



The Muttart Fellowships



**Igniting Young
Minds and Spirits:
Youth Governance**

Wayne Wiens

The Muttart Fellowship Program—unique in Canada—was created in 1996. A project of The Muttart Foundation, a private foundation based in Edmonton, Alberta, the program is designed to:

- develop research and other materials that will benefit the charitable sector in Canada.
- provide senior managers within the social-services sector with an opportunity for a sabbatical year—a chance to recharge and renew themselves.

Each item in The Muttart Fellowship Products Series carries “the look” designed for the program. The concept incorporating pebbles and water fits with the Zen-like qualities of the visual identity of the Fellowship Program.

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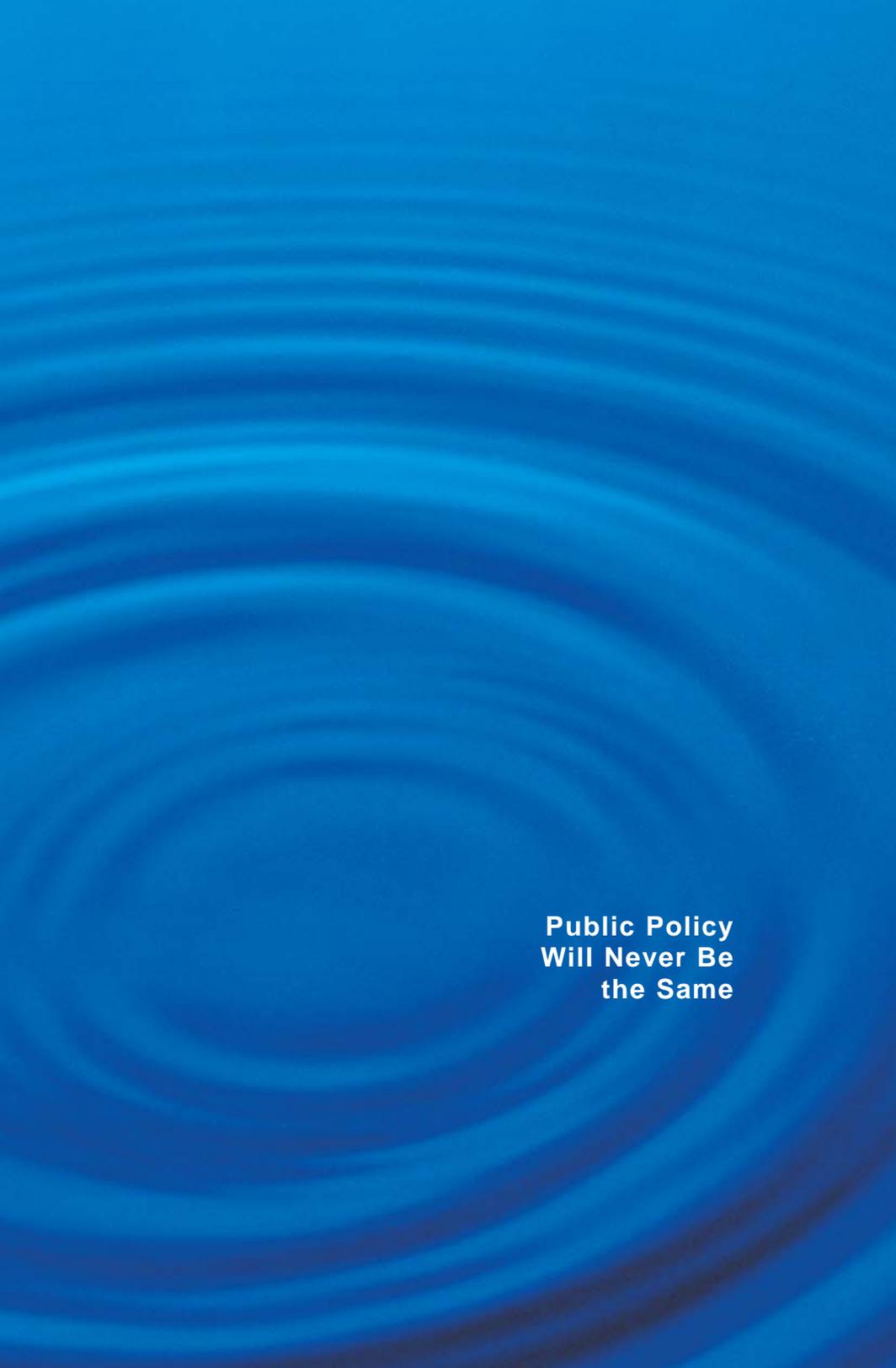
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Introduction

