

Improving Teen Engagement in Buffalo and Erie County

By Hannah Sosenko, Emily Bramhall, and Sara Jablonski

Introduction

Erie County offers many opportunities for teen engagement through afterschool programs, summer jobs programs, and internships. National research reveals many benefits from these programs, such as improved academic achievement, better health outcomes, and reductions in violence. Participation, however, often drops significantly after youth enter high school. A better understanding of adolescent development and youth engagement strategies, ranging from active participation to shared leadership, will draw more teens into programs and maximize their impact.

In adolescence, young people are defining who they will be as adults. However, they live in a society that often disregards their perspectives and ability to contribute. Teen programming can challenge this norm by engaging young people. This report highlights the ways in which programs can fight the decline in participation in out-of-school programs by practicing youth engagement – resulting in benefits for youth, adults, and the community alike.

Opportunities for Teen Engagement

Teen engagement may happen in traditional afterschool settings, summer youth employment programs, or in non-traditional ways such as paid opportunities during the school year.

Afterschool programming takes place in schools and community-based organizations. Students in afterschool programs can gain supplemental academic support, develop mentorship relationships, express themselves through the arts, engage physically in sports and recreational activities, learn to cook, and/or participate in community service.¹

This policy brief defines levels of youth engagement, considers why teens do not always participate in programs, highlights various teen-centered programs in Erie County, and shares details about programs that practice innovative teen engagement. It was created by Hannah Sosenko and Emily Bramhall, Cornell University High Road Fellows, and Sara Jablonski, Urban 4-H Educator with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County.



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Summer youth employment programs aim to offer teens meaningful employment in internships, apprenticeships, and/or workforce development training rather than low-skill jobs that might otherwise be their only choice. These opportunities are paid, typically through government sources of grants and donations, so that host businesses and organizations do not have to pay youth directly.

Paid positions during school year. Some youth programs also pay teens for participation during the school year. This participation may take the form of teens learning knowledge and skills through project-based learning. In some programs, teens are paid to train or facilitate others.

Older youth often want or need a job, and strong youth development programming can pay youth as an incentive for participation. Paying youth for their work also shows teens in a direct way that the program values their participation. Youth employment programs also meet a critical need. A recent report found that teen employment has decreased significantly in the past 40 years. This decline in employment disproportionately affects youth of color. Locally, roughly four percent of youth in the Buffalo metropolitan area are disconnected (out of work and school), but these rates vary significantly by race, as 9.9 percent of Black youth are disconnected, compared to 2.7 percent of White youth.²

Outcomes of Teen Participation in Out-of-School Time Programs

Students in afterschool programming obtain positive educational, social and health outcomes. Afterschool programs have been shown to improve performance on standardized tests and increase attendance and engagement in school, while also improving social-emotional development.³ Research has also found that these programs reduce risky behaviors, like drinking alcohol or experimenting with drugs, while also improving interpersonal skills and increasing self-esteem. Other health improvements include increased physical activity, improved body mass index, and increased knowledge about proper nutrition and healthy lifestyle behaviors.⁴

In the Buffalo region, 4% of youth are disconnected (out of work and school), including **9% of Black youth** and **2.7% of White youth.**



Summer youth employment programs have also demonstrated many positive results. Teens who participate in these programs are more likely to be engaged in school and have higher academic achievement, along with being more socially competent and less likely to have behavioral problems. They have more agreeable relationships with both peers and adults and more positive mental health outcomes.⁵ One study found that teen participation in a summer program in Chicago reduced teen violence by 43%.⁶ Further, teen employment programs create networking opportunities between teens and potential future employers, a benefit for both teens and local businesses and organizations.

Increasing access to, and quality of, teen programs can also minimize the “income achievement gap.” As public school budgets become strained, schools are forced to make cuts, and extracurricular activities are often one of the budget items to get cut. These costs are then shifted onto families, or the programs are cut entirely.⁷ As wealthier students continue to access afterschool and other enrichment programs, they are able to build their resumés for competitive college admissions, while students in poorer households and communities miss out on such opportunities.⁸ Ensuring access to high quality teen programs helps prepare all youth for successful futures, which benefits them, their families, and the larger community.

