Introduction

For the past two decades, there has been large investments in community-based out of school time (OST) programs for youth. Participation in organized activities outside of school can enhance youths’ academic, social, emotional, civic, and health outcomes, and reduces risk behaviors. OST youth spaces, however, are typically adult-driven with programs and services provided for youth. Young people are rarely provided the opportunity to lead their own programs, let alone participate in higher organizational roles that would allow them to contribute to their agencies. As a result, older youth disengage from community youth programs and programs are failing to get the best return on their investment.

Furthermore, many high school students do not feel motivated or engaged by learning. The reasons for these challenges are widely debated. However, practitioners, scholars, and policymakers all agree that if students are motivated to achieve and are adequately engaged in classroom learning, their chances of academic success are greatly enhanced.

Why Provide Youth Greater Leadership Roles and Voice

Research demonstrates that providing youth greater voice and leadership in the programs that serve them has many benefits. When youth have opportunities to make meaningful contributions in an organization their participation grows, as does their engagement, interest, and investment. A greater leadership role not only provides young people all the current benefits of after school programming, but provides new opportunities to develop 21st century skills such as problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity and critical reflection that are essential to college and workforce readiness. Finally, one other important outcome arises when young people are engaged in meaningful decisions—civic engagement, experiences that are critical if society expects them to become active citizens in a democratic society.

Neutral Zone & its Youth Driven Space Model

The Neutral Zone, Ann Arbor’s Teen Center got its start in 1998 and has grown into a thriving, nationally recognized arts and leadership space that engages over 500 high school teens annually. One of the most important lessons we’ve learned is that teens have a fundamental desire to experience control over how they spend their own time. Further, teens thrive when they work in partnership with adults as active collaborators, decisions makers and problem solvers, and are recognized for their unique expertise. Neutral Zone involves young people into the very heart of what we do. Staff work alongside teens to promote and encourage genuine youth decision-making and involvement at the program, organization and governance levels.

For the past seven years the Neutral Zone, in partnership with the Weikart Center for Program Quality and Michigan State University’s Community Evaluation Research Collaborative (MSU), has developed the Youth-Driven Spaces (YDS) model. YDS is designed to help organizations that serve older youth incorporate
practices and strategies that use program, organization and governance roles as an opportunity to build youth proficiencies as well as increase their participation and engagement. To date NZ has worked intensively with over 60 high schools, after-school programs, adolescent health centers, libraries and local municipalities to support these entities to amplify youth voice through partnership between adults and youth.

Adopting YDS: Professional Development & Support for Youth Engagement

Youth-Driven Space (YDS) program is a coaching/training model for after-school youth-serving organizations and school-based programs. The YDS program is designed to increase the capacity of organizations serving high-school-age youth to develop program, organizational and governance strategies. This approach helps youth have a stronger voice and involvement in the mission and operation of the organization. Through this process, organizations support development of youth 21st Century skills (or “soft skills”) by providing opportunities for youth to function within the management system of the organization.

What’s unique about YDS is that it engages BOTH youth AND adults in professional development who then work in partnership to make their setting more youth driven. The YDS model is designed to transform existing youth and school-based programs into youth-driven spaces through four key areas:

- **The establishment of a youth advisory council** – A group of youth meets regularly to make decisions and offer guidance about program offerings and organizational operation.
- **Youth facilitation for youth meetings and activities** – Youth members take on the roles that adults typically perform in a youth program, leading meetings and activities with their peers.
- **Helping adults learn to build strong adult/youth partnerships** – Adults in YDS do not simply step down and let youth lead; rather, they play an active supportive role in helping youth be successful.
- **Building sustainability** – Impact is sustained by including YDS principles in governance operations such as mission statements and by establishing deliberate support across administration, staff and the community at large.

YDS Impacts

The first wide-scale YDS intervention study was conducted from 2010-2012 by the Community Evaluation and Research Collaborative at Michigan State University. The results indicated that the model had substantially developed youth-adult partnerships and youth leadership opportunities and strengthened youth engagement, peer relationships and 21st Century skills. Some of the specific outcomes included:

Organizational outcomes included: more opportunities for involvement, adult support, and youth-adult partnerships; more youth responsibility for decision-making in activity and organizational management. As for youth outcomes, young people had a greater sense of community and programmatic engagement and showed increased solution generation, information sharing, problem identification, and evaluation of information. They also had more opportunities to explore their identities and reflect on who they wanted to be in the future. Youth made gains in a wide variety of 21st Century skills, with the greatest changes occurring in problem solving, organizational skills, management and administrative skills, creative thinking and innovation, goal setting and group process skills.

In a school-based project from 2012-2015, youth demonstrated statistically significant gains across several categories and items. In each of the three annual cohorts statistically significant gains were reported in multiple items within the engagement subscales. Some of the items that made significant gains included: students feeling connected to their student advisory group; feeling connected to adults in their advisory; and feeling that it was important to be involved in the advisory.

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