



LESSONS in LEADERSHIP

The Case for Student Councils at
All TYC Facilities

A Texas Youth Commission Report

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THE MART MODEL

The Mart II Student Council is a model for all TYC facilities. By all accounts, its consistent operation has helped to transform that campus from chaos to stability. The success of that Student Council can be attributed to the following factors.

- **Institutional Commitment:** The most critical factor contributing to the success of the Mart Model is an institutional commitment at the highest level to the dorm level. Superintendent Curtis Simmons and Assistant Superintendent Charles Barton are genuinely committed to the existence of a well functioning Student Council. Mr. Simmons personally meets monthly with the campus-wide council and reviews meeting minutes from each dorm council meeting to monitor for significant issues and trends and to ensure the meetings are being held as scheduled and properly conducted. In rare instances when he can not attend, Mr. Barton attends. Occasionally they are both present. There are bi-weekly dorm council meetings attended by the JCO VI.
- **Democratic Representation:** Mr. Simmons has created a truly democratic selection process. On each pod, youth elect one representative, case workers elect one representative, and Juvenile Corrections Officers elect one representative. Those three pod representatives attend bi-weekly dorm council meetings. The dorm council elects a representative to a campus-wide Student Council which meets monthly. This selection process lends legitimacy to the councils from both a staff perspective and youth perspective.
- **Consistency:** Dorm and campus-wide Student Councils meet regularly and consistently on designated days. As a result, representatives come to the meeting prepared to make a contribution. This enhances youth confidence in the system.
- **Modeling and Leadership Development:** Mr. Simmons uses the meetings as an opportunity to model leadership, diplomacy, negotiation skills, and respectful interaction. His expectation is that the Council members do the same on the dorm.
- **Responsiveness and Results:** Mr. Simmons and his staff act on concerns raised during meetings. If there are reasons he can not address those concerns in a way that is desired by the youth, he will explain the reasons why. This responsiveness leaves youth feeling respected and heard and it increases their confidence in the council process.

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP: THE CASE FOR STUDENT COUNCILS AT ALL TYC

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Student Council members hold a meeting at the Ron Jackson State Juvenile Correctional Complex Unit 1. Student councils represent a way to connect youth with positive social forces and assets, and engage them in pro-social activities and opportunities.



I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents a plan for reinstating student councils across Texas Youth Commission's facilities. Implementing student councils throughout TYC facilities aligns with the research base of the organization's newest behavioral management program, CoNEXTions. It is further substantiated by a wide body of research: student councils would add to the TYC's rehabilitative toolkit by enhancing the resiliency of students' protective factors, specifically using civic participation as a youth development mechanism.

There is a long-standing history of student councils at TYC facilities. Until the late 1990s, an agency policy required all TYC facilities to maintain student councils; however, without a firm policy in place, currently, there are ad-hoc iterations across a limited number of campuses.

As TYC returns to a less punitive approach, student councils represent a way to connect youth with positive social forces and assets, and engage them in pro-social activities and opportunities. Observation and interviews of current student council representatives coupled with extensive review of academic literature on civic engagement and youth empowerment support the reinstatement of student councils as a positive and productive administrative policy. *Lessons in Leadership: The Case for Student Councils at All TYC Facilities* includes a brief history of TYC student councils, a literature review, and recommendations and potential barriers to implementation.



II. INTRODUCTION

TYC has had student council policies in place on and off for many years. In the 1990s, there was an established *Institutions Manual* (see Appendix A), and each institution across the state was required to implement this policy in the fullest sense. This policy outlined general guidelines, including the intended purpose and procedures of the student councils. According to the policy, the main function of student councils was to maintain open communication between administrative staff and youth as well as promote good citizenship based on democratic processes. Oversight was largely assigned to local volunteer coordinators, while case workers and staff had limited responsibility in training these coordinators. That policy was repealed in late 1990 when the TYC devolved from a child-centered agency to one that emphasized total control and punishment¹.

Currently there is confusion as to whether there is a mandate for TYC facilities to maintain student councils. While most administrators believe there remains an administrative policy requiring that, only four facilities maintain a student council in a meaningful way (Giddings State School, Gainesville State School, Mart II, Corsicana Residential Treatment Center, and Ron Jackson I). Turman House is the only halfway house that maintains a student council and no contract facilities do so. The functioning and administration of student councils that do exist, as well as the selection and removal process, is inconsistent across TYC. By most accounts, as demands on local administrators increase, the student council is one of the first tasks to be dropped or delayed.