Barriers to Teen Participation in Out-of-School Programs

Program participation often falls off significantly after youth enter high school, for a variety of reasons:⁹

- In comparison to younger school-aged children, teen programming is often less available and under-funded;
- Lack of access to transportation makes getting to programs difficult;
- Families may not have knowledge of program offerings;
- Families may be unable to cover the costs of participation;
- Risky behaviors may impact involvement;
- Teens have more autonomy than younger youth and may choose not to take part;¹⁰

Teen participation in a summer program in Chicago **reduced violence by 43%.**

- Older youth may have family responsibilities, such as caring for a sibling;
- Programming may be perceived as “uncool” by teens and their peers;
- Program content may fail to engage teens.¹¹

A clear understanding of adolescent development and of best practices in actively engaging youth can help to surmount some of these barriers.

Teen Participation and Adolescent Development

When adults partner with teens, they need to recognize that the process will not be the same as working with other adults, since young people are at an earlier stage of development. Key aspects of adolescence that teen-focused programs should consider include the following:¹²

INCREASING INDEPENDENCE

- As youth become more willing to take on larger commitments, they may not be sure exactly what is expected of them. It is a program’s job to provide structured and meaningful roles in which youth may take part. For example, each meeting can have a note-taker and somebody to facilitate the agenda. As young people gain confidence and leadership skills, they may take on larger leadership roles.
- When leadership roles are short-term or project-based, teens are more likely to be able to fill these roles effectively. Long-term leadership commitments often lapse when new, unexpected priorities come up in life. Additionally, certain roles –such as an advisory position on a board – may be too abstract for some youth. Communicating goals and expectations clearly will help teens maintain motivation and understand their contributions.

What’s going on during adolescence?

- 1. Desire for increasing independence.** Teens want to pull away from their parents and do more things by themselves
- 2. Focus on future interest and cognitive development.** Youth are thinking about their futures and their role in the world
- 3. Need for peer support.** Teens are developing their social networks as part of the process of understanding their identities and social role.



FOCUSING ON FUTURE INTEREST AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Through mentorship, adults can help youth explore what they are interested in and prepare them for larger responsibilities. Mentors can be role models for young people thinking about a specific career or, more generally, thinking about how to become adults. For example, if a youth serves on a board or committee, a mentor should meet with youth before and after board meetings to help answer questions. This adult-teen relationship helps youth recognize their strengths and how they can utilize them in the world.

PEER SUPPORT AND FUN

Programming should be fun and allow time for social interaction so that youth can build strong, positive relationships with their peers. In this way, young people in a program will build community, support each other, and hold each other accountable. For example, each meeting can start with time for teens to check in and for team-building activities to give them a chance to deepen their relationships.

What is youth engagement?

Youth engagement is when young people plan and make decisions that affect themselves and others. By taking an active role in shaping their own development, youth represent their own interests and gain valuable skills and knowledge. Youth engagement often occurs when adults and youth form equitable relationships to work in partnership to strengthen their communities.¹³ Meaningful engagement can make teens more likely to join and stay in out-of-school time programs.

One way to think about engagement is as a spectrum including active participation, consultation, and shared leadership. All levels of engagement are valuable to promoting positive youth development and can help connect with teens where they are. Each level of engagement requires both leadership and organizational skills from teens, along with effort from adults to support and guide teens in carrying out these roles as they become active citizens in their communities.¹⁴

The spectrum of teen engagement ranges from active participation to consultation to shared leadership.



Active participation. Typically, the scope of the program is set by the adults, not the teens. Adults allow young people to choose among activities offered by the program.

- Example: A theater project where teens have freedom to practice self-expression, with adults deciding on the script and directing the play.

Consultation. Young people are consulted about their ideas related to an activity or program, but adults make final decisions.

- Example: A theater project led by adults, with teens giving input that the adults use to modify the script.

Shared leadership. In youth-driven programming, young people take ownership of the program and have direct influence over outcomes, and adults are in collaborative roles with youth. In these relationships both young people and adults are contributing equitably to the final decision or project.¹⁵

- Example: A theater company where adults and teens co-write the play and share decision-making related to the management of the theater company.

As teens move up in increased levels of engagement, they can strengthen their sense of agency and self-efficacy and increase their impact on organizations. In positions of shared leadership, young people can take part in system-level change. However, not all teens, if given the opportunity, will be willing or interested to engage with a program at the highest level. Engaging youth through active participation is a way to involve larger numbers of teens and at a level of engagement that is appropriate to their developmental state and considerate of their time.

