

Strategic Action Plan for Authentic Youth Engagement 2020 - 2023



“Nothing About Us, Without Us”



Strategic Action Plan for Authentic Youth Engagement

This document was developed by the youth members of the ACS Youth Leadership Council in partnership with adult leadership staff from ACS, Lawyers for Children (an advocacy organization representing children), and New Yorkers for Children (a nonprofit partner to the city's child welfare system). The audience for this document is both ACS executive leadership to promote shared governance and the public to impart a blueprint to those seeking to create their own youth council.

About ACS:

The Administration for Children's Services (ACS) is responsible for protecting the safety and promoting the well-being of New York City's children and strengthening their families by providing child welfare, juvenile justice, child care and early education services. In child welfare, ACS contracts with nonprofit organizations to support and stabilize families at risk of a crisis through prevention services and with foster care agencies for children not able to remain safely at home. Each year, the agency's Division of Child Protection conducts over 40,000 investigations of suspected child abuse or neglect. In youth and family justice, ACS manages and funds services including detention and Close to Home placement, intensive community-based alternatives for youth and support services for families. In the Division of Child and Family Well-Being, created in September 2017, ACS issues child care vouchers for more than 50,000 children eligible for subsidized child care and promotes a two-generation approach to child and family wellbeing, family stability and equity through public education campaigns and a place-based approach including Family Enrichment Centers and the Community Partnership Program.

ACS Principles

Protect and Strengthen Children, Young People, and Families

- Through all the work of ACS, children, young people, and families are our priority. Services are to be delivered with respect, cultural competence, accountability, and transparency.

Promote Social and Intellectual Development

- The promotion of education among all those that we serve is critical to the future success of our children and young people. From early care and education, to college and vocational attainment for our young people, education ensures that they have the skills and knowledge to succeed.

Support Our Workforce

- ACS is committed to support the agency's workforce, including staff at our provider partners, to meet the needs of serving the children, youth, and families of New York City through the promotion of a culture of respect, professionalism, and staff development.

Collaborate with Partners

- ACS cannot achieve its mission without the collaboration, mutual respect, and support of partners inside and outside of government, including provider agencies, government agencies, the Family Court community, advocates, funders, and the general public including youth and families. ACS works collectively with them to ensure that we are delivering the best services to those we serve.

Encourage Openness and Transparency

- ACS actively seeks input from young people, parents, advocates, and all stakeholders to inform the policies, practices, and services of the agency. To the fullest extent possible, ACS is transparent about our work, while respecting children, young people, and families' privacy.

ACS Youth Leadership Council History:

The ACS Youth Leadership Council (YLC) was established in 2017 to build on the foundation of previous efforts to adopt a positive youth development framework within ACS' foster care and juvenile justice child serving systems. The YLC formally acknowledges the contributions and "voice" of current and former juvenile justice and foster care-involved youth, by enabling young people to express their ideas, opinions, views, knowledge, and experiences and develop the competencies, values, and connections they need to achieve positive outcomes through their life and their transition into adulthood.

ACS YLC Mission:

The mission of the ACS Youth Leadership Council is to bring together the voices (experiences, complications, triumphs, challenges, needs) of youth that are system-involved into the development, and implementation of policies, programs and services that positively impact young people currently in care as well as those who have exited out of the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Everyone's voice should be heard, and no one is judged based on their experiences.

ACS and YLC Shared Values:

- Appreciate the inherent strengths and potential of youth as partners.
- Adult Partners are committed to creating policies and practices and designing programs that acknowledge the strengths and needs of youth and that support youth in making positive decisions in their lives, by:
 - Eliciting youth input;
 - Ensuring youth partners in decision-making and events; and
 - Providing platforms and viable opportunities that challenge youth to grow and thrive to their maximum potential.
- Adult partners acknowledge that youth are credible and capable communicators of youth experiences, youth needs, and identifiers of gaps in service delivery.
- Adult partners take pride in their commitment, by holding themselves to an equitable partnership between young people and adults, accepting responsibility for ensuring young people have input on all aspects of their care.

2020-2023 Strategic Action Plan

Authentic youth engagement is based on the premise that meaningful systems change is best achieved where equitable partnerships exist between young people and adults. Young people in foster care and juvenile justice are the experts when it comes to determining their needs and measuring the impact that child serving systems have in creating viable and effective solutions to mitigating and resolving many of the complex social and economic issues they face. According to national experts, to achieve authenticity child serving systems, organizations and programs must recognize the value and credibility that young people bring to the table – embracing core principles of authentic youth engagement such as shared governance, moving beyond tokenism, and consciously and proactively striking adultism¹.

