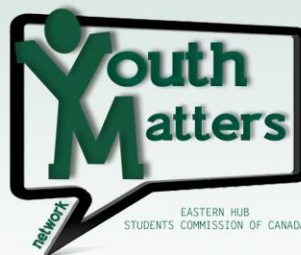


# Youth Exploring Solutions: Youth Engagement in New Brunswick



EASTERN HUB  
STUDENTS COMMISSION OF CANADA



Centre for Research on Youth At Risk



St. Thomas University

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Youth Matters/ Students Commission of Canada

Centre for Research on Youth at Risk/Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, St. Thomas University

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1NB New Brunswick Youth Strategy

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Renaissance College, University of New Brunswick

Office of the Child and Youth Advocate

**Contributions:**

Thank you to all of the youth and adult allies who participated in our forum and online consultations.

## Introduction

### Purpose

This document has been developed to provide individuals and groups with guidance on how best to make youth engagement a meaningful practice within their organization. We want organizations to reach a point where the ideas and opinions of youth are sought out, valued and carefully considered. The value of adult-youth partnerships lies in the strengths, talents and abilities that each can offer. Through youth engagement, we believe that New Brunswickers will be more united and our communities made stronger.

### Our Process

This document is the result of an ongoing collaboration between youth and adult allies from across New Brunswick. It is led by St. Thomas University's Centre for Research on Youth at Risk/Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, Youth Matters/Students Commission of Canada, and the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate.

Youth and adult policy makers in New Brunswick gathered in February 2010, to discuss the various initiatives that were being touted as "youth engagement", in order to find a common understanding and definition. The group decided on the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement's definition as the starting point:

Youth Engagement is the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself"

-Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement

"If youth are truly engaged, listened to and mentored so they can confidently express themselves, we will see youth not simply as leaders of tomorrow, but leaders of today."

-Youth Forum Participant

At the end of March 2010, a group of young people from Fredericton and Saint John gathered for a full-day forum to further clarify some of the key issues that surround the practice of youth engagement, as pointed out in academic literature. Discussion groups looked at the following issues: “tokenism”; civic engagement; youth-adult partnerships; and youth stereotypes. Some of the main themes that emerged from these discussions included:

Tokenism: When adults select a “**token**” youth to speak for all youth, it diminishes the self-esteem and the voice of other young people. The “youth voice” should be shared by all youth, because no one youth can speak for all youth. If the “youth voice” is shared, there is no power imbalance among young people.

Civic Engagement: It is essential to address the issues that surround youth alienation in the political arena. More involvement, in terms of civic education and a stronger “youth voice”, would offer young people a sense of responsibility and respect. This would prompt youth to self-educate and become involved early-on, to ensure that they can lead on issues of importance when they are of voting age.

Youth-adult partnerships: An **adult ally** was defined as someone who is: open-minded; non-judgmental; a good listener; creates opportunities; a partner to youth; approachable; gives guidance with restraint; believes in youth; cares about youth; and, has helpful experience.

Youth stereotypes: Youth are often portrayed negatively in New Brunswick media. This leads to misunderstanding, discrimination, and creates a **blanket of stereotypes** and biases about youth. Because of this, the New Brunswick “youth voice” is not valued, not included and not meaningful. Breaking down stereotypes and creating positive images of youth will lead to more youth volunteerism, more youth leaders, and more student-run programs. It will also communicate that youth are valued contributors in their communities.

Drawing on the information that was gathered from the Youth Engagement Forum, an adult-youth forum was held in April 2010, at St. Thomas University. Diverse groups of youth, and youth friendly organizations shared their insights on the practice of youth engagement in New Brunswick. This forum provided an opportunity for other interested organizations to join the initial steering committee, to move forward and encourage other organizations to recognize the benefits of youth engagement.

The steering committee met to debrief the adult-youth forum and decided that it would be important to create a “document of principles” of youth engagement. This process would be youth led, and adult supported. The document that follows has been written by youth with the support of adult allies.

### **Why Youth Engagement Now?**

A series of events...

- 1) Our own process had revealed that a number of youth-friendly organizations have attempted to practice youth engagement without clear guidelines.
- 2) During youth consultations conducted by the former NB Youth Strategy, youth engagement was identified as one of the top three areas that needed to be addressed by both the provincial government and community organizations.
- 3) On August 12, 2010, the United Nations launched the International Year of Youth. Youth engagement was promoted as a vehicle to address the ideals of peace, respect for human rights and freedoms and solidarity, related to the theme of the year “Dialogue and Mutual Understanding”.

