



Tips for Boards and Commissions Working with Youth

You've invited youth to be a part of your board or commission. You've weighed the benefits of working with youth—the fresh perspectives they will bring, the opportunities for you to clarify your thinking as you explain your goals and strategies to new members, their deep connections in the community—as well as some of the challenges. You've determined it's in your interests to help younger community members develop leadership skills and gain life experience while working alongside you.

There's no foolproof recipe for how to integrate youth, but there are guidelines that can help. And remember: just as supports designed to benefit people with disabilities benefit the larger community, we hope you'll find that building the supportive structures for youth will likewise benefit your entire board. We all benefit when youth are exposed to how things work in a democratic society.

Supports Boards Can Provide Youth

Like any new adult member, youth require training and mentoring in being a board member. Don't assume that every new member understands how boards or committees operate, the rules and norms, the culture of the board, how Robert's Rules of Order work, public relations, politics of decision making, and so on.

Here are some ideas for creating an environment to effectively include youth representation and participation. The list is simply a starting point from which to work on educating youth members.

Talk about why you wanted to be one of the first Minneapolis commissions to include youth. Build your reasoning about how youth can help you get things done that you aren't able to now. Let them know what qualities you are looking for in youth, and what your expectations are. What do you want youth to get out of the experience working with you?

Background. Talk with them about the history of your board or commission. You started doing that when you met with them to recruit members, but now is the time to add some depth and personal experience. Talk about previous issues you addressed, past actions you took, and tell other useful stories. What are things you've all agreed on, and what have been some of the areas with divergent points of view? How does your board operate after a decision has been made? At the same time, don't feel you need to address everything all at once. Have multiple conversations that provide context in different layers. The more your new members know, the more they will be effective and thoughtful members of your board or committee.

Meetings, minutes, and agendas. Be sure to send a copy of the minutes from your previous meeting and the agenda for the upcoming meeting. Assign someone to discuss the minutes and agenda with them ahead of time. This will introduce them to the flow of your meetings and how they are structured.

Talk explicitly about meeting structure and decision-making processes. Ensure that youth members know not only the practicalities of the meetings: time, location, appropriate attire, but also when can they ask questions, when can they give opinions, how and when issues get added to the agenda, and any assignments for work to be done outside of the meeting time. Remind youth more often than you

might adults about meetings and deadlines. It can be especially helpful to craft the reminders in ways that provide additional information or hints about anything it might be helpful for them to prepare.

Communication and welcome. Have a conversation about how the Board communicates. Preferred communication methods vary among youth and some are not as accustomed to using email as might be expected. Be honest with them about how your group communicates but also recognize that you may need to use multiple forms of communication with them. Be explicit when you want a response from them, and don't hesitate to send a text to a youth to say, I'm sending you an important email, please let me know you got it. Understand that youth may not be able to respond during the school day, and some may face restrictions on what apps and programs are on their devices or what internet sites they are able to visit.

Build connections. Intentionally help younger members make connections with others on the board. Tell them about your favorite techniques for networking with other members—and then model those techniques. Make sure they have opportunities to know other members of the board on a personal level. It can be helpful to designate an adult mentor to each new youth member. Ask this member to check in with their mentee after meetings and when the agenda is distributed for upcoming meetings. This connection will be invaluable for the youth member and help them to find their footing quickly.

Youth member responsibilities. Don't assume that youth are too busy to be involved outside of scheduled meetings. Making them full members of the board and assigning responsibilities that match their abilities will help to fully engage them in your work. Try to build clear roles and responsibilities with them. Some possibilities to consider:

- Schedule a youth report during your meeting. This will allow your youth members to share their involvement in board issues, projects, and in the community at large. Hearing what is happening for youth currently in the community can spark ideas for other board members.
- Place youth on subcommittees and, if appropriate, nominate them as co-leaders (with an adult member) of these subcommittees. Again this will help youth members connect with and be involved in the work.
- Assign youth to meaningful and needed tasks, such as taking minutes, contacting other organizations for information, or participating in site visits or meetings.

Board or committee culture. Think about your current culture and structures. If you've been working with many of the same people for a while, you may be taking shortcuts or using jargon that leaves out newcomers to the group or to the advocacy work. Questions to ask as you welcome and work with youth members:

- Does your culture promote open discussion?
- Do you include youth members in all issues, not just those affecting their age group?
- Is there time for all members (including youth) to speak at meetings?
- Do youth members have equal voting status? Is equal weight given to youth members opinions?
- Is there informal time to network with other members?
- Do you encourage young people to take issues that arise back to their peers and gather a broader youth perspective?
- Is there a way for young people to voice their concerns or ideas outside the meeting environment?

Supports Minneapolis Youth OnBoards Staff Provide

General orientation and professional development. YOB staff provide all MYC members orientation and professional skills development.

- Participants receive training on facilitation skills, an overview of Minneapolis City government, an overview of Robert's Rules
- We can support youth with methods they can use gather input from their peers and bring that back to the boards they are sitting on to amplify youth voice
- Group meetings for the youth serving on boards to share their experiences with each other.
- List who will be there to support them throughout the year.

Supporting youth through their service.

- YOB staff provide transportation and meal stipends, as well as supporting logistics for students to attend.
- YOB staff, in coordination with a dedicated board liaison, will help youth process what they are hearing and learning in their meetings, helping them find answers to questions, and helping them identify areas where greater youth input on an issue their group is discussing would be beneficial.

We are here to help support adult members also. For discussion and assistance with additional resources, please contact us.

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