PRINCIPLES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Ethically and Efficiently Engaging Youth with Lived Experience in Education, Program Design, and Advocacy

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I first became interested in the concept of ethical youth engagement during my own experiences working for organizations when I was an unaccompanied homeless youth. I spoke at conferences, wrote resources, and navigated media interviews as a college student with lived experience in various capacities and with various organizations. During this time, I began to note what organizations did well, as well as instances where I felt re-traumatized, or hurt.

I now have my Masters in Social Work and I am the Director of SchoolHouse Connection’s Youth Leadership and Scholarship program. In this role, I ensure that students around the country who have experienced homelessness are successful in moving to and through higher education. In addition to providing direct services, I also connect our scholars with youth engagement opportunities at the local, state, and national level. In this role and in my personal experience, I continue to learn about how we can best engage youth with lived experience.

This document is our effort to document what we have learned, but more importantly what our students have taught us about how to ethically and efficiently engage youth. It is a living document, because as with all of our work at SchoolHouse Connection, ethical youth engagement is a continuous learning process, and we learn and adapt as we go.

Youth with lived experience are our strongest partners and our greatest resource. They are experts that bring invaluable perspectives, innovative ideas, and critical feedback that informs our practice. If we want to improve our programs, policies, and practices, we must engage as many youth as we can, as often as we can.

These principles were shared with the Education Leads Home Community of Practice, who provided initial feedback and input. In an effort to continue to learn and inform practice, we welcome feedback from educators, providers, and youth. To provide feedback or ideas, please email Jordyn@SchoolHouseConnection.org.
1. **DRAFT A PARTNERSHIP DESCRIPTION.**

Prior to identifying and engaging youth partners, meet with your team to discuss and draft a description of the type of partnership your agency or organization is looking for. Consider these questions:

1. What is your agency or organization’s intention for this partnership? For example, you may be looking to:
   a. Learn about/improve practices
   b. Gather feedback about a program, resource, or concept
   c. Gather an impact statement or story

2. What role or combination of roles do you envision? For example:
   a. Youth Voice: Having the youth share their stories and expertise in public forums
   b. Expert Participants: Engaging youth as participants in decision-making, policy-making, planning, etc.
   c. Youth Leadership: Providing positions of power and decision-making responsibility

3. What type of lived experiences are you looking to learn from? For example, would you like the expertise of an unaccompanied youth, a parenting young adult, a youth who experienced homelessness with their family, a youth who stayed with other people temporarily (i.e. not in the shelter systems or on the streets), etc.

4. What types of activities will be requested from the youth (video/phone call meetings, reviewing documents, in-person speaking engagements, feedback on current programming, etc.)?

5. Are there any restrictions you will have around age, location, and scheduling availability?

6. How will this opportunity benefit the youth participating? (i.e. Are you able to pay them, provide internship opportunities, job opportunities, etc.?)

7. Whenever possible, pay youth either hourly or by a stipend in an amount that is a living wage. If we believe that youth are the experts in the room, we need to value and pay them as such.

8. Offer a variety of payment options for student stipends. For example: Venmo, Paypal, Zelle, Checks, Direct Deposit.

9. How do you envision this opportunity benefiting your agency or organization and those that hear and learn from the youth? This question helps you to recognize the value the youth will bring and to begin to set your intention for the partnership.
10. Are all team members committed to taking meaningful action based input received from youth and respecting young people’s time and contributions in authentic, tangible ways?

**ONCE YOU HAVE DRAFTED YOUR PARTNERSHIP DESCRIPTION, PROVIDE IT TO CURRENT YOUTH IN YOUR PROGRAM OR ALUMNI OF YOUR PROGRAM TO REVIEW AND PROVIDE FEEDBACK. ASK THEM IF THEY THINK ANY WORD CHOICES SHOULD BE ALTERED, IF THE DESCRIPTION IS ENGAGING, IF THEY ANTICIPATE ANY ISSUES, ETC.**

**2. BUILD COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS TO IDENTIFY AND ENGAGE YOUTH PARTICIPANTS.**

Identifying youth who are willing and able to partner might be challenging, but engaging community partners and program participants can be a great way to start. Here are some key steps to begin to identify youth:

1. Share the opportunity and partnership description with your community partners, programs within your organization, advisory councils, etc.
   a. Engage local providers who know the youth they are working with very well, and who can match you with a youth who is in a position where they have the time, interest, and capacity to partner.
   b. It is critical that we consider the impact the opportunity may have on the youth, and ask ourselves if there is the potential for any negative impacts, including re-traumatization, to occur. This is why it is essential to identify a provider who knows the student very well, and has earned their trust. The provider can identify only those youth who are in a position to safely partner, and turn down requests for youth who may be vulnerable and not in a good place to partner.
2. Whenever possible, use your partnerships to provide warm-transfer referrals when connecting with new youth.
   a. If one of your local partners identifies a youth in their program who may be a good fit for your opportunity, it can be helpful for you to email the provider a full description of the opportunity, have the provider share it with the youth, and at that point if the youth is interested, have the provider connect you to the youth by way of an email thread or a three-way phone call or group chat.
   b. Once you are connected with the youth, identify a point person in your organization who will be the youth’s main point of contact, and limit the number of people who are interacting with the youth. This will provide a safe space for the youth, and also help with building rapport.
      i. If possible, identify a staff member with lived experience or with an applicable degree/professional experience such as social work or counseling to be appointed as the main contact person.

3. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND RAPPORT.

Immediately upon meeting a youth, begin building rapport by spending time getting to know the youth, providing information about the organization and yourself, and establishing a safe space. Relationship building can include actions like:

1. Have a one-on-one phone call between the youth and the main person of contact within the organization, after the youth agrees to partner. This phone call can be informal and primarily an opportunity for you to learn more about the youth and for them to learn more about their person of contact and the organization.
2. Provide the youth with the opportunity to give insight on what they think the partnership could look like and learn from it. Be willing to adjust your initial description if the youth has an idea that could shape the partnership.
3. After the call, email the youth to provide information on what the next steps are. For example, you could let the youth know that there is a phone call coming up that you would like them to join, with a description of what the call is about and their role on the call, or you could let the youth know you’ll be sending a link for a document you’d like them to review.
4. Provide the opportunity for the youth to give additional feedback on the partnership after the call by including in the email that you’d love for them to reach out if they have additional thoughts or ideas.
5. Depending on the intensity and length of the partnership, consider having check-in calls or texts periodically that are informal in nature, with the youth and the organizational point of contact throughout the duration of the partnership. This should be established as a safe space where the youth can share any issues, concerns, or ideas they may have.
6. Communicate through a platform that is easy and comfortable for the youth: texting, Snapchat, Facebook messenger, etc. Do not expect youth to use the communication platform that is easiest for you.
7. Always follow through fully on any commitments you make to youth, in a timely manner. If you face unforeseen circumstances and you cannot follow through with your commitments, reach out to youth immediately to explain why and what the next steps will be.

4. MAKE AN EFFORT TO UNDERSTAND AND VALUE YOUTH AS INDIVIDUALS.

Show that you understand that homelessness is a traumatic experience, not an identity.

1. Learn about the youth as an individual, outside of their experience of homelessness.
   a. What are they majoring in? What is their career interest? Do they have any hobbies? You may find that there are other ways the youth can partner, and other areas of expertise that they have.
   b. Learning about the youth as an individual also will help you to build rapport with them, rather than hyperfocusing and identifying them by their experience of homelessness.

2. As you learn more about the youth’s experiences of homelessness, identify where the youth is at in their experience, and how that may shape their self-awareness and ability to draw conclusive thoughts and perspectives.
   a. Every youth is unique, but for example, a youth who is actively experiencing homelessness may draw on different thoughts and have a different level of self-awareness than a youth who is three years out of their homelessness experience.
   b. Use this knowledge to guide what you’re asking of the student.
      i. For example, it may be hard for a youth to connect their current experience to what the major barriers are, because they haven't been able to look back and identify those barriers yet. Similarly, It may be hard for a youth who is three years out of homelessness to remember small details or timelines of their experience.
3. Separate the relationship from the organizational benefit.
   a. When working with students in a capacity where they are being paid for their time and expertise, it is critical that we let them know from the beginning, that the relationship we have with them is not contingent on their services and time.
   i. When students are sharing vulnerable experiences, they may have moments or days where they are not comfortable sharing pieces of their story or they may decide that they indefinitely would not like to share all or pieces of their experiences. It is critical that we both respect and encourage this autonomy and that we do not become dependent on them sharing. To the best of our abilities, we should always create a back-up plan in the case that they make the decision not to share.

