

Developing Young Advocates Through the YouthAction Community Leadership Course

Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc.

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Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc. (CCC), a member of Voices for America's Children, believes that teaching children to be strong and successful advocates results in involved, passionate and articulate adults. Five years ago, CCC developed a free course to teach high school students about the important issues facing their city, while also preparing them to become effective advocates for themselves, their families and their communities. The YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC) provides students with the tools and the opportunity they need to play an important role in shaping the issues that affect them.

Background:

The idea for the YCLC stems from the Community Leadership Course designed by CCC in the 1960's to educate adults about advocacy and community issues. In 1999, with guidance from CCC staff, a group of CCC adult volunteers adapted this course to educate youth on the same topics. The course was taken on by CCC as a staff-run project after the first year and continues with help from adult volunteers who lead small group discussions and supervise youth on site visits and meetings with elected officials. The YCLC has enjoyed success as a result of partnering effectively with high schools, community programs studied as part of the course, and elected officials.

The YCLC is held after school for three hours once a week for nine weeks. Participants are provided with eight sessions of classroom instruction, engage in small group activities, and go on site visits to community programs. During their study, students focus on a community, such as East Harlem, and identify issues on which to focus their advocacy work. During the final session, students present their concerns to New York City Council members using a public hearing format at City Hall. At the end of the course, the students are invited to become members of YouthAction, CCC's student membership program. They also participate in activities with CCC staff and adult volunteers.

"We try to integrate YCLC graduates into all aspects of CCC's advocacy work just like our adult volunteers. We see them truly as our partners in this work." - Betsy Guttmacher, Program Coordinator, YouthAction, CCC

Key Planning Elements

Creating relationships: It is important to create strong relationships with volunteers, students, schools, legislators, and the staff of programs and sites that will be studied. (Adult volunteers are recruited from CCC's Community Leadership Course and trained prior to the start of YCLC.)

To recruit for this program, CCC partners with over 40 public and private high schools, setting up face-to-face appointments with principals, and speaking to service groups. The schools recruit students using a short enrollment form provided by CCC; schools are asked to recommend interested students six weeks prior to the beginning of the course.

Publicity: Staff give speeches at school assemblies and post information about the course on the CCC website, www.kidsfirstnewyork.org, but CCC leaves the majority of the publicity for the course up to the schools and the community programs.

Funding: Costs for the course include one dedicated part-time staff person, transportation to and from the site visits, dinner and snacks one night a week, overhead and a small stipend for those students who wish to receive it. Funding is provided by grants from foundations.

Timeline: Because CCC already had the basics of the curriculum developed for the Community Leadership Course, it did not take much time or effort to adapt it for students. But establishing relationships with students, schools, community program staff, and elected officials takes a significant amount of time, so start early! (CCC is crafting an adaptable form of its curriculum for other organizations to use which should be available in early 2005.)

Staff time: A CCC program coordinator balances two days a week developing, coordinating, and teaching fall sessions and spring sessions with her normal work with YouthAction members. The Executive Director speaks to the students about advocacy and the importance of civic participation during the sessions prior to the City Hall meeting.

Evaluation: Each week, CCC staff and adult volunteers meet to evaluate the previous week's activities and prepare for the coming session. Success is also measured by the number of students who become members of CCC's YouthAction program and continue their advocacy work.

Lessons Learned

While the YCLC participants range from freshmen to seniors, CCC prefers sophomores and juniors because they are able to be a part of the program for several years, providing a sense of continuity with the programs, sites and legislators from year to year, and are able to serve as mentors to the younger students.

Between 66 and 75% of students who complete the course go on to become YouthAction members. Those who are unable to most often cite scheduling conflicts with other extra-curricular activities.

Results

- Students involved in the YCLC have participated in advocacy efforts that have resulted in the passage of legislation restoring \$100 million in spending for programs that benefit children and families, including a summer youth employment program. They were also instrumental in urging the legislature to create a New York City-based Earned Income Tax Credit – a \$50 million initiative.
- CCC benefits from having a young and passionate pool of members to help in creating and sustaining grassroots movements on various issues such as public housing, youth homelessness and substance abuse treatment. Through these activities, students gain a better understanding of the issues facing their communities and actively advocate for systems of change.
- As members of YouthAction, students also are able to take part in a CCC peer-training program, where they can share what they have learned with other students.
- Participants increase their interest in the government process, improve their public speaking skills, learn about diversity, and develop their leadership skills.
- Students have the opportunity to interact with their elected officials and council members. Elected officials and council members benefit from increased insight into what their youngest constituents are concerned about.
- Due to the success of this program, CCC expanded the course in 2004 to include a spring session in order to provide more students with this opportunity.
- To date, over 150 students have been educated through CCC's YouthAction Leadership Course.