

## POLICY AND PRACTICE REPORT



Leadership

Responsibility

Choice

Autonomy

# Strategies for Incorporating Youth Voice into Program Design:

*The Importance of Youth Leadership,  
Responsibility, Choice, and Autonomy*

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**Authentic youth participation and leadership** lead to productivity, innovation, and creative dynamism that accelerate economic and societal development (1). The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) indicates that when youth have opportunities for leadership and autonomy, they can experience increased engagement, improved self-management, greater initiative, enhanced communication skills, and a greater sense of competence (2). In addition, Healthy People 2020's Adolescent Health Guide identified positive youth development as an effective means to achieve greater health and well-being (3). Focusing on the full potential of youth not only positively impacts individual youth outcomes, but can also lead to tangible positive differences in their community (4,5).

**Identifying opportunities for youth leadership and responsibility, and choice and autonomy**, is critical to promote the well-being of youth individually. Positive

youth development, the theoretical framework guiding this research, confirms this. By focusing on youth assets rather than youth deficits, this positive approach engages youth in programs, program development, and leadership to cultivate civic and cultural competencies, positive attitudes toward their communities, a strong sense of identity, and supportive relationships between youth and adults. Such opportunities prepare youth to contribute more fully as stakeholders in their communities. **Yet, there is often a gap between the intentions of promoting authentic youth participation, and what is implemented in reality.**

This brief presents findings from research commissioned by Boston After School & Beyond, and conducted by Health Resources in Action, to understand the experiences of Boston youth in out-of-school time programming in the areas of youth leadership and responsibility, and choice and autonomy. Practical strategies to engage youth in these areas are included.

## Positive Youth Development

*DEFINED as the “ongoing growth process in which all youth are engaged in attempting to meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful, and be spiritually grounded, and to build skills and competencies that allow them to function and contribute to their daily lives”* <sup>(6)</sup>

### TRENDS IN BOSTON OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

Boston After School & Beyond (Boston Beyond), founded in 2005, is a public-private partnership that aims to ensure that every child in Boston has the opportunity to develop to his or her full potential by expanding learning and skill development opportunities for students. Through measurement, year-round peer-to-peer learning, and professional development, Boston Beyond’s network of over 110 expanded learning partners pursue four shared goals: increase student access to expanded learning; help students develop skills for college and career success; improve program performance; and scale and sustain data-driven best practices.

Results from evaluations of both school-year and summer partners reveal that youth consistently rate programs low in terms of providing them with opportunities for leadership and responsibility, and choice and autonomy. Although trends since 2010 reveal improvements by programs in these areas, the progress has been incremental. Program ratings from

third-party observers confirm the feedback given by youth in these domains. In response to these findings, Boston Beyond hired Health Resources in Action (HRiA), a non-profit public health organization based in Boston, MA, to conduct qualitative research to explore youth perspectives on the themes of leadership and responsibility, and choice and autonomy.

### GATHERING FEEDBACK FROM YOUTH

#### Methods

Table 1 outlines the variety of methods used by HRiA to qualitatively gather elementary, middle, and high school youth perspectives on the themes of leadership and responsibility, and choice and autonomy. In total, 40 youth representing eight youth program partners of Boston After School & Beyond were included. The semi-structured interview guides for the focus groups and key informant interviews were developed as a collaboration between Boston Beyond and HRiA. The guides can be found on Boston Beyond’s program practice website: ([summerinsight.bostonbeyond.org](http://summerinsight.bostonbeyond.org)).

**Table 1: Research methods, by age group**

Method	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Focus Group	1 focus group held 16 youth 1 program represented	1 focus group held 9 youth 1 program represented	1 focus group held 9 youth 3 programs represented
Key Informant Interview	Not applicable	1 interview held 2 youth 1 program represented	3 interviews held 4 youth 2 programs represented
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>16 youth 1 program represented</b>	<b>11 youth 2 programs represented</b>	<b>13 youth 5 programs represented</b>

## Limitations

As with all research efforts, there are limitations related to the methods. Despite the following limitations, the findings and recommendations can still be instructive to youth programs overall in identifying opportunities to increase leadership and responsibility, and choice and autonomy.

- While reflecting diverse perspectives from a variety of youth organizations, the eight participating programs and 40 participating youth only represent a small sample of Boston Beyond's program partners and youth served.
- Elementary and middle school perspectives are represented by only one and two programs, respectively, and the high school perspectives are represented by five programs.
- Due to room logistics and supervision requirements of programs, teachers and staff were present through a portion or the entirety of the focus group sessions. It is possible that youth were not as candid with their feedback as they might have been without adult presence.

