distill, I guess I'd say, out of all the conversations we've had with folks around the country. And – well, of course, the first job was to talk about what does authentic youth civic engagement mean? And we were really trying to – we used that word intentionally because we wanted to make sure that we were talking about youth engagement that was really meaningful to young people, that put them in partnership with adults, that had them working on issues that were relevant to them and engaged in opportunities where they could really make a difference. You know, things that really see young people as valuable participants in the work of local government. And so, we kind of talked around a lot of those things to help put that together into a definition.

And then, the other thing to kind of share with you real quickly is the idea of a framework, the idea that there are certain things that are common to youth engagement that's successful across the country, and we really narrowed that down to three things. So, what we would say is there are three elements to youth engagement. One of them was the setting, and what we meant by that was that sort of the civic environment of the community that is conducive to citizen engagement in general, but also specifically to seeing young people as part of the community. So the setting is really the whole environment where youth engagement can happen. And what we would look at here, kind of a question that we could ask ourselves or something to explore, would be do the elected officials and the community leaders believe that young people

can help local government, and do they promote that belief and act on it? So that's the whole area of the setting, so that was one of the elements of youth engagement.

The second one was the support. So we've got the setting, and then we've got the support. And the support part is a network of adult allies. And I also would include older young people, and you'll hear from Sumbul in a minute who is probably an excellent example of this. But, a network of adult allies who can help and prepare and support young people to participate. So in terms of support, when we're looking at is the youth engagement authentic in the community, we would be looking at are there adults in and outside of local government who are willing and able to work in partnership with youth, and really to help them build bridges between them and the adult world? That's really a big role of the adult allies.

So we've got the setting and the support, and then the third element we looked at was the structure. And what we meant by that was some sort of system of opportunities designed to get the most youth involved in the most meaningful ways. And what we were looking at here is whether there is a broad range of opportunities available and accessible. Are a broad diversity of youth involved, and can they have real impact on real issues? So that was kind of what we put together for the framework – the setting, the support, and the structure – and all of those things together is what we're saying will really make authentic youth civic engagement. So does that do it? Does that kind of summarize it enough, Leon? Or, should I say other things?

ANDREWS: That's great. No, that's perfect. Thank you for pulling it together and really setting up the discussion around the setting the support, and the structure.

CARLSON: Okay. Yeah. And, one other thing, I guess, to say, Leon, is our friend Barry Checkoway at the University of Michigan, I think his little phrase about this is the most kind of poignant one for me, his definition of authentic youth civic engagement. He says it's that youth and adults are “colleagues in a common cause.”

ANDREWS: Yeah.

CARLSON: I really like that. It just kind of sums up all of those things we were just saying.

ANDREWS: Yeah. It's a phrase that I've been using as well, Cindy. I think it really does.

CARLSON: Are you taking credit for it?

ANDREWS: We tend to give him credit for that phrase. We definitely give Barry credit.

CARLSON: Yeah. Me, too, I know.

ANDREWS: But so, we have an elected official, Councilmember Larry Campbell from Olathe, Kansas. We have a young adult, a former member of the Cambridge Kids Council in the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Sumbul Suddiqui. We have Cindy Carlson, who is wearing two hats, and so, from time to time I'll call on her to wear her local city hat to share the Hampton story and her perspective on her role that she plays within local government as director of the Coalition of Youth within Hampton and what Hampton's been able to do. But, also she's been working with

us at the National League of Cities on this initiative, and really understanding the broader framework for cities.

But, I want to turn it over to our city councilmember, our elected official, and just have you give us your perspective, Larry, on what, when you hear the term authentic youth civic engagement in local government, and the work that's been happening in Olathe, what does that mean to you? Could you define it from your perspective as an elected official in Olathe, Kansas?

CAMPBELL: Yes. I think a good way, maybe, for me to answer that question is to tie into the three results of the project, the setting, the support, the structure.

ANDREWS: Great.

CAMPBELL: Meaningful to us was to allow the students – our programs here are actually student-driven, and they started in Olathe, 1997 was one program, or 1998. So they're student-driven and they're sustainable. And authentic was that, that they were student-driven and that they produced something that we could actually use. That, in other words, that they were involved, but their product was a contribution. And the reason for that was, as you said earlier, it was important to us. It wasn't just something, you know, we wanted to start to get the newspaper headlines. We really needed our students to be involved. So authentic was student-driven involvement as broadly as we could possible get at the time, and to make it to where we really used and cherished their input.

ANDREWS: Yeah. So, I mean, I heard the definitely student-led, sustainable, and useful, right? Something that would have, something that could be used by the city.

CAMPBELL: Yes.

ANDREWS: Sumbul, from your perspective, do you have a different way of looking at it, or is it--you know, what's your--how would you define authentic youth civic engagement?