On the campuses that maintain a student council, with the sole exception of Mart II, students generally express a lack of confidence in their student council. The primary complaints are that high level administrators are not involved, students are not actually elected and instead are randomly assigned by dorm staff, participating youth are not trained and do not have a clear understanding of

¹ See “TYC: Changing Course” produced by the Texas Youth Commission (1996).



their role and responsibility, concerns are raised repeatedly but have gone unaddressed , meetings are not regularly scheduled and are often cancelled when they are scheduled, and because results rarely come from the student council proceedings, participating youths’ peers don’t respect it.

Mart Unit II provides the ideal model of how TYC student councils should function. (see “Mart Model;” cover inset) The *Gainesville State School Handbook* provides an overview and useful tools for implementation on their campus. It begins with a rationale for the policy and is then followed by specific guidelines, including:

- a code of conduct agreement to be signed by the student,
- a mission statement,
- a constitution, with articles detailing
 - membership requirements,
 - executive board officers’ roles,
 - meeting requirements (governed by Roberts Rules of Order),
 - procedures of election,
 - veto power, and
 - petitioning the administration for proposed changes, and
- guidelines for parliamentary procedure

In section IV below, specific recommendations and potential modifications to these two established policies and procedures are discussed.



TYC Director of Youth Services James Smith (center) talks with Student Council members at the Giddings State School. Student Councils are designed to help maintain open communication between administrative staff and youth, as well as promote good citizenship.



III. THEORETICAL BASIS FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF STUDENT COUNCILS ON TYC CAMPUSES

Summary of Relevant Literature

INTRODUCTION

Implementing student councils throughout Texas Youth Commission's facilities complements the research base of the organization's newest behavioral management program, CoNEXTions. It is further substantiated by a wide body of research: student councils would add to the rehabilitative toolkit by strengthening the resiliency of students' protective factors, most notably using civic participation as a mechanism for youth empowerment.

CoNEXTions specifically focuses on reducing risk factors that have caused youth to enter the juvenile justice system by increasing their protective factors. This new approach is articulated through the adoption and implementation of the evidence-based CoNEXTions curriculum. Four of the eight primary leverages outlined in the curriculum for such behavioral change would be enhanced by the implementation of student councils:

- attitudes, values, and beliefs: *enhanced self-efficacy, belonging and competence through civic participation*
- influences and associations with people: *with leaders, staff, and other students*
- academic/vocational achievement: *public speaking and leadership skills, and potential increased engagement in school*
- use of leisure time: *pro-social activity during out-of-school time*

The following section presents a literature review of relevant research to substantiate the implementation of student councils across TYC facilities. Addressed first is research about risk factors commonly associated with juvenile delinquency, and the ways facilities can and are building students' resiliency to rehabilitate adjudicated juveniles, facilitate their re-entry, and lessen their chances for recidivism. Then, research about the impact of civic participation is explored in the context of youth development literature and school-based programs as well as within secure residential facilities.



RISK FACTORS RESEARCH

Researchers have examined how certain conditions, such as poverty², educational attainment³, and gender⁴, can affect delinquent behaviors. While many of the predictors for delinquency are the same for both boys and girls – including a history of antisocial behavior, attitudes, peers, and personality – a distinctive portrait of delinquent and incarcerated girls is emerging.⁵ The Surgeon General’s 2001 Report on youth violence concluded that the way individual characteristics interact with conditions in children’s environments, ranging from family to school, peer group and their community, can produce different types of behavior.⁶

The Surgeon General’s report also suggested that many of these factors’ predictive power depend on a child’s developmental stage, meaning strong risk factors in childhood are often different than those in adolescence, namely due to the variability of influence of peers and families within respective stages of development. The Surgeon General’s final finding indicated that these risk factors do not happen in isolation: the more risk factors a child or youth is exposed to, the more likely s/he will become violent.⁷

The most up-to-date TYC commitment profile reflects the common risk factors associated with delinquency, including the disproportionate representation of low-income, boys of color.⁸ Expanding beyond this anecdotal evidence, TYC has identified “static” risk factors, including prior juvenile history,

²Felner, R. 2005. Poverty in childhood and adolescence. In *Handbook of Resilience in Children*, edited by S. Goldstein and R. Brooks. Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers: New York.

³ Andrews, D.A. and Bonta J. (1994). *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*. Cincinnati: Anderson.

⁴ Lederman, C.S., Dakof, G.A., Larrea, M.A., and Li, H. 2004. Characteristics of adolescent females in juvenile detention. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 27:321–337.