The Administration for Children’s Services recognizes the importance of engaging young people in this work, by providing them with a voice, respect, acknowledging the value that they bring to the work, and listening to them. ACS has taken actions to develop a framework that identifies the supports young people need to be successful and make the transition to adulthood. ACS is leveraging existing partnerships with City and State agencies, non-profit partners, youth advisory boards, advocates and juvenile justice and child welfare experts to develop a “blue-print” for the creation of an authentic youth engagement strategic action plan that embodies the expertise and partnership of young people.

These strategies include:

- developing the internal capacity through coaching and training for young people to actively participate in coordinating agency-wide efforts;
- supporting the development of leadership and advocacy skills amongst youth;
- cultivating a culture of authentic youth engagement;
- including young people in systems planning, development of policies, and reform efforts; and
- actively involving young people in transition planning.

The commitment to *authentic* youth engagement is paramount to the implementation of this strategic plan; the Agency’s culture will reflect this commitment throughout all its work because ACS leadership recognizes that authentic youth engagement is:

1. About making positive changes
2. Based on intergenerational collaboration
3. Strengths-based
4. On-going and consistent
5. Built upon a foundation of diversity and equity

¹ Bell, J. (n.d.) Understanding Adultism: A Key to Developing Positive Youth-Adult Relationships. Olympia, WA: The Freechild Project.

6. Empowering for young people

ACS' youth engagement work is driven by the above underlying principles and promises to build on the strategies that were implemented toward the development of an authentic youth engagement practice, including:

Leadership Intensive Training (LIT). A 30-hour hands-on curriculum-based program designed to youth who are currently or who have previously been in the foster care or juvenile justice systems build core leadership skills (e.g. effective communication, decision-making, managing emotions, time management). Facilitated by former systems-involved ACS young adult staff, LIT is offered approximately four times per year in community and facility-based settings to eligible youth candidates. LIT graduates are encouraged to stay connected to other positive youth development opportunities and resources; and those with an interest in advocacy and system's improvement are connected to the Agency's Youth Leadership Council (YLC).

ACS Youth Leadership Council (YLC). The YLC was created to provide a voice and platform for young people currently and formerly involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice system in NYC to participate in planning, policy development, and decision-making that impacts them and their communities. The YLC is comprised of young people with current or previous foster care and/or juvenile justice experience, leveraging their insights as the experts of their own experiences and situations, representing their peers, and working in partnership with adult staff to review and shape programming and policies that can improve outcomes for youth in care and those transitioning out of care. These young people meet monthly, participate in sub-committees working on priority issues, and regularly present their recommendations to ACS leadership. They also interface with New York State oversight staff and have facilitated several events for their peers throughout New York City including annual summer youth summits involving 150 to 200 youth in care.

Special Leadership/Advocacy Projects.

Annual Youth Conference with the New York State Office of Children and Family Services - Collaboration with OCFS Regional Youth Council members to develop at least one major youth event designed to engage NYC-based youth in care in systems advocacy efforts. Most often, this project is a youth conference or speak out-type event where concerns, data, recommendations are developed and shared with local and state leadership

YOUTH POWER! - A New York State network hosted by Families Together in NYS that is run by and for youth and young adults. This group works to ensure young people have meaningful involvement on all levels of the services they receive. They also work to ensure the availability of Peer Support through persistent advocacy, technical assistance, and by offering training and education opportunities to young people.

Authentic Youth Engagement Model

ACS is committed to providing young people with a voice and a platform to become the drivers of their own development, representing their own interests, preparing them to become contributing members of society. Youth engagement is grounded in the idea that young people

are the experts when it comes to determining their needs and measuring the impact that child serving systems have in creating viable and effective solutions to mitigating and resolving many of the complex social and economic issues. ACS contracts with community-based organizations and directly provides services that contain an array of programs designed to meet the distinct needs of populations. Moving forward, we envision a more integrated approach to assist and support young people to create positive change and achieve long-term stability.