High levels of teen engagement require adults to share leadership with youth in true partnerships. To do so requires adults, who traditionally hold power over youth, to be aware of and work to reduce adultism. Adultism refers to the negative assumptions, behaviors, and attitudes adults often have towards young people. Adultism also allows for the continuation of other socially-constructed hierarchies (racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia, etc.) because young people learn adults' biases before having the tools to form their own opinions about how to interact with people.



“Adultism” refers to the **negative assumptions, behaviors, and attitudes** adults often have towards young people.

Adulthood manifests itself in various ways such as: adults thinking that young people are unable to do certain tasks independently, assuming that adults fully understand young people's needs, denying the political significance of youth, and ignoring differences between youth and adult culture.¹⁶

To build positive youth-adult partnerships, both youth and adults must listen to each other and treat each other with respect and dignity. Just as adults should recognize the talents and perspectives of young people, young people should respect the talents and experience of adults.¹⁷ While working in this way often takes more time, it allows youth to take ownership and build essential skills and leads to more youth-oriented outcomes.

Intentionally *engaging* youth as active participants in designing and implementing programs has further benefits both to youth and organizations:¹⁸

- **Programs become more responsive:** Engaging youth in youth-focused programming creates a virtuous cycle in which teens influencing programs both enhances youth outcomes and makes the programs more engaging and desirable for new teens who join.
- **Teens are more prepared to work with adults:** Engaged youth are better prepared for adulthood. Building relationships with adults who trust and respect youth perspectives and contributions indicates to youth that their voice and participation matter to their communities. In turn, youth also learn to respect adults' experiences.
- **Policies become more youth-oriented:** Policies and programs, not just in youth-centered organizations, but in most institutions, inevitably touch the lives of youth. Opening processes to youth input and youth-driven initiatives allows for youth to influence organizations so that youth voice becomes institutionalized in how they function.

Meaningful engagement creates better outcomes, encourages more youth to join programs, and prepares youth better for adulthood.



Funding and Assessment

On a system level, more research should be done to assess the overall need for youth services in Erie County. It is difficult to know the exact number of teens who are not participating in afterschool and summer youth employment programs because it is much easier to count program participation than non-participation. More funding could provide opportunities to better understand the current landscape and fully identify the need for programming specifically focused on teenagers.

Current funding for afterschool programs is inadequate and unpredictable. Eight out of the 11 biggest youth development service providers in Erie County depend on grants for more than 75 percent of their funding, which is funding that is not guaranteed for the long term. The Wallace Foundation Out-of-School Time Calculator estimates that one high quality program serving 250 young people for 40 weeks, meeting 20 hours per week, costs an average of \$3,430 per youth per year. The amount of funding being provided per young person in Erie County is much lower, as low as \$9/youth in rural towns and up to \$1,600 for youth participating in New York State-funded programs. These funding values are an average for all youth-serving programs, so the costs for a specific teen-focused program may vary. Yet, overall, these numbers demonstrate a clear lack in funding for youth services. More funding, and more sustainable funding sources, can ensure that our community consistently provides high quality teen engagement programs for a much larger number of youth.¹⁹

Additionally, to ensure that programming is always improving to best serve the participants' needs, programs can follow systems of accountability and self-assessment. These systems assess progress towards established goals, along with the quality and effectiveness of staff and administrators. Programs can then make the changes they identify as needed.²⁰ The New York State Network for Youth Success's Quality Self-Assessment Tool allows programs to continuously monitor and assess quality, as well as the opportunity for programs to become accredited.²¹ Additionally, the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality has various tools for assessing afterschool programs. The Youth Program Quality Assessment tool is specifically designed to assess programs that serve youth in grades 4 through 12.²²



Eight of the biggest 11 youth development providers **depend on grants for more than 75% of their funding.**

Featured Teen Engagement Programs: Learning From Our Peers

This section draws from interviews with program coordinators and describes the practices they use to fully engage teens. The programs listed are using innovative strategies that center teen engagement as a core operating principle.

PATCH (Providers and Teens Communicating for Health) For HOPE Buffalo program provides teens ages 15 to 19 the opportunity to serve as health representatives and advocates for change. Teens are hired then trained to become a reliable source of health information for their peers and the community. Teens can facilitate workshops to educate health-care providers on how to improve teen health outcomes.²³

- During training, teens spend a significant amount of time sharing experiences and fostering a sense of team spirit and bonding.
- PATCH prepares teens with health education training so that, when health providers ask questions with complicated words and concepts, the teens are prepared to answer them.
- Teens have the chance to impact the systems around them by expressing teen health concerns to doctors and others in the medical field.