⁵ Ibid. Hubbard, D.J., and Pratt, T.C. 2002. A meta-analysis of the predictors of delinquency among girls. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 34:1–13.

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2001. *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services; and National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Texas Youth Commission, Commitment Profile FY 2008. <http://www.tyc.state.tx.us/research/profile.html>



prior placements, and history of abuse and neglect, and “non-static” risk factors, such as education level, peer relationships, gang membership, and substance abuse.⁹

TYC interventions aim to improve these non-static factors while reducing the influence of the “unchangeable static history.”¹⁰ These types of interventions take into account the research that has found that the experience of incarceration itself is a significant predictor of recidivism, as compared to risk factors such as gang membership and poor parental relationships.¹¹ Implementing student councils has the potential to facilitate in the co-creation of a better institutional environment, where students ideally gain a sense of purpose and standing in the facility. Councils would also have a significant impact in targeting certain individual risk factors, and attempting to improve them by engaging youth in positive pro-social activities and peer/adult relationships as students develop concrete skills.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND RESILIENCY RESEARCH

Because it is difficult to intervene and change static risk factors, researchers have turned to boosting youths’ protective factors or their “resiliency.” Borrowing from the field of mental health, researchers define resiliency as children’s ability to develop stable, healthy personalities even in the most severe conditions for risk.¹² Protective factors, often described as buffers between individuals and risk factors, must be promoted through effective interventions that facilitate positive outcomes for youth, despite exposure to adversity. The underlying assumption of this model of risk and resiliency is

⁹ Texas Youth Commission. *Review of Agency Treatment Effectiveness: Fiscal Year, 2008*.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Benda, B. B. & Tollett, C. L. (1999) A study of recidivism of serious and persistent offenders among adolescents. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 27, 111-126. Benda, B. B., Corwyn, R. F. & Toombs, N. J. (2001) Recidivism among adolescent serious offenders - Prediction of entry into the correctional system for adults. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 28, 588-613.

¹² Kaplan, H.B. 2005. Understanding the concept of resilience. In *Handbook of Resilience in Children*, edited by S. Goldstein and R. Brooks. New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, pp. 39–47



that there are detrimental psychological effects for risk factors, and that protective factors mitigate these to improve mental health and functioning.¹³

Risk prevention researchers have found varying levels of correlation between certain protective factors and a youth's propensity for delinquency; however, most agree on the following primary correlates: the presence of a caring adult,¹⁴ school connectedness (especially important to those who experience adversity in their homes),¹⁵ and academic success.¹⁶ Interventions that boost at-risk youths' protective factors, such as student councils, must be well structured, well implemented, and provide youth with a variety of program activities for extended periods of time to have the greatest impact.¹⁷

The challenge for juvenile justice professionals is to create conditions that build on the strengths and resiliency of delinquent and at-risk youth.¹⁸ For "involuntary youth," (or youth in an involuntary placement) where protective factors are not occurring naturally, new environments must be "manufactured, recreated for youth whose life structures lack such opportunities."¹⁹ Student councils create an environment in which students can bond with adults and with groups, and have the opportunity to gain a sense of personal legitimacy and purpose: this is one common protective influence that distinguishes involuntary youth who "make it."²⁰

¹³ Arrington, E. & Wilson, M. (2000). A re-examination of risk and resilience during adolescence: incorporating culture and diversity. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 9(2), 221-230.

¹⁴ Werner, E., and Smith, R. 1982. *Vulnerable, not Invincible: A Longitudinal Study of Resilient Children and Youth*. New York: McGraw-Hill. Werner, E., and Smith, R. 1992. *Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children From Birth to Adulthood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

¹⁵ Perkins, D.F., and Jones, K.R. 2004. Risk behaviors and resiliency within physically abused adolescents. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 28:547-563.

¹⁶ Resnick, M.S., Ireland, M., and Borowsky, I. 2004. Youth violence perpetration: What protects? What predicts? Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 35(5):424e1-424e10.

¹⁷ Public/Private Ventures. *Serving High-Risk Youth: Lessons from Research and Programming*. Philadelphia, September 2002.

¹⁸ Bazemore, Gordon and Clinton Terry. "Developing Delinquent Youths: A Reintegrative Model for Rehabilitation and a New Role for the Juvenile Justice System." *Child Welfare*. Vol LXXVI (5), September/October, 1997.

