

Using Youth Culture to Develop Youth Leadership

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The importance of youth leadership development in out-of-school time (OST) programs has been well documented in the literature on youth development. Youth leadership development consists of providing youth with opportunities to develop a set of "survival" skills that will last throughout adulthood. Skills such as resiliency, teamwork, conflict resolution, decision-making, and goal-setting are essential qualities of an effective leader. By building these skills, youth gain confidence, core competencies, and the motivation to succeed.

Youth with leadership skills have the capacity to make positive contributions to society. However, in order to build this capacity in youth, it is important that OST professionals first understand how to connect with youth. The emergence of social media and other technological advances have enabled youth to become socially and academically disconnected, and ultimately disengaged from in-school and out-of-school activities. By utilizing leadership opportunities, programs can provide meaning and purpose to youth, thereby increasing engagement and program participation.

To promote effective leadership skills, staff must first have

a clear understanding of youth culture. Youth culture refers to the values, norms, behaviors and practices that shape the way youth conduct their lives. In today's society, youth manifest their culture through the technology they use, the clothing they wear, and even their attitude. By examining current trends, products, and messages, programs can cultivate leadership in a way that is relevant to youth. Using these common interests to meet youth at their level, OST professionals can build a foundation to educate youth, broaden their experiences, and promote positive decision-making.

In the OST network funded by the City of Philadelphia Department of Human Services (DHS), EducationWorks Inc., Early Learning Middle School Program, (EWLC) and the Village of Arts and Humanities are two programs that use youth culture as a strategy in empowering youth through youth leadership development.

EWLC employs leadership development by using the project-based learning (PBL) strategy to introduce youth to the Culinary Arts. In a poll, youth expressed a desire to engage in programming that was active and would cultivate life skills and independence. After researching trends via media and social networking, staff at EWLC noticed that a popular trend was healthy living. Therefore, with the input of youth, staff developed practical and hands on program experiences to expose youth to the culinary arts.

This project integrates preparing healthy meals with the essentials of dining etiquette. Through a series of independent and collaborative assignments, youth are provided with both formal and informal leadership opportunities. For example, youth work in teams, where a captain is assigned and each youth is given a specific role. Youth are charged to develop menus, create budgets, prepare meals and plan events for simulated catering events.

Because youth are responsible for catering the events, leadership skills are cultivated as students work together, communicate and prepare meals. Youth work together to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy food, as well as how to properly use kitchen utensils to ensure safety. They practice communication skills during simulated dining experiences, and exercise the appropriate way to set tables, read menus, order dinner, exhibit dining etiquette, and use positive and respectful language. In this project, youth are empowered to develop as leaders using a medium that has relevance to their lives. Youth take pride in showcasing their competencies both in the program, as well as in their personal lives.

The middle and high school programs at Village of Arts & Humanities foster leadership development through creative arts, exposing youth to music production, filmmaking, photography, hip hop dance, and fashion design. This program implements a method that they refer to as "engaging youth on their turf." The Village

provides a venue for youth to express creativity, as well as provide youth the responsibility to drive the program. Therefore, youth develop leadership skills by having an active voice in program planning and implementation.

At the Village, youth participate in advanced arts courses instructed by industry professionals. In music production, youth use current styles of hip hop music as a tool for self-expression. Youth are encouraged to write their own songs and to utilize the on-site recording studio and editing equipment to produce records. Youth work together and take on the roles of songwriters, artists, and producers to develop finished products.

The Village also offers a film/photography course that teaches students the professional skills behind the art of creating media, while exposing them to possible career paths. Youth use their neighborhoods and surrounding environment to film and photograph for media gallery events. Students at the Village also utilize social media as a platform for self-expression and to promote their work. For example, recognizing that Instagram is a popular social media site, the program integrates its use in the curriculum by allowing youth to create photo grids, short video clips, and typography to post their daily life experiences.

The Village also encourages youth to utilize their leadership skills through real-world job experience. Under their youth-led business entity, Village Industries,

students created a photography company called One Shot. Under the guidance of teaching experts, youth are hired to photograph events where they exercise their artistry, as well as professional skills. Through the application of these leadership skills, youth develop accountability, teambuilding, communication, business management, and networking skills.

Youth leadership is a powerful tool that allows programs to engage youth, while promoting personal development. When OST professionals understand the culture of youth, they can incorporate leadership opportunities that are relevant to youth. As OST programs continue to incorporate youth leadership, it is important that they identify and incorporate youth interests and culture into program activities.