

Fighting Tokenism: Common Youth Engagement Challenges for School Health Advisory Councils (SHACs)

The Problem	Potential Solutions
<p>Under-prepared youth: Youth are uncomfortable or bored because they do not have the preparation or training to contribute effectively.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a thorough orientation for new youth members that introduces them to SBHC issues, common acronyms, board meeting procedures, and board members. • If funds are available, assign a staff member to provide ongoing training and transportation to the youth members. • If funds are <i>not</i> available, turn to other youth organizations in your community to provide training on health, community, and governance issues. • Create a youth-adult partnership: If youth are selected for an advisory role on an adult-majority board, create a youth-adult partnership so the adult can help clarify or explain new material and board procedures. • Facilitate more engaging, interactive meetings.
<p>Not enough youth representation: Often only one youth is included on these types of councils, which can be an intimidating experience for the young person.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aim for at least three youth members on your SHAC. This number enables the youth to provide a support system for one another, making their participation more valuable. Including at least three youth also enables you to gain multiple youth perspectives and potentially expand diversity of experiences on your SHAC. • Make sure the youth know to clarify when they are speaking for themselves or on behalf of their peers. • Prevent yourself and other adult board members from taking the young people's perspectives as <i>the</i> ultimate representation of young people's voice.
<p>Poor logistics: Youth can't attend the meetings because of when or where they are organized.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Worst-case scenario:</i> SHAC meetings are held every week at 1 pm in the public health office, which is located across town from the high school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct your meetings after school, on weekends, or in the evenings. • Hold your meetings at or near the school, or assign each youth an adult partner who is responsible for the young person a ride. • If at least one of your youth members has a car, assign her/him to be the driver, and provide reimbursement for gas. • <i>Best-case scenario:</i> The SHAC meetings are held twice a month on campus immediately after school.
<p>Students may be hard to contact: Because students are in class all day, it is often hard to reach them and get a prompt reply.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require that each youth participant has an email account. Indicate in your recruitment materials that SHAC members are required to check and reply to email at least twice a week. • Use other forms of communication that are more accessible to young people: Facebook, texting, phone calls, etc.
<p>Finding students to participate: SHAC organizers have a hard time recruiting youth who are aware of the opportunity or willing to take on the responsibility.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get youth excited about serving on the SHAC by producing fun recruitment flyers that point out how important the SHAC is (or will be) to teens and with young people's perspectives. • Recruit through people who deal with youth everyday, such as teachers and SBHC staff. • Recruit youth who display an interest in health issues, such as peer mentors, health advocates, or those interested in pursuing a health career. Avoid recruiting overextended youth. • Offer a modest stipend.
<p>Meetings too technical: The content of the meetings is too complicated for youth to understand.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure each agenda has at least one or two items that specifically draw on the <i>youths'</i> expertise, such as what services teens need, what concerns students at school have, or how to make the health center increasingly "teen-friendly." • Assign each youth an adult partner to help prepare youth for the meetings. • Email the agenda in advance, so youth have time to look over it and ask questions before the meeting. • Make council materials more accessible to younger audiences.