

## CHAPTER 03 Youth Engagement

This chapter primarily applies to middle and high school programs. Although children can be an important voice in elementary school-based health center planning, the tactics would be significantly different than those suggested here.

### WHY YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IS IMPORTANT

As the primary clients of school-based health centers, youth should be engaged in the needs assessment, planning, and implementation of school health services. Youth engagement can help ensure that the services provided are those of greatest need to youth, are developmentally and culturally appropriate, and are accessible to youth. Other advantages of youth engagement and positive youth development are described in more detail below.

The Search Institute has created a list of 40 developmental assets that help prevent young people from engaging in high-risk activities and help them become caring, responsible adults (see <https://page.search-institute.org/40-developmental-assets>).

According to the Search Institute:

- Youth involvement is expanding beyond community service to emphasize democratic citizenship that embraces both individual rights and responsibilities and group work for the common good.
- Adults in multiple settings and at varying levels have a primary role in creating opportunities for youth and supporting them in building their competencies as they simultaneously work for change.
- Youth participation in partnerships with adults can take varying forms and is shaped by the mission of the organization or initiative. Youth and adults can work collaboratively in a true partnership, or the initiative can be driven by one party or with support and input from the other.

### HOW YOUTH BENEFIT FROM BEING ENGAGED

In order for youth involvement to be successful for both the center and the youth, it should engage them in meaningful decision-making. This type of involvement is called youth engagement and can occur at the clinic level and local, state, or national government levels.

In addition to youth engagement being valuable to the school-based health center, it can be powerful for the youth involved. Young people involved in decision-making grow developmentally and academically. Research shows that youth engagement builds skills such as leadership and public speaking, increases self-esteem, enhances identity development, and improves academic achievement. Youth develop skills that help them become healthy, confident, well-rounded community leaders. They become “experts,” capable of influencing both their peers and adults as well as being a voice for positive change. Finally, youth who are involved in their school-based health center often develop positive, nurturing connections with caring adults – relationships that are invaluable to their development and help deepen their connection to school and work.

### STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

There are generally three mechanisms for youth to become engaged with school-based health center development: **youth-led research, youth involvement in service delivery, and youth advocacy**. First, youth-led research may drive components of the initial needs assessment and/or ongoing evaluation efforts. Youth researchers may analyze findings and help determine what and how services should be provided by the school-based health center. Second, youth may develop and/or deliver services such as peer health education or mentoring. Third, youth may act as policy advocates for school-based health services locally or statewide. Youth advisory committees may engage in any or all of these three activities, in addition to their general advisory role. More details on each strategy and California-based examples of each are detailed below.

## WHICH YOUTH TO ENGAGE?

Before launching youth engagement efforts, consider how you will recruit youth to participate. Often, adults will select youth who are already involved in school leadership activities. While these youth may have helpful experiences to contribute, they may not reflect the diversity of the student body.

In fact, **all** youth have strengths and the capacity to engage in school-based health center efforts, assuming appropriate support from adults. Prior to launching youth engagement activities, adults working on the school-based health center planning process should assess their own readiness to facilitate youth engagement. Issues to consider include what kind of youth engagement activities are most appropriate for the school community, whether the adults involved have experience facilitating youth-led activities, and what kind of training, support and resources adults and youth will need to ensure their success. Because well-meaning adults may unconsciously engage in behaviors that unwittingly disempower youth, they may need additional education and support to help them be effective in working with youth. Please see <https://www.advocatesforyouth.org> to take a deeper look at what youth-adult partnerships are and how to cultivate them. A great example of this partnership can be found at The Innovative Center for Community and Youth Development at the division of National 4-H Council <https://4-h.org/about/leadership/national-4-h-council/>. The council conducted one of the few existing studies on the effect of youth-adult partnerships. The study showed that “involving young people in decision making provides them with the essential opportunities and supports (i.e. challenge, relevancy, voice, cause-based action, skill-building, adult structure, and affirmation) that are consistently shown to help young people achieve mastery, compassion, and health”. (Shepherd Z, *et al. Youth in Decision-Making: A Study on the Impacts of Youth on Adults and Organizations*. Madison, WI: National 4-H Council, 2000)

It is also important to define how youth will be engaged and for how long. Many youth will be more likely to complete activities or projects that are short-term rather than year-long. Clearly outline the expectations and agreements for both youth and adults involved in your effort in order to sustain youth interest and build into the project both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (e.g., incentives). While financial incentives may be appreciated by youth, many will become involved for other reasons, such as completing community service requirements, forming new relationships, learning new skills, contributing to the school community, or garnering social recognition for leadership or peer mentoring.

