

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Self-Reflection Tool

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Introduction

This self-reflection tool is designed to help organizations document, assess, and strengthen their youth engagement efforts. Specifically, it aims to promote thoughtful reflection on current practices and organizational capacity, identify strengths and opportunities for growth, align youth engagement strategies with organizational vision and goals, inform actionable next steps and resource needs, and support continuous learning and improvement.

Audience: This tool is intended for use by youth-serving organizations that partner with—or plan to partner with—youth to enact policy change. It is designed for organizations that 1) directly engage youth in policy efforts, 2) support and collaborate with other organizations that engage youth in policy efforts, and/or 3) seek to strengthen their capacity for meaningful and authentic youth engagement.

How to Use: This tool guides you through a structured process to assess your youth engagement efforts and identify areas for growth. The tool is divided into five sections that align with the [Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework](#) (Framework). In these sections, you will be asked to identify and describe:

- The ways in which youth are engaged by your organization internally
- The ways in which youth are engaged by your organization in the policy process
- How your organization empowers and supports youth through various strategies
- How local factors help and/or hinder your youth engagement efforts
- The outcomes your organization has achieved, is working toward, and has prioritized related to your youth engagement efforts

For each section, we provide definitions and illustrative examples of the Framework in action, based on a [study](#) that applied the Framework to 32 organizations across the United States engaging youth in the policy process. This includes examples in the top row of each table to illustrate the types of content to include. At the end of each section, you will reflect on your responses within that section. At the conclusion of the tool, you will reflect on your overall youth engagement efforts, identifying priority areas to focus on next in strengthening your youth engagement efforts and the resources and supports needed to achieve your goals. At the end of this tool, you will also find blank pages to take additional notes as needed.

Key Definition: Authentic Youth Engagement

We define the term “authentic youth engagement” as a condition under which youth are active partners in shaping decisions, policies, and programs. They are empowered and valued as contributors, co-creators, and decision makers in their communities and are intentionally supported in these roles by adult partners.

For organizations that have not yet engaged youth in the policy process, this tool can be used to develop your vision and goals for youth engagement and what authentic youth engagement would look like for your organization.

As you work through each section, remember that authentic youth engagement is dynamic and occurs along a continuum. Youth may engage in different roles and at different stages of the policy process over time, and these decisions should be driven by the roles they wish to play and the needs in your community. As such, the goal is not to check off each box, as each organization engages youth in different capacities and in different organizational and local contexts while working toward different goals. This tool is designed to help document progress, assess alignment with your vision, and identify pathways for growth through meaningful reflection, discussion, and planning to strengthen and sustain authentic youth engagement.

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Section I. How Are Youth Engaged Within Your Organization?

This section explores how youth are involved and what roles youth play **within your organization**. This includes activities such as youth serving in leadership and decision-making roles within your organization. In the table below, use the checkbox to indicate whether youth are engaged within your organization in each of the roles listed. If youth are engaged in a specific role, use the Illustrative Examples column to briefly describe how youth are engaged in that way within your organization.

How Are Youth Engaged Within Your Organization?		
In what ways does my organization engage youth <i>internally</i> through...		Illustrative Examples
☐	Speaking roles, where adults lead and youth share their ideas and opinions. • Example: Youth receiving services provide feedback through client satisfaction surveys that inform changes to organizational programming.	
☐	Co-Designing roles, where adults and youth partner. • Example: The organization's Board of Directors includes youth members who offer insights based on lived experience and serve in decision-making roles related to programming and other organizational efforts.	
☐	Designing roles, where youth lead and adults assist. • Example: Youth are hired as staff members with responsibility for designing the organization's roles, partnerships, collaborations, and daily operations.	



Reflection: Based on the roles youth currently serve in our organization, what is one concrete change our organization could make in the next 3-6 months to strengthen youth leadership internally?

Section II. At What Stages of the Policy Process and in What Ways Are Youth Engaged?

This section explores the stages of the policy process at which youth are engaged (i.e., policy identification, formulation, advocacy, and implementation) and how they are engaged (i.e., speaking, co-designing, and designing roles). Using the table below, identify **whether** youth are engaged in a specific stage of the policy process. If youth are engaged in a specific stage, use the corresponding row to identify **what role they serve** and **what engagement looks like** in the relevant cell(s). Youth can serve in multiple roles across each stage and can be involved in multiple stages. You do not need to complete every cell. Complete only the cells that reflect your organization's youth engagement efforts.

