



**COLLABORATING FOR A BETTER FUTURE:
ENGAGING YOUTH IN MUNICIPAL CLIMATE ACTION**



Clean Air Partnership

ABOUT THE CLEAN AIR PARTNERSHIP:

Clean Air Partnership (CAP) is a registered charity that works in partnership to promote and coordinate actions to improve local air quality and reduce greenhouse gases for healthy communities. Our applied research on municipal policies strives to broaden and improve access to public policy debate on air pollution and climate change issues. Clean Air Partnership's mission is to transform cities into more sustainable, resilient, and vibrant communities where resources are used efficiently, the air is clean to breathe and greenhouse gas emissions are minimized.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth engagement is the meaningful and sustained involvement of young people in actions and decisions about matters of importance to themselves and others in ways that positively shape their communities and society. It is more than a dialogue between adults and young people. It is about adults and young people working together as equal partners to act, make decisions, and create change.

Canada is fortunate to have an abundant, diverse, and educated youth population. Nonetheless, less than 1 in 4 or 24% of Canadian youth believe their elected representatives care about their opinions. Further, less than 1 in 6 or 15% think their municipal government creates meaningful opportunities for their engagement. Lastly, less than 1 in 4 or 21% believe they have access to the resources and tools needed to make a difference in their community.

Engaging youth in government and policy prepares them to become active citizens now as well as into the future. Incorporating youth perspectives improves actions, decision-making, policies, and programs by encouraging their input, creativity, and innovation. In addition, these experiences build youth interest and trust in government and policy. With some governments expecting 30-50% of their staff to retire within ten years, recruiting and retaining youth is crucial.

In Canada, municipalities are responsible for between 3 – 8% of a community's greenhouse gas emissions but they often have an influence on over 50% of a community's greenhouse gas emissions (through their land use, transportation, water and waste programs and planning and climate policies) highlighting their importance in local climate action. It is essential that youth are involved in this climate action as many of the plans and policies developed today will require over 30 years of implementation to enable the achievement of greenhouse gas reduction targets. Noting that many of today's decision-makers are expected to retire before this, engaging youth must be a part of succession planning and follow-through.

The purpose of this report was to provide an overview of youth engagement, its principles, and practices with a focus on youth engagement in municipal climate action. The final section of this report presents a narrative analysis of youths' experiences engaging in municipal climate action, as well as municipalities' experiences engaging with youth in municipal climate action. These experiences were collected in informal interviews with youth groups and municipal staff.

The final section highlights the practices and barriers faced by youth engaging in municipal climate action, as well as the practices of and barriers faced by municipalities in engaging youth in municipal climate action. It also features ways to overcome these barriers and points out areas for collaboration and improvement. The goal of this section was to understand how youth can best engage or be engaged in municipal climate action to make communities more livable, equitable, and resilient. Its findings were used in conjunction with a comprehensive literature review to inform the first two sections of this report.



SECTION 1: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth engagement is the meaningful and sustained involvement of young people in actions and decisions about matters of importance to themselves and others in ways that positively shape their communities and society. It is more than a dialogue between adults and young people. It is about adults and young people working together as partners to act, make decisions, and create change.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CIVIC AND POLITICAL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Civic youth engagement is a broad term referring to youth acting in service to their community or society, such as volunteering. Political youth engagement is a narrow term referring to youth taking part in government and policy, such as voting and engaging with elected officials on policies, actions and municipal decisions.

IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth is one of Canada's most important resources. Canada is fortunate to have an abundant, diverse, and educated youth population. Youth represent one-third of Canada's population and have unmatched confidence in their ability to change the world. Nonetheless, less than 1 in 4 or 24% of Canadian youth believe their elected representatives care about their opinions. Further, less than 1 in 6 or 15% think their municipal government creates meaningful

opportunities for their engagement. Lastly, less than 1 in 4 or 21% believe they have access to the resources and tools needed to make a difference in their community.

