



Hampton,
Virginia

Hampton Leads in Youth Engagement

Want a glimpse of state-of-the-art youth involvement? Then visit the port city of Hampton, Va., where more than 600 young people a year are involved in leadership, policy, and decision making. Now known across the country for its dynamic youth-adult partnerships, Hampton had an economic motivation to remake itself into an asset-building community.

Back in 1990, the town was sinking economically. Employment centered on Chesapeake Bay, but military jobs, shipbuilding, and fishing were all in decline. To fight back, the community rallied around a carefully wrought strategic plan, resulting in today's diversified economy, low unemployment, and emphasis on youth and family.

Learning about the developmental assets halfway through the 1990s provided Hampton with the necessary language to galvanize the community behind its young people. "Neighborhoods have rallied behind the idea of assets because it's very positive based, very validating, easily understood, user friendly, and it transcends age, academic level, and socioeconomic group," according to Maria Perkins, youth/community development director with Alternatives, Inc., a non-profit agency specializing in youth-adult partnerships.

Diverse sectors of the community have banded together on behalf of youth. The HC • HY initiative is itself a coalition of groups that includes the Hampton Coalition for Youth, an actual city department responsible for setting the city's youth development agenda; the Hampton city schools; In Sync Partnerships, which focuses on school-neighborhood partnering; and Alternatives, Inc.

Parallel process: The leading edge

Over the years, Hampton has experimented with various models of youth representation on boards and commissions. Currently, at least four different models are in use. Youth representatives serve on the local commissions for the arts, parks and recreation, neighborhoods, and school climate. Youth advisory groups report to the superintendent of schools and the city's environmental relations office. Two high school students are employed in the planning department as youth planners.

But the model to which Hampton seems most committed and deems most successful is *parallel process*, in which youth and adults first tackle part of a problem among their peers rather than in mixed-age groups. Think of an accordion: work gets done as the hands are separated and the bellows pulled apart, but the two hands need to come together again to keep the music going. That's the model employed by the Hampton Youth Commission, which oversees a portion of the city's comprehensive plan and distributes funds for youth development projects (see "In Teens We Trust: Youth Take a Seat in Local Government," Spring 2001).

Early in Hampton's strategic planning efforts, for example, youth and adult groups separately brainstormed, then prioritized, needs of the city. Though the racial mix of the groups was similar, and Hampton's half-black, half-white racial mix had been and still is stable, youth ranked race relations a top priority, while the adults didn't even list the issue. The adults quickly recognized the wisdom of the youth input.

Parallel process works better, according to Perkins, partly because it reflects developmental needs of youth and adults. Because they can stick to a youth-oriented agenda, kids find youth-only meetings meaningful, fun, and interesting. Adults typically can handle more boredom, and they don't need icebreakers as often. And, with separate meetings, adults and youth get to work in their preferred modes—quiet business for the grown-ups, music and pizza for the kids.

Mixed boards can function well, but Hampton has also witnessed its share of "horror stories," says Cindy Carlson, director of the Hampton Coalition for Youth. "One kid gets on a board with 20 adults. The adults don't listen, the kid gets bored and drops out. It reinforces everyone's negative opinions."

Overcoming the 'cute factor'

But for youth to take a seat at a decision-making table and be taken seriously does not happen overnight, as youth commissioner Harmonie Mason can attest. At first, Mason said, young people at city hall needed to overcome the "oh, they are so cute" response. But Mason appeals to adults, "We don't want you to give us things because we're cute. We want you to give us



Quick-take

ON HAMPTON, VIRGINIA

Location: Southeastern corner of Virginia, where the James River flows into Chesapeake Bay

Population: 146,000, including 23,000 students

Initiative launch: 1998

Annual budget: Approximately \$40,000 from Hampton Coalition for Youth, plus a variety of in-kind resources

Staff: Director of the Hampton Coalition for Youth, 20% time; 4 additional part-time staff, hours totaling about 160 per month

Plans for award: Increase youth involvement within existing systems that serve Hampton youth

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Web sites: www.yl-va.org and www.hampton.va.us

"We don't want you to give us things because we're cute. We want you to give us things because you understand the importance of what we're asking." Harmonie Mason, Hampton Youth Commissioner

things because you understand the importance of what we're asking." To entice adults who are set in their ways to entertain new perspectives, Mason says the Hampton youth come to meetings well organized with snazzy PowerPoint presentations.

Both youth and adults need to get past stereotypes before they can work together. Perkins recalls an early meeting between police officers and youth. Both had the same objective: drug- and crime-free neighborhoods. But it took a facilitator to help the "doughnut eaters" and "saggy-pants troublemakers" learn to cooperate in a climate of trust. Eventually, the groups collaborated to bring an anticrime and antidrug message to elementary-age children.

Sometimes simply starting a dialog can help break the logjam between youth and adults. When results from the *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* survey revealed only 19% of Hampton youth believed their schools had a caring climate (the average among communities surveyed is 24%), "We were devastated," says Johnny Pauls, director of secondary education for the city schools. Each of the district's 34 schools is now required to have a plan to improve school climate; many have begun by simply having students and teachers discuss what they need from each other to feel comfortable and posting the lists in the classrooms.

What students want can sometimes be surprisingly simple. "One of the major things, believe it or not, is if you can go to class and have your teacher know your name," says Mason, who is president of her class at Phoebus High School. Another major concern students identified, Mason says, was for teachers to mediate conflicts on their own: "Instead of sending me straight to the principal's office, can we work it out ourselves without going to a higher authority?"

Climbing the ladder of responsibility

Creating a caring culture that empowers youth means offering a variety of options for involvement. "Our challenge," says Pauls, "is to cast the net so it's spread over more students. It's not enough to have 100 kids involved, we want to have all 1,700. The more kids who get involved, the better we'll be."

Thus, the Hampton infrastructure includes many levels of participation, and mentoring and training are available at each level to help newcomers climb the ladder of increasing responsibility. A young person like Kaleatta Poulson, a sophomore at Hampton High, didn't start right out in a leadership position. Poulson, who has recently been appointed an alternate to the Neighborhood Youth Advisory Board, first learned

leadership skills through a weekend retreat and team skills through a youth group that organized several neighborhood cleanups.

Adults serve as resources, both helping to create workable systems and supporting the young people as needed. Perkins, who facilitates the Neighborhood Youth Advisory Board, says, "My role is to train young people. My role should be minimized, and the young people's maximized."

Laying the groundwork for meaningful youth involvement can be time intensive. But what it means is that when a young person like Poulson joins a board, she can say, "The first meeting I went to, we got to know each other. From there we got down to business." ▶

Susan Hawthorne is a Minneapolis writer.

LEADING EDGE: Hampton employs a variety of models of youth representation from all-youth boards to adult-youth teams. Extensive preparation, such as an outdoor training course, helps youth learn leadership skills.



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