At What Stages of the Policy Process and in What Ways Are Youth Engaged?			
In what ways does my organization engage youth <i>through</i> ...			
	<u>Speaking</u> Adults lead policy change and youth share their ideas and opinions for policy change	<u>Co-Designing</u> Youth and adults partner to lead policy change	<u>Designing</u> Youth lead policy change and adults assist
<i>This row provides examples of each youth role at the <u>policy identification</u> stage.</i>	<i>Staff gather youth input during community forums and analyze data to identify issues.</i>	<i>Youth and adults co-facilitate community forums with other youth to identify policy issues that matter most.</i>	<i>Youth lead the planning and facilitation of community forums with their peers and identify issues.</i>
Policy Identification Stage Identifying the problem and gathering background information <i><u>Policy Identification x Designing Example:</u> Youth design and administer statewide surveys, facilitate conversations with peers, and analyze findings to identify issues within education that matter most to youth in their state.</i>			

At What Stages of the Policy Process and in What Ways Are Youth Engaged?

In what ways does my organization engage youth *through*...

	<u>Speaking</u> Adults lead policy change and youth share their ideas and opinions for policy change	<u>Co-Designing</u> Youth and adults partner to lead policy change	<u>Designing</u> Youth lead policy change and adults assist
Policy Formulation Stage Formulating policy solutions, including drafting policy <i><u>Policy Formulation x Co-Designing Example:</u> Youth co-developed a policy agenda, advocacy strategy, and framework for a coalition of organizations working to support the needs of opportunity youth.</i>			
Policy Advocacy Stage Advocating for policy change through a variety of mechanisms such as building coalitions, educating decision makers, and building public awareness <i><u>Policy Advocacy x Speaking Example:</u> Youth advocates travel to the state Capitol to participate in an Advocacy Day, attending press conferences, rallies, and small group discussions with elected officials to share stories and advocate for policy priorities.</i>			

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In what ways does my organization engage youth *through*...

	<u>Speaking</u> Adults lead policy change and youth share their ideas and opinions for policy change	<u>Co-Designing</u> Youth and adults partner to lead policy change	<u>Designing</u> Youth lead policy change and adults assist
Policy Implementation Stage Monitoring and supporting implementation of policy changes • <i>Policy Implementation x Co-Designing Example: Youth partner with local public agency partners to evaluate the effectiveness of a housing assistance program, providing feedback on current strengths and needs and recommendations on ways to address gaps in program implementation.</i>			



Reflection: Looking across the stages of the policy process, at which stage do we have the greatest opportunity to deepen youth leadership? What is one concrete step we can take to bolster youth leadership in that stage in the next 3-6 months?

Section III. How Do Organizations Support and Empower Youth?

This section explores the strategies your organization has adopted to empower and support youth engagement. This includes the structures that support youth engagement (i.e., how your organization conducts its work) and the connections that your organization facilitates between youth, their peers, and adults. In the table below, use the checkbox to indicate whether your organization has adopted each strategy. Then, use the Illustrative Examples column to describe what that strategy looks like in practice.

How Do Organizations Support and Empower Youth?		
Organizational Strategies		Illustrative Examples
In what ways does my organization have structures that support youth engagement such as centering youth by...		
	<i>To support you in completing this table, this row provides examples of <u>adopting specific frameworks</u> that center youth in your youth engagement efforts.</i>	<i>We have a “nothing about us, without us” philosophy and approach to our youth engagement where any decisions made or activities we engage in related to the youth we serve must include those youth. This includes youth input in final decision making and youth involvement in activities we engage in from start to finish (i.e., developing a vision for activities, supporting planning and execution, and debriefing and evaluating efforts).</i>
☐	Adopting specific frameworks that support shifts in decision-making power and leadership to youth (e.g., holistic wellbeing framework, grassroots and community organizing frameworks, positive youth development frameworks, trauma-informed approaches)	
☐	Engaging in specific practices that view youth as experts (e.g., ensuring incorporation of youth voice and opinions in decision-making efforts, having lived experience and/or youth voice as an organizational core value)	
In what ways does my organization support youth engagement through organizational practices such as...		
☐	Recruitment strategies and practices that encourage diverse representation of the youth in our community (e.g., diverse eligibility requirements including age range, advocacy experience, identities, and lived experience)	
☐	Establishing regular meeting structures (e.g., meeting norms, designated decision-making roles, and established meeting frequencies and formats)	