SIDDIQUI: Especially for me – I think I definitely agree with everything that's been said. What I'd, you know, love to add is everything that – what for me, youth civic engagement is about is voice, is about getting the voice of youth, of those students and members of the community who, you know, have felt that they were never included, that they didn't – maybe no one kind of cared about what they thought. So for me, authentic youth civic engagement will incorporate these voices in the ways that have been said: student-driven, something sustainable for the community, how they can see, you know, "Look, I'm actually doing something in partnership with adults."

And what Cindy had said, definitely support is key to making this happen. Youth need to know that there are supporters they can work with. Oftentimes, you'll have adults--you know, I've had experiences with adults who, you know, are skeptical, who are like, "Can, you know, you really make a difference? Can they be involved?" And luckily, there are many adult supporters who really are committed to watching youth, you know, incorporate, to make their voice known. So for me, that has been really powerful in civic engagement, seeing these things realized.

ANDREWS: I'm curious, when we have this discussion, if there is a way for us to be concrete for our audience as we try to discuss youth civic engagement, and this just may be for everyone. You know, so when you have some, when I have some discussions with city officials, the question of youth civic engagement can tend to be very focused on a specific action or opportunity for young people, whether it's youth councils or a youth summit, or something along those lines. And I'm wondering for those on the call here, for Larry and for Sumbul and even Cindy, if you wanted to weigh in, too – when you think about, Larry, youth civic engagement, you know, within Olathe, does it mean specific things to you in terms of, you know, specific roles that the local government can create for young people that are defined? You know, Cindy used the word structures? Does that come to mind for you when you think about that?

CAMPBELL: Yes. There are – I'm trying to understand maybe how to answer. There are three specific programs that have been successful here, but I don't want to mention those. I was just being specific. I really liked what was said earlier. I will tell you what those three specific ones are, but they're all--they all give the voice. I think that was a good way of saying it. They all give a voice. It wasn't just, "Here, we need you to fill this out and give us your thoughts," and we're done.

One of our programs was a teen council that started in 1998. And the teen council, we sort of look at it this way – it's a branch of government – and the teen council was our executive branch, in a sense. Off of that, or about the same time, was a youth congress. We actually ran a youth congress starting in 1999, and there are about 300 involved with that from each of our schools – our higher schools, our junior highs and high schools – and that's sort of what we call our legislative. And then, there's a youth court, a judicial branch. And we have a youth court where 80 to 150 students, I think, were involved last year or currently, and they actually have first offenders go to this youth court. And, you know, certain things that they've done, they can go to youth court and bypass district court. And these students run these deals.

Now, like you said earlier, it takes real partnerships to support something like that. You have to have commitment and partnerships. But, once the event is occurring, it is student-driven. And we really, like I said earlier, value what youth congress – they have resolutions. I've got a list of resolutions that they've passed over the years, and I can address that later but, it's meaningful. They run it, and it's not just specific – to answer your question, it goes back to what was said earlier. In these specific ways, the global answer is they are a voice in our community, and we value that.

ANDREWS: And Sumbul, do you have, for you, when you think about youth civic engagement in local government, do you have specific activities or structures that you think are important?

SIDDIQUI: Sure. Just off the top of my head, a prime example I can think of is – so the Cambridge Kids Council's Youth Involvement subcommittee is the subcommittee of the Cambridge Kids' Council, which is actually a board, you know, dedicated to improving quality of life for Cambridge's children, youth, and their families. And so, you know, it used to be a board of adults and was chaired by the mayor. And so, one of the initiatives the subcommittee said was that, you know, if these decisions about policy, about everything, are being made by adults, it's important that we get youth themselves on the council.

So, we ran, you know, we did this entire initiative to get three voting members who are youth to be on the board with adults. And so, that was more, you know, just kind of a

direct way that youth would be working with adults, and youth were representing Cambridge in that way, to get that voice in there that was not in there, and essentially, you know, that's what kind of happens. There are all these decisions being made and youth aren't being asked. So that was kind of like one of the main ways I can think of. We really wanted youth to be involved.

ANDREWS: Yeah. That's great. It's great. Cindy, did you want to put on your Hampton hat for a moment and respond?

CARLSON: Well, first I'll put on my big picture hat and say that I really liked the way Councilmember Campbell framed this, and I'm really interested in all the different structures that people are coming up with across the country. And this is a very interesting one that you pose about the executive and the legislative and the judicial – that's kind of a nice way to frame it. I think as long as there's any kind of structure that we can look at that helps us think through our youth engagement strategy so they're not just random or one-time, that makes them a lot more authentic. It makes them institutionalized in the community. And I really would applaud that.

The one that we use here is we kind of imagine a kind of a triangle approach to it. And we see the base as the kind of initial maybe more service-oriented or project-oriented opportunities that young people can have with local government, such as participating in a public works sponsored cleanup or something like that. You know something that's very one-time maybe or just an initial exposure to things that happen here in City Hall or out in the neighborhoods. And then, we see kind of another layer of that being the input and consultation opportunities that we have, and I'll give an example. Right after this call, I'm leaving to go to a focus group of young people who are going to be weighing in on the city's vision statement. We haven't redone our vision statement since the '80s, and there's focus groups going on all around the community. Well, there's a youth focus group that's happening. It may be a very short-term project for these young people, but they are being asked their opinion and they're being helped to understand that they are not just representing themselves, but they're representing other young people in their schools and neighborhoods.