¹⁹ Smith, C., Lizotte, A., Thornberry, T., & Krohn, M. "Resilient Youth: Identifying Factors that Prevent High-Risk Youth from Engaging in Delinquency and Drug Abuse. *Current Perspectives on Aging and the Life Cycle*. 4(2), 1995. pp. 238-239.

²⁰ Bazemore, Gordon and Clinton Terry. "Developing Delinquent Youths: A Reintegrative Model for Rehabilitation and a New Role for the Juvenile Justice System." *Child Welfare*. Vol LXXVI (5), September/October, 1997.



CIVIC EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATION: BENEFITS TO TYC AND YOUTH

HISTORICAL BASIS OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AS PART OF JUVENILE FACILITIES

Although in the 1990s there was a shift to a more punitive juvenile justice system, there is a long-standing tradition of the democratization of correctional facilities that reflects current trends seen in TYC policies. During the Progressive era, William George founded one of the first democratically-run juvenile facilities called Junior Republic in Freeville, New York. George's philosophy was to create a miniature state, in which economic, civic and social conditions of the United States were reproduced, and citizenship vested in neglected or troubled young people who lived and worked there. At the self-governed Junior Republic, youth managed all aspects of the institution, including disciplinary actions in a special court with elected judges.²¹

The implementation of democratically represented student councils corresponds to TYC's efforts to reestablish its new approach in the same vein as William George. Furthermore, research on legitimacy in prison regimes has concluded that when the regime is more democratic – that is more ordered and orderly as well as rooted in decency, trust, and respect – there tend to be lower rates of violence and disorder and higher levels of well being among staff and residents.²²

²¹Eggleston, Carolyn and Gehring, Thom. "Democracy in Prison and Prison Education." *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 51(3), October 1999. George, William. *The Junior Republic: Its History and Ideals*. D. Appleton and Company: New York and London, 1910.

²² This research is primarily focused at the adult level (Liebling and Arnold, 2004). However, recently a few researchers have found that that while juveniles have slight variations in their conceptions of fairness and respect, being treated fairly in legal institutions does indeed matter to youth (Fagan and Tyler, 2005).



BENEFITS TO INSTITUTION

The youth are very creative in thinking about different activities or games that would present an incentive for other kids to do well. – Superintendent of Gainesville, Gwan Hawthorn

Because these youth represent their pod...they generally listen better to rule changes or policy changes if they are active participants in the process. – Superintendent of Evins, Bill Hollis

It is an effective means to receive youth input. – Superintendent of Giddings, Stan DeGerolami

Involving students in institutional governance not only benefits the youth (discussed below), but also the institution itself. Through this student involvement, facilities will be “more finely tuned in” to the needs of the youth, and have a “creative edge to them that does not usually exist.”²³ Modeling democratic practice, youth have the potential to improve school management policies.²⁴ Youth “possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate.”²⁵

In the context of TYC, student council representatives act as an intermediary between institutional staff and leadership and the dorm members they represent. Communication can flow both ways: students may express dorm specific and/or campus wide concerns as well as inform leadership of the incentives that will have the most appeal to their peers in encouraging them to accelerate through the behavioral stages.²⁶ And, on the flip side, students can communicate institutional expectations back to other youth in their dorms. Superintendent Curtis Simmons at Mart II has successfully cultivated positive peer leadership among his student council participants, including youth with significant disciplinary histories and gang involvement.

By their participation in the making and changing of facility rules, student council members play a role in the negotiation of power between institutional administrators and residents, in that they are

²³ Stoneman, Dorothy. "The Role of Youth Programming in the Development of Civic Engagement." *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4 (October 2002): 221-226.

²⁴ Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. *Civic Mission of Schools*. Carnegie Corporation of New York: New York, 2003.

²⁵ Mitra, Dana. "The Significance of Students: Can Increasing 'Student Voice' in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?" *Teachers College Record*, Vol.106, No.4, 2004.

²⁶ Interview with Stan DeGerolami, 10/3/2009.



acting as interpreters of institutional rules while also participating actively in the establishment of legitimacy.²⁷ In its most ideal form, this is a process of reciprocal power-building and sharing and order maintenance.

IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP INVOLVEMENT

Researchers agree that the key element in success of youth participation in school governance is the participation of the lead administrator. Without “deep buy-in and attention paid to the process” from the leadership – from TYC’s Executive Director, to campus superintendents and assistant superintendents – efforts to include youth will “typically fade over time.”²⁸ This institutional commitment should be demonstrated through the regular participation of high-level leadership in student council meetings, meaning the superintendent or assistant superintendent should be present at each meeting. Students must feel that their voices are being heard by those in positions of leadership in order for student councils to have the greatest impact. Establishing mechanisms for institutional accountability, such as maintaining and distributing meeting minutes to staff and residents with discrete follow-up items, will enhance students’ sense of being heard.