I have been fortunate to work for quite a number of years in organizations serving children and youth. It struck me that too often any input they had into programs that were to provide them with services was informal, indirect, and from a position of powerlessness.

Thanks to a wonderful opportunity with The Muttart Foundation's Fellowship program, I was able to spend some time looking at the area of the involvement of youth in the governance of programs that serve them. I found a growing awareness that programs and communities were missing something by excluding, or at least by not actively including, the voice of youth.

The youth of this country are not only our future leaders and builders, but their involvement is important to the health of our communities today.



**Public Policy
Will Never Be
the Same**

“Whatever the issue—crime, economic growth, education, or national defense—young people deserve to be heard. No one should make decisions about our lives without talking to us first. We believe that young people care about what our government does, and that there’s a nation of youth who are ready to take action. But we’re not stupid. We need to know what we’re getting into first. We need the facts. We need information.”

– *Nicholas Butterworth, Rock The Vote Education Fund, Activism 2000 Project National Clearing house* <http://www.youthactivism.com>

Public Policy Will Never Be the Same

If communities can ignite the flame of young minds and spirits, public policy will never be the same. Young people have no fear, and their ideas will colour outside the lines. New solutions to old problems can be discovered when youth collaborate on an equal basis with adults to make decisions for our communities. Young people are our allies in planning for stronger, healthier communities, and their suggestions for solving problems must be given equal weight.

Communities need the vigorous, refreshing, and spontaneous thinking and action of young people, on boards, committees, in youth service clubs, and in political and social organizations.

Disengagement. Apathy. Crime. Drugs. Teen parenthood. Neighbourhood disintegration. Most important of all, the loss of a valuable resource. These realities lead to insight into why communities need to actively engage youth and focus on youth development for now and for the future. Cynicism about the political process and disinterest in family and community can be reduced by demonstrating support for youth, by addressing their concerns, and by respect while offering ways to develop their full potential as persons living and working in community.

Families take different shapes—double parents, single parents, gay parents, abusive parents, indulgent parents. Because of their dynamics, some families produce children at risk, who may be more tempted to fall into non-productive or destructive behaviour. We can reshape the interests of youth by offering support, access to developmental opportunities, and education about building and governing strong communities. By care and nurturing from concerned, supportive adults, youth can realize their full potential as productive members of their communities.

We need to view youth as resources in the rebuilding of communities and to acknowledge that we need them in developing a healthy world. We must listen respectfully to their concerns, educate them about how to run social organizations, invite them to join adults on boards of organizations, and allow them to run their own boards and committees to come up with ideas and solutions, especially for their own concerns. We can promote democratic and human rights principles by supporting youth to participate in social governance. By achieving youth participation in governing and running organizations designed to serve youth, communities can build stronger, more effective relationships among youth and adults.

To clear confusion, people need a definition when referring to youth. In relevant literature, the term youth may include a broad age range, from 12 to 30 years. However, the focus of youth in earlier years may vary significantly from later years. The interests and skills of young people in the early years of high school may be quite different from youth in their early 20s, embarking on a new career. Defining a particular age range will help individuals and organizations to focus on the youth they wish to involve.

