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New Efforts to Engage Youth in Legislative Advocacy

By Wendy Schaezel Lesko

The National Secretaries of State recent report confirms earlier findings that more Americans feel disconnected from government. The Council for Excellence in Government warns that "if each new generation continued to form a weaker attachment to government than the one before, the country would fairly soon find that only a small minority of citizens was connected to and involved with government." Concerted efforts are underway to test new approaches to entice young people to participate in the public policy arena at local, state, and national levels. A snapshot follows of a few promising initiatives along with some pointers on how to avoid potential pitfalls.

First, a few theories about the worrisome degree of apathy and cynicism felt by 26% of the population – those under age 18 – as well as Generation X. The mantra heard throughout their lifetime is: Government is the problem, not the solution. This view is reinforced by the explosive growth among young people who perform community service. Volunteer activities usually are apolitical where non-profit agencies and the business sector are seen as the primary problem solvers. While it is patriotic to volunteer, it is un-American to lobby for or against proposed legislation. AmeriCorps members, for example, are prohibited from engaging in any political advocacy, even voter registration.

Syndicated columnist and author E. J. Dionne, Jr. spells out the challenge: "The great reforming generations are the ones that marry the aspirations of service to the possibilities of politics and harness the good work done in local communities to transform a nation." Promising efforts are underway to rekindle this spirit, especially among those not yet old enough to vote. Our national clearinghouse plans to concentrate more than ever on ways to reduce the democracy dropout rate and restore the honored tradition as expressed in the Maryland Constitution Article 7: "That right of the People to participate in the Legislature is the best security of liberty and the foundation of all free Government."

DIGITAL CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Promising Prototypes: Forget the fax and avoid postage. This digital technology is in its infancy but its potential for grassroots organizing is evident. Take, for instance, the successful global mobilization in support of the International Landmine Ban Treaty. Here are three examples of Internet access which target different levels of government.

- ◆ www.e-thepeople.com – This communications hub claims electronic addresses to 140,000 local, state, and federal government officials. Individuals can initiate petitions and letters and then invite others to add their names in support. These documents then are transmitted via e-mail to the appropriate decision makers.
- ◆ www.theyouthvoice.net – A US Department of Commerce \$2 million grant helped launch the Electronic Youth Advisory Council site which

aims to arouse young people to take an active role in debates regarding school uniforms, gun regulations and other legislation under consideration by the Indiana Statehouse.

Potential Pitfalls: There is the risk of petition proliferation where elected officials and the media may disregard this and other electronic astro-turf communication. As long as this tactic is not a substitute for more personal interactions with the decision makers, it can serve as one component of a multi-faceted advocacy campaign.

CIVIC EDUCATION FOLLOWED BY ACTION

Promising Prototypes: Legislative simulations can be stimulating but real world learning takes a leap forward when young people go beyond mock rehearsals. Rigorous research, careful preparation and role-playing for an actual legislative advocacy campaign are the trademarks of several new civic education programs.

- ◆ We The People...Project Citizen – This curriculum gets middle school students to identify a public policy concern, conduct research on the issue, develop a proposal and pursue it through state or local government channels. One class in Phoenix concentrated on overcrowded juvenile detention centers. The National Conference of State Legislatures' website is www.ncsl.org/programs/public/winner.htm.
- ◆ Lobby Day – Approximately 250 New York City youth travel to Albany but it's not a field trip. Last year, students presented legislators with a list of demands, such as reducing class size, raising the minimum wage, providing confidential school-based health centers. This particular event is organized by a citywide coalition of organizations including the AIDS & Adolescents Network of NY.
- ◆ Statewide Statehouse Rally – Young tobacco control activists in Kansas, Nebraska, Florida and other states have planned major events at their state capitol, attracting hundreds of students and major news coverage. These youth-led rallies usually are preceded by role-play activities on a particular legislative proposal before meetings with lawmakers and/or their staff.

Potential Pitfalls: Some programs tend to attract top students rather than those who feel disenfranchised and distrustful of politicians and the democratic process. Even traditional leaders may get a patronizing or unwelcome response from policy makers. Ongoing advocacy training and adequate resources, including coaches experienced in lobbying, are crucial. Often geographical distance and the sheer number of legislators at the federal or state levels add to the challenge. Youth-led projects at the local level, for instance, before the zoning commission or county council, tend to have better outcomes.

