



YOUTH VOICE IN COALITIONS

Youth are experts on their experience and their community. Their leadership and insights can strengthen a coalition's ability to catalyze systems change. Ready by 21 St. Louis and the UMSL Community Innovation and Action Center have partnered to better understand the current local landscape of coalition youth engagement in practice and of the resources required to do so effectively. Interviews with regional practitioners resulted in the following framework, which understands authentic youth engagement as a spectrum, with varying levels of power and responsibility being shared with youth.

This document is a resource for coalitions and cross-sector collaboratives working towards population level outcomes related to youth, defined as young people 14-25 years old. It provides a self-assessment to help coalitions better understand where their current practices stand on the spectrum and helps measure a group's readiness to engage young people as equal partners in the work. Infusing youth voice in coalitions, regardless of the level of intensity, requires intentionality and dedicated resources. While it is labor-intensive work, individuals, coalitions, and communities all stand to benefit from authentic youth engagement.

BENEFITS OF YOUTH VOICE

FOR YOUTH

- Expanded skill building and opportunities to assert leadership
- Increased involvement in grassroots advocacy efforts, policy changes, and campaigns that directly impact their community

FOR COALITIONS

- Solidification of strategies that are informed by experts—youth with lived experience
- Improved feedback loop through youth insight
- Expanded grant opportunities

FOR COMMUNITIES

- Progress and reforms that are co-produced by community members—resulting in progress that is better aligned with community need
- Promotion of youth as vital and contributing members of their communities

Power is at the core of the Youth Voice Spectrum, on who has it and how it is shared. The spectrum ranges from adults holding all of the power to youth being treated as equal partners in the work, with corresponding oversight and responsibility. Engaging youth as equal partners in coalitions is currently the exception rather than the standard. Historically, adults lead and hold the decision-making power in coalitions. This is a manifestation of the assumption that adults, because of age, have the skills, knowledge, and expertise to act in young people's best interest. Authentic youth voice in coalitions requires that participating adults actively tackle these presumptions, so that adults are not holding all the decision-making power in collaboratives intended to directly impact the lives of young people.

Effectively implementing youth voice practices requires intentionality and dedicated resources. Coalitions and cross sector initiatives need to strategically determine the level of engagement that they can realistically commit, given available resources, to support both youth and adults to succeed.

COALITION YOUTH VOICE SPECTRUM



ABSENT

DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Coalition leadership and membership is comprised solely of adults, and there are no active processes to obtain impacted youth feedback or perspective. Youth participation is measured by the number served or impacted by the coalition. Youth with lived experience are not otherwise engaged, nor have their perspectives been incorporated in prioritizing initiative strategies.	<p>COALITION EVENT: Adults decide the event focus, the program content, and the outreach strategies and plan all the logistics for the event. Adult coalition members staff the event, set it up, and clean it up.</p> <p>COALITION MARKETING CAMPAIGN: Adults design and oversee development of marketing campaign without input from youth. Adults disseminate the campaign to youth. Youth might help distribute marketing materials under adult supervision.</p>
STAFF: No resources required	

TOKENISM

DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Adult coalition members set the agenda and make decisions. A couple of impacted youth are engaged to provide input, but their views are not prioritized. Young people are not given leadership roles or responsibilities due to their perceived lack of skills, knowledge or expertise. At this level, youth are generally invited to attend coalition meetings without a set role. Tokenism typically results in youth disengaging from the coalition.	<p>COALITION EVENT: Adults do all the above, but ask a youth to manage the registration table, hand out programs, or perform.</p> <p>COALITION MARKETING CAMPAIGN: One or two youth sit in on planning meetings where the marketing campaign is being developed and solidified. Youth may make a few suggestions, which may or may not be incorporated in final products.</p>
STAFF: 0.1 FTE fully dedicated to youth engagement	

CONSULTATION

DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Coalition members actively seek impacted youth feedback and input within set parameters on what they want advise on. Youth may or may not be told how their feedback was incorporated. At this level, adults still hold all the decision-making power. Young people have no control over resources or any power to put their independent ideas into action.	<p>COALITION EVENT: Youth participate in a focus group about the event. They are asked to provide feedback on pre-drafted flyers and a list of potential advertising tactics. Adults incorporate youth feedback but still have all the decision-making power.</p> <p>COALITION MARKETING CAMPAIGN: Impacted youth participate in a couple of focus groups to provide feedback on the campaign direction, marketing materials, and potential distribution tactics. Adults decide whether or not to incorporate the input.</p>
STAFF: 0.15 - 0.30 FTE fully dedicated to youth engagement	