“It takes a village to raise a child...” is a concept that can help to alleviate the problems arising when parents are absent, abusive, negligent, or over-indulgent. Other supportive adults such as relatives, teachers, youth workers, social workers, ministers, and volunteers can play a constructive role in supporting disadvantaged youth. Any supportive adult can encourage youth to develop social skills and a sense of purpose.

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In Ottawa, the Institute on Governance has observed: “If an engaged and interested citizenry is at the heart of a strong democracy, then current talk of youth indifference to the political process is troubling. Youth apathy has implications for the development of public policy today and the quality of our citizens tomorrow.” (*Elder C. Marques, Institute on Governance, Policy Brief No. 5, Youth Involvement in Policy-making: Lessons from Ontario School Boards. July, 1999.*)

Education for youth to encourage and support their involvement in political and social institutions must include real input on the part of youth into policy decisions. Educational and other institutions often involve parents, bureaucrats, politicians, labour leaders, and business people but overlook youth.

Important reasons to involve youth in all types of community governance include:

- making and implementing more acceptable decisions for the whole community
- raising political issues among youth
- building skills and self-confidence in youth
- creating leadership roles that enhance governance skills for youth, as communities, provinces, and nations need strong, skilled future leaders
- showing youth how to work together for common goals
- promoting an appreciation of democratic debate, lobbying and compromise
- demonstrating how the public sector works.

To be specific, in Ontario there are successful examples where students have become involved as school board trustees.

“Boards that have developed democratic selection mechanisms, provided orientation and support to student trustees, and encouraged student participation have found that the benefits of student trusteeship quickly overshadowed any of their initial concerns.”
(Elder C. Marques, Youth Involvement in Policy-Making: Lessons from Ontario School Boards Institute On Governance Policy Brief No. 5 – July 1999.)

We need to ensure that public officials implement similar examples as they work to reform education and other systems. Legislation must be passed to remove some of the obstacles concerning youth votes and to provide funding for youth training and orientation to their work as board members. School boards must acknowledge student opinion and input, and publicly recognize the value of students as partners in decision-making.

While boards typically reward students for high academic achievement, boards must also value those students who offer other examples of positive leadership and creative contributions in schools and throughout their communities.

Shifting to a youth development focus can be daunting when we begin to explore attitudes toward young people. Adults often view youth involvement as beneficial only to youth, a patronizing and inaccurate view. Adultism, one of the real barriers to youth development, is a form of prejudice that drives young people away from organizational involvement. If they become involved, they quickly realize how undervalued their efforts are, so the concept of youth involvement falters.

Flexibility in offering services and opportunities for involvement to youth are key to their development. Viewing youth in a holistic fashion, rather than providing services and supports in a rigid, prescribed system, is paramount to success.

“The primary focus of the youth development model is not simply on providing services. Rather, it emphasizes offering young people a complement of services and opportunities. The youth development approach enables youth to develop leadership skills and interact with other young people from various backgrounds and in different stages of maturation. Moreover, the youth development model provides chances for youth to become involved in their communities in ways that build on young people’s strengths and give them hope for the future.” (*National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth, Reconnecting Youth & Community: A Youth Development Approach, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, July 1996, p. 6.*)

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For the past 30 years, youth services professionals across the continent have redesigned ways in which they work with youth in order to achieve a more successful youth development model. Ranging from success in diverting youth-at-risk from gangs, drugs, and a life of crime to helping young people gain skills and knowledge to reach independence and full potential as citizens, an evolving model emerges. It recognizes that it is critical to provide opportunities for youth to expand their physical, intellectual, psychological, social, moral, and ethical horizons.

No matter what socio-economic, geographic, or cultural background, all youth need positive outlets and support, especially in a rapidly changing world where opportunities to belong have been reduced. Many modern families fail to provide the safety, encouragement, and beneficial influences young people used to count on. A decreasing sense of belonging to community has further affected young people’s ability to see themselves as valuable

citizens who can solve problems and contribute in a positive way. These factors may affect the behaviour and lifestyle choices that individual young people make.

