



# **25 MUST-HAVE FREE YOUTH INFUSION RESOURCES**

***Get ready to open  
25 Doors***

**AN UNPRECEDENTED MIX  
OF FREE RESOURCES  
THAT SUPPORT YOUTH INFUSION!**

During these dark times of disunity,  
distrust and deep pessimism,  
here are some bright possibilities  
to support any organization's path  
to a stronger, youth-infused team.





# WELCOME!

## ***Top 25 of 2025: Must-Have Free Youth Infusion Resources***

This resource recap is unlike anything you've seen before—filled with useful resources, inspiring stories, and some intentionally provocative comments to spark deeper dialogue.

Those of us committed to replacing token youth engagement—typically limited to the “best and brightest”—need compelling stories and promising practices to convince colleagues and the broader public to inch ahead to end automatic age segregation.

This collection falls into two general categories:

1. **Resources** to help dismantle monolithic assumptions about today's youths—the most diverse generation ever.
2. **Practical guidance** for organizations striving to collaborate more effectively with those of the rising generations who are eager to contribute vs. be shut out.

Please share your favorites for a future addendum highlighting the most inspirational and practical tools for 2026 or connect through the LinkedIn Youth Infusion HUB.

In solidarity,

Wendy Schaezel Lesko  
December 2025





*"Having one-to-one support and continual learning opportunities in partnership with adults have been really amazing... When we find ways to truly bring young folks in as full partners, magic happens."*  
— Evelyn Monje, former Youth Specialist, UP for Learning





## 'SCREENAGER' IS A MYTH

### *Gen Z Civic Pulse Check*

Data from the Institute for Citizens & Scholars debunks the "screenager" stereotype and highlights important findings: discussions and debate with their peers occurs offline, and apathy is not in the picture. Nine out of 10 people between the ages of 14-22 say they care about their community. About a third question if they can make a difference

(true!) and the same percentage do not feel welcome (my words).

Half are motivated by their friends to get involved, which is a reminder not to recruit one solo individual (such as "student ambassador") but a cohort of 3-6 people. Also, an incubator space is important where young people can bounce around their ideas and questions freely without feeling judged or intimidated by adults, even well-intentioned ones.



<https://citizensandscholars.org/research/gen-z-civic-vibe-check/>





## YOUTHS AS CO-ARCHITECTS

### ***Equity-Centered Youth Co-Creation Designing Solutions with Young People, Not Just for Them***

Such a simple and great concept it boggles the mind that it is not the norm: Headstream/Second Muse pairs young people to mentor tech start-ups... Yes, you read that right! They rely on the firsthand insights of prospective users. Over 150 young people have advised nearly 100 app developers that impact over 10 million young people and adults globally.

*"How do we find teens"* is one of the most common questions I get. One strategy regarding recruitment in this resource: *"It wasn't until we took our outreach to Instagram and TikTok that application numbers skyrocketed."*

Check out one of the most comprehensive and concise blueprints on how to bring young people into the heart of your organization.

<https://youthinfusionorg.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/headstream-equity-centered-youth-co-creation-framework.pdf>



## IF YOU SEE A TEENAGER...

Healthy Futures often includes youth as participants in our events. These young people (typically age 15-21) may seem strange and alarming, but if you follow these simple steps, you can make the encounter easier and more meaningful for both them and you.

1. **PANIC**

2. 

Don't run. The

3. 

Sit down and talk with them. The teens are

## DO'S & DONT'S

### *If You See A Teenager*

Conversations with the gifted team at Healthy Futures Texas [healthyfutures-tx.org](https://healthyfutures-tx.org) ranks among my most energizing exchanges in 2025.

And when some young attendees felt disconnected at a conference, this flyer was created with just the right tone to bring attention to some important basics on respecting teens - including topics to avoid

(hair color, school major) and the best rule: to just be interested!

I participated in the staff's "Book Club" discussing my latest [Why Aren't We Doing This? Collaborating with Minors in Major Ways](#), coauthored with 19-year-old Denise Webb. I learned as much as anyone and wow, did we laugh together.