And then, we also see kind of a third layer of opportunities in local government that are the shared leadership opportunities where young people are really kind of working shoulder to shoulder with the adults and sharing the accountability on projects and taking leadership roles, and that would be things like our teens who work in the planning department and our Youth Commission Grant program and those kind of things. So that's sort of the way we frame it, that we try to look at as many opportunities as possible for as diverse a group of young people, as long as they have some kind of voice in the government.

ANDREWS: Yeah. So, service is at the bottom, consulting in the middle of the pyramid, and shared leadership at the top of the pyramid, right?

CARLSON: Yeah, and we try not to, we're not equating any value to the layers. But, it's more like the number of opportunities and the number of young people who can be involved.

ANDREWS: Right.

CARLSON: There aren't as many of the shared leadership opportunities, but they also have the opportunity to have probably the most direct impact on policy.

ANDREWS: Sure. Sure. And Larry, in Olathe, the model that, as Cindy was referencing, really, you know, has an executive, legislative, and judicial. Intentional by the city when they did this?

CAMPBELL: Yes, and if I can go further with it just to enhance what she was saying, that's exactly what we have done here in Olathe. There is a spot, for example, on our parks and rec board for a youth. We, every 10 years or so, we do a comprehensive plan, and we're in the middle of that, and there are intentional participation, input, from youth on that comprehensive plan committee – 10 to 20 are involved with that. So yes, you get them involved by actually having them on the--making a spot for them to be involved in the board beyond just an event like a cleanup. They are part of strategizing.

ANDREWS: And Olathe's population, what's its population?

CAMPBELL: About 125,000. And for the listeners who don't know, to--if this helps compare to maybe the cities of those listening, we have a large youth population. And our city is one of the fastest growing cities and has been for many years. We're 125,000 now, but it's been growing rapidly. Twenty percent of our population is under 18 in Olathe.

CARLSON: Wow.

ANDREWS: Wow. And Cindy, Hampton's, just for the audience's purposes?

CARLSON: We're a city of 140,000 people. We're at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, part of the larger metropolitan area that includes Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Newport News, Chesapeake, Portsmouth, and other areas. So we're a very old city, and we are the size that we are and pretty much the population that we are and will be for some time.

ANDREWS: Right. Built out, essentially.

CARLSON: Right.

ANDREWS: Sumbul, do you know Cambridge's population?

SIDDIQUI: Yeah, it's just a little over – it's like 101,000, or a little more.

ANDREWS: A little over 100,000.

SIDDIQUI: Yeah.

ANDREWS: And so, part of the reason why I asked each of you the question was I'm wondering – because we'll have some listeners on our call that will be from larger cities, you know, maybe 500,000 plus, and some smaller towns – and I'm just wondering if you were to put your hat for a moment and think about the work that has happened in each of your cities to really build a system for engagement – right, that's what essentially you guys are talking about – could

you put your hat in and help them process what the challenge is of them being able to do this versus what you would imagine they would face in a larger city versus a smaller city? I know obviously the perspective here would be one where you don't understand individual politics of cities, but just, if you could, process or explain why you think this is doable in a larger city or not maybe, or even in a smaller city. Any one of you want to be able to take on that challenge and try to answer that question?

CAMPBELL: Well, Leon, I have a thought. I, as you were posturing that, I would say to you it – when our program started in 1997, one of our programs, Olathe, I believe, was around 85 to 90,000. So, just 10 years later, we're at 125,000. So, we were, my thought is this. I think the youth program would be valuable at any size, meaning I don't think you could be too small to have an emphasis into youth. I think it's valuable at any size. Now, what I was thinking, though, was I just, I don't know that I could appreciate what the challenges would be for a large city. That would be, you know, that'd be a whole different thing – 40, 50,000, 150,000 – and I know that – you know, I take that back. That has to do with the make up of the city and the partnerships and how well everyone communicates. But, I would suspect that it'd be challenging in a larger city – doable – but whole different challenges that we didn't probably face here on Olathe. We were smaller at about 85 at the time, and they've just, it's worked.

ANDREWS: Yeah. And to be more clear about the question, because we do know from an NLC perspective that this does work in larger cities. Boston has been really successful and San Francisco, and Philadelphia at some level. So, I guess, thinking about the model that you guys have in Olathe, the teen council, the congress, the youth court, I'm wondering, if that could – if you think about what it took to do that in Olathe, could it work in a larger city or in a smaller city?

CAMPBELL: Thank you. That does help me. From a systems approach or from a process approach, the model could be applied anywhere. I'm with you. I see differently. From a process and system approach, I would say it could work anywhere. One key element I would mention, it's – I don't know how hard to stress this – it would be instrumental to have your as one of your partners, it almost has to be the school district, or it's at least very helpful. It needs to be school district.

