
5. Youth Involvement and Leadership



Introduction

Sport, culture, and recreation offer numerous opportunities for youth involvement and leadership. Many of our political and community leaders built their confidence and gained experience in this sector and have continued over the years to value the principles and values of sport, culture, and recreation. It is a career choice for many and there are employment opportunities and training available that needs to be promoted.

Youth have said that they are ready and willing to get involved but want to do things that matter to them in a way that makes sense for them. While they appreciate the invitations to various meetings, it often appears to be adults talking about what youth need and want. “By youth for youth” is becoming a popular slogan and should be listened to and acted upon. Youth are saying that they are tired of being identified by the deficiencies or negative experiences (drugs, gangs, violence) which is the main message that makes the news. They want us to know that there are more healthy and strong young people than those who are not and it is important to recognize and build on this fact.

Key Messages

Youth networks and youth councils say that what you put out is what you get – and that we need to refocus our key messages. A good start would be to do the following:

- Shift from negative images of youth to positive examples and messages.
- Invite youth to be themselves and work together.
- Support youth and encourage them to be part of community, regional or north-wide networks.
- Inform people about the reduction of social issues through organized recreation.
- Encourage youth to volunteer and to explore careers in sport, culture, and recreation.
- Look for ways to have things done by youth for youth.

Developing Youth Leadership

The majority of sport, culture and recreation organizations have formal leadership courses and certification programs that ensure that young people develop leadership skills. Often young people start as participants, move to being helpers and then take on more formal training such as play leadership, coaching, dance or music instructors, etc.

As well, youth who reach an elite level in sport, culture and recreation may become role models that have a tremendously positive impact on other youth and instill community pride in everyone. The north has been blessed with many young role models and we know that there will be many more to come. One thing that northern youth say is that there is pressure on young leaders and that we need to be aware of “youth leadership burnout”. It is important to not put too much expectation on too few youth.

Other options for training in youth leadership come from having youth attend meetings and planning sessions with community leaders or taking specific youth leadership training from various sources as it is offered. Some of the most effective training in the north is done “by youth for youth” where young people get together and discuss their needs and share their experiences. Often it is a combination of formal training and experience that helps youth move forward.

The key is to not forget them and to make every opportunity available to include their voice in planning, implementation and evaluation of programs and services

How To Engage Youth

Most young people want to be part of good things going on in their communities. When asked across the north, over 80% of youth said that they are shy and not comfortable to present themselves as helpers or volunteers. They need to be encouraged and asked more than once. Engaging youth involves some very basic considerations. Do not ask youth to be involved in something just because a “youth” is needed – this is often tokenism and discourages real engagement.

Youth say that if you want them to be really and honestly involved, it is important to: really show them that you want them; meet them on their level and help them with their interests; provide structure and guidance but don't be too overbearing; keep things active and fun; give them lots of room and time to have their own voice; don't be afraid of the youth who are “different” and, finally, always have lots of food and flexibility at events and activities. Youth want to be involved and they want opportunities to learn, but often we forget that they know a great deal about things and should be encouraged to share what they know – that is real engagement.

Youth Strategies

We tend to involve youth in one of three ways: through programs and events geared to their interests (most often sport, culture, and recreation); as volunteers; or hit and miss through different events, training, or when we need a youth representative. To allow for more continuity, relevancy and ongoing relationship building youth strategies are useful tools.

Youth strategies are plans that outline when and how we are going to engage with or involve youth in all levels of our organization and its offerings. This can include: leadership positions on the board or in other structures; participation in programs and services; volunteer opportunities; training; career exposure, and in numerous other ways.

A key part of any strategy should be to maintain the momentum (keep connections alive and well) and communication using a wide variety of technologies and approaches. Combining ideas with resources, a youth strategy should include young people in the development and implementation of it and be flexible enough to be different and amazing – creative and timely.



The Northern Context

Northern Saskatchewan has a very young population and it's growing. The needs of our youth are at the heart and soul of our communities, so building leaders for the future is our top priority. We need to plan for and invest in youth leadership and do everything we can to develop healthy, happy young people.

In the north, we want to include youth in everything we do, but often costs becomes a barrier. Youth who are doing well are seen as role models and are on all sorts of committees and go to lots of events. Some even say they are burning out. Others, who are on a bad path, need more help to be included more – not put aside or forgotten. We all have a responsibility to youth and in the north we take this very seriously.

“I learned the importance of being a good listener, time, attitudes, performances, building up my self-esteem. I'm going to take what I learnt and use it in my home town.” – Youth participant, Northern Spirits Program

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What's Important to Know?

- ★ Youth are not the future – they are the today.
- ★ Their realities are different and this needs to be acknowledged and accommodated.
- ★ Honest communication is critical and requires a relationship to be in place.
- ★ Most youth have serious stress or concerns in their lives – staying active can help.
- ★ If we don't prepare youth right now, northerners won't be filling future jobs.
- ★ Leadership training is important but so is hands on experience – provide both.
- ★ Youth use all forms of technology as part of their everyday reality.
- ★ Not all youth are the same so don't expect everyone to be interested in everything.
- ★ Young people need role models, not critics.

Tips and Advice

1. Don't just encourage youth to get involved, let them take the lead.
2. Trust youth to do things their way even if it is different from your way.
3. Many teenagers leave their communities, so start young to recruit volunteers.
4. Don't tell youth what to do – listen to them and show by example.
5. Diversify the programs to allow for all types of interests (get beyond sports).
6. Don't push troubled youth away – offer understanding and acceptance.
7. Don't put up with too much nonsense either, boundaries need to be in place.



Story

Gordon Denny Community School in Air Ronge has a strong commitment to youth and developing youth leaders. They have a mentorship program at noon hours where the older students provide supervision and activities for the younger grades on the playground and inside. The youth are encouraged to volunteer in many ways in the school – helping with elder's teas and movie nights, for example. They hire youth workers in the summer and ensure they receive training through the S.P.R.A. Play Leadership Certification Program.

“If you have a youth conference, make sure you have young motivational speakers.” – Youth Conference Participant

“Our youth are our future and it's our responsibility to make sure they have every opportunity to succeed – having them join the Community and School Recreation Coordinator Steering Committee is a great start.” – Lily McKay Carriere, Cumberland House

Toolbox Connection

In the toolbox you will find the following tools related to this section:

- Youth Sport, Culture and Recreation Strategy Framework
- How To Do A Community Project With Youth
- The S.P.R.A. Play Leadership Program
- 40 Developmental Assets