“Sometimes a student may feel obligated to participate in events asked of them simply because resources were provided (such as any kind of support: financial, emotional, etc.) It’s important to make sure that students understand that you (or the organization you represent) won’t be upset with or disappointed in them if they don’t participate in these potential opportunities, and that they aren’t obligated to do so simply because resources were provided. Demonstrate that your relationship with them is important in and of itself, and not dependent on what the student has to offer you or the organization. You don’t want to make the student feel like you’re using them for your (or your organization’s) own gain, as it would risk any rapport built with the student, and dramatically alter the power balance of the relationship.”

-Irene, SchoolHouse Connection Peer Leader
5. PROVIDE INFORMATION REGULARLY AND IN A TIMELY MANNER.

It is critical that youth feel comfortable coming into our organizations ready to partner. In order to create a comfortable space, it is important to regularly communicate and provide ample information. For example:

1. If the youth will be joining conference calls or in-person meetings, consider the acronyms or common terms your organization uses that may not be known by the youth. Consider asking all staff to avoid acronyms on the first call/meeting, or email the student a list of key terms with the acronyms and common language that is used prior to the meeting.

2. When providing information about a speaking, writing, or reviewing opportunity, make sure to respect the youth’s time and schedule by sending the request as early as possible and by providing as much context as possible about what the opportunity will entail.

3. Check in with youth prior to any speaking engagement or meeting to ask if they have any questions or if they would like additional information. This is a great task for the organizational point of contact to do.

4. If a student will be speaking on a panel or will be interviewed, try to send all questions that will be asked ahead of time and ask that the student provide feedback, edit the questions, and/or let their point of contact know if there are any questions they would like to add or omit.

5. Follow up with youth immediately after a speaking engagement, and again a few days later (or be sure an appropriate community partner is doing so). Particularly the first time or two a youth shares, it can be triggering in unexpected ways.

"From my experience speaking at events and on panels, it is immensely helpful to be provided materials, questions and information ahead of time. As a college student you have a lot on your plate so being able to digest and prepare on your own time, prior to the presentation, can greatly reduce anxiety about participating."

-Destiny, SchoolHouse Connection Scholar
6. PROVIDE SUPPORT DURING IN-PERSON EVENTS.

Ask youth ahead of time what will make them most comfortable during an in-person event and let them know you have the resources to make it happen.

1. If they are struggling to think of things they need, you can ask questions such as:
   a. We will make sure we have a water bottle there for you, but is there any other drink you think you would enjoy? Do you have any food allergies and what are your favorite types of snacks/foods?
   b. Where can I stand in the room to best support you while you speak (i.e. beside you, in the center back of the room so you can see me, off to the side, in the front row, etc.)?
   c. Do you want to have a hand signal with me to let me know you need to tell me something/need something if we aren’t near each other?
   d. When I speak, I like for someone to lift up a sign to let me know I have 5 minutes left; would that be helpful for you?

2. Close with something along the lines of “I know it’s probably overwhelming to think of all of these things right now and you will probably think of other things later on. Will you text me any other things you think of?”

3. Check in the morning of the event to ask how they are feeling and if there are things you can do to best support them. Make sure someone is there to greet and immediately support them when they arrive at the event.

4. Be reliable and do what you said you would do. If you said you would stand in the back of the room during their presentation, be there. This reliability will help to build rapport and create a safe place for the youth.

5. Provide a comforting debrief space after the event and acknowledge how intense it can be to share your story and speak in front of a group of people.
   a. If possible, take the youth out for a meal with a small group of the people they are most comfortable with. When you get into a safe space, also ask them how they feel and how they think it went. Provide reassurance and praise.
   b. If it’s not possible to leave and debrief immediately after the event, pull the youth to the side and provide immediate praise and reassurance and ask them how they’re doing. Offer them the opportunity to step out for a moment if they need to relax and make sure that they are not alone during the next part of the in-person meeting (i.e. lunch time, another session, etc.). Make sure they have someone they can sit with that can provide support. After the event, provide a full debrief space (see bullet i).
6. If your event is virtual, adjust these principles to apply within your space. For example you can ask youth if they would like:
a. A check-in call with you the morning of the event
b. A text letting them know when there is 5 minutes remaining for their presentation
c. A practice session with you prior to the day of the event using the same platform you will be using for the event (zoom, gotomeeting, etc.)
d. To join the virtual room 30 minutes before the event to make sure audio and video is working properly
7. For virtual debriefs, if possible give the youth a call immediately after their portion of the event is over. Focus heavily on praising their work and affirming them, while also checking in to see how they are doing and if there is anything they need. Check back in that evening or the next morning to see if they’d like to talk about anything or if they have any feedback for how the event went.

