

Who's Preparing Today's Youth for Leadership in Community Development?



Panelists at a NeighborWorks® youth symposium in Atlanta are (from the left) London Davis, Alexis Collins, and Faduma Guhad. Photo by Séan Bennett

Remember the familiar African proverb, “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child?” Well, as the next generation of community development leaders prepares to take the reins, a new adage has emerged – “It Takes a Child to Raise a Village,” which means young people have the energy as well as innovative ideas to breathe new life into a community.

by Charlotte Underwood

Ideally, young people should play an integral role in the decision-making process when planning and revitalizing communities. After all, decisions made today impact not only them but also their children and grandchildren.

It Takes a Child. . . . in fact, is one of several mottoes promoted by the Freechild Project (www.freechild.org). Freechild believes that it is unethical to exclude young people from participating in actions that affect them. So, who ensures youth's engagement in community development activities, and when should it begin?

The Good Ol' Days

"Back in the day (as the young folks would say)," civic and community responsibility were taught in school as part of the educational curriculum. Schools were seen as "safe havens" or the core of the community.

Values taught in the home carried over into school, and vice versa. This relationship between home and school reflected a community partnership that focused on the safety and positive development of youth. This partnership included cooperation and collaboration among parents and extended family members, community schools, local businesses, churches, community leaders, and local officials.

Changing Times

Today, the nation's schools focus on raising test scores and meeting other federal mandates set upon them under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which was signed into law in 2002. NCLB was created to ensure that all children receive equal access to a quality education and that parents are included in the decision-making process affecting their children.

However, many students find that a test-focused curriculum leaves little time to find creative ways to engage them, and when students don't do well on tests, their self-esteem suffers as well.

Demetrius McCoy, sophomore class president at Miller Grove High School in Lithonia, Georgia, was one of several young leaders who participated in NeighborWorks® Training Institute's "Youth Matters" symposium held in Atlanta in February (www.nw.org/youth).

"One thing I've noticed with the pressure to get better test scores," McCoy said, "is that youth are criticized [due to poor test scores]; then expected to do well [the next time]. When you 'put someone down,' they are not going to perform at the best level." As far as opportunities for experiencing community development-type work, McCoy is not aware of any opportunities at his school. "Everything relates to school," he said.

Khepe-Ra Maat, who facilitated the youth symposium, later expressed the frustration she experienced as a young person: "I was 10 years old when I first realized that I wanted to make a difference in the

quality of my life and the lives of my family members who were being lost to the streets and/or hopelessness. . . . There were little or no outlets for my passion." (See Maat's article on page 18.)

"There seem to be plenty of opportunities for youth in community service, but not much for community development," said Jessica Filion, Movement City's assistant director, who considers herself a "youth worker." Movement City is a youth-empowerment network sponsored by Lawrence CommunityWorks, a Lawrence, Massachusetts, NeighborWorks® organization.

"The idea of school is not just about producing educated people," Filion said. "Schools must recognize their responsibility to engage and improve the community. Too much emphasis is placed on teaching tests – not all students test well – we need a holistic approach to education."

Community Partnerships – A Holistic Approach

Morehouse College – Atlanta

As with many community groups, resident members may have great ideas but lack the "people-power" or technology to transform them into reality. This is

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where Morehouse College offered help to nearby campus communities. Morehouse learned to be a “good neighbor” and partnered with the communities, where approximately 25,000 residents are predominantly African-American, low- to moderate-income, and female-headed households.

“Morehouse found a way to involve its students in the revitalization efforts of communities that surround its campus,” according to Gwen Cain, program manager of the Emma and Joe Adams Public Service Institute.

“We teach our students that you are guests in somebody else’s house when you visit communities,” said Cain.

Through Morehouse’s Revitalization Task Force program, students must attend community meetings, but Cain emphasizes that Morehouse is not there to tell communities what to do, but to help them accomplish their goals. Also, said Cain, “Students who participate in this program do not have to be urban planning students, they just have to have a passion to give back.”

In addition to several neighborhood associations, Morehouse also partners with several organizations such as HUD, the Fannie Mae Foundation, University Community Development Corporation (UCDC), and the United Way of Greater Atlanta – among others.

In order to overcome barriers such as cultural differences among students, community residents, and community development organizations, there’s a need for youth exposure to community development issues much sooner. Therefore, said UCDC Director Peter Haley, “we will begin a pilot program soon that will target high school students.” Currently, Morehouse has a Service Learning initiative in place that targets middle and high school students.