Government actions and decisions impact youth's lives, and youth have a right to be heard. They also have the right to equal access to opportunities and support and to influence matters that will affect them now and in the future. Unfortunately, 7 in 10 Canadians or 70% don't think youth are as prepared as they should be to become active civic and political leaders where being an active civic and political leader was defined as being engaged in the community and voting. Despite this, more than 1 in 2 or 56% of Canadians feel youth have too little influence in government and policy, with older Canadians feeling just as strongly as younger ones.

Engaging youth in government and policy prepares them to become active civic and political citizens who contribute to their community and economy. When youth contribute to their community and economy, diversity and sustainability outcomes are often improved. Incorporating youth perspectives improves actions, decision-making, policies, and programs by encouraging creativity and innovation. In addition, these experiences build youth interest and trust in government and policy. With some governments expecting 30-50% of their staff to retire within ten years, recruiting and retaining youth is crucial. This recruitment and retention require municipal leaders and staff to engage youth early and often, increasing their likelihood of taking part over time.

IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN MUNICIPAL CLIMATE ACTION

Climate change poses a significant threat to future generations. As a result, climate change is a top priority for many young Canadians. Young adults aged

18 to 29 are the most likely to think about climate change often and report getting anxious about it. They are aware of the negative impacts of climate change and recognize they will be the ones to deal with the consequences. As a result, 1 in 2 or 50% of young adults aged 18 to 29 believe climate change is an emergency compared to only 4 in 10 or 40% of adults aged 30 and up.

Young adults aged 18 to 29 were also the most likely to think that the government wasn't doing enough to combat climate change. Young Canadians are eager to act and have more of a say in decision-making. In Canada, municipalities account for over 50% of greenhouse gas emissions, highlighting a need for local climate action. It is essential that youth are involved in this climate action as many of the plans and policies developed today will require over 30 years of implementation. Noting that many of today's decision-makers expected to retire before this, engaging youth must be a part of succession planning and climate commitment follow through.

CIVIC AND POLITICAL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Many Canadians feel youth aren't politically engaged because they are less likely to vote than older individuals. Many Canadians feel youth aren't politically engaged because they are less likely to vote than older individuals. For example, a 2013 survey found that 60% of young adults voted in the last federal election compared to 92% of seniors aged 75 and up. While youth political engagement appears to be declining based on voter turnout, research suggests many are civically and politically engaged. Outside of voting, young adults aged 18 to 29 participate in most civic-engagement activities at the same or higher rates than older individuals. For example, young adults are most likely to support or oppose a political or social cause publicly, sign a petition, and volunteer. They are also most likely to attend a political meeting or organize a political event.

Unsurprisingly, young adults are the most likely to express their political and social views on the internet. In 2013, 17% of young people aged 15 to 25 stated

their political and social opinions on the internet compared to 9% 45 years or older. Interestingly, young adults are also the most likely to search for information about a political issue, and the rate at which they do so is growing. Over 50% of young adults aged 25 to 34 sought information about a political issue in 2013, compared to only 30% a decade earlier. Due to youths' unprecedented technological savvy, they are likely to find and share this information online.

Finally, youth civically and politically engage most often in matters of personal meaning and relevance to them. Consequently, they enjoy engaging in less formal social organizations that address specific issues of importance to them instead of more traditional political organizations that address issues more generally. Notably, memberships in organizations that allow youth to serve their own community are linked to long-term engagement. Youth are also more likely to engage when they feel included and share interests with their peers.

BENEFITS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth engagement helps young people understand they have a vital role to play in government and policy. It allows them to provide their input, influence decisions, and create change while developing a sense of belonging and trust in political organizations. It also gives them a chance to break down generational barriers between adults and youth and connect with and give back to their community and society.