BENEFITS TO YOUTH

I can tell the higher-up people what’s going on on-campus. – Student Council Representative, Giddings State School

I can be a voice on campus. – Student Council Representative, Giddings State School

While the value of student participation in governance to “institutional vitality”²⁹ is generally well-recognized, the evidence in terms of benefits to youth traditionally has been anecdotal. However,

²⁷ Anecdotal research by Alexandra Cox in New York juvenile facilities. Comments, 12/3/09.

²⁸ Stoneman, Dorothy. "The Role of Youth Programming in the Development of Civic Engagement." *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4 (October 2002): 221-226.

²⁹ Kuh, George D. and Lund, Jon P. “What Students Gain from Participating in Student Government.” *New Directions for Student Services*. 66(4), 1994.



recent research indicates that becoming a productive citizen, generally and for TYC youth, upon reentry, requires an understanding and proclivity toward civic issues, which can be cultivated through participation in such activities as student council. Civic involvement also encourages pro-social behaviors and builds resiliency. It promotes positive self identity, provides roles and mechanisms for contributing to the community, allows group membership and strengthens bonds to others and community through a shared cause.³⁰

CONCRETE SKILL DEVELOPMENT: POSITIVE USE OF LEISURE TIME, PUBLIC SPEAKING, NORMALCY

I have started to take more responsibility as a result of being on student council. Now, I'm even not afraid to speak in front of people and that took me a long time. – Student Council Representative, Ron Jackson State Juvenile Correctional Facility Unit I

Participation in student council provides an opportunity for students to gain concrete pro-social skills. It is a positive use of leisure time (one of CoNEXTions leverages for behavioral change) during which youth practice social cognitive skills including public speaking, active listening, problem solving, and the ability to see others' perspectives.³¹ Despite the "disempowering milieu" of incarceration, "interactions between school personnel and prison staff can provide opportunities for nascent forms of democracy to appear" when students are encouraged to engage in "ethical forms of communication such as respect, politeness, reciprocity, and inclusiveness."³² Participating in student councils can also provide TYC youth with a sense of "normalcy," that students can call upon later in their lives to feel they shared in a common high school experience.³³

³⁰ Sherrod, Lonnie R., Constance Flanagan, and James Youniss. 2002. "Dimensions of Citizenship and Opportunities for Youth Development: The What, Why, When, Where, and Who of Citizenship Development." *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4: 264-272.

³¹ Eggleston, Carolyn and Gehring, Thom. "Democracy in Prison and Prison Education." *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 51(3), October 1999.

³² Wright, Randall and Gehring, Thom. "From Spheres of Civility to Critical Public Spheres: Democracy and Citizenship in the Big House (Part I)." *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 59(3), September 2008.

³³ TYC Giddings psychologist. Informal interview conducted by Lindsey Stuart, 11-3-09.



INFLUENCES AND ASSOCIATIONS WITH PEOPLE: COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION WITH DIVERSE YOUTH AND ACCESS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL

Other students know I am on student council, and they come to me to tell me what's going on in the dorm. – Student Council Representative, Giddings State School

Student council can “create a sense of shared community, ...promote democratic values and bring youth together with persons from a variety of cultural, class, and racial backgrounds.”³⁴ To some extent, such an activity represents a microcosm of the larger society³⁵ -- youth from diverse backgrounds work together to propose incremental, democratic change:

Participation in such activities and organizations offers young people opportunities to explore what it means to be a member of ‘the public’, and to work out the reciprocity between rights and obligations in the meaning of citizenship. As a member of a group, the young person helps to define its meaning and has a “say” in defining group goals. By having a say, youth exercise the citizen’s right to self-determination.³⁶

Furthermore, one study found that participation in such extracurricular activities led to more positive race relations.³⁷ Crain’s 1981 study recommended that secondary schools prioritize encouraging involvement in extracurricular activities because it increases student attachment to the school, reduces student alienation, provides alternative channels to develop self esteem and increases the opportunity for positive interracial contact.³⁸

Student council representatives interact not only with demographically diverse students and work toward a common cause, they also gain experience in representing themselves positively among adults. Thus, participation in student council has the potential to build youths’ social capital, which is

³⁴ Bazemore, Gordon and Clinton Terry. “Developing Delinquent Youths: A Reintegrative Model for Rehabilitation and a New Role for the Juvenile Justice System.” *Child Welfare*. Vol LXXVI (5), September/October, 1997. p. 698.