# Youth Engagement has Many Important Benefits for Youth, Adults, and our Communities

Here is what youth forum participants had to say about the value of Youth Engagement for themselves, for adults, and for their communities.



## Youth

“You can connect with adults who can help you make a difference.”

“Training opportunities are available for personal fulfillment, skills development and capacity building.”

“Increased awareness of services and programs available in their communities.”

## Communities

“Youth Engagement allows programs and services for youth to be informed by youth, instead of adults dictating to youth what they think they need.”

“When youth contribute to solutions to improve their community, it is not only a better place for all, but adults begin to see youth as a relevant and positive part of society.”

“You know you are doing youth engagement when alienated youth move from being outsiders in their communities to empowered citizens.”



## Adults

“It improves intergenerational relationships.”

“Youth Engagement eliminates stereotypes about youth, adults, and what youth engagement is.”

“Youth Engagement reaches its highest level when the adult community naturally, without prompting, works alongside youth as equals. It becomes a natural way of doing business.”



# Hart's Ladder of Participation



**Rung 8: Young people and adults share decision-making**

**Rung 7: Young people lead and initiate action**

**Rung 6: Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people**

**Rung 5: Young people consulted and informed**

**Rung 4: Young people assigned and informed**

**Rung 3: Young people tokenized**

**Rung 2: Young people are decoration**

**Rung 1: Young people are manipulated**

Note: Hart explains that the last three rungs are non-participation.

Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre

Created by The Freechild Project - <http://freechild.org>

## Summary of Guiding Principles

Principle #1: Youth Engagement is Best Achieved Through a Positive Youth Development Approach Building on Youth Assets

Principle #2: Create a Safe and Comfortable Atmosphere

Principle #3: Always Be Flexible and Innovative

Principle #4: One Youth Cannot Represent all Youth

Principle #5: Inclusiveness of People and Experiences is Essential

Principle #6: Break Down Intergenerational Stereotypes

Principle #7: Prepare and Be Prepared

Principle #8: Increase Participation Through Mutual Motivation



## Youth Engagement is Best Achieved Through a Positive Youth Development Approach Building on Youth Assets

“Adults must not be too focused on “empowering youth. They must truly acknowledge youth as a valuable resource already.”

- Forum Participant



**Positive youth development (PYD)** is a field of professional practice that focuses on the strengths, talents and abilities of young people, rather than an attempt to label problematic behavior.

A Positive Youth Development approach levels the playing field for all youth. It promotes a society where all youth are valued and celebrated for their positive contribution to our communities.

## Principle #2

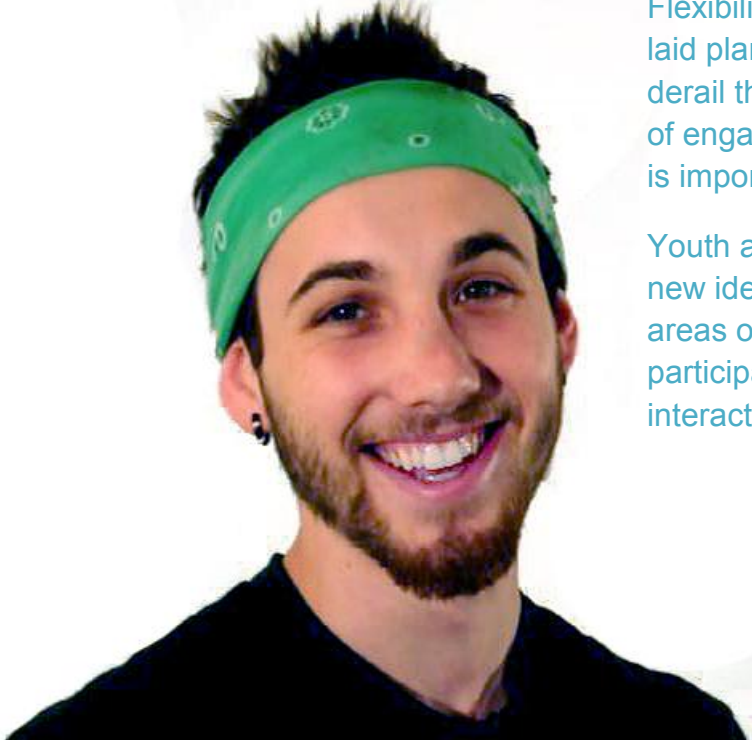
### Create a Safe and Comfortable Atmosphere