The YLC's Theory of Change

A theory of change defines all the elements required to link a group's efforts, long-term goal with its mission. It is the theory of what it takes to create the change the Agency wants to see in our City and our communities. The ACS Youth Leadership Council's (YLC) Theory of Change reflects all the changes at various levels that can contribute towards enabling youth to have an authentic voice and place at the table to create sustainable, equitable and fulfilling shared governance. As the YLC matures as a decision-making body, with an increasing focus on authentic youth engagement, our belief in and evolution of this theory of change should improve.

The theory of change has as its long-term outcome a contribution to shared governance: that young people work alongside adults in creating and defining policies, programs, and making decisions that directly impact the lives and improve the conditions of all young people involved in child serving systems. Racial equity and cultural competence are the core theory of change for sustainable authentic youth engagement with the ultimate objective that youth acquire the skills and competencies to effectively contribute and chart the course for their successful transition into adulthood.

For youth to have the skills and competencies to effectively contribute and create the pathway for their successful transition into adulthood, they must first be ready and prepared to advocate for themselves as well as the preparation of other youth. However, readiness and preparedness are not enough. The theory of change identifies some preconditions that make it possible for ready youth to attain the sustainable self-advocacy objective. These preconditions are paramount to the adoption of an authentic youth engagement framework and buy-in from adult partners and provider agency staff. The YLC leadership team hold themselves accountable to ensuring that, after their participation in the YLC, young people and adults acquire/possess:

1. Skills, knowledge, gainful experience, and networks
2. Enhanced competencies, better understanding and appreciation of young people, and a deeper commitment and motivation to incentivizing long-term youth engagement
3. Ownership for engaging communities and attracting funders to make investments in service or services that improve quality of life, increases coordination and collaboration of efforts, and authentically embraces equity through the representation of young people.

The Youth Leadership Council will continue to work with the adult partners toward achieving shared long-term outcomes, including shared governance and the promotion of racial equity and cultural competence. YLC has seen a shift in shared partnership as they are being asked to review and add guidance to policies, procedures and guidance's that are being developed. The

YLC has achieved many of its short-term outcomes such as co-creating agenda's for both the monthly YLC meetings as well as the quarterly agenda meetings with ACS leadership. With respect to our intermediate outcomes, some YLC members have transitioned into supportive roles as peer leaders and provide coaching to other YLC members around advocacy and the pursuit of sustainable employment opportunities within the agency. And finally, the YLC has achieved its short-term outcomes by fleshing out and prioritizing a series of strategies for systems improvement to promote authentic youth engagement and create a strategic an action plan for authentic youth engagement that represents the voice of systems-involved youth.

Strategy #1 : Equity at the Centerpiece: promote shared governance by partnering with youth to ensure that social services are designed and delivered equitably

Activity 1.1: Implement authentic coaching to support youth in deepening their understanding of the agency, develop skills to effectively navigate the agency, and to establish relationships with agency staffs as partners.

Action Items	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
YLC will co-create agenda for monthly YLC meeting	YLC	On-going discussion start date 9/16/2020 (long-term)	Other YLC and YABs Supporting Staff of YLC
Implement authentic coaching to support youth in deepening their understanding of the agency, develop skills to effectively navigate the agency, and to establish relationships with agency staffs as partners	Division of Family Permanency Services (FPS) and Division of Youth and Family Justice (DYFJ) & Youth Engagement Staff	Begin 9/16/2020 (long-term)	Youth Engagement Specialist NYC Service Jim Casey Youth Opportunities NYFC OCFS

Activity 1.2: Create opportunities for ACS’s Racial Equity & Cultural Competencies Working group and the YLC to work collaboratively in promoting equity across throughout the child welfare and juvenile justice system

Action Items	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
Create opportunities for the RECCC and the YLC to work collaboratively in promoting equity across throughout the child welfare and juvenile justice system	FPS & DYFJ & Youth Engagement Staff	On-going discussion start in the fall (long-term)	YLC Youth Engagement Specialist

Activity 1.3: Recruit and hire Youth as paid staff in different Divisions at ACS (e.g. comparable to the Youth Engagement Specialist role in DYFJ)

Action Items	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
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Recruit and hire Youth as paid staff in every Division at ACS	FPS & DYFJ	On-going discussion start date 9/11/2020 (long-term) add to strategic blueprints	Division of Finance Administration/HR Commissioner's Office Public/Private Partnership Workforce Institute
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Activity 1.4: Promote shared governance through the joint (e.g. youth/staff) development and review of agency policies, protocols, and the youth Bill of Rights that were created by Office of Children & Families