## Headlines

**Youth of all ages spoke highly about their program experiences.** Students expressed a sense of accomplishment and increased confidence as they recognized their skills improving, and found programs to be informative and extending beyond what they ordinarily learned in school. High-school students in particular noted that summer and after-school programs were opportunities to “have fun, make long-lasting friendships, and learn things that [they] wouldn't otherwise learn.”

**Youth seek to be active agents in their learning,** and are eager to understand leadership and practice leadership, responsibility, choice, and autonomy. They acknowledge that their input must fit within a program's goals and recognize that programs must be structured in certain ways to advance learning and development.

**Youth found program staff to be caring and approachable,** with staff often teaching life lessons in addition to subject matter. Middle schoolers often thought of staff as parental figures or older siblings.

**Advanced planning by program leaders is needed** to intentionally incorporate youth voice into program design. Incorporating youth voice into a summer program, for example, could start as early as when students register. Youth feel leadership is as much about opportunity, as it is about advanced and intentional planning, feedback structures, and follow up.

**Youth feedback identified concrete strategies** for programs to incorporate youth leadership, responsibility, choice, and autonomy, which are detailed and stratified by age group in the Recommendations Section.



Within Youth Participation is a focus upon:

**YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY:** *Youth planned and youth-led initiatives, activities, and practices that lead to a sense of youth ownership*

**YOUTH CHOICE AND AUTONOMY:** *Individual choice and self-determination*

Young people having the power to make and implement decisions and changes, with shared responsibility for the results. Participation takes place at varying levels and in differing forms, and there is a reciprocal relationship between the power of youth and the power of adults, including youth workers. High levels of youth participation lead to the gaining of developmental youth outcomes.

(Advancing Youth Development/ BEST – HRiA)

## FINDINGS

### Elementary youth

#### Leadership and role modeling



When defining leadership, elementary-aged youth generally understood that leadership involved responsibility, taking care of other people, and role modeling. In regards to the program, one youth stated, *“Some people want to try some things that I do in the program. They want to do the things that I do.”* This basic understanding of leadership indicates great potential for introducing more intentional leadership opportunities and discussions in future programming.

Although youth had difficulty thinking of concrete examples of leadership in their own experience, they were enthusiastic when probed about potential areas in which youth might help lead or make decisions. Youth unanimously liked planning

concrete things (e.g. what snack they will get, what activities they will do, etc.). Youth were in less agreement around more involved leadership opportunities, such as planning events like science fairs and art activities. However, youth stated that staff could encourage them to lead by *“convincing us that it’s easy to do and not hard”* and *“giv[ing] an example, so we can understand.”*

Youth expressed that they did not want a formal leadership group (e.g. a youth council), as they did not want *“the kids to think that [we are] better than [them].”*

#### Choice and autonomy

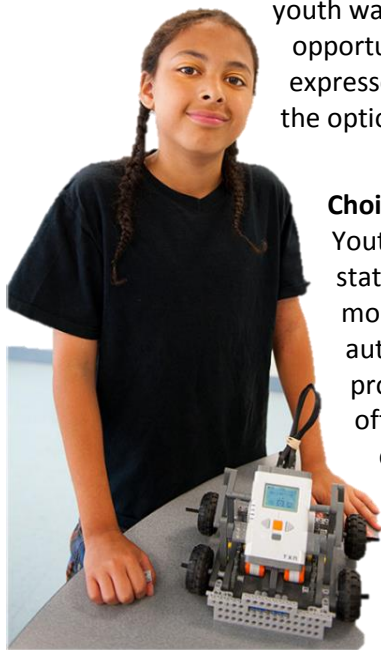
Youth appreciated the opportunity to make decisions within guided or structured parameters. Once probed, youth enthusiastically talked about wanting to choose what teams they played with in soccer, what food they ate, and what activities they did during free time. As with leadership and responsibility, youth talked about the importance of having staff and/or teacher support in making choices to ensure that their decisions were the “right choice.”

## Middle school youth

### Leadership and responsibility

Youth highlighted opportunities for leadership and responsibility in their program experiences. For example, older youth who had been through the program before had the opportunity to work for the program the following year. Additionally, youth mentioned that staff sometimes allowed them to offer creative ideas to influence the management of the class. For example, youth were able to plan and implement a stress management program and also suggest an incentive system for following classroom rules. Youth expressed a sense of satisfaction to know that these suggestions were implemented.