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ONGOING CONSULTATION WITH PUBLIC POLICY MAKERS & YOUNG CONSTITUENTS

Promising Prototypes: A small but significant number of government officials depend on young people's varied perspectives and firsthand information, not unlike their reliance on other constituents and paid lobbyists. Unlike one-shot youth summits or focus groups, periodic meetings with a youth advisory committee require greater commitment in terms of resources and staff.

* User Groups – After the Rockville City Council (MD) heard testimony from two young skateboarders, the Recreation Department was told to develop a plan. A Skatepark Task Force was formed, typical of other user groups created to get citizen input. Some 30 teens collaborated on a proposed budget, site selection, architectural plans, and soon they will help select the contractor.

* City or County Youth Commissions – The Board of Supervisors in dozens of California municipalities depends on recommendations from a citywide youth advisory council before enacting proposals pertaining to transportation, crime, health and other issues that impact on children and teens. Check out: www.yli.org

* Ongoing Information Exchange – Various officials from school principals to Cabinet members meet regularly with youth. U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Senate Advisory Youth Involvement Team or SAY IT!, composed of about 100 students in five regions of Washington, gives feedback on pending legislation and raises other issues with the Senate and her staff (www.senate.gov/~murray/sayit.html). Also contact Ashley Price about the Youth Civic Engagement project (301-961-2972) aprice@fourhcouncil.edu.

Potential Pitfalls: Sometimes these interactions can amount to no more than a photo-op. A legislator or his/her staff may think that they are providing a great opportunity for "tomorrow's leaders" rather than actively listening and responding to their ideas now. In other cases, young people may be expected to rubberstamp a policy maker's agenda. Many of the same students are invited to participate in numerous forums and conferences and may suffer from action planning when their ideas are solicited repeatedly but there is no follow-up or genuine collaboration.

◆ 8 REASONS TO INVOLVE YOUTH ◆

Intergenerational teamwork goes far beyond reducing age segregation, promoting diversity, and providing opportunities for youth development. Collaborating with 26% of the population holds great promise for the discovery of innovative and practical solutions to many of today's problems.

MAXIMUM YOUTH INVOLVEMENT MAKES SENSE BECAUSE YOUNG PEOPLE . . .

❶ **SERVE AS ROLE MODELS AND PEER EDUCATORS.** Peer education is perhaps the most recognized and accepted role for young activists. It is no secret that kids listen to kids. Teenagers as well as pre-teens can be excellent teachers, credible messengers, and effective recruiters. Many believe the real benefit is that peer educators practice what they preach and avoid many risky behaviors.

❷ **INFLUENCE THEIR PARENTS AND OTHER ADULTS.** Sons and daughters have more influence on their elders than is acknowledged. Persuading a relative to quit smoking, prodding a parent to register to vote are examples of the domino effect that children can have on people of all ages.

❸ **DIAGNOSE PROBLEMS AND PROVIDE A REALITY CHECK.** Young people have firsthand knowledge about their school and community environment. Youth collaborators can collect data adults cannot obtain from other youth, and can offer a pragmatic client perspective to data analysis and planning. Geoffrey Canada, author of *Fist Stick Knife Gun*, writes, "[C]hildren are the real experts in violence prevention...they are the first ones to ask if you really want to know what works and what doesn't."

❹ **CHALLENGE CONVENTIONAL THINKING.** These underage allies offer fresh perspectives and imaginative ideas. "Children everywhere can stop us short with their unnerving moments of innocent good sense," writes Robert Coles in *The Political Life of Children*. "Adults wouldn't even consider trying to do what these kids were attempting. To them everything is possible," remarked an aide to Utah Senator Orrin Hatch after meeting with 6th graders who lobbied successfully for a new federal grant program to youth groups.

❺ **ATTRACT NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE.** Students who write letters to the editor, pitch a story to a producer, or send out news releases have an advantage. A sound bite by a teenager stands a better chance of being quoted in an article or over the airwaves than speeches by experts and other articulate, knowledgeable advocates.

❻ **CAPTURE THE ATTENTION OF DECISION-MAKERS.** Concerned young people, whose motives are rarely questioned, can motivate powerbrokers to take action. One community organizer claimed, "Without youth on our coalition, parents as well as school officials and politicians would not listen to me."