<https://youthinfusion.org.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/if-you-see-a-teenager.pdf>







## MOVE AT THE SPEED OF TRUST

### ***What Young Leaders Want - and Don't Want - From Older Allies***

One of the reasons young people are recognized for their catalytic force in every movement is their sense of urgency. This trait fades with age and it is a primary reason for engaging with the rising generations.

This “impatience” is expressed by the participants in this report by CoGenerate. (Many other themes by these young adults hold true for those under age 18.)

My favorites:

- *Personal connection before collaboration. Always.*
- *No one wants to be dismissed because of their age.*
- *Cash over compliments.*

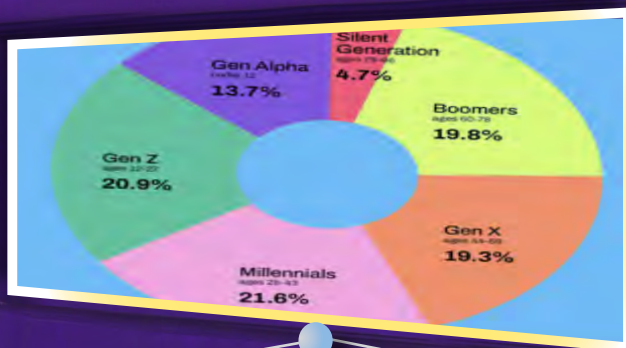
Another specific request by Thanasi Dilos, co-founder of a youth civic leadership org:

*“Your objective shouldn't be telling young leaders the solution. It should be asking questions that make the entire landscape clearer so we can see all the pitfalls and find our own solution.”*



<https://cogenerate.org/young-leaders/>





## NOT JUST RESPECT, ADMIRATION

### ***What Older Leaders Want - and Don't Want - From Younger Allies***

*"It starts with admiration."*

Similar to the twin pub produced by CoGenerate, the first point grabbed my attention and applause. What a dramatic attitudinal shift for adults to lead with.

This fresh language ushers in new meaning to the familiar yet sometimes hollow commitments of respect, curiosity and listening. And better yet, this mindset can lead to mutual admiration with older generations.

It's ironic that adults can feel so out of their element around young people—despite having been young once too!

It's a reminder that real interGEN collaboration requires everyone to *"get comfortable being uncomfortable."*

I also appreciate seeing my favorite verb appear in this report: *"Young people oxygenate me. We talk about new perspectives and new energy, but it is so much deeper than that."*



<https://cogenerate.org/older-leaders/>







## AI: NON-JUDGMENT ZONE

### *Teen and Young Adult Perspectives on Generative AI*

While headlines often warn that students “cheating” will be the downfall of civilization (remember *CliffNotes*?), this survey of 1,500 youths shows a far more nuanced picture.

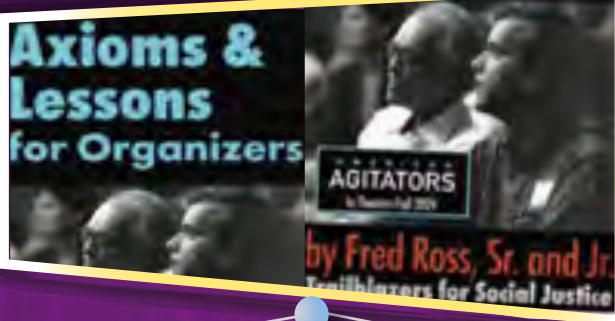
A significant share of teens and young adults do not use AI for schoolwork at all. Given the rapid expansion of AI tools, this percentage is bound to increase, but for now it reveals a gap between adult assumptions and youth realities.

I recommend reading the section titled “What Teens Say Adults Should Know About Their Uses of AI.” No single consensus emerges but the responses offer a candid window into how young people navigate this technology. One comment in particular stands out: AI is a “non-judgment zone.” That insight alone speaks volumes about why young people turn to these tools—and what adults often misunderstand. Another says the information is presented and is explained “better than most adults.”

<https://assets.hopelab.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Teen-and-Young-Adult-Perspectives-on-Generative-AI.pdf>



## Axioms & Lessons for Organizers



# SECRET: HUMILITY BUILDS CRED

## *Axioms y principios para organizadores* *Axioms & Lessons for Organizers*

This bilingual pocket-size gem by Fred Ross, Sr. and Jr. was re-released in conjunction with the documentary *American Agitators* (<https://www.americanagitators.com/>). It is packed with dozens of principles from these two legendary organizers. I relied on these lessons early in my life while working for the United Farm Workers in Ohio. They hold true today—especially when adults aim to genuinely team up with young people.