Yet, leadership examples tended to be either youth-initiated, or focused around a single event, like an end of summer celebration. Youth recommended that staff create ongoing leadership opportunities to influence the planning and execution of daily programming. Youth also expressed interest in being trained for more formal leadership roles, such as becoming a peer mediator, or developing a leadership team. While not all youth wanted these opportunities, they expressed interest in having the options offered to them.



### Choice and autonomy

Youth overwhelmingly stated that they wanted more choice and autonomy in their programs, but they often understood why certain decisions were made. For example, when talking about being randomly assigned to groups

for projects, one youth reflected, *“I know that this is so we won’t just be with friends, which is good and not good. But maybe we can sometimes have chances to work with friends.”* Similarly, while youth understood why certain rules were put in place, numerous youth expressed interest in providing input. They believed they could provide

ideas for rules that would address youth interests, while still meeting program goals.

For example, youth expressed dissatisfaction with the rule prohibiting cell phone use during the program, but understood the intent behind it. One youth stated, *“We can’t be on our phones at all – they don’t ask our opinion. They know we wouldn’t pay attention if we were allowed to use our phones. But, what if we could have a short phone break during the program, or between school and the program?”* In this situation, youth believed that if asked, they could identify a creative solution that would meet program goals, as well as youth preferences and needs.

Finally, one youth suggested that to increase youth ownership of the program, programs could consider doing a focus group at the beginning of the program so their ideas could be incorporated throughout the program cycle. In this youth’s words, *“We would be able to tell if the ideas got incorporated if we could suggest what happens in the program.”*

## High school youth

### Leadership and responsibility

Compared to other age groups, high school youth more consistently felt that they had regular opportunities for planning and leading activities, and giving input to the program structure. This typically included leading icebreakers and activities, organizing “fun nights” and field trips, being mentors or peer leaders, and participating on youth leadership councils. A few youth expressed the importance of such leadership opportunities in their own development. For example, one youth stated, *“At the end of summer celebration, I got to choose what I talked about and give a testimonial. I was shy, but when I said it, [it was like] a whole different person came out.”*

In addition, youth also identified room for growth. One youth shared, *“If we could work during the academic year to plan for the summer, it would be a great way to include leadership for rising Juniors and Seniors and influence the summer.”* While youth on the leadership team appreciated the opportunity to provide input on programming and ideas, it was typically initiated when the adult staff wanted to hear feedback. There were fewer youth

initiated opportunities to have such discussions. By engaging youth in early planning, creating space during programming for youth input, and soliciting feedback proactively, youth believed that they would feel greater leadership and youth ownership of their programs.

Youth expressed that formal leadership opportunities through mentorship or leadership councils were limited to a small group of youth; by increasing the number of leadership opportunities and the types of roles, more youth could participate and practice leading, even at a smaller scale. One youth said, *“I feel we could have more leadership. Some students are immature, but not all – give us more leadership opportunities; maybe we could earn it in some way.”* Ideas included incorporating youth input into program rules, co-leading classes with adult staff, and working with adult staff to make program elements more youth-driven.

### **Choice and autonomy**

When compared to other age groups, high school participants were more likely to describe opportunities throughout the program day to choose activities, classes, or electives to engage in. Youth mentioned that they felt more ownership of *“the parts of the program that allow them more choice.”* And, as with the other age groups, most youth also had suggestions for improvement.



For example, one youth suggested that youth could be engaged in choosing summer and after-school electives and activities prior to the start of the program (e.g. once accepted or registered for the program), which could facilitate increased youth investment in program decisions. Youth understood the need for pre-program planning by staff, and if given the opportunity, youth were willing to commit time to also participate early and do extra work to facilitate more youth choice in program decisions.

Youth also expressed the necessity to have adequate information to inform the choices that they get to make. For example, if youth are able to choose electives, it is important to ensure that they understand what the electives are about to equip them to make thoughtful and informed decisions.

Finally, youth expressed interest in being involved in larger program decision making, including providing input to program rules, budget management, and hiring. While youth always acknowledged that they did not expect to have the final say, they thought that by including their voices, they would become even more invested in their programs, better understand why program decisions are made, and grow in their own skills.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Overall, the youth programs represented in this report have numerous strengths in promoting youth leadership and responsibility, and choice and autonomy. The following tables highlight age-appropriate, practical strategies to enhance these strengths, addressing the areas identified by youth for improvement. Specifically, opportunities are categorized in the following areas:

- Increasing opportunities for and awareness of youth leadership and choice (Table 2);
- Engaging youth in informing program design and structure (Table 3); and
- Soliciting and incorporating youth feedback (Table 4).