❼ **PURSUE UNORTHODOX TACTICS AND CIRCUMVENT ROADBLOCKS.** Young people can take advantage of their age and gain access to VIPs without scheduled meetings or abiding by conventional protocol. Painted faces, costumes, and visual props are among the creative tactics that help youth communicate their concerns. Setbacks and outright opposition may increase young activists' determination, due partly to their sense of invincibility and idealism.

❽ **MOTIVATE OTHERS.** Certainly teaming up with young people can be frustrating but when it works, the benefits are stunning. Professionals from teachers to CEOs who serve with youth on a board of directors as well as members of an intergenerational coalition frequently rave about how the meetings are more lively, the adults are more polite to one another, and that youth members help forge consensus. Another potential is the positive energizing impact on politicians and other decision makers. A state senator in Texas said, "The children motivated me. I'm going to do all I can to help get the bill passed." (And, yes, this student campaign resulted in amending the state law to allow local zoning boards to reduce the number of liquor stores.)

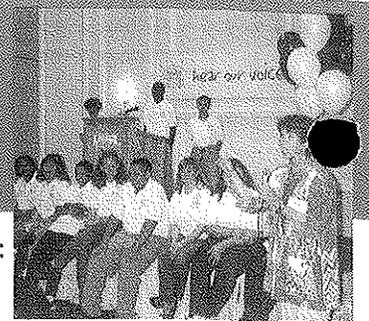
The ACTIVISM 2000 PROJECT responds everyday to requests from government agencies and private non-profits that are having problems in their efforts to

Common Mistakes To Avoid When Collaborating with Youth

collaborate with adolescents. The challenges are similar whether it is an advocacy campaign on a specific legislative proposal, a youth advisory council that makes recommendations to local government officials or an organization's board of directors, or perhaps a youth-adult coalition planning a press conference, rally, etc. While recruitment and retention, liability, transportation and other logistical concerns have to be addressed, the root cause of many difficulties centers on an organization's philosophy and bottom line commitment to youth involvement. Most successful intergenerational initiatives have one or several adults who are uniquely suited to partner with young people and are respected for their work by both youth and adults.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS	SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS
<p>ATTITUDE: The stated or unspoken goal is: "We want to use kids for this event and tap their creative ideas and energy."</p>	<p>The guiding principle is to involve young people as equal partners in significant and substantive ways. This mission has clear and consistent support from the top.</p>
<p>AFTER THOUGHT: Young people are asked for their input even though key decisions have been made.</p>	<p>Diverse group of young people are invited to participate in the decision making process at the ground floor.</p>
<p>ADD-ON: Staff in charge of working with young people have many other job responsibilities. A common complaint is "Only 25% of my time is set aside for working with youth."</p>	<p>Adult-youth collaboration is recognized as vital but also labor intensive and emotionally demanding. Adequate staff time signals to the entire organization and young people that this is a priority.</p>
<p>9-5 SCHEDULE: Youth workers are expected to follow the standard workday and meetings are scheduled when young people are at school or have after-school commitments.</p>	<p>Flex-schedule recognizes that working with youth usually occurs at 9 p.m. rather than 9 a.m. and also on weekends.</p>
<p>INADEQUATE BUDGET: Money is budgeted for a one-shot event or program but there is little funding for follow-up. Time and energy are spent getting dollars to cover food, transportation, chaperone expenses. The pay differential is significant between those who work on the front lines with youth and other staff.</p>	<p>Wait to begin collaborating with youth until funding is assured. Make sure the budget covers enough staff positions and the compensation is at a level to retain these youth workers. Snacks, travel, overnight retreats, video conferences and other costs associated with youth involvement are not discretionary but essential.</p>
<p>FEW OPPORTUNITIES: A bare bones budget means youth workers and young people cannot attend conferences, receive ongoing training and learn new skills. Young people, who are in volunteer positions but take on work that adults are paid for, receive no compensation. (The justification is the students are getting great experience.)</p>	<p>A continual stream of opportunities through varied experiences may be the single most effective way to maintain committed young people and also hold on to talented youth workers. Stipends and part-time job opportunities for youth can boost organizational capacity, increase youth infusion, and demand accountability that isn't possible with volunteers.</p>
<p>INCOMPATIBILITY: The person doesn't relate well to adolescents (domineering, divisive, dismisses ideas proposed by youth, etc.) or lacks prior experience in advocacy and appropriate training.</p>	<p>If conflicts persist, act promptly. Issues of control and trust are not uncommon and after frank discussions, if tensions persist, other staff should be assigned. This can be a tough job to fill. Many adults, even teachers, may not adapt to shared decision-making with adolescents.</p>
<p>ISOLATION & BURNOUT: Often only one person carries the entire load for a youth initiative while the majority of the staff - especially in youth-serving organizations - concentrate on funders, business partners, etc. and have no dealings with the young people. The youth worker may be low on the totem pole and have limited access to senior staff.</p>	<p>Walk the Talk...An organization with young people as its primary constituency will elevate the prominence and compensation of those staff members who work directly with youth on programming, planning, evaluation, or advocacy campaigns. It will show respect for youth, their perspectives, and value the importance of intergenerational teamwork.</p>