³⁵ Sherrod, Lonnie R., Constance Flanagan, and James Youniss. 2002. "Dimensions of Citizenship and Opportunities for Youth Development: The What, Why, When, Where, and Who of Citizenship Development." *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4: 264-272.

³⁶ Flanagan, Constance A. and Nakesha Faison, “Youth Civic Development: Implications of Research for Social Policy and Programs.” *SRCD Social Policy Report*, vol. xv, no. 1 (2001).

³⁷ Holland, A., & Andre, T. (1987). Participation in extracurricular activities in secondary school: What is known, what needs to be known? *Review of Educational Research*, 57 (4), 437 - 466.

³⁸ Crain, R. L. (1981). “Making Desegregation Work: Extracurricular Activities.” *Urban Review*, 13, 121-126.



“created when relations among people change in ways that facilitate action.”³⁹ A variety of studies have concluded a strong correlation between positive youth outcomes, especially for at-risk youth, and this interaction with a caring adult.⁴⁰ Moreover, the political scientist, Robert Putnam has argued that “civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations” with adults and peers.⁴¹ This “civic virtue” is perhaps related to a more active engagement with the state upon re-entry.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDES, VALUES AND BELIEFS

LONG-TERM IMPACT: MORE CIVICALLY ENGAGED CITIZENS UPON RE-ENTRY

We should be role models for other students. – Student Council Representative from Mart II.

I can be a voice on campus. – Student Council Representative, McLennan County State Juvenile Correctional Facility Unit II

Engaging detained juveniles in activities that reinforce civic values, such as student governance and community service projects, prepares them to be more effective citizens upon reentry. There is a long-standing tradition of research (some dating to the early 1900s) and current, longitudinal, international studies (IEA Civic Education Study) that suggests giving students a voice in the management of their schools helps build civic skills and attitudes.⁴² Studies have found that even when

³⁹ Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95–121.

⁴⁰ Werner, E., and Smith, R. 1982. *Vulnerable, not Invincible: A Longitudinal Study of Resilient Children and Youth*. New York: McGraw–Hill. Werner, E., and Smith, R. 1992. *Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children From Birth to Adulthood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

⁴¹ Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone*, New York Simon and Schuster. p. 19.

⁴² Constance A. Flanagan and Nakesha Faison, “Youth Civic Development: Implications of Research for Social Policy and Programs,” *SRCD Social Policy Report*, vol. xv, no. 1 (2001).



controlling for socioeconomic status and academic achievement,⁴³ youth who participate in extracurricular activities such as student council, are more likely to vote and be active members of their communities as adults (through involvement in community and neighborhood organizations).⁴⁴ Such an increased engagement and enhanced “civic virtue” that is built through participation in student council may play a role in youth’s normative compliance with the law.

GROWTH OF AGENCY, BELONGING, AND COMPETENCE: THE ABCS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ASSET BUILDING

I have a voice now to speak up and make a change. – Student Council Representative from Mart II

Shifting away from the traditional approach of improving civic education the most recent research has identified “student voice” activities to be not only instrumental in developing youth’s assets of agency, belonging, and competence but also a revolutionary approach to education reform.⁴⁵ At least two outcome-based studies, one in Manitoba, Canada and another at a high school in California, found that student voice activities – namely participating in school-wide decision making and change efforts – created meaningful experiences, especially for more “sullen and unreachable” students who otherwise “do not find meaning in their school experiences.”⁴⁶

While there is no conclusive, agreed-upon set of assets from the youth development field, psychologists identify agency, belonging, and competence as the most influential in determining future

⁴³ Hanks, M., & Eckland, B. K. (1978). Adult voluntary associations and adolescent socialization. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 19, 481-490. Otto, L. B. (1975). Extracurricular activities in the educational attainment process. *Rural Sociology*, 40, 162-176.

⁴⁴ Verba, S., Schlozman, L., & Brady, H. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Youniss, J., McClellan, J. A., & Yates, M. (1997). What we know about engendering civic identity. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40, 620–631. Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. *Civic Mission of Schools*. Carnegie Corporation of New York: New York, 2003.

⁴⁵ Mitra, Dana. “The Significance of Students: Can Increasing ‘Student Voice’ in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?” *Teachers College Record*, Vol.106, No.4, 2004.