Our chamber here is also involved. We have in Olathe something called Leadership Olathe, and it is very successful, and key leaders from our key corporations all over the city go – and they pay dearly – to train for leadership. Well, again the Chamber has included positions for our youth on that Leadership Olathe program, which was an adult program, really. And so you've got to have good partnerships. But, the model would work. Yes, from a systems and a process approach, the model would work. But, your school district would be very valuable, to have them very much on board.

CARLSON: Leon, I was going to kind of echo that, too, that the common elements across all sizes of communities are schools, neighborhoods, and the business community, and then the faith and civic and social community. And all of those exist in all kinds of communities and all different sizes. And so, breaking it down or working with those entities can be the consistent thing across size.

ANDREWS: Yeah.

SIDDIQUI: I definitely agree. Luckily, you know, Cambridge – it only has one public high school and so, that made things much easier in that respect is we had the one public high school. I think what we could have done better was doing some outreach to sort of the private high schools that were around, because I do feel that sometimes, you know, that was overlooked because there's a lot of just focus on the – you know, you had the one public high school and mostly everyone went there. And so, that was interesting. And I really agree, it's really important to know the neighborhoods, especially where – I mean, this is much more difficult for larger cities. But, it's definitely possible to – there's going to be different kind of groups working in the city. So to kind of network and bring those youth groups together can be challenging, but I think it can provide for much more opportunity.

ANDREWS: Right. I'm going to pause for a moment here and have Nicky, our operator, come in, and I think there are some directions for those that may want to chime in by phone to ask questions. Nicky?

OPERATOR: At this time, if you would like to ask a question, please press star, one on your telephone keypad to be placed into queue. Once again, please press star, then one on your telephone keypad to be placed into queue.

ANDREWS: Great. And for those that want to send questions in by e-mail, you can send it to karpman, K-A-R-P-M-A-N at nlc.org. That's karpman, K-A-R-P at nlc.org. So, we'll continue the discussion, guys, and I'll check in with Nicky in a little bit to see if she has any questions. And I'll be getting e-mails from Michael if folks are sending questions in by e-mail. Sounds good?

SIDDIQUI: Yes.

ANDREWS: Okay.

CARLSON: Leon, can I go ahead and ask a question?

ANDREWS: Please. Absolutely. Yeah.

CARLSON: Sumbul mentioned earlier the whole idea of giving young people a voice, even those who believed they didn't even have a voice. And I know that's a question that gets asked a lot to me, because we do engage a wide diversity of young people. And I think that's a real valid thing to talk about, is how do we make sure that this process is structured and open and barrier-free enough to have a lot of different kinds of young people involved in it, even those who normally would not get involved in this kind of thing.

ANDREWS: Yeah. So, are you posing the question to Sumbul or to Larry or to yourself?

CARLSON: Well either one, let's just talk about that.

ANDREWS: Yeah.

CARLSON: Sumbul, do you know what you guys did?

SIDDIQUI: Sure. Well, you know, it's always hard, you know – how do you really know who this is, which populations to reach? And who to go to, essentially, is the main issue. What happened in Cambridge was luckily, you know, there are already a lot of youth centers. There is youth work being done in different manners, either students going to do afterschool activities and so forth. So what we had done was, in terms of outreach strategy, going to these places as youth ourselves, to talk to these youth and just, you know, not really do surveys – but, at some point we did kind of survey the high school and survey "How would you, you know, want to get involved? What would you like to see?" And those types of kind of getting to know the interests and kind of just getting to know who is in the city, that approach. You know, I'm sure for larger cities that is much more difficult. And even for Cambridge, it was, doing that in like a kind of sustainable and organized way, you know, we faced challenges but, again, kind of utilizing youth who have kind of stepped forward and, you know, gotten involved to be messengers, to be getting other youths involved. So, I think that was a strategy that we definitely used in Cambridge, and youth still use it there to kind of get more youth involved, to have that kind of domino effect.

ANDREWS: And Larry, do you, how does the city address issues of diversity and diverse youth voice within local government?

CAMPBELL: Well, on the youth congress, for example, there is a set number of students that represent each school. And so, therefore we have a diversity, we have a wide diversity in our city, and you're going to have diversity just by the representation. Then, the application process, you know, they announce it well – the school districts do – announce you know, the opportunities. And if someone wants to be involved, they fill out an app. But, no, as far as I know, there's no one turned away. I mean, you fill out an application, but all can participate. And the 80 to 150 that have been estimated involved in our youth court, for example, that's a wide variety. And a lot of times, some of the students that are involved were ones that had to appear before youth court. And they don't – our recidivism is very good in that area. So, they – it works and they get involved. And then, like I said, on the youth congress, there's 300 or so involved in that and it is a wide diversity.

ANDREWS: Great. Let's check in with Nicky. Are--do we have anyone in the queue to ask questions for our panel?

OPERATOR: We have three participants in the queue at this time. Our first question will come from the line of Katie Tumbleson.

ANDREWS: Great. Hi, Katie.