Rather than advocating for getting tough on young offenders, our communities are more successful when they focus on a youth development approach to encourage young people. This will help reduce or repair unfortunate and costly social choices. Relevant education, developmental opportunities, and social involvement teach young people to solve their own problems and move their lives forward on a healthy course. This two-edged approach empowers youth—through education and skills relevant to their life goals—while encouraging them to take ownership of their decisions and actions. Instead of focusing only on troubled youth, our communities could try to define what youth need to become healthy, caring, responsible adults. A collaborative effort with young people is paramount to this research.

However, in the United States several programs have recognized the efficacy of the youth development model in crime and drug-use prevention. For example, the Department of Justice provides communities with resources to strengthen youth and community connections and provide young people with developmental and educational opportunities. Many programs have successfully adapted this model.

But though the concept is widely touted, the youth development model is often squeezed into existing and unsuitable programs, due to insufficient program funds or changing public policy environments. Rather than short-term funding for pilot projects, (often used to boost a political agenda), communities need long-range, consistent support for youth development programs to produce lasting results for the entire community.

A range of new strategies is needed to implement a widely acclaimed concept of youth solving its own problems and governing equally with other members of community organizations. The philosophical concept is broader than our present system. The most progressive community leaders of youth service agencies will redesign ways to implement a youth development model, empowering youth to solve problems collaboratively with other community leaders.

Strong leadership is needed for organizations to implement a youth development approach. Leaders can begin by assessing youth policies within agencies, communities, and larger governments. Using these principles, leaders can change communities.

Philosophical Elements

Philosophical elements of a youth development framework for progressive agencies include:

- “Adolescence is a turning point in the overall life development process and therefore an opportunity for communities to support young people in positive directions.
- “Adolescent development is natural, evolving, and complex.
- “Youth development does not occur in isolation from family, community, and country.
- “Young people’s maturation process is influenced by their surroundings and affected by relationships with key people, such as parents, teachers, and peers.
- “The youth development approach includes services, opportunities, and support for all young people.
- “Young people’s development is supported through involvement with people or places that offer intellectual, spiritual, and emotional nurturing.
- “Young people can and should begin to take charge of their destiny through learned decision-making and an enhanced understanding of the choices available to them. They also should be provided the support necessary to deal with the consequences of those choices.
- “Even adults struggle in some developmental areas. Each young person has different skills and abilities and matures at a different pace.
- “Not all young people start at the same place developmentally because of economic circumstances, family problems, or personal differences.

- “Developmental activities must be tailored to meet the needs of young people who are disadvantaged so that they receive the resources necessary to address the limitations in their life circumstances.”

(National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth, Reconnecting Youth & Community: A Youth Development Approach, U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, July 1996, p. 12.)

Fundamental to a youth development approach is the notion that young people share in a partnership with adults, in their families and communities. The developmental needs of youth are taken into account, providing opportunities to fulfill those requirements, with caring adults to support them.

An instructive example is provided by many First Nations cultures where elders and youth show mutual respect and support for one another. The wisdom and learning of elders is revered, and the vigour and spirit of youth is valued and encouraged. This supportive, two-way relationship sustains and renews the First Nations community as a whole.

Organizations may have to change to implement a youth development approach. Organization missions and structures will have to give power to youth as equal partners with decision-making and voting rights within the organization.

Organizations will need to develop goals shared by youth and adults in communities, and a language expressing that shared vision. When providing opportunities and services to youth, they must be in agreement with organizational goals. What are the needs youth want met? How will organizations meet them? These questions can be answered through a collaborative process among youth, parents, and other community members.

Organizations must also collaborate with each other to address the full range of developmental, preventive, and intervention services required for youth. Social services, education, and other community programs for youth need to share a vision of what they are trying to accomplish, recognizing that each organization contributes to the overall picture.