Unsafe	Safe
Bullying.	Programs that address bullying, develop life skills and open communication.
Adults who dictate to youth what they think they need.	Programs and services informed by youth...for youth.
Space that is not accessible to youth or not easy to get to with public transportation	A central area where public transportation is available. Participants who are provided with transportation if needed.
Sterile, cold, and overly professional atmosphere that makes youth and adults feel too rigid.	Open and inviting physical space where people are accepted in both casual and business attire that encourages open communication.
An individual in the group (either youth or adult) who monopolizes the time of the entire group and dictates what is to be done.	Appreciation of a variety of perspectives that promotes acceptance of diverse views and encourages others to participate.
Youth are told to sit behind adults at a boardroom table as observers.	Arranged seating where there is equal attention to all participants and no power imbalance.

People are more likely to fulfill their potential when they feel that their ideas will be respected and acknowledged.



### Always Be Flexible and Innovative



Flexibility is important because despite a best laid plan, sometimes situations arise that may derail the plan. In order to maintain a process of engagement, the ability to adapt on the spot is important.

Youth and adults must commit to being open to new ideas and have a willingness to explore areas of interest, encourage curiosity among participants, and look for innovative ways to interact.

“When different barriers are broken down, more innovative solutions can be achieved and youth engagement will be enabled.” - Youth Forum Participant

The Students Commission of Canada has identified TheFour Pillars™ that assist in promoting effective communication:

“When we truly **respect** another person we can **listen** to what they are saying. By listening we can **understand** who they are and what they mean; by understanding each other we can open the door to real **communication**, learning and growth.”

In order to acknowledge the interests, talents and abilities of all participants, different forms of communication that allow more opportunities for people to express their ideas should be explored.

### One Youth Cannot Represent All Youth

Youth Engagement should include all youth and offer opportunities to those who feel underrepresented and enable them to have a say in issues that affect them.”

- Youth Forum Participant



**Tokenism:** *“When youth appear to have a voice.”*

Tokenism is the practice of limited inclusion of members of underrepresented groups in order to deflect criticism. It creates the false appearance of inclusiveness. Young people may be asked to express their views, but do not have much choice in the way they express themselves.

Sometimes young people are selected based on existing leadership roles (e.g. Student Council, model parliament) and asked to speak for all youth. This does not help youth become engaged. As one youth participant remarked;

*“When you praise the “token youth” the self-esteem of others diminishes”.* – Youth Forum Participant

It is important to build on the strengths, talents and abilities of all young people as outlined in Principle #1.

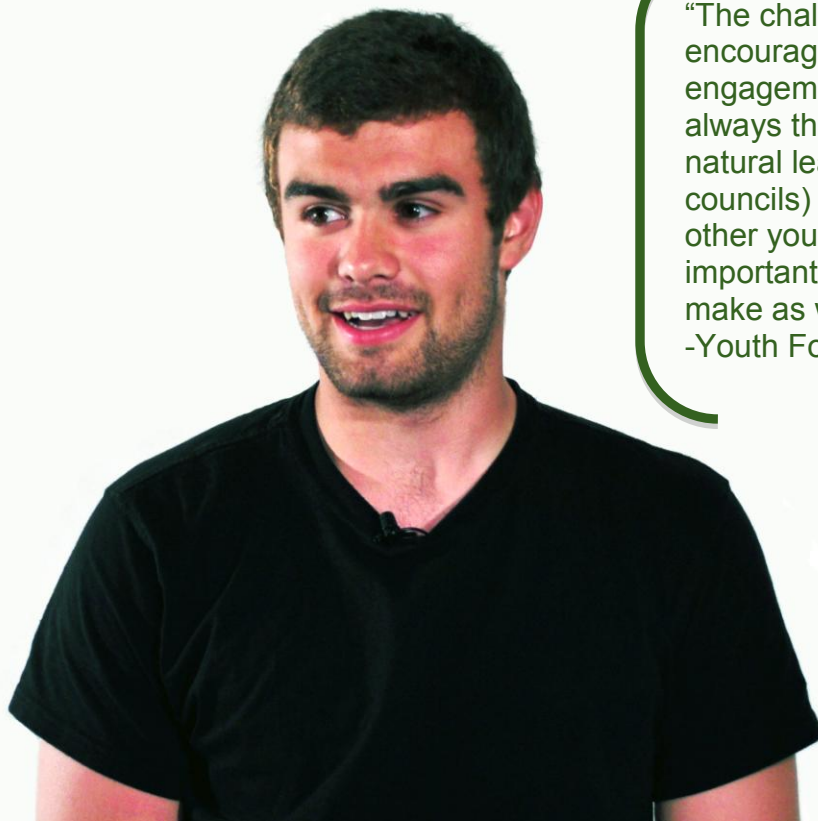
*“Youth engagement should include all youth and offer opportunities to those who feel marginalized, isolated, and under-represented and enable them to have a voice and say in issues that affect them.”*

