

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



## YWCA New Britain House of Teens

New Britain, Conn.

35

Average number of students served during the school year

100%

Students from low-income families

### Main funding sources:

- ▶ American Savings/Community Foundation
- ▶ Aetna Foundation
- ▶ Maternal and Child Health Bureau
- ▶ Mayor's charitable fund
- ▶ Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds

## Providing authentic opportunities for students to lead and govern

Civic engagement starts with our nation's young people. The afterschool field is an essential partner in ensuring that all children have the ability to participate in relevant, experiential civic engagement opportunities. Involvement in civic engagement has been linked to both short and long-term positive outcomes, including improvements in academics, behavior, and connection to the community and a lower likelihood of arrest. As 3 in 4 superintendents agree that preparing students for engaged citizenship is a challenge for their district, afterschool and summer learning programs are critical partners in strengthening student civic engagement and helping them become informed, involved, and conscientious individuals.

### Overview

YWCA New Britain serves and strengthens the local community by offering a mixture of programs and services within three key areas: racial justice and civil rights, empowerment and economic advancement of women and girls, and the health and safety of women and girls. YWCA's House of Teens program engages high school girls in activities intended to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to address barriers to health in their neighborhood, speak out to generate change, and lead overall healthy lifestyles.

### A typical day for students

House of Teens is an afterschool program designed with a comprehensive approach to healthy living in mind. Afternoons begin with scheduled time for academic mentoring, followed by structured enrichment activities that focus on fitness and wellness or life skills development, with the potential for earning school physical education (PE) credits. Classes offered include stress management, career and college preparation, nutrition advice from mentors from the Community Health Center, and more. On Fridays, youth are in charge of planning and running activities for the day.

### Outcomes

According to the 2016-2017 New Britain District School Profile, only 38 percent of 10<sup>th</sup> graders meet the Health Standard in Physical Education. The House of Teens program works to improve those numbers by tracking participants' attendance, earned credits, and high school graduation rates. Girls in the program report gains in confidence and leadership in their small-group discussions and personal reflections. House of Teens girls also express a desire for more opportunities to engage in the community and make their voice heard.

## Program characteristics

The program provides teen girls with access to health services while equipping them with the tools to become advocates for health promotion. Program staff foster a supportive environment, and within the safety and comfort of this “home away from home”, young girls are encouraged to make personal strides, building the confidence and independence that shapes them into leaders. As teen girls build on their knowledge of well-being and achieve personal health goals through enrichment classes, they also have the opportunity to exercise their advocacy skills, acting as leaders in their community. For example, teens can join the House of Teens advisory board—which plans YWCA community events and projects aimed at strengthening neighborhood ties—and participate in the decision-making process.

Teens are also able to connect health and fitness to leadership and character through Photovoice, a yearly capstone project where girls explore their neighborhoods using digital cameras to capture barriers to health like neighborhood blight and lack of child-friendly public spaces. The photos are the basis for critical dialogue; girls in the program collectively reflect on, identify, and develop solutions to the issue of concern. They then create photo-based presentations to share their recommendations and advocate for policy change. Girls in the program have presented their proposals to local policymakers, school administrators, health providers, and community members. One Photovoice project capturing closed local swimming pools and littered, graffiti-filled parks initiated beautification efforts including the installation of new splash pads and field turf.

## Program history

In 2007, after a needs assessment highlighted a concern over the obesity rate of Latina teens, many of whom who were not passing PE and risked delays in graduation, the Community Health Center forged a partnership with YWCA New Britain to implement an obesity prevention project. The Healthy Tomorrow for Teens Program found its home at YWCA New Britain as an afterschool PE credit recovery program that taught healthy eating and physical activity, and engaged Latina teens in a leadership-training project called Photovoice. With the continued support of community partners, the program evolved into a full afterschool program with the establishment of the YWCA House of Teens Center.

### Recommendations

*for providing authentic opportunities for students to lead and govern:*

- ▶ Spend time building strong ties with community members, partners, and key stakeholders in order to cultivate community investment in your youth.
- ▶ Be deliberate in creating a student-driven program that empowers youth to find and use their voice. Focus on personal development and asset building.



## Challenges

The U.S. faces a civic engagement predicament, particularly with the nation’s young people.

***A disengaged public.*** Between 1980 and 2016, the percentage of voters aged 18-29 years old fell well below voting rates of older age cohorts and volunteerism among 16-to-24-year-olds remains consistently below the national average.

***Civics in schools is largely a second-tier subject.*** The No Child Left Behind Act ushered in a greater emphasis on reading and math, leaving less time for subjects like civics and social studies, despite poor student performance in these areas. A 2018 scan of civics education found that components of high-quality civics education, such as interactive and participatory opportunities for learning, were largely missing.

***Civic engagement as an equity issue.*** Disparities in voting turnout, volunteerism, and circumstances hindering civic participation across income levels and race and ethnicity have been observed. For instance, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that students in classes with a high average socioeconomic status level were more likely to report learning how laws are made, participating in service activities, and taking part in debates or panel discussions.

Read [Promoting Civic Engagement Through Afterschool Programs](#) to learn more.



**Afterschool Alliance**

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