7. MODERATE PANELS INTENTIONALLY.

When moderating a panel of multiple youth or a panel where a young person is speaking alongside providers, it is critical that we intentionally manage our questions and that we provide space for all panelists to speak and participate.

1. Introduce the student(s) to all panelists prior to the speaking engagement. This can be done via email, phone, zoom, or in-person. These introductions should include a short conversation on the area of expertise each person is bringing to the panel so that the student can begin to find and understand their place within the panel.
2. Send the questions that will be asked prior to the speaking engagement whenever possible. Ideally, send the questions a week or more before the panel and provide the opportunity for the student speaker(s) to provide feedback or ask for questions to be rephrased/omitted.
3. Let the student(s) know how the panel will be moderated. For example, do you plan to ask a question and then open the floor for anyone to answer or do you plan to go down the line and provide the opportunity for each panelist to speak.
4. Let the student know the level of engagement you would like to see. Panels can be tricky due to time constraints, so let the student know if there are questions that will be asked specifically for them to answer or if you would like them to provide feedback or responses to all or most questions.
5. Let the student know the ideal amount of time each answer should be given to stay on schedule. For example, let them know that ideally answers should be 30-60 seconds, but if they would like to elaborate on an answer they feel is important, that is ok.
6. After the panel, make sure to provide immediate praise and reassurance to all panelists and if possible, provide a debrief space for them all to talk amongst each other.

8. AUDIENCE BOUNDARIES AND Q&A TIMES.

When having a student or multiple students speak at an event, it is important that you as the provider help to set audience boundaries to protect the students. Examples of audience boundaries include:

1. Asking that no photos or videos be taken during the event.
2. Stating that if the students feel comfortable, they will remain at the foot of the stage/by the podium after the presentation to meet attendees, but that if the student is not there, we are asking that attendees refrain from approaching the student.
3. State that as an organization you emphasize asking what people are comfortable with before engaging in physical greetings, such as hugs or handshakes, and that you ask attendees to do the same.
4. Ask that attendees avoid leaving and re-entering the space as much as possible, especially if the student will be sharing their stories.
5. Let attendees know that there will be a designated Q&A time at the end of the session, but that during that time, if a student does not want to answer or doesn’t have an answer for a question it will be skipped and we will move forward with the next question.
6. As the provider, whenever possible, ensure that you assist or lead moderating the Q&A time to help navigate difficult or uncomfortable questions that may arise.

9. ENGAGE MULTIPLE YOUTH OVER TIME TO PROVIDE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES.

One youth’s experience and perspective cannot provide the sole perspective, or be generalized to represent a diverse population’s needs. Work to partner with multiple youth over time so that your organization can hear and learn from diverse perspectives. Tips for providing diverse youth perspectives include:
1. Consider the variety of homelessness experiences that youth have. For example, were they unaccompanied or with their families (or both)? Did they enter the shelter system, stay with other people, in motels/hotels, all of the above, etc? Did they experience homelessness repeatedly, from childhood, or only in adolescence?

2. Consider the demographics of the youth you are partnering with. Examples:
   a. Rural, suburban, and urban homelessness experiences
   b. Race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation
   c. Age
   d. Access to resources within their family system or community

"To better understand the world around us, every student’s stories, experiences, and memories need to be heard when organizations partner with diverse youth. There is no singular background and you can’t assume all students have had the same experience. The collective stories of all students can aid the bigger picture."

-Diego, SchoolHouse Connection Scholar

10. GATHER FEEDBACK FROM THE YOUTH TO INFORM FUTURE PARTNERSHIPS

1. At the conclusion of the youth’s contract/partnership, provide them with the opportunity to reflect on their experience and provide insight as to how processes can be improved for future partnerships. Be open to what they have to say and use it to guide your next youth partnership.
11. ENGAGE SEASONED YOUTH PARTNERS AS MENTORS/PEER LEADERS.

Another way to engage youth is through mentoring or leadership roles with new youth involved in your program.