Youth benefit through improved health and well-being. They also display lower delinquency and drug and alcohol abuse. Engaged youth perform better academically and achieve higher graduation rates. They also show personal growth by building self-esteem and social networks. When youth have opportunities to be active citizens, they develop communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills. These experiences support youth transitioning to adulthood. They also teach them resilience and responsibility. Engaged youth

are more likely to advocate for and lead positive economic, environmental, and social change.

The benefits of youth engagement extend beyond those to youth themselves. Adults who engage with youth gain a better appreciation and understanding of youth experiences and needs. They also report feeling a renewed energy for their work, greater job satisfaction, and improved workplace health. In addition, these adults enhance their careers by building networks and developing resources and skills. These benefits build positive and respectful work environments and relationships and reduce stress.

Communities benefit from youth engagement by developing active citizens who can address issues and create change. Youth engagement breaks down barriers and builds communities with more consideration and understanding for others. Youth engaged communities become known as youth-friendly, as reflected by their improved youth health and well-being indicators. They are also more likely to grow and be sustainable by creating a strong sense of longer-term community liveability and competitiveness and encouraging democracy and social responsibility amongst young people.

Lastly, organizations that engage with youth build capacity and perspective. They can create meaningful change informed by diverse experiences with the help of increased support to rise above traditional barriers. In addition, these organizations benefit from greater accountability and transparency. They may also attract funders and gain recognition while producing savings and revenues through collaboration and innovation. Lastly, organizations that engage youth make decisions that are appropriate and responsive to youth experiences and needs. As a result, they contribute to positive youth development, improving quality of life and sustaining their organization, community, and society.

BARRIERS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth often choose not to engage politically because of trust-related barriers. Youth feel disconnected and overwhelmed by political processes. Many feel they have no voice, and their opinions aren't valued. They also feel ignored by adults who they don't believe will take them seriously. Relatedly, youth often don't feel their engagement is meaningful and valued. Instead, they feel their engagement is confined and defined by adults who task them with unimportant jobs that they don't believe will bring about change. As a result, many are skeptical about current ways to engage. They also feel intimidated that adults will judge them for their lack of experience or knowledge.

Youth also face structural barriers when trying to engage. For example, many organizations don't ask youth to engage, and when they do, youth don't know how to get involved. Many youth don't understand what actions can make a difference or where to begin. In fact, many youth don't believe their engagement would make a difference at all. Youth also struggle to navigate political spaces and understand industry jargon. Finally, they are often unclear about expectations and what happens with the feedback they share. Youth also face logistical barriers, including a lack of compensation and scheduling and timing conflicts. Examples include activities happening when youth cannot attend because of school, volunteering, or work and lack of payment for labour or reimbursement for volunteering expenses.

Organizations also face barriers when trying to engage youth. The problem many organizations face is engaging youth in a meaningful way. It can be challenging to create opportunities, find the resources, and offer the right incentives. In addition, many organizations do not see youth engagement as a priority and may face resistance from leadership and staff. They also may not know how to engage and support youth or even where to find them. Their biggest misconception is that youth don't want to be engaged. Their biggest challenge is finding the resources and time.

SECTION 2: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

PRINCIPLES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Too often, youth engagement is missing in government and policy. Simply having youth present is not enough. Youth want their voices heard and opinions valued. They have a right and want to be involved in actions and decisions shaping their communities and society. Youth want their engagement to be meaningful and create change. Youth are the experts on their experiences and needs, and adults must treat them as such. They can drive change and have unique perspectives. However, if youth only contribute to minor issues, they may not feel valued enough to donate their time and effort.

Youth engagement has four key components: the activity itself, its initiating and sustaining factors, and its outcomes. These components operate on three levels, titled self, social, and system. For example, youth may become involved (initiating factors) because the activity itself aligns with their interests (self), a friend recommended they do so (social), or there is an opportunity to address an issue (system). They may stay involved (sustaining factors) because they value commitment (self), made new friends (social), or are creating change (system). Its outcomes may include skill development (self), increased social support (social), or improved services (system). The reason youth become and stay involved and how they perceive the outcomes of the activity inform their experience and may impact their perceptions towards future engagement.

