

# The Power of an Untapped Resource

Exploring Youth Representation on Your Board or Committee





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## Exploring Youth Representation on Your Board or Committee



This booklet was created by Alaskan youth 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, to adolescent health committees, 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 Roberts Rules of Order work, public relations, politics of decision making, and so on.

A young person who serves on a board, is properly trained and mentored, and attends all the meetings can influence decision-making. 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?”

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

## Preparing Your Board for Youth Involvement:

### Assessing your readiness

Boards tend to work effectively with youth if, prior to including youth members, they have the following qualities:

- ◆ Willing to be flexible with meeting times in order to accommodate school schedules.
- ◆ Willing to reframe their culture from: doing things to and for youth; to working with youth.
- ◆ Willing to 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.
- ◆ Willing to make some adjustment 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.)



## 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.

- ◆ Propose the idea of having younger members on your board. Remember change is often feared, 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.
- ◆ Counter the stories you hear about “kids these days” with positive examples of youth 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.

## Creating a position:

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. This will mean that you will need to reach outside of normal board operations to show your youth members that you value their input and opinions.
- ◆ 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 a position you may need to adjust your by-laws or board structure to accommodate the newly created position.

## Choosing youth representatives/members:

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.

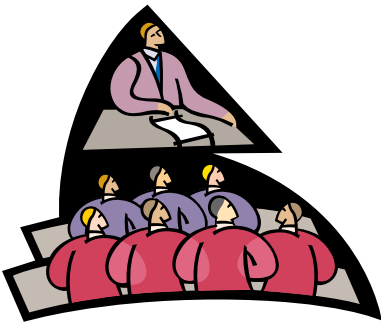
- ◆ If your board deals with liability issues, confidentiality, conflict of interest hearings, employee contracts, and/or student discipline issues it is a good idea for your board to have a conversation with a lawyer to determine the appropriate level of youth involvement in these sensitive matters.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

## Recruiting youth:

It is one thing to create the opportunity for youth representation on your board, it is quite another to find a 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.

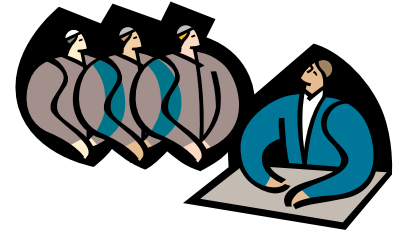
- ◆ Make a list of youth that you personally know through church, school, and/or neighborhood. Invite each member of your board to do this as well.
- ◆ Consider asking the heads of youth-serving organizations to compile a list of recommended youth. (Examples are: recreation centers, cultural centers, churches, sports leagues, and youth courts.) Ask the school counselors, administrators, teachers, club sponsors, coaches, and PTA's 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 candidate, 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 selection, rather than precedes it. It is because too many times board 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:**

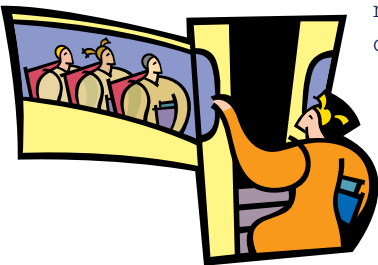
- ◆ Place a member report at the beginning of each meeting. This will allow your youth members to share their involvement in board projects and report back from any other groups or subcommittees they may be a part of.
- ◆ Nominate youth to serve as co-chairs of your board and/or as members of your smaller subcommittees.
- ◆ Assign youth to meaningful, but needed tasks such as minute-taking and/or contacting other organizations for the board.

## Educating the youth member:

- ◆ Provide the new board member 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 Roberts 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 straight up.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ Advise your board in advance of who your new members are and when they will begin attending meetings.
- ◆ Have an open dialog about appropriate meeting dress. Will the new members dress up, or will the board chose to move in a more casual direction?
- ◆ 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.

## Completing the details:

- ◆ Provide transportation to and from your meetings for your new members. 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 kid. 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 simple 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 my board have the time and resources to make a commitment to effective youth representation?
- Have you amended the by-laws or created policies stating that young people will be a permanent part of governing your organization?*
- Is your board clear about why you are involving young people in governance?
- Is the board willing to adjust their culture to make things youth-friendly?*
- Have you 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?*
- Do you 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 your board 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 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 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, do you 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?*

## Organizational YOUTH Checklist:

Youth can use this simple 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 group(s) 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 effect 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:<sup>1</sup>

### **Youth/Adult Shared Decisions**

This is the goal. The board is so comfortable with the competence and ideas of the youth representative that 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.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted with permission from “Benefits of Youth Partnerships” by the Seven Circles Coalition Youth Adult Partnerships Project in Sitka, Alaska.

## 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. Be confident with 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, 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 who you feel comfortable with, who has some 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 aren't 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. Attend all the meetings, find out the dates, times, and locations. Mark them in your calendar. If you don't want to be treated as a token youth, don't act like one.
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. The only dumb question is when you ask the same question more than three times. Everyone will understand that you are learning the lingo of Boardsmanship. 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 notepad 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

### **Youth on Board**

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

58 Day Street  
PO Box 440322  
Somerville, MA 02144  
(617) 623-9900 x1242  
<http://www.youthonboard.org>



### **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>

### **National 4-H Council, At the Table**

Advances the youth in governance movement on a national level.

7100 Connecticut Ave.  
Chevy Chase, MD 20815  
(301) 961-2972  
<http://www.fourhcouncil.edu>

### **Community Partnerships With Youth, Inc**

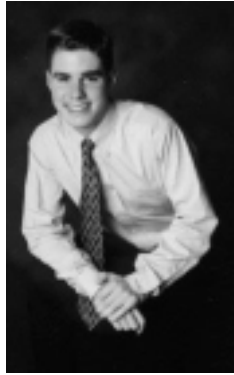
Offers a training curriculum and provides training to young people about their role as trustee, or as partners in the governance process.

6319 Constitution Drive  
Fort Wayne, IN 46804  
(219) 436-4402  
<http://www.cpyinc.org>

For a printable version of this publication you can contact the Association of Alaska School Boards web site at [http://www.aasb.org/publications/untapped\\_resource.pdf](http://www.aasb.org/publications/untapped_resource.pdf)

## About the Author

Hans Bernard is 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 national conferences and spoken to several Association of Alaska School Boards statewide audiences. Hans has been a full voting member and subcommittee chair of Alaska's state Adolescent Health Advisory Committee for three years. A Chugiak High School senior at Eagle River, Hans will graduate the spring of 2001 and attend Willamette University in Salem, Oregon.



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## Notes