1. If you have students who have been engaged in your program for a while and who have experience providing leadership and expertise within the space, consider offering them a paid stipend to mentor and provide support to incoming students. Examples of the type of support they could provide include:
   a. Assign youth leaders to new youth who live in their area, have similar interests, or who you overall think would be a good, supportive fit. Have the youth leader schedule an introduction call with the student. During this call the youth leader can spend time getting to know the new youth and establish themselves as a support for them. They can let them know about their experience in the organization, answer questions, and overall provide a youth perspective. After the call, they can let the student know they are available by text if they need anything.
   b. Utilize youth leaders as in-person supports during events in addition to having the staff contact available.
   c. Youth leaders can read through written resources and provide grammar and content feedback for students, or help with brainstorming and any questions that students may have.
   d. Youth leaders can plan and coordinate events for the other youth in the program or design ways to honor them and thank them for their work.
“I’ve been a part of School House Connection since 2011, first as a scholar and now as a peer-mentor. The past ten years with this organization have been more rewarding and impactful than I ever could have imagined. Year after year I’ve had students confide in me and trust me with some of the most fragile and personal details of their life. In turn, I’ve been able to intact positive change and help them through some of these situations because they trusted me to do so. I believe the presence of peer mentors who have gone through similar experiences and who are close in age creates a sense of safety and unity and allows for a more open and welcoming atmosphere for students to truly open up.”

-Tia, SchoolHouse Connection Scholar

“Peer leaders matter. We have shared lived experiences, and I'd trust a peer leader like a friend. I'm willing to trust and lean on them in a way that I wouldn't with anyone else. Their recent experiences and willingness to support me makes me want to give back and do the same for other students.”

-Christian, SchoolHouse Connection Scholar
1. **Bring in students to write or review resources for your organization.**
   a. Example: This summer, SHC contracted with six students to help launch a youth resource page called “Youth Connection.” This resource page was designed to host resources written “by students, for students.” The YLS Director was the main point of contact for the students and she started by having a call individually with each student to explain the opportunity and having a group video call for the students to meet each other. The students then had an opportunity to collectively brainstorm topics they would like to write about, with SHC providing suggested topics as well to help guide and provide ideas. A spreadsheet was created with all topic ideas, a google doc was set up with links to all in-progress and completed documents, and a weekly video call was set up with all participants. Each week the YLS Director and participants would meet and each student would select a topic to work on for that week. In the spreadsheet, we added the student’s name by the piece he or she was writing, to keep things organized and then the students used the document link found in the google doc with all in-progress documents to begin drafting their piece. The YLS Director asked the students to email when their piece was drafted, and she then read through and provided grammar and content edits. Once this was done, the document was shared with the other students who reviewed and provided feedback and positive reinforcement. The final step was having the SHC staff team review and format the documents. The students drafted 14 documents during a six-week contract, and we plan to release these resources throughout the year.

**Additional Resources:**

- Tax Guidelines for Scholarships, Fellowships, and Grants
- Applying to College
- National Crisis Line Information
- COVID Distance Learning Strategies
- Planning for College Breaks
- Accessing COVID-19 Relief Funds
- How to Buy and Choose a Cell Phone Plan
- Finding Care for my Child
- How to Get a Lease
- Preparing for an Independent Determination Financial Aid Interview
2. Engaging students in policy advocacy and speaking engagements.
   a. Example: SHC recently held a **virtual congressional briefing** focused on youth homelessness and the coronavirus pandemic. We strategically selected 5 youth to speak at the briefing based on what we knew about their experiences, demographics, and current stability/availability. The YLS Director had individual calls with each student explaining the opportunity and talking with the student about how their experience might provide expertise to participants. An email was then sent out with all the questions we planned to ask, and we asked the students to review, give feedback, and let us know if there were questions they would not like to answer. The YLS Director then scheduled a practice run using the same webinar platform as the briefing. This provided the students an opportunity to practice using the platform, ensure their video and audio functioned properly, and for them to meet the other students who were speaking. During the practice session, the YLS Director asked the briefing questions and let students know they could take time to think and talk through what their answers might be. This gave the students a chance to practice answering, but it also let them hear about the experiences of the other students and how their experiences might relate or be different. The YLS Director then checked in one more time the day before the event with each student, and the day of the event, had the students join the call 20 minutes early to check in one more time and ensure all technology was functioning appropriately. Following the briefing, the YLS Director paid each student and sent an email to the students with the positive feedback and quotes attendees provided. She later also sent an email showing that there had been positive policy progress as a direct result of their briefing. This follow-up helped to show the youth what a tremendous impact their participation had on policymakers and practitioners.