

How well are you supporting young leaders, and tapping into their potential?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 7 OF 14**



Educating young people to be productive citizens and future leaders is a cause that many local officials feel passionately about. Some officials have also recognized the potential of young people to be dynamic leaders today, capable of fulfilling all kinds of roles in public engagement initiatives.

In most cities, opportunities for youth leaders are still somewhat limited. Some communities have youth advisory groups that provide input to adult decision makers, but these experiences have generally been limited to a small number of students who operate within a proscribed sphere of influence. There are also volunteer opportunities for young people who want to work on race, crime, substance abuse and other public issues, but in most of these projects, adults have already determined the course of action.

Youth leadership is a potent civic asset, and local officials who want to engage the public would be wise to incorporate roles for young people in their planning. These roles should reinforce the belief that youth input leads to smarter public policies, and verify that young people can be dynamic citizens in their own right. They should serve as a proving ground for young leaders, giving them the skills and connections they need to continue their contributions to public life.

Young People as Engagement Leaders

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The Youth Advisory Commission in Fremont not only provides a “youth perspective” in public decision-making, it engages large numbers of young people and adults in issues of concern to youth. To qualify for the Commission, candidates need to be residents of Fremont or attending one of Fremont’s schools, be entering 7th-12th grade and be willing to commit roughly six hours per month. Special consideration is given to underrepresented districts, schools and historical minorities. At present, 13 Commissioners are appointed by the City Council for 2-year, staggered, terms. The commission is self-sustaining, with some administrative support coming from an adult, who keeps track of most of the paperwork and other clerical duties.

Aside from reporting to the City Council, Commissioners organize and attend meetings, workshops and conferences to engage the public and explore issues of importance to teen life. Their annual flagship event, The Junior High Leadership Conference, won the California Healthy Cities Special Achievement Award from the California Healthy Cities and Communities Network. The commissioners plan, design and facilitate every aspect of the conference.

MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT YOUTH LEADERSHIP:

- What kinds of youth leadership opportunities are available in your city?
- How many young people take part in these activities? How diverse is the participation – do only the most high-achieving students take part, or is there a wider range of young people involved?
- Are these youth leadership opportunities supported by the school system, by local government or by other organizations in the community? How well do the adults involved work together?

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Convene a group of young people and talk with them about the community and their roles in public life.
- Consult NLC's *Authentic Youth Engagement: A Guide for Municipal Leaders* and other resources from NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (See Appendix).
- Involve young people in the planning of public engagement initiatives.
- Appoint youth leaders to various public commissions and boards.