In the media and in the community, images can convey positive impressions of youth, which will affect the resources dedicated to serving youth and designing programs to meet their needs. Rather than showing only negative behaviour, news stories need to reflect the accomplishments and achievements of youth. Agencies should dedicate resources to positive news releases and press conferences, that tell communities about youth initiatives and young people's involvement in providing community service.

Education of families and communities about development in the adolescent years will help people understand the needs of young people, which is key to continuing personal growth.

In their effort to evaluate outcomes of a youth development approach, agencies will find it difficult to determine normal results because there is such variation among youth.

Look for behavioural changes indicating improved interpersonal skills and the development of life goals in young people. Look at creative accomplishment. Look at healthy lifestyles and social activities. Look at growth in academic achievement, but consider the support network and opportunities for education young people may or may not have. Adolescent development is contextual within community and life experience for each young person.

Agencies may want to measure the success of programs through focus groups, interviews, surveys, *etc.* Agencies wanting to implement a youth development approach need to ask some key questions:

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- What is youth development and what is the agency's objective in implementing this model?
- How does this approach benefit the agency? What are the disadvantages?
- Does the community want this model as part of the organization? How can the agency promote this ideal?
- What groups in the community can show how they have successfully used this model? What expertise can help to ease the implementation for the agency?

- Does the agency need a new organizational structure to introduce or enhance a youth development approach? Can we preserve the successful elements in our current structure?
- How can the agency bring the community on board?
- What are the benefits for the whole community of a youth development approach in the agency?

The very premise of this model means that each agency must collaborate to find its own solutions. Other organizations can offer advice and ideas, but each group will find its own way. In every community, the consultation and results will differ according to needs, strengths, and resources in the community. Each group will emphasize the importance of valuing young people and treating them as equals.

Rebuilding communities and reconnecting youth means finding new ways to deliver youth services. Young people must feel a part of their communities and their future. They will master skills and gain knowledge needed throughout life. They must feel involved in finding solutions for their future, while recognizing the societal imperative to regulate behaviour for the common good. Finally they must believe that they can contribute to their communities. They must believe that they will make a difference.

Youth workers should examine how their agencies are structured and how they function with youth, their families, and other leaders in their communities. What changes to agency structure and policies could facilitate the youth development model for the challenge of community building?

Adopting a Youth Development Model

In order to develop a youth development model, leaders must:

- Examine how the agency can serve youth and the community by implementing the youth development model.
- Review the agency's mission, programs, policies, and procedures to ensure a vision promoting youth development.
- Invent strategies for involving youth and the larger community when determining the services to be provided.
- View life as a developmental process in which the community can raise issues and suggest change, which will keep the organization alive.
- Offer education to staff about adolescent development and behaviour.
- Develop an intake process to identify young people's strengths and contributions as well as their needs.
- Promote respect for individual differences among youth as well as racial, gender, physical, age, and regional differences.
- Promote personal growth among staff.
- Develop responses to negative behaviour, show its effect on community, and include restitution as a way to re-engage youth who have offended the community.
- Give youth support as they accept leadership roles.
- Give youth opportunities to feel that they belong to a community, can gain skills, are useful, and do have some power.
- Use language that values and empowers youth in all written materials, especially in contracts and agreements with other agencies.
- Promote a community culture that values, supports, and involves youth.

Rebuilding Communities

The fragmentation of our communities is being tackled in a new way. Rather than an old negative approach—for example, building more institutions to house young offenders—communities are strengthening families, supporting youth, and improving conditions before they contribute to community breakdown.

Communities recognize the need for early intervention in a long-term plan to alleviate the social problems caused by poverty and deprivation. Early childhood development and continued support for youth development flourishes in a community empowered with a long-term vision of change for positive social results. An educated and happy child grows into a productive, involved young person.

