

THOUGHTS ON STARTING A YOUTH COUNCIL

Rebecca Heimstead, Tampa Mayor's Youth Corps, Retired

1. Adult leadership and/or staff need to be consistent in order to build a solid relationship with the students.
2. Rules and consequences must be established (always with student input) and must be strictly administered. It's difficult to "fire" a student but that's real life, it's the workplace and we should prepare them to be successful. (The rules I created are available. Just let me know if you'd like a copy.)

This is the strength of the Mayor's Youth Corps and, while some teens don't like it, most eventually understand and value what it taught them.

3. I always URGED parents to let this responsibility be the students' alone. Most parents understood the value of doing this and supported me. Other felt like if their teen "failed" they had failed.

4. Determine who you want as members of your council and how they will be selected – school nominations, student self-nominations, city staff, city council nominations or a combination of all of these. Will selections be made based on applications and interviews or in another way? Tampa always seeks emerging leaders, not necessarily those already in leadership positions in their schools. It is those students who really need programs like this and who will benefit most from participating.

5. Run background screens on ALL applicants. I've been ordered NOT to take a student based on their negative background screening results.

6. Determine the council size that will work for your city and determine your program year. I highly recommend a year round program. Having significant time off means a loss of connectedness and momentum.

Youth Corps members can only serve for 1 year. I recommend you have rotating terms so you always have some continuing members as well as new ones. For many, a one-year term was just not enough. They were just getting into the program when the year came to a close. Returning students provide leadership and mentoring for new members.

7. Understand that many adults may need to be convinced that this is worthwhile and will be looking for the teens to fail. It's unfair but the stupid behavior of one teen can ruin it for all of them.

8. Students need to be thoroughly briefed. Cities use language that teens don't understand. In all things they need to be prepared to be successful.

9. Adults should be trained to work with teens.

10. An IDEAL youth/adult ratio is 1/3 youth to 2/3 adults. This is not always possible but a single youth in an otherwise all-adult group is tokenism.

11. In my experience boys have a much harder time being successful in this system. They tend to be less organized; more easily overwhelmed and less mature than the girls though there certainly are many exceptions.

12. When choosing students to serve, Tampa looks for two types of teens, those who MYC needs and those who need the program.

13. Social media is a great way to help the group stay informed. The Youth Corps has both a public Facebook page and a private group page. I was always amazed at how willing former members were to assist when needed. For communication between city staff and members I recommend email. This teaches them how to write professional email and to read and respond to email in a timely fashion - again, useful skills for both college and the workplace.

I can honestly say the Mayor's Youth Corps was a family. Over the course of my tenure with the group we lost several parents to suicide and illness as well as two former members who passed away. In every case, members of the MYC family rallied, providing support and comfort.

14. Determine (again with youth) what the council will do and create a program calendar.

15. Because many former members of the Youth Corps have chosen to stay in touch, I do a lot of mentoring even though I'm now retired. It takes time but I am honored to have them continue to include me in their lives.

16. Let the teens know you are there to help them in any way. Lots of bad things are happening to our young people and they need a caring adult they can go to who will be there for them. All adults in this role should understand that they are mandated reporters if a teen talks about harming him/herself or others.

17. DO NOT ever become discouraged. Many of today's teens have helicopter parents who have done everything for them and have never asked their the teen to think. School, for many, is only about learning what's on the test, not thinking. You can play a vital role in changing that but it can be a very frustrating process.

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS
PLEASE EMAIL rbh2174@aol.com OR CALL ME AT 813-404-1741

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Adults as (Youth) Allies by Barry Checkoway, University of Michigan
<http://digitalcommonc.unomaha.edu/slcepartnerships/38/>
2. Building Effective Youth-Adult Partnerships by Jane Norman, Advocates for Youth
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/publications-a-z/672-building-effective-youth-adult-partnerships>
3. The Fear of Youth – The freechild Project
<https://freechild.org/ephebiphobia>
4. Understanding Adulthood
https://www.nuatc.org/articles/pdf/understanding_adulthood.pdf (There is an _ between understanding and adulthood)
5. Tips for Working With Youth
<https://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/publications-a-z/674-tips-for-working-with-youth>
6. Authentic Youth Civic Engagement –National League of Cities
<https://3t61of1t6u3x3af7ir2y91ib.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/authentic-youth-engagement-gid-jul101.pdf>