Youth are most engaged when they feel they are contributing to something larger than themselves. Effective youth engagement that incorporates all components and levels of youth engagement consists of the head, heart, feet,

and spirit. The head offers a cognitive piece like learning new things. The heart provides an affective piece, like the feeling of making a difference. The feet offer a behavioural piece like spending time doing an activity. Lastly, the spirit provides a connection piece like working with others to make a change. In summary, youth engagement is more than just providing knowledge or showing up to do an activity - the experience and process matter.

There are three approaches to youth engagement, and under these three approaches, there are four methods. The first approach involves viewing youth as objects and receivers where adults are in control and allow no youth involvement. The second approach involves regarding youth as actors and recipients where adults are in control and regulate youth involvement. Under the second approach, there are three methods. Method one is involvement, where youth actively engage in activities regulated by adults. Method two is consultation, where adults collect youth feedback in regulated settings where they retain the authority to make the final decision. Method three is representation, where adults regulate and select youth to represent and work on behalf of their peers. Finally, the third approach involves valuing youth as leaders and resources where adults and youth share control and form partnerships. Under this approach, there is one method, shared leadership, where adults and youth function as partners to address issues and create change with shared accountability for outcomes.

Youth adult partnerships are an essential principle of youth engagement. They involve youth and adults working together and sharing ideas, experience, knowledge, and power to build stronger communities. They are structured so that both groups contribute, teach, and learn from one another. Youth-adult partnerships create mutually beneficial agendas, encourage shared ownership in actions and decisions, and take joint responsibility for the success or failure of outcomes. Together they are better able to channel their ideas and enthusiasm into meaningful action to create change.

PRACTICES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth engagement must be a priority in government and policy. This prioritization starts by acknowledging youth as active citizens and believing they belong in civic and political environments. It is essential to listen to youth voices and make them feel valued. Youth must be confident adults will take them seriously, and there must be open lines of communication.

Awareness and knowledge building alone is not a sufficient form of youth engagement. Organizations must develop youth engagement opportunities with youth in concert, not only with youth in mind. Efforts to improve youth engagement without listening to youth experiences and needs will not work. Youth must be able to contribute on their terms and feel their contributions are meaningful and valued. Such engagement facilitates a balance of power with adults and promotes youths' sense of belonging and well-being.

Organizations must present messages in a way that speaks to the interests and values of young people. Importantly, these interests cannot be assumed but must instead be established through engagement and research with youth. Youth are more likely to engage when activities connect to their interests. It is essential to ensure their engagement can create change and is meaningful. There must be opportunities to inspire both short- and long-term change for youth engagement to be successful. Youth must also be able to connect with decision-makers and be offered opportunities to engage with decision makers. Lastly, they must have the necessary information about issues and processes to avoid any skepticism about their engagement.

It is important to engage youth early and often as young people develop their core beliefs, interests, and habits before the end of high school. Engaging youth early in life makes it much more likely they will be active citizens in the future. It is also vital to create an environment where youth feel safe and supported. This

environment must recognize youths' unique abilities and perspectives and put their knowledge and strengths at the center of programming. It is also beneficial to offer less formal settings with more open membership styles to make engagement more accessible and enable youth to feel more comfortable.

Youth respond positively to messages that frame issues as current problems and are most likely to protect the things they care about. Youth particularly care about the science and social aspects of issues and receive political and social information best from trusted messengers, including their peer networks and trusted adults. The relationship between youth, adults, and peers is the single most influential contributor to youth engagement success. Youth may become engaged because of their passion for an issue, but they remain engaged because of their relationships. They also are more likely to seek information online and through social media.