How Do Organizations Support and Empower Youth?		
Organizational Strategies		Illustrative Examples
☐	Promoting mutual respect between adults and youth (e.g., valuing each other's expertise, creating safe spaces for youth, and having transparent, open communication)	
☐	Offering flexible and accessible participation options (e.g., virtual meetings, meeting at times youth are available, supporting youth to focus on topics and activities of interest)	
☐	Facilitating regular debriefing of youth experiences (e.g., individual or group check-ins)	
In what ways does my organization offer resources that facilitate youth participation in activities including...		
☐	Financial compensation and other resources to meet youths' individual needs (e.g., stipends, transportation, child care)	
☐	Training for youth in preparation for decision-making and leadership activities (e.g., trainings on leadership, communication, advocacy, the policymaking process, and networking)	
☐	Training for adults to build their capacity to partner with and support youth (e.g., trainings on power sharing, effective communication)	
☐	Equipping youth with data and information to inform their policy efforts (e.g., data on youth needs)	
In what ways does my organization encourage connections between youth and their peers and adults such as...		
☐	Offering opportunities for peer relationship-building and peer support (e.g., by fostering an inclusive community, dedicating time for team-building activities, providing moral support to one another)	
☐	Having a dedicated staff member to support youth on a regular basis	

How Do Organizations Support and Empower Youth?		
Organizational Strategies		Illustrative Examples
☐	Fostering mentoring relationships between adults and youth (e.g., connecting youth with staff who share their interests and experiences)	
☐	Connecting youth with external resources to support their advocacy efforts (e.g., other adults and external trainings)	
In what ways does my organization connect youth to future benefits and professional development opportunities beyond specific policy actions such as...		
☐	Connecting youth to internships, networking, and alumni engagement opportunities	



Reflection: What is one organizational strategy or support we most need to adopt or strengthen to better support youth engagement? What is the first step we can take to implement or improve it, including who will lead and by when?

Section IV. What Local Factors Help or Hinder Authentic Youth Engagement?

This section explores the local contextual factors that help or hinder authentic youth engagement efforts in your community. Using the table below, describe how each factor supports and/or hinders your youth engagement efforts in the corresponding column. This can include information such as how a factor has advanced or limited your ability to engage youth internally and/or in the policy process. These factors may support, hinder, or do both, and are not mutually exclusive. If a factor does not contribute to your youth engagement efforts, use the checkbox to indicate “not applicable (i.e., N/A).”

What Local Factors Help or Hinder Authentic Youth Engagement?			
In what ways does this factor....			
	Support our youth engagement efforts	Hinder our youth engagement efforts	N/A
<i>To support you in completing this table, this row provides examples of how <u>historical local and systemic inequities</u> may support or hinder youth engagement efforts.</i>	<i>Partner organizations assist in the recruitment of youth most affected by homelessness, ensuring diverse representation.</i>	<i>Longstanding underinvestment in some neighborhoods reduces access to supportive spaces to host activities with youth.</i>	
Historical Local and Systemic Inequities Inequitable access to supports and resources that often underpin other local factors.			☐
Stakeholder and Partner Engagement Stakeholders and partners’ receptivity to and engagement with youth. • Stakeholders refer to decision makers who hold power to enact policy change that youth are working towards. • Partners refer to individuals who hold a shared understanding of the value and expertise youth bring to the policy process and who support both youth and the organization to further their policy agenda.			☐

What Local Factors Help or Hinder Authentic Youth Engagement?			
In what ways does this factor....			
	<i>Support</i> our youth engagement efforts	<i>Hinder</i> our youth engagement efforts	N/A
Political Landscape The effect of local and/or state politics (e.g., majority political party's policy priorities) on youth engagement and state and local policies.			☐
History of Youth Engagement Historical and recent examples of youth engagement in your community.			☐
Geography and Infrastructure The physical environment and systems that shape young people's daily lives and feelings of safety and connection, including the natural landscape (e.g., climate, disasters), transportation systems, and the overall built environment (e.g., public spaces, parks, community centers).			☐
Philanthropic/Private Support Funder investments in youth engagement.			☐



Reflection: What is one local challenge we need to actively plan around, and one local opportunity we can leverage to strengthen youth engagement? How will we adjust our approach in the next 3-6 months to respond to both the challenge and the opportunity?

Section V. What Are the Outcomes of Authentic Youth Engagement?