City of Boise (Idaho)

“Partnerships have a lot to do with the personalities present at the time,” said Matt McCarter, coordinator with Youth Services/Park and Recreation, who oversees Boise’s Healthy Communities*Healthy Youth Initiative.

“We’re fortunate,” he said, “that both Mayor Dave Beiter and Stan Olson, superintendent of Boise public schools, are both on the same page.” Mayor Beiter has a “big heart for youth programs,” said McCarter. The city of Boise ensures there is youth representation on each of its boards and commissions.

Through its partnership with the school district, the city of Boise will be presenting the “40 Developmental Assets” survey to the seventh, ninth and 12th graders to measure how its programs rate with young people. This research-based survey uses concrete experiences and qualities that affect the decisions young people make. (For more information regarding the survey, contact Matt McCarter at mmccarter@cityofboise.org or 208-384-3829).

“Having youth on boards and commissions has been a rewarding experience for everyone involved,” McCarter said. “Youth feel their voice is valued and that they have an impact on city decisions. Adult members benefit from the fresh perspective, optimism, and enthusiasm youth bring to the table.”

When to Begin?

Since fifth grade, Alex Schneider, now an eighth-grader at Riverglen Junior High School in Boise has been active with the NHS Inc. of Boise’s community.

As the son of NHS board member, Andy Schneider, Alex has shown that he’s more than capable of creating programs and making a positive difference in his community (see *NeighborWorks® Bright Ideas*, spring 2006 or www.nw.org/youth). Alex organizes many “Paint the Town” projects, volunteers to cook and clean-up during community events, and serves on NHS’s resource development committee.

He became a fundraiser in his own right when he worked with local businesses to secure donations to install a new driveway and a flowerbed with a sprinkler system on behalf of a senior resident. “I’m so proud of him,” said Andy Schneider.

Service Learning Resources

America’s Promise
www.americaspromise.org

AmeriCorps
www.americorps.gov

California Center for Civic Participation and Youth Development
www.californiacenter.org

The Center for Teen Empowerment
www.teenempowerment.org

CommunityAction
www.communityaction.org

Corporation for National and Community Service
www.nationalservice.gov

The Freechild Project
www.freechild.org

Healthy Community*Healthy Youth Initiative
www.search-institute.org

National Youth Leadership Council
www.nylc.org

Youth Leadership Support Network
www.worldyouth.org

Youth Service America
www.ysa.org

Back to Basics

Schools play a vital role in the success of revitalization efforts. Quality schools support vibrant communities, and vibrant communities demand quality schools.

As issues such as quality education, affordable housing, smart growth, and economic development become more complicated, it's important that relevant education and training of our young leaders begin sooner. Ignite their interests and engage them in the elementary and secondary schools through community/school partnerships.

"Involve youth in the decision-making process," said Movement City's Director Jessica Filion. "Don't use them 'tokenistically' as board members . . . Value young people and their contributions."

Or, as Demetrius McCoy put it, "Show us how to lead – don't just tell us!"

Charlotte Underwood (cunderwood@nrv.org) is a publishing specialist with NeighborWorks® America



Photo by Séan Bennett

Youth Cultural Competence Same Message – Different Methodology

"If young people today are most heavily influenced by peers and popular culture, then it is vital for youth programs to find a way to utilize these influences to promote positive beliefs and behaviors." – Edward DeJesus, president, Youth Development and Research Fund.

Based on research by the Youth Development and Research Fund (YDRF), youth cultural competence includes the following:

► **Youth Involvement** – engaging youth in shaping and designing program offerings; taking an active role in the management and leadership of the program; and empowering youth to be the agents of change both within the organization and in the outside world.

► **Youth Popular Culture** – utilizing young people's music, fashion, creative arts, language and entrepreneurial spirit, as well as immediate and tangible incentives and rewards, to make youth feel comfortable and engaged and to address high-risk youth's "survival" mentality.

► **Positive Peer Influence** – harnessing the influence of youth's peers through group activities and lessons, peer tutoring, mentoring, peer mediation, and social outings to serve as a catalyst to encourage youth to take part in program offerings and to take responsibility for their growth and development.

Source: Youth Cultural Competence: Effective Strategies for Recruiting and Engaging Youth and Preparing Them for Labor Market Success – A Report by the Youth Development and Research Fund, 2004.