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Youth can serve as full participants in local government and civic organizations

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Wisconsin teens don't have to wait in the wings as "the citizens of tomorrow." In many places around the state, they take on the roles and duties of citizens today.

In New Berlin and Muskego, teens serve on a youth advisory board – an arm of the city council -- where they respond to community issues and provide a voice for youth in city government.

In Waupaca, teens are voting members of city council committees that oversee the libraries, parks, cable television, airport, wellhead protection and historical society. Another dozen or so have been named to the boards of important nonprofit organizations in the city.

In Superior, several teens will be sworn in as members of both the city council and the county board, where they will take their seats as almost-fully participating

representatives. (They won't be able to cast votes, because they are appointed, not elected, and are not yet 18 years of age.)

In Veroqua, three high school students will become members of "Veroqua Partners," a merged board for the Chamber of Commerce and the "MainStreet" organization that encourages economic development.

In each of these communities, the University of Wisconsin-Extension 4-H youth development agent has played an important part in encouraging adult community leaders to give younger members of the community a chance to share in civic leadership and in teaching both the youth and the adults techniques for working together harmoniously and productively.

"I don't think people give kids enough credit for having good ideas about government and social programs," said Bob Browne, a 67-year-old Douglas County supervisor who pushed for acceptance of youth members of the county board and the Superior city council. "It's a good thing for the city leaders to interact with the young people. We need their fresh ideas."

Youth development research validates Browne's observation. According to Shep Zeldin, UW-Madison/Extension youth development specialist, research shows that youth who are engaged in meaningful decision-making in their families, organizations and schools gain clear and consistent developmental benefits.

The research shows that organizations and community also benefit when youth are involved.

Because youth have been isolated from adult society, many adults don't think youth have the ability, "the values, motivation, or competence to contribution to civic life," Zeldin said. "Youth are keenly aware of adult stereotypes and this awareness negatively influences their own decisions to engage in civic affairs."

In an increasing number of communities these stereotypes are changing.

"I think some of the adults were reluctant at first," said Greg Bybee, a 2003 high school graduate who has been chair of the Youth Board in New Berlin and is headed for Harvard this fall. "Over time they began to see that it wasn't like we were just on a field trip. They began to see what youth could do. I think because we set goals and accomplished them we earned some respect."

Ted Wysocki, New Berlin mayor agrees: "We as adult need to hear their thoughts and ideas because they are our next generation. In addition, I think this is the best way for young people to learn about civics and community responsibility."

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