

# Youth Engagement

## KNOWLEDGE BRIEF



*"The importance of meaningful youth engagement cannot be overstated"*<sup>1</sup>. This quote best summarizes the literature related to youth engagement. The survival of rural regions depends on investing in innovative and inclusive ways of engaging people, particularly youth<sup>2,3</sup>. Engagement is critical for countering youth outmigration and increasing opportunities for youth<sup>4</sup>.

However, youth engagement faces challenges, such as a general disconnect between youth and adults and a lack of youth involvement on essential tasks and processes<sup>5</sup>. Engagement ranges from meaningful participation and sustained involvement in activities (e.g., arts, music, volunteering, sports) to opportunities for involvement in planning and decision making<sup>6</sup>.

For the purposes of this knowledge brief youth engagement is any meaningful involvement of youth within their community.

Youth engagement affords opportunities for youth to make connections and gain experience<sup>7</sup>. Engaged youth are a more informed population, able to gain skills, as well as enhance productivity and innovation<sup>8</sup>. Engagement has been linked to benefits such as: doing better in school, increased sense of

responsibility, better decision making, and increased sense of ownership and legitimacy<sup>7,9</sup>.

Active youth engagement can result in decreased substance abuse among youth, lower dropout rates, lower teen pregnancy, lower crime, lower rates of depression, and increased civic participation<sup>3,10</sup>. Engagement is also a basic principle of youth retention as engagement offers youth a sense of ownership of the community and active participation<sup>8,11,12</sup>.

Getting youth involved also helps with repatriation, as the more involved youth are prior to leaving the community the more likely they are to return<sup>5</sup>. Engagement comes in many different forms. Active engagement includes interaction directly with youth, such as interviews with students to gain community input<sup>2</sup>.

Passive engagement includes activities like community chalk boards and "I wish this was" stickers used to solicit input<sup>2</sup>. Communities can also invest in the social engagement of youth through the creation of activities (e.g., recreational programs) as well as investment in physical spaces (e.g., drop in centres)<sup>3,13,14</sup>. When getting started on youth engagement holding a conference or forum to

identify, discuss, and understand youth is a common initiative<sup>1,15-17</sup>. Youth councils are another popular form of engagement, used to inform policy and program development, give youth an informed say in decisions, increase youth participation, and to increase community connections with youth<sup>8,9,18</sup>.

While there are many new forms of engagement, particularly surrounding social media use, the success of these initiatives varies. Overall there is a range of ways to engage youth from those that are shallow and manipulative to token involvement to shared power<sup>8,19,20</sup>. It is important to note that shallow, manipulative, and token forms of engagement in all likelihood will do more damage than doing nothing at all.

From the existing examples of youth engagement there are several common success factors, including:

- Make youth a priority<sup>21</sup>
- Define what is meant by engagement<sup>6,20</sup>
- Youth driven initiatives and leadership<sup>6,17,20</sup>
- Partnerships and collaboration<sup>1,2,4,5,16,18,20-28</sup>
- Informal efforts, transparency, and flexible structure<sup>1,16,20</sup>
- Be inclusive and respectful<sup>1,6,7,9,21,25,29,30</sup>
- Develop and strengthen sense of place<sup>31</sup>
- Have and manage realistic goals and expectations<sup>2</sup>
- Be action oriented<sup>25</sup>
- Be innovative with existing resources<sup>2,20</sup>
- Long term investment and support<sup>2,9,11,15,17,19,20,25</sup>
- Monitor, review, and follow up<sup>2</sup>
- Make it fun<sup>1,6,20</sup>

There is a recognized link between youth engagement and an overall increase in community vitality and engagement<sup>18</sup>. One study noted that the more young people like their environment and get involved in their community the more they will want to live there and pursue studies there<sup>31</sup>.

This was echoed throughout the literature reviewed. Of all the success factors noted above, one near universal point was that youth engagement must be carried out with youth, as opposed to creation of programs for youth by adults. This includes the previously mentioned points of having youth

directed initiatives, having youth as active partners, and youth as decision makers<sup>1,2,4-6,16-18,20-28</sup>.

Communities need to engage their youth through more outlets and in more accessible and interactive ways<sup>32</sup>. This means engaging youth in ways that make them excited, interested, and invested<sup>32</sup>. True engagement emphasises elements like two way interaction, conversation, power sharing, and mutual respect<sup>9</sup>. Real engagement goes beyond developing and advertising a program, particularly if program development did not include youth. Additionally, active engagement extends beyond token gestures. Having youth engage and work with organizations results in full civic engagement<sup>17</sup>.

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