TUMBLESON: Hi. Can you talk to us a little bit about how did you prepare the organizations and the governmental units in the community and the young people to be--you know, to be effective in the roles that you were placing them in? What was your, can you talk a

little bit about what training was necessary? How did you actively engage support from both young people going through that kind of a process and also the community?

ANDREWS: The training, preparation, and then think a little bit more about the structures – so, anyone want to take the question? Larry, you want to?

CARLSON: Well, that's –oh, go ahead, Larry.

ANDREWS: Or Cindy? Sounded, Cindy, like you were about to?

CAMPBELL: No. Please, Cindy, go ahead and then I'll follow up.

CARLSON: Well, I was just going to say it's a great question. And I think that I like that you said both the young people and the adults, because I think that it's not necessarily natural for us as adults to be in a relationship with young people more as partners as opposed to them being kind of the recipients of our services. And so, I think that takes some getting used to for adults. I've also found that adults are a little uncomfortable with the idea that they have to be trained in that, though. So we've done things more of just general meetings and having adults experience being with young people in a group, and then talking about some of the challenges and some of the things that we've learned. And if young people are going to sit on one of our boards – for instance the Parks and Rec Advisory Board as we mentioned, as Councilman Campbell mentioned – there's some training for the young person to understand what their role is on the board, but then there's also some training for the board members to understand what it's going to be like to have a young person in that role. So I think for us the training has been kind of commensurate with the level of responsibility. So if young people are going to be like in this focus group I mentioned tonight, we'll probably spend about 15 minutes at the beginning of it getting them oriented and hopefully assume that they can talk in a group. If they can't, then we may have to stop the process and do a little bit of training but we always set norms at the beginning. But, the amount of training for something like that isn't as much as, let's say, for our youth commission. We have a three-day boot camp for new members, and then we have a retreat, a two-day retreat, at the beginning of every year to get them prepared for their roles. So it really varies.

ANDREWS: Yeah.

CAMPBELL: If I could, then, I'll follow up.

ANDREWS: Sure.

CAMPBELL: That's a very, very good question because you've got to, you know, got to know how to implement this successfully. I'll start by saying we had no idea how far this would grow in 1997, so luckily it was smaller. So I would just encourage you to start out, and that first year, that first youth congress, there were 20, and now there's 300, and it'll keep growing, I feel – it's just very successful. So you asked how do you mentor them? One of the things – I'll mention several things. First off, for example, at youth congress – those are representatives from junior high and high school. However, we have our – and I could be wrong in this – we either have our

fifth and sixth graders or our sixth and seventh graders also. There are representatives who go and just, they have a mentor there that takes them around. They get to watch the process before they step into it in junior high. So there's mentoring.

The other way to maybe help with how you pull this thing off is you've got to have a commitment. Back when this thing was kicked off, the school district, I think – I'm pretty sure this is accurate – there's a full-time person on staff that runs this thing. And then, I remember we, as a city, dedicated staff time, valuable staff time, to make sure, to help with facilities, to help with communication, if there needed to be people there. There was a large involvement. You know, I'm remembering now some of those early ones, chamber members were there to help just make sure things went well, and city staff were and councilmembers were there. So the answer is maybe you wing it at first and you start small – that's kind of how we did in 1997 – but, then it grows. And youth court now, there's structure and you have adults that help provide that structure. But, once they get there, the success part of it is it's student-driven. So, training is – and then, I know the school has teambuilding training. They watch – we start them earlier and they watch, and then they grow. I think that's all that I would have to answer.

ANDREWS: Sumbul, did you want to respond?

SIDDIQUI: Yeah, sure. I know in the beginning what our committee had done was we had consultants come in to work with us who specifically had kind of worked with groups to, you know, do projects, do kind of long term – looking at the long term picture. And, you know, there's tools involved with that as was just mentioned, teambuilding activities, even just knowing more about government. In the beginning, you know, if you want to get involved with your city and get involved with the local level, it was really important to learn, you know, hey, who is the mayor, who are the councilors, who is who, because I think sometimes that – it's really important to know that. And even just how the system of government – Cambridge's system of government is very unique from the rest of the cities around the county. So knowing how things were done at that level, so we had the kind of activities was trainings to inform us of what was happening. So that's really important, especially in the beginning of everything starting. So your – the youth are trained with these tools just to know – and to just know that you'll keep learning as you're going, but these are some of the basic things to know – so that was definitely useful to me with the work we were doing.

ANDREWS: Great. One question just came in from the e-mail about our recruiting strategies. – and anyone can pick this question up, I think. So the question is really about opportunities for youth to be engaged, and kind of what have each of your cities done to publicize and market to get – you know, when you really look at the diversity question that we talked about earlier – to get the range of youth engaged. And the specific question is have schools been the main vehicle for that? Let's see. Who would – Larry, you want to pick that up first?

CAMPBELL: Sure.

ANDREWS: Yeah.