REPRESENTATION

DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
A select number of impacted youth who have lived experience in the coalition's focus are chosen or recruited to represent their peers in the coalition and have a clear role. Youth representatives either join the majority adult leadership board or are part of a separate youth council that provides guidance and advise. Young people have some decision-making power and responsibility.	<p>COALITION EVENT: Appointed youth representatives provide input on the entire event, helping solidify planning logistics and supporting on the day of. They provide ideas for the program and staff the event with adults.</p> <p>COALITION MARKETING CAMPAIGN: A youth advisory board, comprised of impacted youth in the target audience, provide regular input throughout the campaign development process. They have some decision-making power on the vision and final products.</p>
STAFF: 0.5 - 0.75 FTE fully dedicated to youth engagement	

PARTICIPATION

DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Adults and impacted youth jointly share decision-making power. Young people's views hold equal weight as those of adults, and there is a clear structure set up to ensure equitable decision making. The role of the staff person is to support, challenge, stimulate, and serve as a facilitator for youth. Participation is not an end product but rather a process and the structure which allows impacted youth to have real decision-making power.	<p>COALITION EVENT: Throughout the planning and the implementation of the event, youth are involved as equal partners with adults and equal decision makers. They are involved in the decision on the focus, outreach, budget, marketing, and production of the event.</p> <p>COALITION MARKETING CAMPAIGN: Throughout the vision development, design, material solidification and distribution, youth are involved as equal participants as adult coalition members.</p>
STAFF: 1 FTE fully dedicated to youth engagement	

SELF-MANAGING

DEFINITION	EXAMPLES
Young people hold most, if not all, the decision-making power. They set the agenda, decide on issues, take action, and control resources with marginal or no adult oversight. Adult staff play a very important role in a support position, to help with the implementation of the young people's vision.	<p>COALITION EVENT: Youth have all or most of the decision-making power. The event is designed, planned, and produced by them. Adults serve as support and give input when asked.</p> <p>COALITION MARKETING CAMPAIGN: Youth have all or most of the decision-making power and the responsibility for developing, designing, and distributing the coalition marketing campaign. Adults serve as support and give input when asked.</p>
STAFF: 1.5 FTE fully dedicated to youth engagement	

NEEDED RESOURCES

It is important to allocate sufficient resources to ensure the success of a coalition's youth engagement efforts.

BUDGET

Budget for staff salaries, compensation for youth, meeting snacks, trips, conference hosting, speakers, and trainings.

TIME

Budget time for onboarding and supporting youth, facilitating coalition culture change, engaging and building relationships with youth, and trainings.

TRAINING

ADULTS: Anti-bias/anti-racism, trauma awareness, adultism, and youth participation
 YOUTH: Onboarding training prior to joining coalition

YOUTH PREPARATION

Young people will not be able to engage until they understand and can speak in the language being used at coalition meetings. For this reason, a strong onboarding process is recommended to ensure that they are set up to succeed. Make sure to incorporate a history of the coalition and review its mission, strategies and goals. Break down the vocabulary, acronyms, or other industry language that is commonly used at the coalition. Additionally, remove common barriers to attending meetings by making sure that they take place at a time and location that is accessible to impacted young people. Ensure that youth have a clear role to play in meetings, that has been explained to them, so that they actively participate and contribute. Ask youth for feedback and actively incorporate their suggestions.

LESSONS LEARNED

Below are several generalizable lessons and on-going barriers that have been flagged by regional initiative staff who oversee coalition youth engagement:

- Compensate youth for their contributions and meet at times and locations that work for them
- Ensure there is strategic and high-level commitment to youth voice with dedicated resources
- Train adults in youth development practices prior to engaging youth
- Acknowledge that institutionalized racism, sexism, and ageism will impact the work
- Communicate with parents
- Actively listen to youth and prepare to share power equally
- Provide larger support systems for youth and promote community among youth
- Acknowledge and address larger systems and contexts
- Make sure that engaged youth are diverse and represent the impacted community
- Build strong and sustainable relationships with youth and with community partners

THIS DOCUMENT IS THE RESULT OF A COLLABORATION BETWEEN READY BY 21 AND THE UMSL COMMUNITY INNOVATION AND ACTION CENTER.

Ready by 21 St. Louis is a growing regional movement to ensure that all children and youth have the support they need to be safe, healthy, and successful from birth into adulthood. Ready by 21 St. Louis achieves this vision by facilitating the alignment of practice, policy, and investment in five priority areas.

The UMSL Community Innovation and Action Center makes whole communities a reality in St. Louis by building powerful leaders, fostering effective non-profits and governments, supporting strong community partnerships, and developing shared infrastructure and policy. As a university based center, CIAC conducts applied research, builds skills, and convenes community partners in each of these four areas.