Leaving Our Legacy (L.O.L.) is run through Erie 1 BOCES. In L.O.L., teens learn about important topics in sexual health and receive training to become Youth Health Advocates. Following training, they have paid opportunities to tackle issues of their choosing through clinics and other community health events.²⁴

- L.O.L. uses a comprehensive risk assessment to find out what is happening in each of the teen's lives.
- Teens take on all roles from workshop facilitator to media contact at community events.
- L.O.L. serves as a platform for teens to meet people in the community. The participants have the chance to make connections that can lead to future employment opportunities.

Teen engagement is: “teens being involved in whatever involves teens”

Elizabeth Terranova, PATCH

“I don't make any decisions within the program without youth input.”

Sue Donovan, L.O.L.

“To be successful adults, people not only need knowledge and skills, but they need to feel like they have a place where they belong, and they need to feel like they are worth something.”

Diane Picard, MAP

“It takes three times longer to plan something with young people than by yourself. But they won't be engaged with something that you plan by yourself.”

Hillary Worthington, YEL

The Massachusetts Avenue Project's (MAP) Growing Green Works program gets teens engaged with urban agriculture. Growing Green Works is a paid youth development program with the mission of creating a diverse and equitable food system within the City of Buffalo. Students are paid to grow and market organic products, while bringing awareness to the surrounding community about the food system. Through outreach and research activities, teens identify real community issues and policy solutions related to food.²⁵

- After a year of the program, teens in Growing Green can apply for specialist positions. These positions come with more responsibility as well as more pay.
- While MAP adult staff provide a lot of education to the teens, the adults also actively recognize that they have a lot to learn from teens as well. MAP adults are especially intentional about creating space for youth voice when other adults volunteer and collaborate with the teens.
- At the beginning of each program cycle, the teens create the rules. Doing so means the teens are more likely to keep each other accountable.

Youth are referred to **Youth Empowerment and Leadership (YEL)**, through Erie County Mental Health Services, the Juvenile Justice System, or the Erie County Department of Social Services. In this program, the youth meet each week to plan and implement community projects addressing issues they care about. The teens have the opportunity to spend time with peers and take on project-based leadership roles.

- Stipends serve as an incentive for youth to get more involved in the program. Teens receive small payments for taking on a role as a facilitator, and they can earn stipends for participating outside program hours to help plan future programming.
- Youth engagement is task-driven and project-based. A shorter-term commitment, such as leading the outreach efforts to coordinate a one-time event, makes leadership roles more accessible.
- Teens spend about 20 minutes in the beginning of each session to eat pizza and talk to their friends, which gives time to develop positive peer relations.

When teens create the rules for a program, they are **more likely to hold one another accountable.**



Teen-focused programs in Erie County

This section provides an overview of several additional providers offering teen-focused programming in Erie County, with a focus on Buffalo. This list is not comprehensive but reflects organizations that reach large numbers of youth and/or offer innovative programming.

<p>BestSelf Behavioral Health, Inc.</p>	<p>BestSelf’s Building Brighter Futures (BBF) School Based Department focuses on strengthening the mental health and safety of youth at home, school and in the community in several Buffalo Public Schools. BBF helps determine how children and adolescents are able to manage and express emotions, their quality of relationships with friends and family, and the ability to develop cognitively and intellectually. BBF provides programming during and after school around academic assistance, social-emotional learning, family engagement support, and mental health screenings.</p>
<p>Boys and Girls Clubs of America</p>	<p>Local Boys and Girls Clubs offer teen programming through Keystone Clubs, which are opportunities for teens to experience academic success, career preparation, and community service. Groups meet at clubs to plan and conduct community service projects, go on college trips, and get academic support.</p>
<p>Buffalo Center for Arts and Technology (BCAT)</p>	<p>BCAT offers the Youth Arts Program for students at four Buffalo schools. The program gives teens the opportunity to explore digital media, fine arts, and music as a means of self-expression. BCAT collaborates with local artists to give teens mentoring and training that prepares them for beyond high school.</p>
<p>Buffalo Urban League (BUL)</p>	<p>BUL’s Youth Engagement Services (YES) program gives youth ages 14-20 life skill development and academic supports. The Youth Life Opportunity (YOLO) program gives teens who are out of school the chance to prepare for their high school equivalency exam, complete occupational training certification, volunteer and complete paid internships. BUL also runs the Erie County Summer Youth Employment Program during which they coordinate placement of teens at worksites and provide workforce development support to teen participants.</p>
<p>City of Buffalo Mayor’s Summer Youth Program</p>	<p>This program pays residents of the City of Buffalo ages 14-21 to participate in internships for six weeks during summer. Teens gain experience working in a professional setting, allowing them to develop vital workforce readiness skills.²⁶</p>

