

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

EMPOWERING YOUTH THROUGH YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCILS



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) works to protect and improve the health of youth. Its goal is **"a future where all youth in the U.S. will be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resources for a healthy adolescence and adulthood."**¹ One key part of reaching that goal is to give youth the skills to address structural barriers to their health and well-being in their schools and communities. Working with **youth advisory councils (YACs)** is one way to help school districts function in a youth-centered way. YACs can also help students gain vital life skills and knowledge.

YACs are formal groups made up of diverse youth. These groups make decisions, advise others, and work to improve the schools and communities they serve.

YACs let students share their experiences and views with school districts on the policies and issues that matter to them and their peers. Youth drive the YACs. YACs have regular, structured meetings. They give youth a safe space to work together to talk about, plan, and implement projects.

2021–2023 FUNDED YAC SITES

- ▶ **Chicago Public Schools, IL**
 - 14 students
 - *Focus:* Mental health, supportive school environments, connections
 - *Project:* Poster series on sexual health education and LGBTQIA+ support
- ▶ **Genesee Intermediate School District, MI**
 - 8 students
 - *Focus:* Mental health, general health
 - *Project:* Color-coded bracelets with information and resources
- ▶ **Corbin Independent School District, KY**
 - 12 students
 - *Focus:* Mental health and vaping
 - *Projects:* Podcast series and mural design
- ▶ **Greene County Schools, AL**
 - 15 students
 - *Focus:* Mental health, depression, suicide, bullying
 - *Project:* Community event
- ▶ **Spartanburg School District Consortium, SC**
 - 19 students
 - *Focus:* Mental health, sexual health, and relationship violence
 - *Projects:* Social media campaign and youth summit

THE BENEFITS OF YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCILS

By getting involved with YACs, youth can help shape their environments. YACs help them to gain leadership skills. They also help them to build stronger connections with their peers and with adults. Taking part in YACs can help youth counter adverse childhood experiences and other risk factors.² As the CDC notes, **“Positive youth development programs (including YACs) strengthen young people’s sense of identity, belief in the future, self-regulation, and self-efficacy as well as their social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral competence.”** YACs have many benefits. These include improved academic and health outcomes. For example, YACs may help to reduce sexual risk behaviors. They may also lead to reduced rates of HIV, STDs, and unplanned pregnancies.³

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) defines youth engagement as “an inclusive, intentional, mutually respectful partnership between youth and adults whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people’s ideas, perspectives, skills and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms and organizations that affect their lives and their communities, countries and globally.”⁴

YACs can also benefit adults and organizations. They offer diverse views. They build capacity. They also create opportunities for new, innovative solutions. Programs can be **more effective when youth are partners** and help with their design, development, and implementation. These partnerships can help the adults involved to feel a renewed passion and commitment for the goals they are trying to reach.

CDC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PROJECT: 2021–2024 LESSONS LEARNED

During 2021 to 2024, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) has been working with CDC DASH on a youth engagement project. Under this project —

- School districts receive grants of \$25,000 to \$37,500 to set up or expand their YACs.
- AIR provides training and technical assistance to the school districts.
- Student YAC members connect with one another during YAC meetings and
 - learn about adolescent health topics,
 - choose topics of interest, and
 - form teams to implement their projects.

Based on interviews with students and their district liaisons, the YACs have been positive learning experiences for those involved. Students value learning about their districts and adolescent health topics. They also enjoy the in-person meetings with their peers. The district liaisons are pleased that students can connect with each other and take ownership of their projects.

The projects the YACs have developed are as varied as the communities and districts they serve. All projects have been a success. This is due to the commitment and passion of the YAC members and the district liaisons who support them. As research has shown, the **YACs give youth the power** to shape their environments. They also help youth to build stronger connections with their peers, adults, and their communities.

Learn more about
Youth Advisory Councils

www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth

[@CDC_DASH](https://twitter.com/CDC_DASH)

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REFERENCES

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2. Adolescent Health Initiative. (2017). *Creating and sustaining a thriving youth advisory council*. <https://umhs-adolescenthealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/manual-for-website.pdf>
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH). (2020). *The path forward: DASH 2020-2025 strategic plan*. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/about/pdf/strategic_plan/2025/dash-strategic-plan508.pdf
4. U.S. Agency for International Development. (2023). *Youth Power Community of Practice – Youth Engagement*. <https://www.youthpower.org/youth-engagement-cop>