CAMPBELL: The vehicles to advertise for this and to get folks involved are twofold. Number one, the actual communication, or getting the communication out, is the school district. That's

where you know, with the school district. There's word of mouth, and then there are city and school publications and, of course, personal relationships. And then, once it grows, students want to – they know about, it so they want to get involved.

The second thing, though, is – beyond marketing – is you then build into the structure, for example, where – and you can tailor this to your ability, to your size of city – but, you would have, we then built in the structure where you'd have two representatives from each junior high or four from each high school. So you – at the beginning, it's word of mouth, and then, you, as you grow and need to adopt more detailed processes, you do that. And then, of course we used Web sites and Facebook to get the word out. Kids know about it.

ANDREWS: Yeah. And Sumbul?

SIDDIQUI: I definitely agree. I think that youth themselves, once this structure gets going, they know how to get the word out. They use, especially in the school district – I feel like the school district can be an ally to this work. Word of mouth, of course, it's very – for us, it was more – Cambridge has certain neighborhoods, so we know kind of the neighborhoods by name, and so for us, it was sometimes if there was a meeting going on or some group was meeting, we'd just go to these meetings and, you know, show up with flyers, show up with ways to get involved. It was very kind of grassroots-oriented to get that initial participation. And then, you know, it is word of mouth. It is kind of the publications, kind of even the local city hall letting parents know, letting families know. And so, that's how our approach was.

ANDREWS: And Cindy, any components different than what was mentioned already from Hampton?

CARLSON: The only two I would add to that, and those – everything that's been said are – it's all very effective. The only two I would add is that we actually ended up constructing what we call a youth booth in each of our four public high schools. And each school has taken it on in a different way, but generally it's sponsored by one of the clubs or organizations in the school. They got a grant from our youth commission to actually construct a little portable booth that can be put in the cafeteria and opened up during various times to advertise the various engagement activities that are going on around the city. And it's kind of a fun opportunity to do that, and a way of getting the word out.

And the other thing is there are many teachers who will offer extra credit for youth participation in various events. So for instance, when our youth commission has a public meeting, they might be trying to attract young people to come and to have input into the capital improvement plan or one of the other decisions that the city is facing. They'll go to the government teachers or some of the other folks in the school and ask them to offer extra credit and help to advertise to young people. We actually have had a number of young people who have ended up as youth commissioners who came the first time because they wanted to get credit for being there, and just found it to be a wonderful activity and ended up getting involved in it.

ANDREWS: Interesting.

SIDDIQUI: And also from – I meant to add we had – we were lucky enough to have stipends. The city, we petitioned to get stipends for the work that was being done. You know, not all the

years, but towards the end. So I mean, you kind of – sometimes youth don't – I don't know. There are a lot of activities out there that you can be involved in during high school. So it was kind of a way for youth to be involved more. So that was kind of – I don't know how many cities actually have stipends, but we were lucky enough to have that.

ANDREWS: Let's take a call, Nicky.

OPERATOR: Our next person on the line is Meda Okelo.

OKELO: Yeah, this is Meda Okelo from the city of East Palo Alto. I'm very, very impressed by, you know, some of the information that was being shared with all of us. I particularly like the whole idea of a youth congress. But my question is really not about that. My question is about – for all the presenters, number one how diverse, from a cultural perspective, are your communities? And in the communities where the school districts are intricately involved, does the school district have youth councils within their district or within their respective schools, so youth are actively participating in decision-making in those schools. And finally, parents are critical, because these are still under 18 folks. How have parents been involved in this whole, in these initiatives?

ANDREWS: So, the first question, let's make sure our panel understands. Your first question is about the diversity of youth, demographics of youth, within their cities?

OKELO: Yes.

ANDREWS: And the second is kind of their role, youth's voice within school districts.

OKELO: Yeah.

ANDREWS: And then, the role of parents.

OKELO: Yeah.

ANDREWS: Okay. Thank you. All right. Who wants to take – why don't we break up the questions among the panel. Who wants to go first about diversity? If we can quickly just hit the diversity?

CAMPBELL: I can do that quickly.

ANDREWS: Yeah.

CAMPBELL: This is Larry. I can tell you that I've – I know some data. We have 57 different languages in our schools. But, our actual diversity is – I think Olathe is about 11 percent Hispanic, 9 percent African American. So you know, everything's relative. I bet the speaker's probably has a much higher diversity, I'm just guessing. But, that is our diversity.

ANDREWS: Well, let's find out quickly. Hampton? Do you know, Cindy?

CARLSON: Yes, in our school division, 65 percent of the young people are youth of color, predominantly African American. But, we also have Hispanic, Indian, Middle Eastern, others – and many, many mixed race young people.

ANDREWS: Okay. And Sumbul, do you know Cambridge's statistics on youth?

SIDDIQUI: Yeah. It's about – like 68 or 65 percent white, about 12 percent African American, and then as far as Latino population, about 8 percent.

ANDREWS: Okay. So, pretty diverse, very diverse. Good. And so, then there's the question about youth voice within school district, then. Does anyone have a really good example of how that's worked within your school district?