**Table 2: Increasing opportunities and awareness for leadership and choice - Strategies and practical ideas, by age group**

<b>STRATEGY: Identify daily, or frequent opportunities for informal leadership and choice:</b> Youth expressed an interest in practicing leadership and choice on a more regular basis.		
Ideas for Elementary	Ideas for Middle School	Ideas for High School
Choose a snack for the day Choose an icebreaker, warm up activity, etc. Choose a recess activity	Create and maintain a snack schedule for choosing, distributing, and cleaning up snack Choose an elective, a classroom activity, or field trip to participate in Plan and/or lead icebreakers or activities Give input to program rules or group agreements	Manage the snack budget and create and maintain a snack schedule for choosing, distributing, and cleaning up snack Co-teach an elective or lesson with adult staff Plan and lead icebreakers or activities Give input to existing program rules, or facilitating the development of group agreements
<b>STRATEGY: Create formal youth leadership opportunities with clear training, roles and expectations:</b> Youth expressed a desire for more youth representation in programming decisions, and wanted more formal leadership roles or jobs that would provide these opportunities.		
Ideas for Elementary	Ideas for Middle School	Ideas for High School
Rotate leadership roles where everyone has the opportunity to participate throughout the program (e.g. line leader, snack distributor, etc.)	Train and create mentorship opportunities for younger youth Develop a youth leadership council with formal roles and responsibilities Plan a larger event or celebration where there are multiple planning roles that youth can take on	Train and create mentorship opportunities for younger youth Develop a youth leadership council with formal roles and responsibilities Plan a larger event or celebration where there are multiple planning roles that youth can take on
<b>STRATEGY: Introduce intentional conversations and language around leadership, responsibility, choice, and autonomy:</b> Youth struggled to easily articulate what these four concepts could look like in youth programming, even in theory. If youth understand what these concepts entail, they may be more likely to recognize it and engage in its practice.		
Ideas for Elementary	Ideas for Middle School	Ideas for High School
Discuss what it means to be a leader Define and give examples of leadership, responsibility, choice, and autonomy	Discuss what it means to be a leader Define and give examples of leadership, responsibility, choice, and autonomy Identify opportunities with youth to practice these four concepts in programming Encourage youth to suggest ideas for growing in each of the four areas	Discuss what it means to be a leader Define and give examples of leadership, responsibility, choice, and autonomy Identify opportunities with youth to practice these four concepts in programming Have youth create their own learning plan to grow in these areas and track progress

**Table 3: Informing program design and structure – strategies and practical ideas, by age group**

<b>STRATEGY: Engage youth in planning, early and often:</b> Rather than engaging youth as passive recipients of programming, identify opportunities to involve them actively in the development and planning of the programming.		
Ideas for Elementary	Ideas for Middle School	Ideas for High School
Identify concrete tasks that youth can lead or participate in planning (e.g. a craft project)	<p>When developing ideas for programming, seek to have youth representation at the table as early and often as possible</p> <p>Pair youth with adult staff to co-plan activities</p>	<p>When developing ideas for programming, seek to have youth representation at the table as early and often as possible</p> <p>Split youth into planning committees where they can take charge of a group of tasks or an area of work</p>
<b>STRATEGY: Engage youth in providing input or creating program agreements or rules:</b> Go beyond just asking youth to agree to rules and ask them for their input and creative solutions.		
Ideas for Elementary	Ideas for Middle School	Ideas for High School
<p>Develop group agreements with youth</p> <p>Encourage questions about rules or agreements</p>	<p>Develop group agreements with youth or youth facilitate the development of agreements</p> <p>Practice innovation by asking youth to identify a rule that they do not agree with, and develop and propose a creative solution that addresses the program's needs and their wishes</p>	<p>Youth facilitate the development of group agreements</p> <p>Practice innovation by asking youth to identify a rule that they do not agree with, and develop and propose a creative solution that addresses the program's needs and their wishes</p>
<b>STRATEGY: Provide appropriate guidance and support to enable youth to lead and authentically provide input to program design:</b> Without proper training and support, youth will not be able to authentically and effectively provide input, leadership, and feedback to programming.		
Ideas for Elementary	Ideas for Middle School	Ideas for High School
<p>Provide opportunities for youth to make concrete choices, particularly in regards to their preferences for activities, ideas, etc.</p> <p>Remind youth that adults are there to support their decision-making process, so they are not doing it alone</p>	<p>Describe opportunities for decision points and feedback</p> <p>Train youth, whenever appropriate, on skills required for effectively providing input to program design and structure (e.g. how to facilitate group agreements)</p>	<p>Describe opportunities for decision points and feedback</p> <p>Train youth, whenever appropriate, on skills required for effectively providing input to program design and structure (e.g. how to manage a budget, how to plan an event, etc.)</p>