One of my favorite axioms brings to mind the countless young people who tell me how rare and refreshing it is when an adult admits they don't know something.

Fred Ross captures this perfectly: *"If you don't know the answer, don't pretend you do"* and *"When you are tempted to make a statement, ask a question."* Perfect segway to this axiom: *"There is a time for sound and a time for silence and a good organizer needs to be able to differentiate between the two."*

<https://www.americanagitators.com/axioms-for-organizers>





## NON-EXPERTS NEEDED

### *Expanding Youth Civic Engagement Strategies*

The new frontier of youth engagement is not a sideshow operating apart from real decision-making. Instead, young people are infused into many roles and deliberations. One small city appoints two youth representatives to its liquor license board, water safety committee, and even its cemetery commission.

This shift reflects a broader philosophy: tapping the “non-expert” expertise of much younger minds. Visionary government

leaders are creating more meaningful on-ramps for civic involvement, moving beyond Youth Advisory Councils, which provide leadership training but rarely give young people the chance to use those skills to influence actual policy.

Go deeper: see my article in the Fall 2025 issue of the *National Civic Review*. While the audience is mayors and local governments, there is relevance for neighborhood groups, local coalitions and nonprofits.

<https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/ncr-article/expanding-youth-civic-engagement-strategies/>







## YOUTH “FORESIGHT”

### *A Voice for Youth in a Time of Change*

I often use the words “*youth perspectives*” to shine the obvious value on youth inclusion. But Bo Viktor Nylund and Shai Naides refocus this viewpoint with a modern moniker, “*youth foresight*.” This is the ability of young people to anticipate emerging trends, imagine alternative futures, and spot risks and opportunities that adults frequently miss because their thinking tends to be cemented over many decades.

These two “*foreseers*” urge institutions to embed youth co-leadership within decision-making bodies, arguing that pairing genuine power-sharing with youth foresight is essential for integrating rising generations into the shared search for solutions.

If more adults adopted this term, it might help us gain an elevated orientation and recognize that young people see the future in ways others simply cannot.

[https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/stories/youth-in-time-of-change?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/stories/youth-in-time-of-change?utm_source=chatgpt.com)





# YOUTH ASSESSING IMPACT

## ***Youth Engagement: A Key Ingredient for Effective Impact Assessments***

During my years as a congressional reporter, legislation usually included a cost-benefit analysis, racial equity assessment, or environment impact statement. But what about a child impact assessment? It is common sense, and hardly a radical idea.

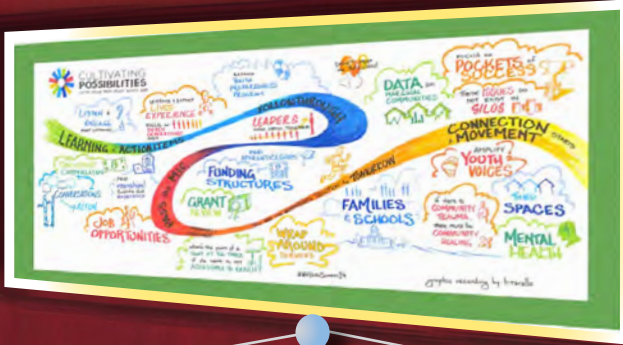
Adam Benforado's recent book *A Minor Revolution* discusses what should be a prerequisite for proposed municipal ordinances that pertain to children and youths.

This "revolution" could give actual meaning to the empty cliches like "*youth are our most precious assets*" (sounds like rare earth minerals) or "*young people are the leaders of tomorrow*" (meaning not now).

Check out real world examples of young people advocating for this systemic approach, and in early 2026, look for Kids Impact and UNICEF USA's toolkit based on its impactful high school and college pilot program.

<https://kidsimpact.org/2025/01/05/engage-youth-to-impact-communities>





# CO-BUILDING WITH YOUTHS

## *Cultivating Possibilities*

Youth involvement with federal agencies is typically limited to one-off photo-ops. That's why this report on interagency collaboration with young people—released just before the U.S. Department of Education's demolition—stands out.

