

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



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

YMCA of Port Angeles is committed to strengthening communities through a variety of programs, activities, and classes that promote a happy, healthy lifestyle. Youth and Government is the Y's national civic education and leadership initiative that equips young people with the knowledge and tools to enact change through firsthand participation in the legislative process.

A typical day for students

The Youth and Government Port Angeles delegation meets every Monday after school during the school year. Youth, grades 8-12, kick off the year by diving straight into discussions about current legislative topics. Staff divide each meeting into two segments: educational time and debate time. Students first learn lessons on being an informed voter, parliamentary procedures, the democratic process, and the importance of respect and decorum in debate, and then engage in practice debate sessions. Weekly meetings are designed to prepare students for a mock legislative session at the State Capitol.

Outcomes

Youth and Government students improve their ability to speak respectfully and knowledgeably on issues they feel strongly about. This civic engagement experience translates to the development of independent, informed, and responsible voters—evidenced by the higher than average voting rates of program alumni. Students, remarking on the overall value of the program have said, "It taught me the importance of pragmatic civility and compassionate servant leadership," and, "I walked away with the ability to actually know how to look up [and] read bills so that I didn't need to rely on talking points or the issue being summarized for me."

YMCA of Port Angeles Youth and Government Program

Port Angeles, Wash.

Average number of students served during the school year:

500 in Washington state **22** in Port Angeles

Students from low-income families

15% in Port Angeles

Main funding sources:

- ▶ Student fees
- ▶ Corporate sponsors
- ▶ Local fundraising events

Program characteristics

The Youth and Government program highlights the values of “learning-by-doing” by providing an immersive civic engagement experience for youth. As a delegation, Port Angeles youth practice democracy by learning what it means to be well-versed citizens, researching legislation and court cases, drafting bills, and advocating for solutions to important community issues. As they make connections between U.S. history, the law, and the way the world works, youth become capable community leaders. The program also underscores the connection between community involvement and good public policy, incorporating service learning to provide students with a closer look at issues that affect their community.

The program culminates in a four-day conference held at the State Capitol, where youth from across the state come together to hold an entirely student-run and student-led mock legislative session. Students assume roles of those involved in the legislative process including legislators, lobbyists, and a youth governor. Youth draft policy solutions that balance competing interests within the state, such as the needs of rural communities like Port Angeles against the broader needs of the state. Youth gain awareness of their impact as they decide which bills move through the legislative process. All laws signed by the youth governor are shared with Washington state’s legislature for consideration. For example, a bill mandating white lines be painted along the curbside of two-lane roads, that was first introduced and passed by the youth legislature, was later signed into law by the Washington State Legislature.

Program history

The Washington YMCA Youth Legislature was founded in 1947, with its first legislative session for youth held in the spring of 1948. YMCA of Port Angeles was one of the original three delegations present at that session. There are now 30 different delegations from six districts across Washington state, attracting 450-500 student participants each year.

Recommendations

for providing authentic opportunities for students to lead and govern:

- ▶ Create platforms for youth of all ages to speak out about their beliefs, while being mindful of the particular needs of each age group.
- ▶ Provide students with meaningful opportunities to shape programming. This can run the gamut from students determining discussion topics to students leading or carrying out an initiative or project.



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.