Organizations must look at their processes to find policies and practices that restrict youth engagement. They must also innovate their recruitment strategies to ensure they allow young people to get involved. Youth often need to be invited to participate and there needs to be a simple way to keep them aware of engagement opportunities. They are more likely to say yes if various opportunities are offered, appealing to numerous abilities and interests. It is also important to ensure these opportunities are accessible and appeal to a diverse range of youth. Organizations must be aware of barriers that keep youth from engaging. They must also provide them with timely feedback about decision-making processes and how they use their input. The best approaches include intentional, ongoing, and positive outreach. They also make time for reflection with the input of youth.

It is crucial organizations build positive relationships with youth. They must ensure youth-adult partnerships are a priority. Youth adult partnerships must promote youth leadership and youth-led initiatives. Organizations must also collaborate with youth groups and youth-serving organizations (e.g., schools) and leverage

their networks. They do not always need to lead youth engagement but can instead engage through various youth networks. Many youth groups and youth-serving organizations build youth capacity and develop youth interests in issues of mutual concern. Organizations must coordinate their efforts and supports with these youth groups and youth-serving organizations to create change and empower youth. They should also learn from the experience of other organizations and their youth while sharing their own to improve.

Lastly, organizations must go to where youth are. Meeting youth in the physical and virtual spaces they are in can comfortably bring them into conversations in a way that is convenient for them. Organizations should also be innovative in their online communication. Online platforms can be a tool to converse with youth in a safe environment rather than simply a venue for broadcasting information and messages. Going to where youth are, extends to being where youth can be. Organizations must consider the availability of transportation and when and where meetings occur. Communities are diverse in culture, geography, and socioeconomic status, and different areas require different approaches. Given the financial challenges and instability, many young people face, offering monetary or other incentives can facilitate diverse participation and representation. Organizations must consult with young people to understand their needs and what incentives would work best for them.



SECTION 3: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN MUNICIPAL CLIMATE ACTION: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

This section of the report presents a narrative analysis of youths' experiences engaging in municipal climate action, as well as municipalities' experiences engaging youth in municipal climate action. These experiences were collected in informal interviews with youth groups and municipal staff.

This section highlights the practices of and barriers faced by youth engaging in municipal climate action, as well as the practices of and barriers faced by municipalities engaging youth in municipal climate action. It also features ways to overcome these barriers and points out areas for collaboration and improvement. The goal of this section is to understand how youth can be better engaged in municipal climate action to make our communities more livable, equitable, and resilient. Its findings were used in conjunction with a comprehensive literature review to inform the first two sections of the report.

YOUTH GROUP INTERVIEWS

The youth group members interviewed were between the ages of 16 to 30 years old. Most youth groups noted their members were high school or college students. They also shared that many of their members had post-secondary educations. Most youth groups perceived their members as being more privileged with strong networks. They then cited these strong networks (e.g., colleges) as often being what allows youth to get involved with their organizations.

Most youth groups said their members are climate literate. However, many face challenges navigating the political world. Youth groups highlighted that youth

feel overwhelmed by political processes and don't know who to talk to or how to get involved. They also shared that youth don't know how to affect change at different levels of government or what issues each level tackles. One youth group shared that they depend on adult partners to know how processes work, who they need to talk to, and how they can get involved. Many youth groups felt their members would benefit from training in this regard. They emphasized youth need to know they don't need to be policy or topic experts to engage in politics. They also highlighted the importance of governments asking youth to get involved.

Many youth groups discussed youth losing faith in their ability to affect change and democracy as barriers to their engagement. Many youth groups shared that youth feel hopeless and don't know where to start. They emphasized youth don't know which actions will have an impact. They felt youth would benefit from being educated on actions they can take to create change and provided opportunities to do so. One youth group emphasized the importance of these actions and opportunities being interesting and relatable to have the greatest impact and uptake.