CARLSON: Well, for us, the way we've put it together is that in all of the secondary schools, that includes the middle schools and the high schools, each principal has a principal's advisory group that's a part of our whole youth engagement structure. And it's co-facilitated by the principal and someone from our nonprofit youth development agency, somebody who has a really good sense of managing that group process and pulling out the group voice. And so, it's a nice balance between the school administration and kind of more of the community-based youth development. And those groups advise the principal on everything. They mostly tackle issues around climate in the schools and what's happening and what's working and what's the student perspective on things. But, they debate pretty pithy issues and understand that their role is to represent the student body in that way. And then, the superintendent has his or her own advisory group as well, made up of young people who are there to really advise on the policy level. And then, there is a youth representative on the school board. So, we try to kind of tackle it at each level.

ANDREWS: And let me ask our other two panelists, Larry and Sumbul, if you could give a perspective of involvement of parents, the other part of the question. Has either city been intentional about engaging parents?

CAMPBELL: This is Larry. You know, I don't have an answer for that. I apologize. I don't know how they're involved. The school district pretty much helps put together the participation. There are parents who help volunteer at some of these functions. But – and then I know that all of our schools, I believe all of our schools have site councils, have parents that are on site councils and there is involvement there. I don't have anything better for you on that one.

ANDREWS: And I think the caller is no longer on the phone to chime in, but I'm wondering if his intent was to suggest that parents are critical in sustaining youth engagement, sustaining their involvement – making sure that their parents are on board is important towards making sure youth remain engaged. And if that is, you guys may have had a different interpretation.

OPERATOR: Meda's line is live.

ANDREWS: It's live? Okay. Are you there?

OKELO: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I think my concern is, especially if your council or communities have a variety of cultures and children are growing up in an environment where they are doubtful of authority, it's the most important authority. So if they are not engaged in decision-making at home and here we are trying to get them engaged in decision-making at a community level, there's a dissonance there. You see, there's a disconnect there. And so, parents have to be engaged for efforts to be meaningful, because otherwise parents are going to undo everything that we are trying to do at the school or at the city level.

ANDREWS: I see. Yeah.

CARLSON: I think that is so important, what the gentleman was talking about. And I know from our experience, we've had situations where, in some of the groups in our community, education is such a valued thing among the parents that they were concerned that when their young person joined the youth commission and got really involved with all these things that their grades might be suffering a little bit, and so, that was – you know, it was really important for us to have that communication. And so, we have a meeting at the beginning of the year with all of the parents. Now, we have not had the problem of parents not being able to speak English and we haven't had the problem of not having the interpretation there. The young person usually was there to be able to interpret. But, we have a meeting at the beginning of the year with all the parents to talk about what the expectations are, and just to kind of give that affirmation to them that, you know, we want to set up the policies of how it's going to operate. But, the bottom line is they're the ones that are in charge and if they feel this needs to happen, then that's the thing that's going to happen. You know, we want to be able to have a voice in that, but that's how it's going to be.

ANDREWS: Um-hmm.

SIDDIQUI: I also think that, you know, you can kind of nurture that dissonance that you mentioned. I mean, I know that many working – there are a lot of parents who have to, you know, work two jobs, who, you know, aren't necessarily home all the time. Getting involved can definitely be a very meaningful way for youth to kind of have that support where they don't have at home.

CARLSON: Good point.

SIDDIQUI: And that's a really important point to consider, because I know that, you know, just in my case, my parents were always working. And like they were working for me, so I was like, "God, you know, I'm really lucky." So I had you know – I looked for other ways to – I just wanted to involve myself as much as possible. It was not like they didn't want to be home, but sometimes, you know – and that's the case for a lot of youth, I think, the parents are out working. They, you know, aren't home, and this was a really great way to get involved. And I think for some youth, they may just be like, "Oh, wow, you know, now I can kind of do something with my time. You know, I don't – I can kind of feel more involved instead of just like, oh, you know, waiting at home and not really doing much." So it can definitely be an opportunity in that light.

ANDREWS: Yeah. I see that we're coming to the tail end of the audioconference, but I wanted to check in with Nicky. Do we have anyone in the queue for calls?

OPERATOR: We have two more participants. We have Lizette Navarette.

ANDREWS: Let's quickly take her call, take her question. Hi, Lizette.

NAVARETTE: Hi. I'm Lizette Navarette calling from the City of Riverside in California. I just actually had a question. I've heard a couple of mentions about the youth summits. So I wanted to address two things. One was how that summit was framed to the topic, and the other one was how did you guys – what kind of follow up and action items did you guys take from that and how did you follow through and keep the youth-led activities in that aspect?

ANDREWS: Great. That's a good question. I think, Cindy, you guys--Hampton does a youth summit and good youth follow up, so that may be a good question for you to take on what you guys do in Hampton.

CARLSON: Well, ours are a little different, and I really appreciate the way you framed that about how you do the follow up, because there probably isn't anything that drives me crazier than when we bring on young people and ask their opinion and then don't get back with them about what we did with it or keep them engaged in what's happening.

