FOSTERING YOUTH LEADERSHIP The Program Perspective

The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) invests in a network of community-based organizations and programs to alleviate the effects of poverty and to provide opportunities for New Yorkers and communities to flourish. DYCD serves youth and families across New York City through afterschool programs, employment programs, services for homeless and runaway youth, immigration services, literacy programs for adults and youth, and other community development programs. DYCD is invested in understanding what works in youth and community development programs.

Through *DYCD Focus*, an occasional series of thematic stories on best practices across DYCD programs, we will share information gathered from DYCD programs, as appropriate to the topic. In this *Focus*, we feature the Cornerstone Program, the DYCD Literacy Programs, the In-School Youth Program, the Beacon Program, the Fatherhood Initiative, the Summer Youth Employment Program, Neighborhood Development Area (NDA) Programs, and the School's Out New York City (SONYC) program.

Why Youth Leadership?

Youth leadership development is an important component of programs that aim to prepare youth for success in life, education, and careers. Youth programs play a role in fostering key leadership skills—such as persistence, communication, problem solving, and collaboration—that youth need to excel as leaders. DYCD has a rich history of fostering youth leadership development through its service learning enhancement for Beacon and Cornerstone programs (formerly known as Teen ACTION). More recently, DYCD has made youth leadership a core priority in its middle school afterschool programs. To support these and other programs, DYCD developed a Youth Leadership Development Framework that captures some of the most critical attitudes and skills that young people need as they move through life, school, and work, including those that relate to the inner self (e.g., confidence, autonomy), collaborating with others (e.g., bringing people together), and communication (e.g., ability to persuade). The DYCD Youth Leadership Development Framework was designed to promote a common language for youth leadership development and to help

providers design quality youth leadership programming and integrate youth leadership principles into their existing programs.

DYCD's Youth Leadership Development Framework
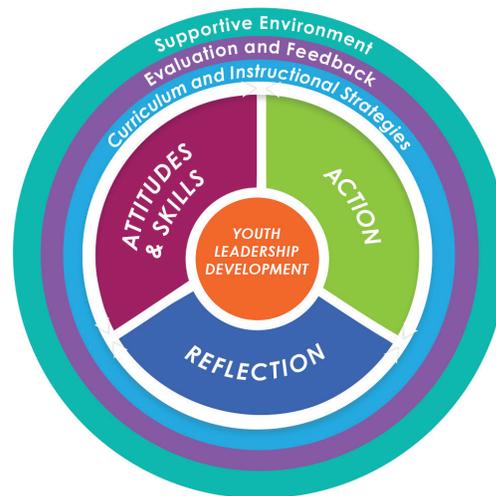
Focus on Key Leadership Attitudes & Skills
Inner/Self Characteristics
Communication
Collaboration

Learn By Doing Leadership
Motivate
Mastery
Engage school and/or community

Reflect on Action
Continuous
Connection
Challenge
Contextualize
Recognize accomplishments
Make new plans

Create the right environmental conditions for leadership development
Authentic opportunity
Safe environment
Community building
Ask-listen-encourage
Reframing conflict

What Are DYCD Programs Doing to Promote Youth Leadership?

DYCD programs, and the SONYC middle school initiative in particular, have prioritized and are engaged in activities and programming that support youth leadership skill development. Some examples of how SONYC and other DYCD programs are doing this include:

Promoting leadership through program activities and structures—DYCD programs promote youth leadership through their program structure and activities. For example, programs may provide young people with opportunities for leadership roles within a content-based activity, such as a lead in a play, solo in a performance, or captain of a team sport. Other programs have explicit leadership opportunities outside of program activities. Several DYCD programs have a youth leadership council or other youth leadership bodies that are responsible for making decisions in partnership with the program's staff.

How One NDA High School Afterschool Program Fosters Youth Leadership Through Activities

In one NDA culinary program, teens learn about and prepare different foods and then are invited to serve as part of the catering crew for big events. This program gives participants an opportunity to demonstrate leadership skills in a real-world context.

Promoting leadership through opportunities for knowledge sharing and communication—Programs support the development of leadership skills such as confidence, persuasion skills, and effective communication by providing youth with opportunities to share the knowledge and skills they have developed in their activities. Some programs have an end-of-session presentation during which youth perform or present to their peers and families. Other programs post artwork on the walls, distribute youth-developed newspapers, or find opportunities for presentations in the community. For example, some programs host dance shows that are open to the community or take place in community locations. By sharing their knowledge, talents, and skills, young adults develop confidence in their abilities and practice sharing that knowledge with other individuals—both important skills for strong leaders.

How One Cornerstone Program Fosters Youth Leadership Through Opportunities for Communication

In one Cornerstone Program, youth participate in a reflection activity to help them identify their existing leadership skills and how those skills have helped them succeed. They reflect on their experiences from birth to the present by first thinking about their successes and then working to identify what made them successful. They are encouraged to use adjectives to describe themselves, convert those adjectives into leadership skills, and finally to identify how they developed those skills.