Many youths also shared that youth don't believe the people in power care about or listen to their concerns. They mentioned that politicians often don't ask them for their input. But when they do, they often say they will take action, but then the youth do not receive communication on follow through or outcomes. While youth assumed that they say these things make to them feel heard in the short term, they highlighted it made them feel distrust in the long term. Youth believe that they would benefit from clear expectations and more transparency. They stated youth need to see evidence the people in decision-making roles care about and listen to their concerns, starting by asking them for their input. They also emphasized the importance of adults following through on what they say to build trust with youth.

A commonly reported feeling by youth was that youth engagement can be insincere and self-serving. Several youth noted municipalities often ask youth to delegate on behalf of ideas they are pitching. However, they rarely ask youth to provide feedback on what actions need to be advanced. They shared that youth can feel like they are being used to forward someone else's agenda when this happens. In this regard, youth reported feeling valued when they were first asked to give input and later asked to provide delegations on an issue. Youth also mentioned feeling heard when politicians later quoted them on the same issue.

Another barrier identified by youth was not knowing when and where things were happening. All youth noted that municipal agendas can be hard to find and navigate. One youth group mentioned they have a dedicated person to read municipal agendas and identify areas of concern. They also shared this task can take up to four hours per week.

Two other youth groups noted that it can be hard for them to keep up with dates, and they often find out about things at the last minute. Both youth groups shared when they find out about things at the last minute, it leaves them scrambling to prepare, and they often miss deadlines. Youth highlighted they would be more likely to get involved if they had adequate time to review the material beforehand to build confidence about the issues.

Building confidence was a point raised by many youth, with many citing youth struggling immensely with fear of judgment and feelings of imposter syndrome. Youth highlighted being prepared and feeling confident can be the difference between youth engaging or not. All youth agreed that an events calendar would be of benefit in this regard. Youth also suggested municipalities have a subscription option for their agendas based on keywords or themes.

Youth felt passionate that inviting youth to delegate isn't always the best way

to engage them. They mentioned they had seen the most success engaging in informal settings. They felt strongly that youth should have the opportunity to contribute, and it should not have to be in the form of a formal delegation if that is not where they are most comfortable. Youth mentioned that they would appreciate it if municipalities held regular informal check-ins to build capacity, trust, and relationships.

Another barrier experienced by younger youth, in particular, was dense reports. This youth group reported not having the ability or time to read lengthy documents filled with jargon hidden away in archives. They believe they would benefit greatly from summaries. They would also appreciate it if these summaries were shared on social media where there is a broader youth audience to access and read them.

Logistical barriers were common to all youth. The first barrier they reported was being underfunded and under-resourced. Many youths participate in climate action on the side of jobs and/or school. Many youth highlighted that municipalities often don't pay youth for the work they do the way they would pay an adult. Nonetheless, they still expect them to be available and take time off their paid positions when needed. These youth groups then stressed the importance of consistent and reliable funding to keep youth motivated and sustained during emotionally laborious work.

Youth also reported scheduling and timing barriers. Many youth expressed they have conflicting priorities during typical business hours, such as school or work. Two youth groups shared that the COVID-19 pandemic made it easier to participate when municipalities moved meetings online. These youth emphasized that they would benefit from attending meetings and delegating virtually moving forward to avoid them having to time off school or work or find reliable transportation.

Youth also said they would benefit from having a designated time slot when delegating. Currently, youth don't know when they will be asked to speak or how long they will have to do so. They highlighted by having a designated time slot, they can reduce the time they have to take off school or work and only show up when required. They can also show up prepared to speak for a set amount of time, keeping the meeting on track.

Lastly, several youths noted that not all municipalities were as experienced in terms of youth engagement. Youth wished municipalities were better connected and more willing to learn and share their knowledge. They noted due to time and resource constraints, youth often cannot connect with all municipalities to create change. They argued that many youth engagement strategies and youth inputs are widely applicable. They believe if one municipality has done the work on youth engagement, they should share their efforts with other municipalities in hopes that what goes around will come back around and everyone will benefit.