We do probably about three of what we call public meetings a year where young people from all over the city are invited to come and give input into various issues. And it's always – we try to – it's always a serious issue like how should the city spend its money in the capital improvement plan. But, we also try to frame it in a way that's very engaging to the young people so that they will feel like they want to come. So you know, a question like, "If you had \$5 million, how would you spend it?" and that kind of thing. And so, once the young people are there, we also try to set up a situation where they are able to comment in small groups as well as in the large group, because you know, if there's a couple hundred kids in the room, they're not going to be comfortable standing up at a microphone, most of them. They want to be in small groups. So we do it that way, and then the information goes to the youth commission who processes that information. And then, if action that needs to be taken by another group, they'll share it with them, or if it's something they need to get back with the young people about, then they'll have post follow up meetings or do follow up activity.

ANDREWS: Great.

CARLSON: I know that was quick answer.

ANDREWS: Yeah. No, that's great. Thank you, Cindy. And let's – I want to make sure we take the last call if we could. Nicky, could you – is that person still in the queue?

OPERATOR: Yes, Nelson Rodriguez.

ANDREWS: Okay. Hi, Nelson.

RODRIGUEZ: Good afternoon. My name is Nelson Rodriguez, and I work in the Mayor's Office in Newark, New Jersey. And the question I had was – you know, you already answered the recruitment, how to recruit kids to be part of these youth programs or these youth initiatives – but, how do you select the leaders in them without trying to – with taking politics away from it? You know, working in government, sometimes politics creeps in when you're not looking at it, and I'm just wondering how do you take politics out of these youth initiatives and get students that actually work in the community, who do leadership in their own schools, but really aren't involved in the political process? Because sometimes you have to please everybody, and I'm just trying to find out if there's actually a way to please everybody without being political.

ANDREWS: Yeah. Well, Larry, do you have a perspective on that?

CAMPBELL: I can go very quickly.

ANDREWS: Okay, great.

CAMPBELL: The students select their own leaders. Now, I think what you're saying is during youth congress, for example, there can be some crazy ideas, but so far, they self-police. They've – it's amazing to watch what goes on. They kick those crazy ideas out. And, for example, one resolution they have passed in the past has been a recycling initiative for the Olathe schools. There was – they came up with a resolution to have Youth Friends Corps, which is a peer mentoring in the schools. They have done good work. They have had good suggestions and that's how it has worked here.

ANDREWS: Great. And I do want to thank all of those that have sent in emails and those that have asked questions through the operator. I do want to give my panel an opportunity to be able to just say a last word, if you guys can do it within a minute. There is this question about why should people care that came in a couple of times by email. Why should elected officials be motivated, you know, are there benefits for elected officials? There are two or three kind of questions like that. And maybe, Larry, you can answer that within your final thoughts, and Cindy and Sumbul can also just chime in with just final thoughts for our listening audience. So Larry, you want to go first?

CAMPBELL: I will, and I'll make it short: sustainability. We needed youth to be plugged in and our community is growing so rapidly, we needed – looked down the road and needed leaders of the future. And it is working.

ANDREWS: Thank you. Well said. Cindy?

CARLSON: Better decisions. This is the whole untapped group of people who have an expertise in what it's like to be a young person in our community, and we need to make sure that we're using that expertise. And we also know that the behaviors now of their engagement are transferrable to when they are an adult, so that also benefits our community.

ANDREWS: Great. Thank you.

SIDDIQUI: I agree.

ANDREWS: Sumbul?

SIDDIQUI: Yeah, you know, you always hear the saying, you know, youth are the future, and people say it but don't really think about it. And, you know, as soon as we think about it, we have to realize, you know – you have to invest. You have to make sure that happens. And that's the importance, like make that a reality and give youth that voice.

ANDREWS: Yeah. Well, thank you. Let me first thank my partner on this, Cindy Carlson, who has been wearing two hats for this call, both wearing the hat of co-partnering with us on this work and the work we've been doing at the National League of Cities, but also the local example within Hampton. Thank you, Cindy.

CARLSON: Sure.

ANDREWS: And thank you, Councilmember Larry Campbell from Olathe, Kansas. Thank you for sharing the perspective and the innovative work that's happening within the City of Olathe. Thank you for joining us today.

CAMPBELL: You're welcome.

ANDREWS: And Sumbul Siddiqui, thank you for your perspective on this as a former youth councilmember within Cambridge, but your commitment and passion to this and why you think this is so important. And thank you for joining us as well.

SIDDIQUI: My pleasure.

ANDREWS: And to our listening audience, we appreciate you calling in. And from the National League of Cities perspective, we are committed to continuing to share our best thinking and promising examples of what cities are doing around the country. We look forward in the coming months to be pulling together a framework and a document that could be useful to you. And so, we do encourage you to continue to check the Web site, and also, if you're not a part of any of our networks, please sign up and register to be a part of the networks. We'll share through those networks when the upcoming publication will come forth. But, we appreciate your time on this call, and good day to everyone.