Together, these initiatives hope to promote and support youth engagement practices in St. Louis region coalitions working towards youth outcomes.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was possible thanks to the willingness of representatives from the following organizations to share their time and insight:

- Creative Reaction Lab
- Cultural Leadership
- East Side Aligned
- FOCUS St. Louis
- Metropolitan Congregations United
- Planned Parenthood Teen Advocates for Sexual Health
- The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis
- Teen Pregnancy and Prevention Partnership
- Vision for Children at Risk

COALITION YOUTH VOICE SELF-ASSESSMENT

Below is a self-assessment tool to help you identify a baseline for where your coalition stands on the spectrum. Please circle either yes or no for each prompt, indicating whether or not it is a current practice in your coalition. If you are involved in multiple coalitions, fill out separate assessments for each.

		Current Practice?
ABSENT	The coalition leadership and membership is comprised solely of adults.	Yes / No
	There are no active processes to obtain youth feedback or perspective on coalition activities.	Yes / No
TOKENISM	One or two youth are engaged to provide input on coalition activities in an ad hoc basis. Their suggestions may or may not be implemented.	Yes / No
	There is an open invitation for any interested youth to attend general coalition meetings. Attendance is not consistent.	Yes / No
CONSULTATION	Youth participate in focus groups designed by adults and are subsequently informed about how their input will be used.	Yes / No
	In order to evaluate coalition activities and tactics, youth fill out surveys. Adults derive meaning from this data to inform their decision making.	Yes / No
REPRESENTATION	More than three youth with lived experience in the coalition's target focus are part of the coalition, a set role, and some responsibilities.	Yes / No
	The coalition has a separate youth council that provides advice and feedback but have nominal decision making power.	Yes / No
PARTICIPATION	The coalition has structures and processes to ensure adults and youth have equal decision-making power.	Yes / No
	Adults and youth coalition members jointly oversee the coalition's direction, budget, and evaluation.	Yes / No
SELF-MANAGING	Young people have opportunities set the agenda, decide on issues, take action, and control resources with marginal adult oversight.	Yes / No
	Impacted youth hold most if not all the decision making power over a key coalition tactic or activity.	Yes / No

ANALYZING RESULTS

Implementing authentic youth voice in coalitions is a non-linear journey and even within the same coalition, youth engagement can exist at different levels. For the purposes of this framework, your coalition's current youth voice level along this spectrum is represented by the level of highest concentration of "yes" responses. There is no judgement if your coalition currently engages youth at the none or tokenism levels. Effectively implementing youth voice practices is labor intensive work that requires continual intentionality and dedicated resources.

If your coalition's practices currently stand between none and consultation, but you want to increase engagement, then there needs to be an intentional shift in perspective among your current coalition members around young peoples' abilities and a willingness to shift power and responsibility to them. Coalition Youth Voice from representation to self-managing is not a product or end goal, rather these levels embody a way of working that infuses processes and structures to ensure young people are co-producers in the work and have real decision making power. The following page has a tool to help you better understand your coalition's views about young people's readiness to have this level of responsibility and power.

PERSPECTIVE BAROMETER

Please circle yes or no in the appropriate place for what you believe and what you guess your coalition’s leadership and general membership would believe:

YOUTH HAVE THE ABILITY TO INDEPENDENTLY...	YOUR BELIEF	COALITION LEADERSHIP	GENERAL COALITION MEMBERSHIP
Run coalition meetings	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Create and oversee coalition budgets	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Plan coalition community events	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Make policy recommendations	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Act as coalition spokespeople	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Organize a protest or march	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No
Manage a coalition tactic	Yes / No	Yes / No	Yes / No

ANALYZING RESULTS

If the majority of your answers to the perspective barometer above were “No,” then a critical first step towards increasing youth voice practices to representation and above is training for adults coalition members on youth development, adultism, and youth participation. Additionally, impacted youth in the St Louis region are primarily youth of color. There is an added level of bias because of this that requires adults to engage in anti-bias/anti-racism and trauma informed trainings. Anti-bias/anti-racism training provides education on systems of privilege and oppression while promoting skills on inclusivity and empathy. This training will increase coalition members ability to identify and address implicit and explicit biases within systems with impacted youth. Trauma-informed trainings will increase adults’ ability to recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and better understand how their coalition can promote policies, procedures and practices that actively resist re-traumatization within the initiative’s sphere of work. Below is a list of suggested trainings in each of the three categories mentioned here. Please note that this list is not exhaustive.

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

ANTI-BIAS/ANTI RACISM

- Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training, Introduction to Anti-Bias, AntiRacist (ABAR) Education
- Anti Defamation League, A World of Difference Institute
- NCCJ St. Louis, Inclusion Institutes and Interrupting Racism Trainings

ADULTISM AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

- Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality
- Health Resources in Action, Youth Worker Certificate Training

TRAUMA AWARENESS

- Wyman, Trauma-Informed Youth Development Training
- Alive and Well, Trauma Awareness Training: How Trauma Impacts Social, Emotional, and Health Outcomes