



STARTING A YOUTH COUNCIL

A PRACTICAL GUIDE



YOUTH VOICE • CIVIC ENGAGEMENT • STRONGER COMMUNITIES



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A youth council can give young residents a meaningful connection to local government while helping cities hear fresh ideas, develop future civic leaders, and strengthen community engagement. The key is to build a clear structure, provide consistent support, and create real opportunities for youth to contribute.

1. BUILD THE FOUNDATION

1

Identify the Purpose

Clarify why the city wants a youth council. Define the issues, goals, and outcomes you want youth participation to address.

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Develop Rules & Expectations

Create bylaws, guidelines, or a handbook covering attendance, conduct, confidentiality, communication, social media, participation, and applicable city policies.

2

Get Governing Body Support

Present the concept to the city council or governing body. Identify a champion and determine whether an ordinance, resolution, or policy is appropriate.

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Determine City Staff Support

Assign a staff liaison to coordinate meetings, prepare agendas, communicate with members, and connect the council with city departments. Make sure adequate staff time is available.

3

Define the Structure

Decide eligibility, age or grade range, number of members, terms, meeting frequency, leadership positions, and how members will be selected and replaced.

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Build Community Partnerships

Connect with schools, counselors, youth organizations, libraries, and community groups that can promote the opportunity and encourage broad participation.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Create the structure—but let young people help shape what happens inside it.

2. RECRUIT, PREPARE & LAUNCH

Move from a good idea to a functioning youth council.

Recruitment and orientation are opportunities to establish credibility and inclusion from the beginning. Make the process accessible, communicate expectations clearly, and make sure members understand that their participation is intended to be meaningful.

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Recruit & Select Members

Create a simple application process and promote it widely. Seek a group that reflects different schools, neighborhoods, interests, and experiences in the community.

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Give Youth a Meaningful Role

Provide real issues to explore, projects to lead, and recommendations to make. Establish a clear process for city officials to receive and respond to youth recommendations.

8

Orient & Train the Council

Introduce members to local government, city services, elected officials, staff roles, meeting procedures, teamwork, public speaking, and respectful disagreement.

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Connect Youth to City Government

Invite members to governing body meetings and arrange opportunities to meet department directors, elected officials, and staff. Help youth see how decisions and services work.

MAKE PARTICIPATION REAL

A youth council is most effective when young people can see a connection between what they discuss and what happens in their community. Consider giving members a regular agenda item at a governing body meeting, assigning a citywide project, inviting them to provide feedback on a proposed initiative, or asking them to research an issue and present recommendations.

CITY OFFICIAL CHECKLIST

- ✓ Provide meeting dates and materials well in advance.
- ✓ Use language and meeting formats that are accessible to students.
- ✓ Make transportation, scheduling, and other participation barriers part of the planning conversation.
- ✓ Pair youth with supportive staff rather than expecting them to navigate city government alone.
- ✓ Recognize contributions publicly and give members opportunities to celebrate successes.

LAUNCH QUESTION

What is one issue your city could ask young people to study, discuss, or help improve during their first year?

3. ENGAGE, SUPPORT & SUSTAIN

Build a program that lasts beyond the first group of members.

The city's role does not end when the council is established. Ongoing staff support, meaningful projects, communication with elected officials, and regular evaluation will determine whether the youth council becomes a lasting part of the community's civic infrastructure.

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Support Youth-Led Projects

Provide resources and guidance while allowing youth to take ownership. Projects might involve parks and recreation, community events, public spaces, civic engagement, sustainability, or other local priorities.

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Evaluate & Sustain the Program

Ask youth and city officials what is working and what should change. Track participation, projects, recommendations, and community impact; adjust the program as it evolves.

TIPS FOR CITY OFFICIALS

- ✓ Keep communication two-way: city staff should listen as well as provide.
- ✓ Give youth projects with visible outcomes.
- ✓ Invite governing body members to interact with the council regularly.
- ✓ Create a transition plan so new members can learn from returning members.
- ✓ Review bylaws and program goals periodically.
- ✓ Share accomplishments with the community.

FIRST-YEAR ROADMAP

	Establish purpose • secure governing body support • define structure • develop guidelines • identify staff liaison
	Recruit members • complete orientation • hold initial meetings • identify a priority issue or project • connect with city departments
	Complete a youth-led project • present recommendations • recognize accomplishments • gather feedback • refine the program for the next class

**YOUTH VOICE.
STRONGER
COMMUNITY.**

A successful youth council is more than a city-sponsored student club. It creates an authentic connection between young residents and local government—giving young people opportunities to learn, contribute, lead, and see the results of their involvement.

Use this guide as a starting point and tailor the council's structure, policies, and activities to your community and governing body.