Be sure to secure parent/guardian consent for school-based youth engagement activities or clubs. Consider including in the consent form a release to use photos of youth leaders for promotional or reporting materials. If youth activities involve trips off-site, you will also need to have students secure written parent/guardian permission using your local school district “field trip” forms.

## YOUTH-LED RESEARCH

Before youth representatives (or any advocates) can be real participants in decision-making, they must do some research. For example, before suggesting that the school-based health center promote certain services, youth should ask other students what they think are the most urgent health care needs. When young people cannot explain the rationale for their recommendations, they run the risk of being disregarded or considered “puppets” of their adult advisors. However, when youth can independently describe survey results and recommendations, their credibility increases.

In this section we address three approaches to youth-led research: surveys, focus groups, and community interviews.

**YOUTH SURVEYS** – Collaborating with youth to develop a survey is a great way for adults and youth to work together. This partnership works best if the adults involved have some experience developing and analyzing surveys so that they can provide guidance on how to structure the questions in order to gather the information that the youth think is important. Generally, youth surveys are not highly scientific in terms of the sample of youth surveyed. Oftentimes, youth simply survey their peers. It is a convenience sample, not a random sample. One alternative is to ask the school if the surveys can be distributed in class. If permission can be negotiated with the school and the youth can survey a class that all students take (e.g., English), this can be a good way to get a more representative sample. Survey results can be analyzed using Excel or pen and paper tallies. Again, it is best to find an adult familiar with survey analysis to assist in the process.

**YOUTH-LED FOCUS GROUPS** – Focus groups are another way to gather information. Youth-led focus groups are small meetings led by youth moderators (with or without adults present) where people discuss a topic or topics. Focus groups are forums for discussion and conversation. They offer the opportunity to learn not only **what** people think about a certain issue, but also **why** they think that way. With relatively little training and practice, youth can moderate focus groups, giving them the power to collect feedback on a policy or a project idea without having to do a full survey. (For more information on focus groups, see Chapter 9.)

**YOUTH INTERVIEWS OF COMMUNITY LEADERS** – A final way for youth to do research is to identify key leaders in their school, city, or community. The leaders can be elected officials, local citizens, principals, or directors of community organizations. Youth representatives, with or without adults, can organize these meetings and conduct structured or informal “interviews” with the leaders. Often even the most inaccessible public official will respond very positively to being approached by a teen regarding local issues.

## YOUTH-LED SERVICES

Another way to involve youth in the school-based health center is to develop peer-led programs such as peer health education and/or mentoring. These programs train students in both the health content, and the skills needed to participate. The health center oversees this training, provides the space and arranges the venues for youth to work with other students. It is important to note that adequate staff time must be devoted to these programs in order for them to succeed; ideally a minimum of one half- time staff person for each program, even if it only meets a few hours each week.

**PEER EDUCATORS** - Many SBHCs have successful peer education programs, where youth are trained on a specific health topic/s (reproductive/sexual health, mental health, substance use, traffic safety, nutrition, etc.) and use the knowledge they have learned to train their peers. They can facilitate health education workshops, or host events like health fairs to disseminate their key messages.

**PEER MENTORS** - The peer mentoring program model is when adult staff recruit and train older adolescents in a wide range of mental health concepts and tools to help them communicate, engage and support mentees using semi-structured processes. The program then partners them with younger adolescents for counseling, mentorship, and support, with appropriate professional supervision and support. This can be an effective way to reach youth who are unwilling to engage in traditional behavioral health counseling.

All of these programs also create a pipeline for youth to future health careers, something desperately needed in California and throughout the country.