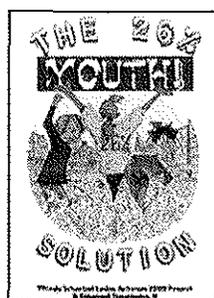
Technical Assistance, Training and Resource Materials



The ACTIVISM 2000 PROJECT offers expert help to meet the two interdependent objectives:

- 1) To convince young people that it's worth it to speak up and to teach them advocacy skills so they will be effective when making their views known to decision makers; and
- 2) To train adults including student advisors, community organizers, politicians and government officials on how they can collaborate effectively and engage young people in meaningful ways.

Here is a snapshot of resources available from our private, non-partisan national clearinghouse. Wendy Lesko, founder of the ACTIVISM 2000 PROJECT, has firsthand experience as a former grassroots organizer, a reporter who covered the U.S. Congress, and whose two teenage sons have lobbied Maryland legislators for the past 10 years.



◆ The one book designed to complement your organization's materials, *YOUTH! THE 26% SOLUTION*, that the American Library Association says "is a lively pep talk full of instructions on everything...Activist teens and the adults who work with them will find this book most helpful and motivational." This 130-page paperback by

Wendy Lesko and 19-year-old Emanuel Tsourounis describes how to identify the key decision makers, track competing proposals, mobilize support, prepare to meet with a legislator, create compelling visuals, write a press release in 500 words or less, present newsworthy testimony, and other proven advocacy strategies that young people have used effectively. Discounts are available for bulk purchases (\$14.95 retail price) for this user-friendly book that fits into a pocket folder of a conference notebook. Call 1-800-KID-POWER for discount prices.

To purchase multiple copies of *YOUTH! THE 26% SOLUTION*, or to explore training options or consulting services, please contact Wendy Lesko, Executive Director of ACTIVISM 2000 PROJECT, at 1-800-KID-POWER or 301-929-8808 or e-mail: info@youthactivism.com

◆ **Advocacy 101 and Advanced Advocacy presentations** for youth or a team composed of teens and adults which are always customized and developed in close consultation with the sponsoring organization. Recent keynotes and trainings include the Center for Youth As Resources Program Directors Conference, the Delaware State Teen Tobacco Satellite Conference, Ann Arbor Youth-Adult Partnership Summit, Indiana Middle Level Leadership Teen Institute, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy's Youth Leadership Team, Nebraska Youth Rally Committee.

◆ **Staff development and in-house training** typically includes:

- 1) a motivational presentation with interactive breakout sessions followed by Q&A;
- 2) a videotape featuring success stories of youth-led campaigns relevant to the organization; and
- 3) Activism 2000 Project manual entitled "Advocacy Guide: Minimizing Mistakes and Maximizing Youth Involvement."

◆ **Consulting services** respond to specific needs, for instance, developing issue specific advocacy materials and skill-based curricula; providing guidance on recruiting and retaining youth; suggesting strategies and publicity tactics; resolving poor group dynamics and troubleshooting other challenges.

"A big thank-you for the outstanding commitment and leadership you displayed throughout the planning and implementation of an extremely successful conference. You were the 'guiding light' in keeping us true to our mission of listening to youth. In addition, your serving as a sounding board and mentor for the youth leaders was essential."

- Dr. Pat Cooper, First Florida Youth Leadership Conference on Health

"Wendy Lesko generates energy and excitement. Her uplifting, fast-paced presentation includes different types of ideas and formulas that could be implemented. Very pertinent information with good variety of materials and actual videos."

- Black Hills Health Education Annual Conference participant

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