Action Items	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
Promote shared governance through the joint (e.g. youth/staff) development and review of agency policies, protocols, and the youth Bill of Rights	FPS & DYFJ & Youth Engagement Staff	Ongoing work (long-term)	Workforce Institute Various Divisions at ACS (DYFJ, FPS, DPPM, DCP, DPS) OCFS Various Divisions at ACS (DYFJ, FPS, DPPM, DCP, DPS)

Activity 1.5: Engage and invite other YLCs to participate in ACS YLC quarterly meetings to leverage their insights and efforts to promote equity on a broader scale

Action Items	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
Engage and invite other YLCs to participate in ACS YLC quarterly meetings	FPS & DYFJ & Youth Engagement Staff	On-going on a quarterly basis	Provider Agencies/CBO's/Legal partners Children's Village/Bravehearts

Strategy #2: <u>Incentivize Long Term Youth Engagement</u>: increase youth engagement by institutionalizing paid positions and stipend-earning opportunities for youth across the child welfare and juvenile justice system			
Activity 2.1: ACS will fund or secure resources to create and sustain stipend programs, certifications, and paid positions within ACS and externally			
Action Items	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
ACS will fund or secure resources to create and sustain stipend programs, certifications, and paid positions within ACS and externally	FPS & DYFJ	Start discussion first week of September 2020 (long-term)	Office of Public/Private Partnership NYFC ACS Finance Human Resources ACS Office of Education and Employment
Activity 2.2: Identify and define potential paid and internship opportunities for youth at ACS for 2021			
Action Items	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
Identify and define potential paid and internship opportunities for youth at ACS for 2021-2023	FPS & DYFJ	Started November - December 2020 this is on-going	ACS Office of Education and Employment
Activity 2.3: Identify a cohort of Young Adults to brainstorm/conceive, alongside paid staff, the authentic recruitment of Youth in every Division at ACS			
Action Items	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
Identify a cohort of Young Adults to brainstorm/conceive,	FPS & DYFJ	Start September-December 2020	Safe Harbour Grant purchasing gift cards

alongside paid staff, the authentic recruitment of Youth in every Division at ACS		(long-term on-going)	(Office of Older Youth Services)
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Strategy #3: Training and Coaching (create opportunities for young people and staff to enhance or refine their skills around authentic youth engagement)

Activity 3.1: Develop materials & strengthen youth’s coaching skills

Action Item	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
Staff and youth (curriculum design)	YLC and Youth Engagement Specialist FPS & DYFJ	Start July 2021 projected end date April 2022	YLC Other YLC’s Youth Engagement Leadership Team
Develop training to support youth in strengthening their speaking and writing skills	YLC and Youth Engagement Specialist FPS & DYFJ	On-going (long-term)	OCFS NYC Services Workforce Institute Youth Engagement Leadership Team

Activity 3.2: Develop a mentoring model for youth and staff

Action Item	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
Develop a mentoring model for youth and staff	NYFC & Other YABs	Started March/April 2021 (long-term)	NYFC YAB LFC-LAS-CASA etc.

Activity 3.3: Train, prepare and support youth through the coaching roll-out

Action Item	Who Will Be Responsible	By When	Required Help or Resources
Train youth on the essentials of and provide coaching post-training	YLC and Youth Engagement Specialist FPS & DYFJ NYFC & Other YABs	On-going (long-term)	YLC leadership staff OCFS Workforce NYFC YAB

			LFC-LAS-CASA etc. Advocacy programs NYC Service
Institutionalize and rollout youth engagement training to the agency workforce	YLC and Youth Engagement Specialist FPS & DYFJ	Start January 2022 On-going (long-term)	YLC leadership staff OCFS Workforce NYFC YAB LFC-LAS-CASA etc. Advocacy programs NYC Service

Conclusion

The ACS Youth leadership Council aims to promote authentic youth engagement with the support of and in partnership with adult leadership staff from ACS. The YLC seeks to work with ACS staff to achieve:

1. A consistent understanding across all Divisions within ACS of the important role young people play in the achievement of organizational long-term outcomes.
2. A shared understanding of the opportunities for planning and in decision-making and youth-adult partnerships available within ACS to engage youth toward the achievement of Agency’s mission and priorities; and
3. The systematic inclusion of young people in key Executive and Senior leadership meetings internal to ACS as well as city-wide City Agencies and stakeholder meetings, as standing members.