⁴⁶ Ibid.



success (through increased school engagement and academic success). Defined as “acting or exerting influence and power in a given situation,” student voice activities have the potential to increase youth’s sense of *agency* or *self-efficacy* through their ability to articulate their opinion to others. Students in Mitra’s California study developed a greater sense of self worth and confidence to speak out when they felt that people were listening to their perspectives.

Through student voice activities, youth are able to construct new identities as “change makers” and leaders on campus. Mitra and others conclude how important it is for youth to practice and assume leadership roles to prepare them for adult responsibilities, especially those related to critical thought, deliberative processes, decision making, and empathy.⁴⁷ At Giddings, student council representatives are recognized on campus and are frequently approached by other students and staff who express grievances to be heard at council meetings.⁴⁸ When asked why they continue to be involved in student council, many Giddings youth identified as their reason to “have a voice,” or to “speak up and make a change” on campus.⁴⁹

Developing a sense of *belonging* to the school community by developing meaningful relationships with other students and adults as well as having a designated role at the school encourages positive adolescent development. Mitra found that when students believe they are valued and respected for their perspectives, they begin to develop a “sense of ownership and attachment to the organization in which they are involved.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, scholars have found that this sense of belonging is positively related to academic success and motivation.

⁴⁷ Camino, Linda, and Shepherd Zeldin. 2002. "From Periphery to Center: Pathways for Youth Civic Engagement in the Day-To-Day Life of Communities." *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4: 213-220. Mitra, Dana. “The Significance of Students: Can Increasing ‘Student Voice’ in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?” *Teachers College Record*, Vol.106, No.4, 2004.

⁴⁸ Interviews with various student council members, conducted by Lindsey Stuart 11-3-09, 11-13-09.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Mitra, Dana. “The Significance of Students: Can Increasing ‘Student Voice’ in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?” *Teachers College Record*, Vol.106, No.4, 2004.



Finally, student voice activities encourage youth to develop a sense of *competence* in their new abilities as a vocal leader within the school and being appreciated for these new talents. Youth have the opportunity to critique their environment, develop problem solving and facilitation skills, get along with others and speak publicly. These are all identified as important developmental assets that help young people grow up healthy, caring and responsible.⁵¹

The most innovative education reform initiatives of the day are deliberately involving youth in the decision-making process for the impact their voices have on improving school policies. Begun in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the “Rethinkers” of New Orleans are a group of middle school students working together to ensure student voices continue to be at the forefront of the rebuilding of the public school system there.⁵² In concert with a handful of adults, this group of youth has performed qualitative and quantitative research and presented their findings in a variety of reports, written from their point of view. Implementing student councils in all TYC facilities ensures youth have the opportunity to participate in a student voice activity that can not only benefit their own development but also the development of the institution.



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⁵¹ *40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents (ages 12-18)*. www.search-institute.org. Accessed 11-2-09.

⁵² www.there thinkers.com, Accessed 11-11-09.



IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All TYC secure facilities, contract facilities and halfway houses should reinstitute a student council program.
2. Use **Gainesville State School Student Council Handbook** as a guideline for facility implementation, with specific recommendations pertaining to student representation, election procedures, and establishment of subcommittees. Some specific recommendations include:
 - a. Each dorm should have representation on student council, *without* stage restrictions.
 - b. Youth should be *nominated* by at least one staff member (including a teacher, case worker, etc.) and then *elected* by peers in their dorms.
 - i. If dorms are unhappy with their representative, they should be permitted to hold a recall, using a 2/3 majority for decision.
 - c. An *executive committee* of president, vice president, secretary, treasurer should be established by a vote of the full council with a 6-month term limit.
 - d. A *meeting schedule* should be established as follows
 - a. Student council: once per month
 - b. Dorm meeting: once per month
 - c. Executive committee meetings: as needed, but once before each general student council meeting to draft agenda.
 - e. Dorms should establish *procedures* by which their ideas and concerns can be heard by their representative (such as, drop-box or scheduled time during week of the meeting to discuss relevant issues as a dorm).
 - f. A clearly communicated *removal policy* must be established, with the following recommendations:
 - i. Removal from council for major rule violations
 - ii. Student should have the opportunity to run again.
 - g. *Committees* of youth on student council should be created to address specific, recurring campus issues, to plan for events, etc.
3. Use the former administrative policy as a guideline for writing new student council policy, establishing *oversight* by a paid staff member in **Central Office** who will have specific monitoring responsibilities.
 - a. Establish coordination by a paid local staff member, not a volunteer coordinator.
 - b. Maintain single point of contact in Central Office who oversees the implementation of student council. His/her duties include, but are not limited to:
 - i. Ensure student councils convene at least once per month.