Promoting leadership by offering participants jobs or responsibilities—Programs help youth embrace and develop leadership skills such as motivation, ability to organize, and perspective-taking. They do this by sharing roles and responsibilities with youth in the program—for example, they might ask participants to report to the principal on program activities or offer opportunities to monitor attendance and facilitate and take notes at youth advisory meetings. Other programs offer opportunities for youth to take on roles and responsibilities outside of the program through internships and other job-related activities.

How the Summer Youth Employment Program Fosters Youth Leadership Through Job Opportunities

Ladders for Leaders is a professional internship program that is an extension of the Summer Youth Employment Program at DYCD. It provides teens with unsubsidized internships with corporations, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies. Prior to the experience, youth go through training in résumé writing, interviewing, and workplace conduct. The program focuses on helping teens identify and explore their interests.

Promoting leadership through service learning—Finally, a number of programs engage youth in service learning programs. Service learning is a way to connect young people to their community and help them to build key leadership skills, such as perspective-taking, having a sense of shared purpose, and developing the ability to inspire others.

How DYCD Service Learning Enhancements Foster Youth Leadership

DYCD's service learning enhancement for Beacon and Cornerstone programs is designed to engage youth in Grades 6–12 in opportunities to participate in structured learning, service projects, and reflection. Youth lead every aspect of the service learning project, including identifying the project by determining the most meaningful contribution to their community. One program completed a neighborhood beautification project and learned about advocacy in the process.

Top Tips for Fostering Youth Leadership—Ideas From DYCD Programs

1. **Build relationships with strong adult mentors.** The adults in a program can provide important guidance, feedback, and access to leadership opportunities by mentoring youth participants. Encourage adult program staff or volunteers to build strong and trusting relationships with youth rather than telling them what to do.

How One Cornerstone Program Fosters Youth Leadership Through Ongoing Mentoring

Two dozen Cornerstone programs receive funding through the Young Men's Initiative (YMI) to offer group mentoring to youth. In one Cornerstone program, youth choose their activities throughout the year, including a showcase to demonstrate what they have learned. Midway through the program year, they have the opportunity to complete an evaluation designed to help them think about what they have learned, how they felt about the activities in which they participated, determine their interests, and guide them to further those interests.

> *"We want kids who are going to go out and take more control and be more decisive in their lives. The afterschool program does that … We're supporting the kids going out joining and doing and becoming and changing and I think that's our primary goal in our school: Give the kids more autonomy and support their drive … their curiosity and their ambition, and expand the range of their interests."*
>
> —A school principal at a school that hosts a SONYC program

2. **Offer youth opportunities to take on leadership roles within the program.** Providing youth with opportunities for leadership roles can build a greater sense of belonging and commitment to your program and foster the development of key leadership skills. Providing space for youth to develop, lead, and facilitate a youth council, for example, is a great way to engage them in the leadership of your program.

How One SONYC Program Fosters Youth Leadership

One SONYC program pairs seventh graders with teachers to act as teachers' assistants in sixth-grade classrooms. They help the teachers think about new activities to try or ways to approach content and offer help and support in a variety of capacities. By taking on a mentoring role with their younger peers and helping teachers, youth gain leadership skills that will be important for the future.

3. **Offer youth leadership opportunities through internships or service learning programs.** Experiencing leadership through jobs, internships, and service learning programs allows young people to develop key leadership skills and feel more confident to take on additional leadership opportunities in the future.

How One Beacon Program Fosters Youth Leadership

Using a *Ladder of Leadership* model, one program provides progressive leadership opportunities for participants throughout their development. For example, high school participants receive academic assistance and participate in clubs where they discuss components of leadership such as life planning and decision making, while also completing an internship as a counselor in training (CIT). As CITs, youth have the opportunity to grow directly into leadership positions within their Beacon program while serving as role models for younger participants who aspire to become CITs. Many Beacon directors were once participants themselves, which speaks to the leadership and community development impact of these programs.

4. **Create program conditions that empower youth to advocate for themselves, their families, and their community.** One of the core components of youth leadership is giving youth the space to lead and empowering them to take ownership. Ultimately, this is the goal of DYCD programs: to ensure that young people have positive opportunities to identify their strengths and build skills so that they can independently navigate the world and make a positive contribution.

> *"They basically come up with everything … [I am] just there to guide them … you have to let them do the work. You have to let them come up with these things because if you're taking over, then they're not really learning. Each person always has a role in what they're doing."*
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> —One SONYC activity leader shared her philosophy about how to foster youth leadership

AIR was pleased to contribute findings from the ongoing School's Out New York City (SONYC) evaluation to the *DYCD Focus*.

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