– Youth Forum Participant

## Principle #5

### Inclusiveness of People and their Experience is Essential

New ways of thinking flourish when diverse groups of youth and adults are involved.



“The challenge is to encourage youth to initiate engagement and not just always the same youth (i.e. natural leaders, student councils) to be able to reach other youth as they have important contributions to make as well!”  
-Youth Forum Participant

Inclusiveness ensures that people are valued, respected and supported. A positive youth development approach facilitates inclusiveness by focusing on the strengths and needs of every individual. When the right conditions are in place for each person to achieve his or her full potential, we know that we have succeeded in being inclusive.

To accept and embrace diversity means to avoid all forms of prohibited discrimination, beyond simply the traditional grounds such as religion, gender, race or ethnicity to all forms of exclusion that can arise including: opinion; sexual orientation; age; image; ability; mental health; and geography, to name a few.

### Break Down Intergenerational Stereotypes

Both youth and adults need to look past stereotypical images. Youth engagement efforts may be compromised if either party holds an ageist orientation towards the other.

“When both adults and youth see each other in a different light.”

- Forum Participant



#### Defining Ageism:

“Ageism” is defined as the negative stereotyping and systematic devaluation of people solely because of their age.

We need to think about the ways that we stereotype groups of people. For example, to generalize all Canadians as “polite” is to suggest that we can account for about 33 million people. Similarly, teenagers (between the ages of 13 and 19), who account for about 1.5 billion people worldwide, should not have personality characteristics ascribed to them based on age.

#### How do stereotypes make people feel?

- Less valued than someone else
  - Like they don't matter
  - Low in confidence
  - If you tell someone something enough times about themselves, they will start to believe it
  - Like they're always wrong
- (From youth forum discussion)

### Prepare and Be Prepared

“Prepare youth for engagement so that they are not as intimidated. Provide more comprehensive information outside of simply handing out pamphlets.”

- Youth Forum Participant



#### What are we preparing for?

Depends on the organization and the context:

- Conference
- Workshop
- Planning meeting
- Advisory group
- Board meeting

#### Where does youth engagement happen? (*Centre of Excellence on Youth Engagement*)

- Community/youth organizations
- Playing in a band/orchestra
- Sports teams
- Ethnic/cultural organizations
- Work/career related groups, meetings and organizations
- Social activism
- Political activities
- Religious and spiritual settings
- School

- Provide background materials to help ensure participants are aware of the topic and are ready to participate.
- Set goals (short term and long term) to help participants have a road map for the event or project.
- Follow-up to ensure that participants have enough information, tools and resources to necessary to carry-out the tasks they have agreed to do.

When things don't go as smoothly as you might expect, remember to be flexible and innovative! (Principle 3)

### Increase Participation Through Mutual Motivation

“There is an issue with adults making youth feel that they should be thankful to be offered the opportunity to be engaged or invited to be engaged – not on equal footing or a partner in decision-making.”

-Youth Forum Participant



There are many benefits for both youth and adults when they are actively and meaningfully involved in a project. Adults benefit by learning about new ways to do things that may differ from the way they did things in the past. Likewise, youth gain from the wisdom and lessons of adult experience, especially when grappling with complex issues. It is similarly interesting to see how some things have changed and how some things stay the same through the years and the generations.

#### **Compensation**

Youth and Adults should be compensated equally for their participation in order to acknowledge that they are valued equally.

#### **Evaluation**

It is important to constantly provide opportunities for youth to give feedback during engagement initiatives. This helps create awareness about what is effective and what can be improved. Evaluation also includes reporting back to youth to demonstrate that youth contribution is both valued and meaningful. Acknowledge participants for their efforts and congratulate them on the work that they have done for the organization.