*"Working with young people in a different way strengthens the agencies, and moving forward, they're going to continue to use their experience to shape their work."*

— Shital Shah, former Senior Advisor of Strategic Partnerships, U.S. Department of Education

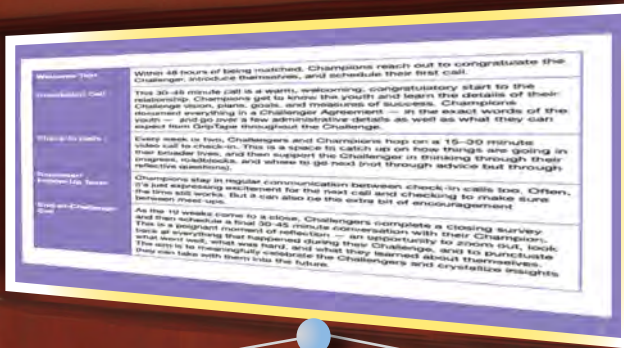
The report details a true "co-building" process, from a seven-month planning period through implementation following the 2024 White House Youth Policy Summit. Perhaps in a few years, even the U.S. Department of Homeland Security will again seek guidance from young people.

My top takeaways and links to this report are outlined here:

<https://youthinfusion.org/2025/03/07/master-plan-for-every-city-and-nonprofit/>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/departementofed/albums/72177720323090340/with/54258583756>





# ACCELERATE INTERACTIONS

## Champion Model

Whether you prefer the term “adult ally,” “adult partner” or my favorite, “accomplice,” check out the practical specificity in this GripTape guide. What is especially helpful is the advice on how to build relationships using Zoom or other digital tools.

There are many clues about this next level of virtual coaching. This community-based organization

recommends a “light touch” with scheduled check-ins. Quick turnaround, not waiting days or weeks, is essential.

In the words of one aspiring “Challenger,” it was their “Champion” who provided “The steady drumbeat of encouragement [that] stokes their sense of possibility, especially as things get challenging.”

[https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/640b7fef2e2b1662cd0a7b2a/6448771ac052a16fcd6ec772\\_Champions\\_-\\_Overview.pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/640b7fef2e2b1662cd0a7b2a/6448771ac052a16fcd6ec772_Champions_-_Overview.pdf)





## ADOLESCENCE: A TIME TO BE REFLECTIVE?

### *Igniting Ideation with Younger Minds*

When young people are asked to solve complex community issues, often times brief brainstorming sessions rely heavily on the experiences of only those participating. New research offers a promising approach for widening the aperture of young people's imagination and sense of possibility.

Prof. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang spent two hours individually with 65 low-income teens, ages 14 to 18, from high-crime neighborhoods.

Together they watched 40 compelling true stories and then discussed "*How did that story make you feel?*" This reflective process sparked "*transcendental adolescent thinking*"—ideas that reached beyond the here and now, outside their lived experiences and assumptions. Two years later, this same cohort remained deeply motivated to contribute to their communities and then as young adults, reported high life satisfaction.

It may sound too simple, but time—real, unrushed time—is a critical success factor.

<https://youthinfusion.org/2025/10/10/igniting-ideation-with-young-people/>





## DATA SCIENCE FOR SAFETY

### ***What Youth Researchers Learned About Safety & Violence in D.C.***

*"Nothing about us without us" is as loud and insistent as ever in 2025. These data scientists sharpen the message even further: "If you want to understand what's going on and what could actually make a difference in communities, you need to listen to young people—not just when it's easy, but all the time." Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) not only generates richer stories and stronger data—it also translates as*

increased credibility with policymakers.

The "Safety 7" team is a concrete example, pushing forward their analysis of violence in the poorest wards of the nation's capital. YPAR demands substantial coaching and a long-term commitment—Phase 1 alone took 16 months—and now the next phase will bring in younger peers to deliberate solutions. The inclusion of Gen Alpha is no longer an experiment; it appears to be an emerging norm.