MUNICIPALITY INTERVIEWS

Youth engagement hasn't been a priority for most of the municipalities interviewed. While many reported trying to engage with youth when approached, they emphasized that they don't actively seek youth out. Although their youth engagement may be limited, they all noted community engagement is important to them.

While most municipal staff interviewed tried to engage with youth when approached, many reported struggling to identify where youth are and what issues they're interested in. Several suggested more research be conducted in this regard. However, one noted seeing success engaging youth in things they can relate to, such as driving to school vs. riding their bike. They said they often try to use these topics to point out more significant issues such as greenhouse

gas emissions. By relating these more significant issues to their lives, they have seen youth engagement increase.

Municipal staff suggested an inventory or roster of youth groups and their interest would be helpful. They noted that they depend on youth groups sharing information and spreading awareness with their networks. Several municipal staff echoed this sentiment, indicating one of the best ways to connect with youth is by connecting with youth groups who have already established connections and trust. They highlighted by doing so, they don't have to spend time and resources looking for youth who are interested or want to get involved. They already know where to find them and how to contact them.

Although municipal staff try to connect with youth groups, many noted that youth, in general, aren't showing interest or showing up in the ways they need to, such as attending meetings or providing delegations. Many reported talking to youth and encouraging them to reach out but not hearing back. They said this silence signalled to them that the youth weren't interested in getting involved.

Municipal staff reported youth don't know how to access political information or how to get involved. They noted youth struggle to navigate the political world and often don't know how or where to start. Several thought youth would benefit from training on how government systems work, who they need to talk to, and how they can get involved. They also thought youth would benefit from developing skills such as how to delegate. One municipality highlighted these barriers might be why youth are not showing up; perhaps they don't know how or who to talk to.

A municipal interviewee experienced youth not showing up as youth being politically disengaged. When probed with the idea that youth may be engaging in other ways, this municipality shared their belief that youth need to

learn how to engage in the processes that exist. They highlighted municipalities don't make decisions in the streets or on social media. They make them at meetings with the input of delegations. They felt that youth need to engage where the decisions are made if they want change to happen.

A few municipal staff shared the belief that the systems need to change. One stated that municipalities continue to push the same forms of engagement they have been using for years, trying to rebrand and rename them, leaving youth frustrated by the same issues and processes. Another echoed this, stating they think it's critical to engage with youth in ways they want to get engaged and stressed the importance of doing what they want to do. They proposed that if you offer youth something youth are interested in, it can facilitate the conversations you want to have.

Municipal staff also stressed public servants must be ready to go out and serve in the ways the public wants. They spoke of the importance of meeting youth where they are physically and emotionally. They also said they don't believe traditional forms of engagement are working. They highlighted youth aren't showing up, so they must go out, find, invite, and engage with them where they are. They emphasized going to people makes them feel comfortable, builds trust, and shows them you care.

Another difference in perspective amongst the municipal staff was around the use of language in official documents. One municipal interviewee viewed language as a barrier to youth engagement and highlighted the importance of writing things youth can and will want to read. Another disagreed with this approach and felt that issues should be comprehensive and not be "dumbed down." Although they also mentioned trying to write in plain language and avoid jargon, they stated they believe youth are bright and can hear it how it is.

One thing all the municipalities could agree on was that youth engagement has focused on awareness and knowledge building more than actions and decision making. One municipal staff shared they offer a yearly internship position. Another added they offer a youth seat at their roundtables. However, leadership opportunities were scarce and paid positions were almost non-existent within them all.

One municipal staff acknowledged that youth engagement is often hard to sustain because youth are expected to do emotionally exhausting work with no compensation. They noted youth groups face many of the same barriers as NGOs, including competing for limited resources. In response, this interviewee suggested holding youth to a different standard to qualify for municipal funding or grants. They highlighted it is hard for youth to compete for resources against organizations of higher sophistication without adult support, defeating their purpose entirely.