- ii. Review meeting minutes.
 - c. Establish procedure for how to handle non-compliant campuses.
 - d. Periodically attend student council meetings.
4. In addition to serving as a forum to raise concerns, student councils should be more formally designed as a place to develop leadership and organize events that promote positive campus culture and engagement.
- a. Leadership Development
 - i. Leadership skills training provided by community business leaders and organizations, including public speaking, conflict resolution and negotiation, etc.
 - b. Organize and plan events to promote positive campus culture and engagement, such as community service projects, cultural exchanges, holiday events, team support (pep rallies), etc.
5. Staff involved in student councils must be formally trained on student council policies and procedures including but not limited to, parliamentary procedures; Roberts Rules of Order; petitioning, election, nomination processes; etc.
- a. *Establish a safe, open space:* Included in the policy, there should be a retaliation clause prohibiting institution staff or leadership from retaliating against student council representatives who raise concerns at the meetings.
6. Executive committee members from each student council should convene once a year for a *TYC Student Council Symposium* to enhance cross-campus communication. There, students will share best practices, discuss system-wide problems, and gain more leadership training. Preferably the youth could meet in person, but this could be accomplished through video conferencing technology as well.



V. POTENTIAL IMPLEMENTATION BARRIERS

Moving forward with the implementation of student council, there are foreseeable issues to consider:

1. **Buy-in:**

- *Staff leadership:* We have observed campuses in which there is a large amount of campus administrative support, participation, and responsiveness. However, in the absence of such strong, supportive leadership, how will the organization ensure the student council serves more than symbolic purposes?
- *Students:* The recommended models are taken from a more traditional school setting. In a more restrictive environment like TYC, how will campuses ensure students have a genuine voice and responsibilities?

2. **Funding** will need to be allocated for:

- Central Office oversight position
- Student councils to plan and put on events
- Training for campus-level staff

3. Considerations related to current **Youth Grievance System:**

- Efforts must be made to ensure the student councils do not replace or impede the functioning of the youth grievance system or the Incidence Reporting Center.
- All efforts should be coordinated with the Youth Rights Division and the Office of the Inspector General.



VI. APPENDIX A:
FORMER TYC SCHOOL STUDENT COUNCIL POLICY (1990s)



Chapter: Daily Living
Rule: Student Council
References:

Replaces: INS.07.25
Dated: 6/1/91, T-11

T. A. C. §	A. C. A. Standard
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(a) **Policy.**

Each institution has a Student Council to establish and keep lines of communication open between the administrative staff and youth. The council discusses and explores program ideas and solutions. One goal of the council is to promote in each member a desire for good citizenship based on democratic processes.

(b) **Procedure.**

Action	Person Responsible
(1) Schedule meetings.	(1) Volunteer coordinator
(2) Have a written plan to identify discussion topics including the following. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Youth concerns: The youth represents his cottage concerns at each meeting. (ii) Projects: The Student Council plans and implements community projects, fund-raising, etc., in conjunction with the Community Council. (iii) Responsibilities: The council represents the student body to the Community Council. 	(2) Volunteer coordinator
(3) Ensure meetings are held in a democratic and orderly manner using an agenda.	(3) Volunteer coordinator
(4) Ensure members represent the youth population as a whole through input at council meetings.	(4) Volunteer coordinator
(5) Ensure that youth submit the proposed projects to superintendent for approval.	(5) Volunteer coordinator
(6) Approve projects as appropriate.	(6) Volunteer coordinator
(7) Contact Community Council or other community person for sponsorship and support of project, if needed.	(7) Volunteer coordinator
(8) Write memo to cottage committee for approval of youth's participation in off-campus projects.	(8) Volunteer coordinator



Chapter: Daily Living
Rule: Student Council

Replaces: INS.07.25
Dated: 6/1/91, T-11

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|---|--|
| (9) Provide the volunteer coordinator a list of youth approved and dis-approved for any off-campus projects as indicated by level and custody/supervision rating score. | (9) Caseworker or social service administrator |
| (10) Follow off-campus trip procedures. | (10) All staff |
| (11) Ensure council representation tells dormitory members of items discussed in meetings. | (11) Caseworker |
| (12) Pass out copies of the minutes, and report items discussed in Student Advisory Council meetings. Copy dormitory directors. | (12) Volunteer coordinator |
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VI. APPENDIX B:
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