<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/youth-researchers-safety-violence-washington-dc>







## MENTAL HEALTH CAREER PIPELINE

### *Colorado Youth Mental Health Corps*

Intergenerational collaboration has long been a hallmark of Colorado's state agencies, most notably through its innovative 9to5 initiative, which brought young people in-house to develop program design and evaluation. The Colorado Youth Mental Health Corps is a natural next step in that evolution.

In this model, behavioral health professionals work in tandem with

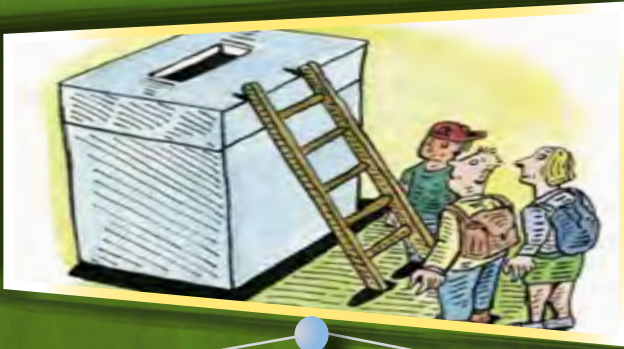
young adults who receive work-based training and industry-recognized certification. These apprentices not only serve as near-peer mental health navigators but also co-design action plans in response to emerging mental health needs.

Building a career pipeline is another result of this intergenerational partnership and this innovative initiative is spreading across the country in nearly a dozen other states.



<https://www.youthmentalhealthcorps.org/partners>





## VOTE16 MOMENTUM

### *Vote16 USA*

Many people of all ages are unaware of the movement that is gaining momentum to expand voting rights to 16- and 17-year olds in municipal elections.

The latest tally, according to Vote16USA, is 10 cities in Maryland, 3 cities in California, 1 city in Vermont (after the override of Governor's veto) and the Newark, N.J. Board of Education.

Dive into dozens of infographics and guides:

**<https://vote16usa.org/resources/>**

Also, I designed this interactive exercise for all ages to debate teen competence. Not only adults but many young people internalize the outdated research that the so-called "*teenage brain*" hijacks cold cognition and reasoning when it comes to voting.

<https://youthinfusion.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/freebie-why-arent-we-doing-this-vote16.pdf>





## AUTHENTICITY PLEASE

### *After Everything, They Still Want In*

In the words of one young voter, many campaign messages “sound like scripts from a Human Resources department.” In stark contrast to other candidates in New York City’s mayoral race, Zohran Mamdani communicated curiosity not condescension. As pollster John Della Volpe noted, the optimism was evident long before the resounding result: 78 percent of voters under 30 cast their ballots for him.

Their words say it all:

*We’re hopeful — and just ready for some new love and spaces.*

*We still care. We’re just not represented.*

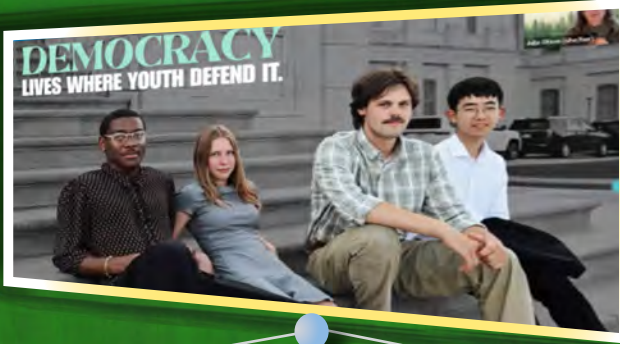
These same sentiments echo throughout **Youth250: Our Declaration**. Young people aren’t asking for polished slogans; they’re asking for sincerity. Whether it’s an election, a nonprofit boardroom, a classroom, or city hall, they want a real invitation to help fix what’s broken.



<https://historymadebyus.org/youth250>







## COURTROOM CLIMATE CAMARADERIE

### ***This is What Democracy Looks Like: 2025 in Review***

Youth plaintiffs nationwide directly harmed by extreme weather and other climate changes persevered for another year with Our Children's Trust. The sluggish pace of the courts as well as being accused as pawns have only strengthened their resolve.