A common theme reported by all municipal staff interviewed was the desire for youth groups to collaborate. Several municipal staff reported that many young people approach them to start new groups or projects. They stressed it might be more valuable for these young people to collaborate, join forces, and unite. They highlighted that if they merged their strengths, they wouldn't have to compete as much for limited resources. They also indicated that if there were fewer but larger youth groups, municipalities would have more time to communicate with them and reach more youth in the long run. They concluded by highlighting such collaboration is good for everyone's resources.

Municipal staff cited logistical barriers such as youth being in school or working during business hours. One municipality stated youth like to engage in the evenings or on the weekends, but staff have commitments outside of work hours and connecting during non-work hours can be challenging. Municipal staff reported liking to stay connected with youth; however, they did acknowledge

that their engagement with them is off the side of their desks or volunteer. This sentiment was echoed by several municipal interviewees who shared youth engagement is not on anyone's job description. They highlighted that their work on this effort is offer after hours and is unpaid.

One interviewee emphasized when they engage youth, they do it because they care and want to, not because it is expected or are recognized for it. Another suggests engaging youth can sometimes create challenges because youth want change, and they want it now. They mention youth may want them to say or do certain things, but they are bound on how much they can say or do publicly.

Municipal staff spoke to the importance of managing expectations on both sides of the equation, noting municipalities need to be transparent at every step as not to mislead youth. They acknowledged youth might lack confidence or experience feelings of imposter syndrome. They also spoke of the importance of offering informal environments for youth to participate. Although municipal staff highlighted how impactful youth voices can be when they overcome their fears, they are grateful youth groups can advocate on priorities while they use their strengths in other areas.

Almost all youth engagement done by municipal staff was done through schools. Some were also done with community organizations. They provided engagement examples such as delivering presentations and workshops, facilitating research projects, and helping coordinate and promote events. They also highlighted most of this youth engagement was done by faculty or staff requests. Many municipal staff shared that some of the most impactful youth engagement initiatives they were involved in weren't led by them but instead supported by them. In fact, one municipality shared that they can be involved more frequently by supporting youth engagement rather than leading it as it requires less time and resources.

All municipal staff interviewed reported being most excited about youth engagement opportunities that help them meet their goals. Many specifically look to engage youth in projects that relate to municipal priorities. Many expressed because youth engagement is a lot of work and requires a lot of resources, they need to get a lot out of it. In fact, one municipal interviewee believes that youth engagement is often shelved because it is a lot of work for minimal outputs. However, they emphasized a sum of small outputs eventually adds up to larger, more meaningful outcomes. They also highlighted that the more youth build trust and see their peers involved, the more they will get involved and contribute to more significant outputs.

Several municipal staff cited sustaining youth connections as a barrier. They stated they made most of their connections through schools that were not in session between April and June. They noted that students and teachers move on quickly, and progress can often be lost. Another barrier they mentioned was that most of their youth engagement happens at and during the school term. Because of this, engagement decreases in the summer. One municipality highlighted if decision-making happens in the summer, it often systemically excludes youth who engage through schools.

Municipal staff shared that the COVID-19 pandemic was eye-opening for them about the importance of engaging youth and the road forward. This municipality highlighted that COVID-19 opened more channels for youth to engage digitally, and they heard from more youth than ever before. They learned that when youth were able to engage from the comfort of their home, more youth showed up. As a result, they are moving away from in-person engagement forums and leveraging online engagement opportunities to get a more diverse and inclusive representation from within the community. They also plan to offer opportunities while youth are not physically in school, such as after school hours or during the summer. This shift has resulted in a drastic increase in youth voices being heard.

Lastly, the most significant barrier reported by municipal staff was a lack of time and resources. Many noted they barely have enough resources to engage the public, let alone specifically target youth. Again, many highlighted when they engage youth, it is often after hours and unpaid. Many felt that youth engagement required a role of its own so there is someone youth can engage with on an ongoing basis who can ensure two-way communication and follow through.