This section explores the outcomes that have been achieved as a result of your youth engagement efforts at the policy, community, organizational, and youth levels. Using the table below, identify **whether an outcome type is a priority** and **what outcome(s) you aim to achieve/have achieved** as a result of your youth engagement efforts for each outcome type. For each outcome, read across the row to determine where you are in achieving the outcome (i.e., Not an identified priority, Not yet started, Making progress toward desired outcomes, and Achieving sustained, measurable outcomes”) and place the outcome in the relevant cell(s). Note that not all organizations will have prioritized outcomes at each level and organizations will be at different stages in their outcomes of interest.

What Outcomes Are Achieved Through Authentic Youth Engagement?				
In what ways do our youth engagement efforts work towards...				
	Not an identified priority No desired outcomes have been identified.	Not yet started Desired outcomes have been identified, but no meaningful action has taken place yet. Planning related to this area is in the early stages.	Making progress toward outcomes Active efforts to achieve desired outcomes are underway, with strategies implemented and early indications of change. Progress may be inconsistent, and results are still developing.	Sustained, measurable outcomes Changes have occurred that can be supported by data or evidence. Outcomes are maintained over time and embedded into systems/communities.
<i>To support you in completing this table, this row provides examples of <u>policy outcomes</u>, using the example of increasing foster youth access to postsecondary education opportunities.</i>		<i>Policy priorities for postsecondary education identified for next legislative session, with initial planning meeting scheduled.</i>	<i>Established coalition of youth, community partners, and state policymakers to discuss issues and develop proposed solutions.</i>	<i>Legislation, informed by the coalition, passed that ensures foster youth's access to tuition waivers to attend vocational college.</i>
Policy Outcomes Administrative and/or legislative policy changes, and the intermediate steps that lead to these changes (e.g., increased decision-maker awareness, new coalitions)				

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Community Outcomes Changes within the community (e.g., how youth are engaged by other entities, shifting community narratives of youths' strengths and needs, and more equitable access to services)				
Organizational Outcomes Changes in how the organization engages youth (e.g., increased youth leadership opportunities, increased organizational capacity to support youth)				

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Youth Outcomes Changes for individual youth (e.g., increased self-efficacy, skill development, and sense of belonging)				



Reflection: Which outcome area is our highest priority for the next phase of our work? What specific milestones or indicators will tell us we are making progress in the next 3-6 months?

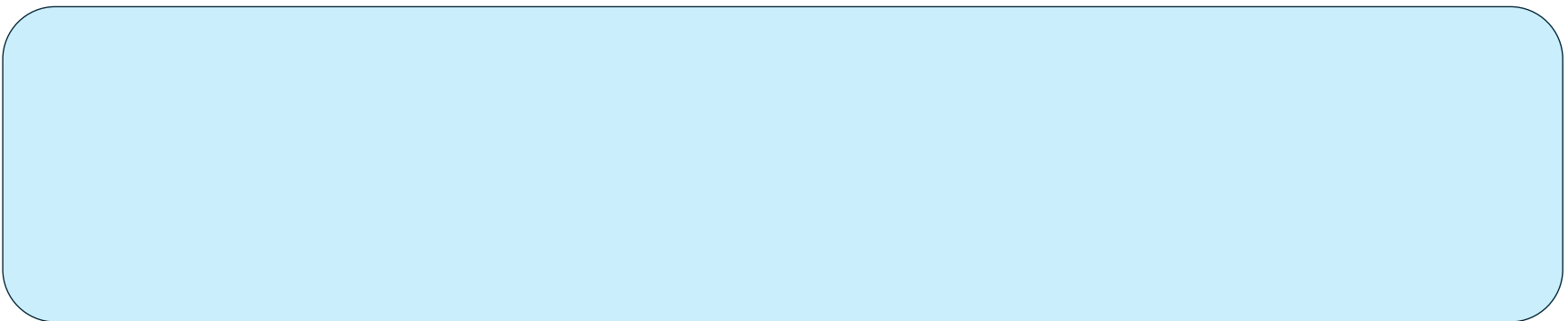
Final Reflections

Below, we ask you to reflect on your responses overall. These questions are intended to foster reflection and discussion about your overall youth engagement efforts, including actionable next steps to strengthen your efforts and the resources and supports needed to achieve those next steps.

Next Steps: Looking across all sections of the tool, what is the *highest priority* next step our organization should take to strengthen authentic youth engagement?



Resources & Supports: What resources, partnerships, or supports do we need *most* to move that next step forward in the next 3-6 months?



Additional Notes