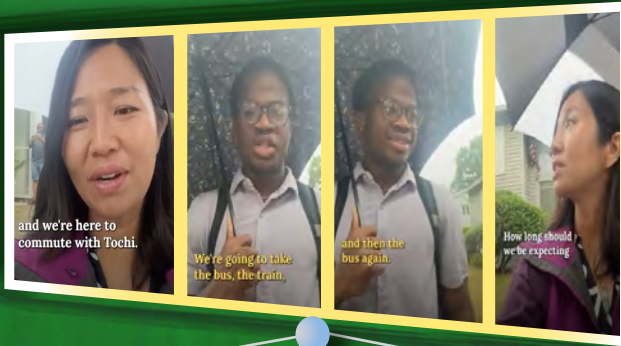
A major victory in Hawaii to decarbonize transportation establishes in the settlement agreement an avenue for young people

to provide ongoing input to the state Department of Transportation. The age range for this Youth Council: 20 people as young as 12!

Another inspiring example of Youth Infusion: An international organization established a non-voting youth subcommittee of the Board of Directors, a conduit for formal feedback and recommendations on integrating youths into its governance structure.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTjbaaF-A3k>





## WALK IN MY SHOES

### *Mayor Meets Teens Where They Are*

*"Meet people where they are"* is a familiar phrase, but young constituents are usually expected to meet elected officials on their turf—resulting in little more than a brief exchange and a photo-op.

Boston Mayor Michelle Wu flipped that script by joining high school graduate Tochukwu on his daily commute to his summer job. Imagine if more elected officials followed this example.

It's also a brilliant way to draw attention to *"Youth Speak Boston,"* a comprehensive survey on transportation, safety, mental health, mentorship, community spaces, and events conducted by the Office of Youth Engagement and Advancement.

If more leaders took this approach, listening to young people wouldn't be an event—it would become standard practice.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm8tpelz10w>





## REACH RURAL YOUTH

### ***Rising Where We're Rooted: How Local Organizations Rebuild Youth Trust***

You've likely heard young people say, *"Don't ask us to wait our turn."* Youths outside major urban centers add another message for national organizations and large nonprofits with pre-packaged programs: *Don't parachute in.*

Local groups such as Appalshop, CivicLex, Kentucky Student Voice Team, and The Rural Youth Voices Initiative succeed because they

treat young people as full participants and co-create infrastructure grounded in shared values. This mutual respect helps explain why 77% of rural youths trust their peers and neighbors—the highest level of trust among this demographic—along with 65% who trust nonprofit organizations and 61% who trust their local government. However, that trust erodes when larger institutions enter the picture.

<https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/rising-where-were-rooted-how-local-organizations-are-rebuilding-youth-trust>







## DISRUPT ADULTISM

### ***A Framework for Authentic Engagement of Youth Policy Creation***

Do we need more models? Yes, until it is the norm for young people from all backgrounds to participate from the first brainstorm through evaluation. One best practice in this research that deserves extra attention is the conclusion: *“stronger adult training was needed, especially to disrupt adultism and prepare staff to serve as*

*facilitators, not directors, of youth engagement.”*

Another crucial point – involve young people at every step in the process in order to avoid rubber stamp approval.

Age segregation, even if unseen, exists. Another challenge that I detect is the need for the senior leadership team also to participate in these training and spend time informally with young allies—not just in meetings.

<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/framework-authentic-engagement-youth-creating-policy>





## CODIFY YOUTH INCLUSION

### ***When Youth Lead and Adults Listen, Bills Get Passed***

I expect an eye roll when talking about a Children's Cabinet that includes young people.

The outgoing Youth Representative on the Indiana Commission on Improving the Status of Children (CISC) gives a behind-the-scenes look at this law that mandates the Commission *"shall develop a mechanism for ongoing engagement of youth with lived experience and shall*

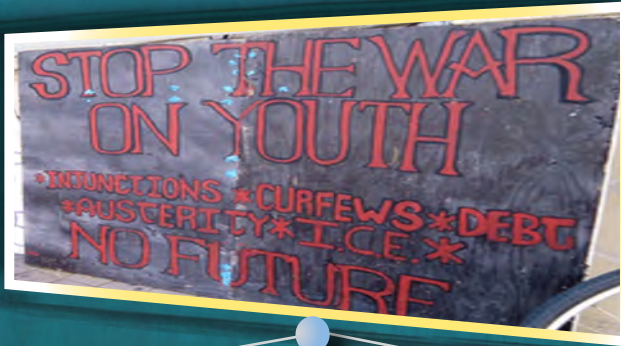
*document how youth input informs its priorities and recommendations."*

