



NLC Promotes Youth Participation in Local Government

From coast to coast, NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) is leading exciting activities to further youth participation efforts. These activities include a leadership academy for young people together with adults, a regional conference and site visits.

The predominant theme is the importance of adults and youth truly respecting each other and working together in partnership. Although implementation is hard work, cities and towns around the country are finding success.

Leadership Academy

NLC's first-ever leadership academy to promote youth participation included two-person teams from 15 cities. Each team was composed of one youth aged 15-18 and one local elected official or city staff.

The cities were Boston, Mass.; Caldwell, Idaho; Edmond, Okla.; Galveston, Texas; Newport News, Va.; Portsmouth, Va.; Rexburg, Idaho; Rock Hill, S.C.; Salt Lake City, Utah; San Jose, Calif.; Santa Clarita, Calif.; Savannah, Ga.; Spokane, Wash.; Tampa, Fla.; and Tucson, Ariz.

The selected participants had a unique opportunity to share successes and learn from others in this in-depth training. The leadership academy featured peer learning and expert presentations on strengthening youth participation in cities and towns.

Both adult and youth participants gained from discussing what young people need from adults. Adults can

- be an ally by being reliable and completely on their side.
- encourage an environment that is safe from blame or judgment.
- tell the truth and share information openly and in clear, direct language.
- promote community by providing information about their and others cultural, ethnic and gender struggles and achievements.
- be a partner who is willing to share the power and work with them.
- celebrate their successes.



Two-person teams of youth and adults from 15 cities participated in NLC's first-ever leadership academy to promote youth participation in San Jose, Calif.

All participants created action plans with time frames and benchmarks to measure progress.

Many of the youth councils — whether newly formed or not — emphasized a desire for greater interaction with city council members and addressed this in their plans. For example, Santa Clarita, Calif., will begin to invite elected officials, the school superintendent and other city leaders to future youth council meetings so they can hear from the youth first-hand.

Inspired by the training, Edmond, Okla., and Rexburg, Idaho, are now planning their first youth summits. Caldwell, Idaho, is borrowing the 'Silence the Violence' theme from Newport News in planning a youth town hall event.

Echoing a common theme, Tucson's Fran Embrey Senechal said, "Our next step is to begin utilizing what we already have in place and improve on it."

Regional Conference

NLC's recent one-day regional conference in San Jose, Calif., promoted youth participation in municipal government and civic affairs to 100 youth (15-18 years old) and adults from California and six other states.

San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales opened the conference with remarks about building effective relationships between youth and the police. Then, trainers from the Youth Leadership Institute led the audience in acting out both helpful and inappropriate roles in youth-adult partnerships.

In a workshop on developing and sustaining youth councils, the audience heard from youth and adults representing the youth commissions in El Dorado County, Calif., and San Francisco.

According to these presenters, these are the criteria for being a successful youth commissioner:

- engaged in the community
- civic-minded
- committed to public service
- able to work as a team member and partner
- passionate about issues facing young people and their community
- time, time, time

Youth commission representatives from Spokane, Wash., and Marin County, Calif., shared strategies on getting out the youth vote and raising young voters' consciousness of issues in the community.

By holding town halls with elected officials and those running for public office, youth can ask questions that are important to them and be a part of the political process even before they may be old enough to vote. Working with the schools, either to increase attendance at the forums or to administer the sample ballots for a youth vote, is a crucial partnership for both cities.

Youth service was the focus of the workshop presented by youth and adults from Lakewood, Wash., and San Jose, Calif. They suggested working with 'natural sponsors' for each project, such as Lowe's or Home Depot for a construction or landscaping project. Another important planning step is identifying project leaders, both youth and adults, who will see the project to completion.

"This ... helped me learn that we [youth] really can inspire other youth," said Jacob Thatcher, a high school sophomore from Rexburg, Idaho. "We can do something for our community."

Site Visits

A recent site visit to Salt Lake City, Utah, focused not only on enhancing two kinds of partnership opportunities and but also on offering persuasion training.

To stimulate partnerships within the city, the YouthCity Government (YCG) program reached out to school officials.

Participants learned that the superintendent or a school principal might not always be the right person to approach. One newly appointed vice principal at the meeting — responsible for ongoing relationships with the student body — had not been aware of YCG or the student participants from his school.

In an example of external partnership, representatives from 12 cities across northern Utah met together to learn from each other and to explore future partnerships. They shared ideas and energy and began to develop plans for a regional conference in which networking and joint planning would be the themes.

Since the site visit's overall goal was reaching out, the Salt Lake City youth asked for training on persuasion and marketing. They focused on letters to the editor, presentations to various community groups and getting media coverage.

Three basic strategies used in persuasion are appeal to reason, appeal to audience emotion and appeal to audience needs.

To communicate effectively, know the audience, determine your purpose, organize your message, deliver the message and arrive at closure.

An upcoming visit to Fall River, Mass., will highlight the city's plan for youth being developed through youth and adult discussions, trainings and summits.

NLC staff will assist in increasing youth involvement and participation in activities such as sports and clubs and in empowering students to affect their school environment, develop pride in their school and develop an inclusive setting for all students.

Details: These activities are part of the YEF Institute's MetLife Foundation Youth-City Connection project. For further information on youth involvement, download NLC's action kit for municipal leaders, "Promoting Youth Participation," in the publications section of www.nlc.org/iyef. To receive a printed copy, leave a detailed message at 202-626-3014 or send an e-mail to iyef@nlc.org. The Youth Leadership Institute, which assisted with training in the above meetings, will share additional information at www.yli.org.



Attendees at NLC's regional conference on youth participation in San Jose, Calif., participate in high-energy activity to promote community building.