

How to Engage Young People: Lessons from Lowell, MA

December 17, 2012

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The Kinder & Braver World Project: Research Series (danah boyd, John Palfrey, and Dena Sacco, editors)

Brought to you by the Born This Way Foundation & the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, and supported by the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

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I. INTRODUCTION

A youth organization's success depends on young people's participation within the local community. Many of the issues facing young people today reflect a poor engagement with community politics, cultural identity formation, and risk-taking behaviors based on that identity formation. The Teen Block was founded in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1990 with the goal of addressing these issues. Since that time, it has served over 8,000 young people, integrating social, behavioral, mental, and physical health.

The city of Lowell rose during the Industrial Revolution, where it marked history with technological, social, and economic advances with textile factories and millworker unions. However, its economy fell and it quickly gained a reputation for urban decay, notable for being the setting of movies such as *The Fighter* where Christian Bale plays a local celebrity famous for being a drug addict. The median household income in Lowell is about 25 percent less than the statewide average. About a quarter of Lowell's population of 106,000 was born outside the United States, and nearly half the population speaks a language other than English at home.

The city of Lowell has a high population of marginalized young people, mostly of recent immigrant descent. The teen pregnancy rate of Lowell is the tenth highest in Massachusetts; gang violence has caused significant rifts in the community; and, considerable health disparities persist among Lowell's ethnic groups.

The Teen Block serves approximately 80 young people annually, aged 12-20 years old. Many of them are first or second generation Americans. 80 percent are Asian, 10 percent are African, 5 percent are Latino, and 5 percent are classified as 'Other.' Members are recruited through high school and referred from the community, sometimes through the justice department. These teens are at risk for teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancies, poverty, high school dropout, low educational attainment, alcohol and drug abuse, and the lure of gang activity. Because many Lowell youth are from refugee families, they are also affected by things like having been in refugee camps as young children, the challenges of adapting to a new country and/or culture, generational conflict between children and their immigrant and refugee parents, and second generation trauma for adolescent children of Southeast Asian and African refugee parents suffering from torture and trauma under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and oppressive regimes and war in African countries, respectively.

The Teen Block is a department of the Lowell Community Health Center, through which it has access to medical and mental health professional services. It relies on this organizational structure, its staff, and a youth development model for engaging young people in their communities. Activities in the Teen Block are based on best practices and evidence-based research as well as on self-conducted needs assessments. Since the Teen Block was founded,

Lowell has experienced an 18 percent decline in teen births. Adults who were former members have returned to help sustain its structure through volunteering, grant writing, and employment. Teen Block youth go onto higher education, obtain jobs, and contribute meaningfully to the art communities of Lowell.

II. LESSONS LEARNED

The following three primary “lessons learned” from the Teen Block’s experience may help leaders of youth organizations, teachers, and others working with marginalized youth in diverse, urban settings like the city of Lowell.

Lesson 1: The Youth Organization as Part of a Community Health Clinic

The Teen Block is a department of the Lowell Community Health Center (LCHC), which has granted it easy access to medical and mental health professional services. Every staff member of the Teen Block undergoes training on employee standards of the medical center, familiarizing the staff with confidentiality issues and offering development opportunities such as certifications in Mental Health First Aid. LCHC acts as both an in-point and out-point for Teen Block members, who can be referred to the Teen Block by clinicians and vice versa. Not only does this help the youth population, but convenient access to professional care and preventive health activities also includes parents and families of the youth, which addresses Lowell’s overall health disparities. The access to LCHC also eases barriers to sex education, counseling, and testing for sexually transmitted diseases as well as contraception and contraception counseling. Staff members of the Teen Block are provided with multiple cultural competencies trainings and a Community Health Education certification, certifying them as Community Health Workers. These courses include sexual health, nutrition, trauma, and mental health. Each staff member has an opportunity to receive a Mental Health First Aid certification to address serious emotional issues. At the Teen Block, however, it builds awareness for staff members who interact with teenagers seeking help and health.

LCHC provides primary and behavioral health care services to the people of the Greater Lowell area, targeting individuals and families who are medically underserved, uninsured, and low income. Because of its good connections with the Teen Block, the most underserved youth are referred to a safe place where they can engage in the community along with the back-up clinical resources close at hand. This means an absolutely holistic approach to the health of the young people.

Lesson 2: The Staff are Key Stakeholders in the Community

The best attribute of the Teen Block is its staff, which is comprised of community members who spend time engaging youth. The success of the staff depends on each staff member’s own engagement within the city of Lowell. Most Teen Block staff members are adults (ranging from 20-60 years old) who have grown up in Lowell and attended the same public

schools as the young people they serve. They participate in events and activities in the city. Most of the employees at the Teen Block are of Southeast Asian and African descent. This cultural ‘mirroring,’ as described by common mental health practices, includes but also going beyond racial/ethnic lines by incorporating local Lowellian staff. This system provides familiarity for the youth, as well as real life examples of how to successfully navigate adolescence and young adulthood in Lowell.

The director of the Teen Block, Sopheap Linda Sou, also directs and coordinates a dance troop that is a significant part of the Lowell Khmer community and attracts teenagers in marginalized ethnic group members as well as those youth interested in the dramatic arts. The cross-pollination of leadership within the community allows youth participating in the Teen Block opportunities and examples of local leadership. This cross-pollination also can be seen in every staff member who interacts with youth daily. Masada Jones, a staff member, heads a local slam poetry association that reaches out to artist and LGBT communities in Lowell. Other staff members include teachers from local public high schools and members of fundraising boards on local arts committees or the public access station.

Staffing an organization with key stakeholders in the community is essential to teen “buy-in” and presents diverse and unique opportunities for youth. For a youth organization to be successful, it must employ staff members that remain present and engaged in the youths’ community.

Lesson 3: Young People are Part of the Solution

In the experience of the Teen Block, young people—from teenagers to young adults—offer innovative collaborations but also provide sustainability for our youth organization. The Teen Block focuses on developing young people as assets, thereby developing them as assets within their communities. The Teen Block uses a strategic prevention framework, defined by five steps:

- (1) Assessment
- (2) Capacity-building
- (3) Planning
- (4) Implementation
- (5) Evaluation

Youth are involved at every step of the planning process so that the organization is actually *youth-driven* and *youth-directed*. The concept behind this idea is simple: young people are part of the solution.

Successful community engagement helps prevent youth violence and promotes healthy behavior in young people. In this engagement, youth have been recruited for opinions, ideas, and solutions to issues facing their communities. The Teen Block’s strategies involve health

education and leadership development wrapped around support and mental health care, having trusted positive adults available, and using one-on-one case management.

LCHC's Teen Block utilizes a whole-health model by incorporating STI-prevention, teen pregnancy prevention, anti-violence, cultural competency, identity formation, and community into its programming. These are based on the idea of developing its young members as assets within their communities, and collaborating with them to achieve solutions within the community. Only until young members are allowed access and decision-making power within their community will they be truly engaged. In turn, youth will be recognized as the assets that they are.

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