Promoting Health Awareness to Teens (PHAT) is the youth advisory board to the Logan Health Center in Union City. It meets once a week and serves as a forum for youth to give input on health center policies and functions. The group gives direct feedback to clinic staff. They develop “health tips” that air on the school video announcements. They also host workshops and health fairs. This group has represented the clinic and the school at community events that promote leadership, community involvement, and civic participation. PHAT has been involved in promoting a “Month of Respect Multiracial Unity and Respect Fair”. The PHAT program develops leadership skills and gives youth visibility and voice in their school and community.

## YOUTH ADVOCACY

Youth can also become key advocates for developing or sustaining their school-based health centers by engaging in local or state advocacy for school health services and programs. In many cases, youth can be more effective than adults in attracting and sustaining the attention of policymakers.

Youth-led **direct advocacy** occurs when young people attempt to affect policy themselves by holding a face-to-face meeting with a policymaker, calling their legislator, or speaking at a hearing. They may also develop issue papers to present at legislators' meetings, publish in a newspaper, or post on the internet to inform the public. Students in California have participated in direct advocacy for the passage of legislation promoting school-based health centers. In Oakland Unified School District, young people helped overturn that district's previous ban on dispensing contraception.

Youth-led **grassroots advocacy** occurs when young people organize others to take action. Youth can be very effective at leading petition drives or letter-writing campaigns, canvassing, distributing flyers, or organizing rallies.

## YOUTH-LED MARKETING AND MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

Youth can be the most effective way to market your health center. They can also become the spokespersons for specific health initiatives. Let your youth help develop and implement a marketing plan for all types of media.

If possible, draw support from your local newspaper, TV station, teachers, graphic designers, webmasters, and others to guide the development of professional skills in this area.

The **My Choice Project** at the Manual Arts High School Health Center in Los Angeles is a peer education project with a focus on pregnancy prevention. The program delivers information through clinic health education counseling, classroom presentations, lunchtime discussion groups, campus-wide events, community outreach and after-school activities. It ensures that students are aware of the clinic services and helps them access those services. Students become the voice of the clinic outreaching to the entire campus. In addition, the program builds knowledge and skills and provides leadership opportunities for youth.

## YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEES

In addition to, or in lieu of, involving youth in your advisory council (see Chapter 2), you may consider establishing a separate youth advisory body. Such a group often consists of 6-10 youth who meet regularly and make recommendations to health center staff. Youth advisory committees are a great way to build youth leadership skills, get youth feedback, and help prepare youth to become future members of your wider advisory council. Two or three youth from the youth advisory committee can become representatives to the advisory council, serving as the liaisons between the youth and adult councils.

The success of a youth advisory committee depends greatly on the degree of support and mentoring provided by the school-based health center. Some school-based health centers may not have the staff, funding, or experience to support a youth advisory committee initially. In this circumstance, it is better to wait until the school-based health center has more resources than to launch a youth advisory committee prematurely without adequate staffing or support.

## SUSTAINING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Maintaining youth engagement is essential to your clinic's success. In general, youth participate because they:

- Have fun and feel good about doing the work!
- Make friends with other youth as they form new, supportive social networks
- Recognize social injustices or problems in their community
- Seek to promote youth voices, ideas and opinions to influence decision-making
- Want to emulate an important person in their life
- Are provided with short- and long-term incentives that are meaningful
- Were encouraged, supported, or saw parents or other significant adults model the importance of involvement.

In order to sustain youth engagement, school-based health centers need to ensure that the adults working with youth view them as assets. They need to provide guidance, mentorships, role models, and learning/professional development opportunities. Additionally, they need to build on creative youth-adult relationships or opportunities that support bringing youth and adults together as partners. Most importantly, the youth engagement program needs to facilitate team-building between youth participants and be fun. For more resources on youth engagement best practices, see <https://www.schoolhealthcenters.org/youth-engagement>.

At the Balboa Teen Health Clinic in San Francisco, the Youth Advisory Board (YAB) was created with the goal of educating other youth on their minor consent rights. The YAB conducted a needs assessment at seven high schools assessing students' knowledge regarding minor consent rights and their opinions on school health. The YAB then presented their findings to the school district's Board of Education, urging them to pass a resolution incorporating minor consent education into San Francisco's high school health education curriculum. As a result of this process, more youth became aware of the clinic and were referred by their peers for services. The youth presence made the clinic friendlier to youth and reinforced the perspective that youth were partners in the clinic with real responsibility, respect, and the power to make change.