Community Action Organization (CAO) of Western New York	<p>CAO offers Drive Academy, which provides mentoring and support for teens in the Juvenile Justice system in their efforts to improve their behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making. CAO’s 21st Century Learning Community Center program addresses students’ academic needs with programming such as graphic design, cooking, and arts.²⁷ CAO also trains and employs teens to serve as camp counselors during their Nurture summer camps.</p>
Community Health Worker (CHW) Network of Buffalo	<p>The CHW Network trains students and families interested in joining the Wellness Teams at their schools. Trained teens are certified as Community Health Workers and receive stipends to serve as school Student Wellness representatives and to co-facilitate Community Health Worker events and trainings.²⁸</p>
Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition	<p>The Coalition works with schools and other sites to train teachers, students, and staff on the principles of restorative justice and how to implement restorative practices in schools. Youth leaders learn how to facilitate restorative justice circles and lead circles at trainings, in addition to schools and community centers.</p>
Grant Street Neighborhood Center	<p>The Neighborhood Center offers afterschool and summer programming including drum lessons, film making lessons, and a writing club. In their Recycle-a-Bike Program, youth learn to work with tools by dismantling old bikes and building new ones.²⁹ The Center also offers Guy Talk and Girl Talk, where teens can freely express their thoughts in a non-judgmental zone. The Center serves young people between the ages of 10 and 20.</p>
Peace of the City	<p>At Peace of the City, teens can participate in job readiness programming in which they gain soft skills to transition to the Teen Employment program to work as Homework Club tutors, or complete tasks such as answering the phones or working at one of Peace of the City’s three small businesses. In Shakespeare Comes To (716) teens work collaboratively with adults to perform Shakespeare plays, adapted with modern twists.</p>
Say Yes to Education, Buffalo	<p>Say Yes offers paid internships, job readiness workshops and supports, and access to college mentors. Buffalo students receive higher education scholarships. Say Yes focuses on supporting students academically, including behavioral, social, and mental health components.</p>

<p>Teens in Progress</p>	<p>Teens in Progress is made up of teens and young adults ages 13-25, with a junior division of youth ages 8-12. It is team of active and positive youth and young adults that coordinates events, programs, and activities that serve to uplift their community, strengthen peer bonds, and increase young people’s sense of self. They also attend, participate, and volunteer at events and programs throughout New York State.³⁰</p>
<p>WAY to L.I.F.E Program at Baker Victory Services</p>	<p>WAY to L.I.F.E. supports youth ages 14 to 21 to become independent and contributing members of their community through educational support, vocational development, community service, and acquisition of independent-living skills. Participants who are risk of dropping out of school or becoming homeless are referred through schools and local agencies to the program.³¹</p>
<p>Young Audiences of Western New York</p>	<p>Young Audiences offers apprenticeships for Buffalo high school students in which students work in teams to engage in creative writing, visual arts, theater and dance programming. The teens work directly under a Master Teaching Artist and develop essential career and social emotional learning skills.³²</p>
<p>4-H Youth Community Action Network (Youth CAN), Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County</p>	<p>High school-aged youth in Youth CAN participate in civic engagement and leadership activities afterschool, at four schools in Erie County, in which they identify community issues and develop and implement projects to become part of the solution. Over the summer, teens take part in paid internships, and meet regularly to plan and implement their community projects.³³</p>
<p>YWCA Teen Empowering and Mentoring Program</p>	<p>This afterschool program supports teens with school attendance, participation, and graduation and offers opportunities for community service and field trips. Teens also receive college and job readiness preparation through paid summer internships.</p>

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www.ppgbuffalo.org
617 Main Street, Suite 300
Buffalo, New York 14203

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