

YOUTH VOICE at the State Level

Goal Statement

The goal is to involve youth in meaningful state level public decision-making in Wisconsin. The inclusion of youth as age and maturity allows should become the norm at all levels of state public decision-making. It is further expected that these efforts fully include youth of diverse backgrounds and interests.

Scope of the Problem

There are widespread beliefs that youth are incapable of contributing to public decision-making. Young people are typically perceived as “problems to be solved” as opposed to “resources to be nurtured.” Youth are aware of these perceptions: research demonstrates that many young people do not feel valued by their communities. Indeed, there are limited opportunities for youth to meaningfully contribute to their communities. This lack of opportunity weakens the development of young people’s civic-minded attitudes, skills and behaviors.

There are clear benefits to engaging young people in meaningful decision-making. Youth engagement in decision-making empowers young people and makes them aware of their ability to effect change. Youth are able to develop leadership skills while taking on responsibilities to change their worlds. Communities also benefit from engaging young people in meaningful decision-making because it helps prepare a new generation of community leaders. In addition, youth participation strengthens the ability of current leaders to effectively address youth issues.

Fortunately, many creative approaches have been developed to engage youth in their communities. Five types of opportunities for youth have been identified: public policy consultation, community coalitions, organizational governance, youth organizing, and school based service learning. A healthy society needs youth involved in all these ways.

However, Wisconsin is missing critical opportunities where youth voice can and should be heard. This brief focuses specifically on participation in governance and policymaking through the development of *statewide youth councils*.

Youth councils are formal bodies made up of older youth who advise elected officials and public decision makers. Statewide youth councils can be implemented to advise the legislative branch, the executive branch, or an agency within the executive branch. Thirteen states have

Past Youth Voice Policy

Wisconsin has no statewide policies requiring or encouraging youth voice in public decision-making.

Current Youth Voice Policy

No current statewide policies requiring or encouraging youth voice exist. However, there are some independent initiatives to increase youth voice. The Department of Children and Families, Department of Public Instruction, Department of Natural Resources, and the Department of Justice all include youth voice in their decision-making processes. These departments are currently the exceptions, not the norm. The inclusion of youth voice needs to become the norm.

The above youth councils need to be supported by adult staff. For example, the Department of Children and Families’ Youth Advisory Council is supported by the state department living coordinator, independent living specialists, contracted adult staff, foster parents, and adult

active statewide youth councils. Wisconsin, however, does not.

It's important to note there is also visible international support for youth voice. The belief in youth voice is evident in Article 12 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child. Put simply, Article 12 states that young people are capable of expressing views and they have the right to be heard on all matters affecting them, including policy matters. Youth councils are one way to solicit young people's input on matter affecting them. Although the United States has not ratified the Convention, thirteen states have created youth councils, demonstrating their support of youth voice.

Youth Voice Policy Options

State Resolution: State legislatures can use a Resolution to support youth voice. A Resolution would declare the worth of youth, urging all public institutions, agencies and systems that serve youth to include their input to the extent of the young person's maturity. No definitive policy change is needed and it does not cost anything, but it sets a standard. A Resolution can then be used as a rallying tool for activists and a catalyst for further action to be taken.

Executive Order: For a Governor, an Executive Order can accomplish the same goal as a state resolution. An Executive Order can declare the worth of youth voice, urging public institutions and systems to include youth input, and can also set a framework for a Governor's Youth Advisory Council. No definitive public policy change is needed and a declaration of value does not cost anything, but it sets a standard.

Enact State Youth Council: Direct action can be taken by the state legislature, executive office or state agency without a Resolution or Executive Order. A youth council can be enacted without a State Resolution or Executive Order through another act of government or in accordance with a previously passed Resolution. See **Model Youth Council Programs** for examples.

Model Youth Council Programs

Legislative Youth Council: a council established through a legislative resolution, adopted by one house or both, or a bill to advise members of the legislature on issues that matter to youth. Five states (Maine, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Washington) have formed legislative councils.

Example of Legislative Youth Council:

Maine's Legislative Youth Advisory Council began in 2002 through a statute to advise the Legislature on proposed and pending legislation and state budget expenditures. Youth

volunteers. In addition, it is critical that youth councils encourage a diverse pool of members to ensure a broad array of voices, experiences and talents. Diversity leads to a more complete and thought out decision-making process.

Thirteen other states (Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Washington) have implemented youth councils. Programs in other states demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of youth councils and offer valuable models.

Model Advantage

Youth from all state regions have the opportunity to participate and network with state leaders.

Disadvantage:

It may be challenging to gain majority support to implement a youth council.

Council members are expected to conduct seminars on leadership and government for other youth, hold public hearings and annually report to the legislature. The Council also has the legal authority to propose legislation to implement their recommendations. The Council is co-chaired by a youth member elected by the council and of an appointed legislative member alternating between a member the Senate and a member of the House of Representatives.

The Legislative Council provides staffing assistance within its existing budgeted resources and reimburses the youth members for reasonable expenses incurred in order to serve the council. The council may seek outside funds to support the council.

Executive Youth Advisory Council: a council established to advise the Governor on issues impacting youth.

Example of Executive Youth Advisory Council:

Arizona Governor's Youth Commission is a 40-member commission of 10th-12th grade students. The Commission's goal is to make youth policy recommendations to the Governor on issues related to substance abuse prevention, youth homelessness, education, and domestic violence prevention. In the past these youth have been involved in policy reports, administering youth mini-grants, hosting a Youth Leadership day, and making policy recommendations to the Governor and Governor's Office for Children, Youth and Families.

The Commission is housed in the Governor's Office for Children, Youth and Families and is supported by one full-time staff person with additional support from two other adult staff. The Commission receives funding from the Governor's office, Safe and Drug Free Schools and Arizona Parent's Commission.

State Agency or Department Youth Council: the council advises a specific state department or agency. Executives can encourage this action though an Executive Order or individual agencies can take the initiative to develop programs specific to their work.

Example of State Department Youth Council:

Pennsylvania State Board of Education has two student members and two student members-elect serve on the Board as non-voting members. The Chairperson of the Board appoints all student members. One student member, currently attending a Pennsylvania high school, serves on the Council of Basic Education. The other student member, currently enrolled at Pennsylvania institution of post-secondary education, serves on the Council of Higher Education. Each member serves one year as a student elect and then one year as a student member.

Model Advantage

This model does not require the majority support and thus can be easily implemented by a motivated governor.

Disadvantage

Youth representatives only advise one individual, narrowing their potential influence and tying the council's existence to the motives of the executive. Councils may not continue when another administration is elected.

Model Advantage

Youth can become engaged with agencies and issues that best suit their personal interests.

Disadvantage:

Youth are limited to a scope of issues and not exposed to broader statewide policies.

Members and elects are entitled to attend all Board, council and committee meetings.

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Glossary of Terms

Article 12 - an article within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that states young people are entitled to be active agents in their own development, they are capable of expressing views, and they have the right to be heard in all matters affecting them, including policy matters

Executive Order - a declaration made by a President or Governor that has the force of law within the Executive branch, according to the Executive's jurisdiction, and does not require action from the Legislature

Resolutions - proposals from the Legislature to take action affecting its own procedure that does not require action by the Governor if adopted by one house of the legislature or both.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - first international law that formally acknowledged the rights of children

Youth councils- formal bodies made up of youth (typically ages 16-18) who advise high-level decision makers and elected officials

Youth voice - the participation of youth in decision-making processes