**Table 4: Soliciting and incorporating youth feedback – Strategies and practical ideas, by age group**

<b>STRATEGY: Assess youth needs and interests to inform program design and decisions:</b> Wherever possible, identify areas that have flexibility to be shaped by the expressed needs and interests of youth.		
Ideas for Elementary	Ideas for Middle School	Ideas for High School
Conduct small group discussions (<5 youth)  Send short needs and interests survey home for discussion and completion between youth and parent/guardian	Conduct small group discussions (<5 youth), and/or key informant interviews  Engage youth from past program cycle or newly hired youth to brainstorm for upcoming program session  Send short needs and interests survey home for discussion and completion between youth and parent/guardian	Conduct focus groups (10-12 youth), and/or key informant interviews  Engage youth from past program cycle or newly hired youth to brainstorm for upcoming program session  Send a short needs and interests survey to youth participants
<b>STRATEGY: Engage in ongoing monitoring and evaluation efforts:</b> Beyond collecting evaluation data before and after programming, it is important to monitor youth progress and satisfaction throughout the course of the program cycle.		
Ideas for Elementary	Ideas for Middle School	Ideas for High School
Create pros/ cons lists at the end of each program day	Conduct verbal feedback exercise at the end of each session (e.g. plusses/ deltas)  Solicit feedback at regularly scheduled intervals from the youth leadership council	Conduct verbal feedback exercise at the end of each session (e.g. plusses/ deltas)  Conduct an individual written evaluation at the end of each session  Solicit feedback at regularly scheduled intervals from the youth leadership council



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**STRATEGY: Evaluate youth-identified successes and opportunities for improvement following the program for continuous quality improvement:** Following the program cycle, engage youth in discussions around their experiences in the program, and the program’s strengths, growth areas, and lessons learned.

Ideas for Elementary	Ideas for Middle School	Ideas for High School
Compile youth data collected from pros/ cons lists and small group discussions to identify strategies for improvement  Conduct small group discussions	Compile and consider all youth feedback collected throughout the program  Conduct small group discussions (<5 youth), and/or key informant interviews  Identify areas of improvement  Convene a youth-adult planning committee to identify strategies to address these areas  Engage youth in implementing recommendations	Compile and consider all youth feedback collected throughout the program  Conduct small group discussions (<5 youth), and/or key informant interviews  Identify areas of improvement  Convene a youth-adult planning committee to identify strategies to address these areas  Engage youth in implementing recommendations

**STRATEGY: Follow-up with youth on unincorporated feedback, whenever possible, to explain rationale:** Youth often understand that grant and funding requirements often drive program decisions, but explaining such constraints can foster greater understanding and partnership.

Ideas for Elementary	Ideas for Middle School	Ideas for High School
Share information with youth, and parents/ guardians, if applicable	Facilitate group discussions to address areas of concern or disappointment  Explain rationale for decision with as much transparency and candor as possible  Acknowledge disappointment and concern	Facilitate group discussions to address areas of concern or disappointment  Explain rationale for decision with as much transparency and candor as possible  Acknowledge disappointment and concern

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**Boston After School & Beyond (Boston Beyond)** is a public-private partnership that seeks to ensure that every child has the opportunity to develop to his or her full potential. Boston Beyond's role is to increase learning and skill development opportunities for students during the afterschool hours and summer months.

Boston Beyond advances student learning by mobilizing partnerships among program providers, philanthropy, business and higher education, the City of Boston, and especially the Boston Public Schools.

Boston Beyond was founded in 2005 as the successor to two flagship initiatives — the Boston 2:00-to-6:00 After-School Initiative, the first-in-the-nation municipal after-school office, and Boston's After-School for All Partnership, a collaboration of 15 local funders and the City of Boston.



[www.bostonbeyond.org](http://www.bostonbeyond.org)  
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**Health Resources in Action (HRIA)** is a nonprofit public health organization dedicated to promoting individual and community health through prevention, health promotion, policy, and support of medical research. HRIA is the parent organization of The Medical Foundation, which provides medical research grants programs and philanthropic advisory services.

### **Our Vision:**

A world where social conditions and equitable resources foster healthy people in healthy communities.

### **Our Mission:**

To help people live healthier lives and create healthy communities through prevention, health promotion, policy, and research.



**Health Resources in Action**  
*Advancing Public Health and Medical Research*

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