One nugget is that the adult commissioners participated in three trainings about adultism and *"when the adults and young people came together for the first time, it was magic."*

If Indiana could adopt this structural policy to replace symbolic leadership, it could happen anywhere.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/community-in-site/id1740987908?i=1000722923956>





## STOP SCAPEGOATING

### Youth Facts


I check the Youth Facts website regularly for its brutal critique of the “youth development industrial complex” and statistical distortions like the “youth crime wave.”

A hearty mention for this book review featuring *On Doing Democracy in Third Places*, which calls out the practice of counting how many young people attend a workshop, summit, etc. Instead measure what they value from their experience – including their collegiality with adults.

The concept that deserves attention is what the authors describe as “horizontal relationships” between adults and young people in which power relations, identities, and status roles become more flattened out rather than institutionally stratified in static professional hierarchies.”

What an aspirational leap to move from youth participation to authentic youth contributions.

Subscribe free to [YouthFacts.org](https://www.youthfacts.org).

  
<https://www.youthfacts.org/?p=161172>





## PASS THE E-TORCH

### *Youth & e-Democracy*

I'd guess that most adults aren't spending hours on TikTok or Discord. For young people, these ever-evolving digital spaces feel like home; for many older generations, they feel foreign. Encode Justice, started by high school students several years ago, paved the way for Gen Z to weigh in against Big Tech.

Adam Fletcher's commentary echoes this sentiment that young creators and consumers need to be at the wheel driving their digital futures.

One ambitious idea is to build *"an open-source legacy for youth-led digital initiatives: making all program materials, research, and impact stories freely accessible so communities anywhere can replicate, adapt, and improve on them without starting from scratch."*

Our next democratic breakthrough may come from doing what adults rarely do: trusting young people to build the digital future that belongs to them.

<https://adamfletcher.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/youth-e-democracy-by-adam-f.c.-fletcher.pdf>



## 18x18 Civic Learning Journeys for Nurturing Adolescent and Community Thriving

1. Conduct an Oral History	2. Civil Discourse on a Contested Topic	3. Research an Unknown Local History	4. Write and Deliver a Speech	5. Create a Game	6. Be Part of a Deliberative Body
7. Co-Design a Solution	8. Deep Reading Journey	9. Analyze or Map a Complex System	10. Create a Public Narrative from Many Sources	11. Create a Piece of Original Art	12. Design a Ritual or Festival
13. Produce a Public Festival	14. Take on a Challenge of Self-History	15. Organize and Do Something in Community	16. Shadow a Public Figure or Mentor	17. Find a Format for Civic Solitude	18. Curate or Host an Exhibit or Tour

# TAXONOMY FOR CHANGEMAKERS

## Teen-Centered Civics for Human Thriving

This blueprint for our collective growth is a perfect way to close out 2025. The 18x18 Learning Journeys identify core competencies for young people. And let's be real: many adults never got the opportunity to have these experiences. If we turn the table, young people could mentor older people about the most current methods of many of these civic life skills. The potential for intergenerational symbiosis is here to learn, play,

deliberate, communicate and problem solve together.

Hold onto this note of hope:

*"In this time of fear and uncertainty, we are ignoring a crucial resource: the creative, generative, caring power of teens... Adolescence—too often treated as a problem to manage—is in fact a magnificent developmental window... When systems are designed with this reality in mind, young people do not merely absorb the world around them—they actively and creatively shape it."*

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/628d83a9cae7f302fa52eb31/t/69038051177ff606434862c1/1761837137513/Teen-Centered-Civics-Final.pdf>



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My appreciation to countless visionaries who have opened many doors as I continually learn and relearn how we can strive for a more inclusive society. Those who continue to give me a wider lens include:

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Sophia Montemayor  
Shai Naides  
Hikma Sharpa  
Shankar Vedantam  
John Della Volpe  
Denise Webb

**Please submit your own "Must-Have" Resources  
that we can share with our growing community. Thanks!**

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