Every community has talented, skilled individuals, and strong organizations to accomplish these ends. To repair and reconnect communities, agencies must: focus on a shared purpose; develop a collaborative plan (intra- and inter-agency); develop leaders in addition to services; provide stable funding for goals; promote effective learning about youth development principles; and have the means to bring together all generations from differing backgrounds. An emphasis on positive attributes of young people is an effective strategy to strengthen awareness in the rebuilding process.

The youth development approach, when combined with community empowerment:

- emphasizes strengths and skills—especially in youth—rather than focusing on problems
- works for social change
- recognizes a balance of responsibilities among youth, families, and communities, and offers support to all three
- offers recognition, opportunities, and support for leadership to youth
- provides opportunities for youth to learn, grow, and connect with their communities.

Community agencies must understand the politics within their community and form links with political and religious leaders to set an agenda of youth development and community empowerment. Agencies must be prepared to lose some battles in the struggle to effect social change. However, they must set realistic short-term goals that enable success and celebration of it to be part of an effective strategy to encourage members to continue working for larger, long-term goals.

Youth Development Campaigns

In developing youth development campaigns, agencies must follow these steps:

- Create positive messages about youth, both visual and verbal, that will reach the whole community.
 - Encourage members of the community to become actively involved in supporting, including, and recognizing young people.
 - Examine the agency's mission and how it is communicated to young people and others in the community.
 - Involve youth and the community in developing programs and services to promote youth development.
 - Know where young people's strengths and talents are in the community and how to include them in your agency.
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- Plan strategies for the agency and the whole community to reconnect youth. Include strategies to support youth, families, and the larger community.
 - Collaborate with other individuals and organizations to build a community-wide campaign.
 - Use previous lessons learned in other community efforts to further the youth development/community empowerment vision.

Many services and agencies will value healthy young people for the future resource they provide—future parents, leaders, employees, community volunteers, and neighbours.

Those agencies may give pro bono services to assist a public relations campaign for youth/community development. Free consulting, advertising, and publicity to strengthen public understanding can create a positive picture of youth/community development.

The community will want to take part in focus groups and discussions to establish goals, and design and evaluate programs for youth development. Provide plenty of opportunities for the community to share their ideas. Prepare for positive and negative responses you may get.

Barriers

Barriers to youth-community development include:

- General apathy among community members and a feeling that world problems are insurmountable.
- False assumptions about youth's abilities and understanding.
- Youth inexperience and need for knowledge. Good mentors who enjoy young people, and have the patience to teach and explain in meaningful ways, are in short supply.
- Poor communications between youth and adults, including terminology that is not clearly understood by both adults and youth.
- Squeezing youth into unsuitable adult structures.
- Resistance to adaptation and change.
- The slow pace of change, which is so frustrating to young people.
- Fear that crime and violence are increasing.
- Short-term reactions to social problems (for example, incarceration or expulsion from school) rather than a longer-term vision with strategies that may produce lasting changes in communities.
- A competitive environment, which is hostile to a collaborative approach, community empowerment, and a focus on a youth development model to revitalize communities.

Specific Challenges

Some specific challenges for successful youth involvement include:

- A time for councils and boards to meet appropriate to a youthful schedule.
- Transportation to and from meetings which means bus fare and taxi fare home from later meetings.
- Cash resources for youth for transportation, meals, and lodging, replacement for lost wages, up-front costs at conventions, registration, *etc.*
- Youth access to business tools, (faxes, photocopiers, computers, and printers, e-mail, voice mail, *etc.*) and the skills to use them.
- Orientation to board and council meetings, supported by mentors to provide board history, missions and goals, procedures, Robertson's Rules of Order, *etc.* Follow-up support for youth members requiring this service by mentors on boards and councils.
- An attitude of equality for youth and recognition of their contributions. Understanding that personal development is a by-product of youth involvement.
- Recognition of the individual differences among youth, rather than expecting a young person's opinion to represent all youth.
- A comfortable, relaxed environment for board meetings in order to encourage young board members to voice opinions and make suggestions. This includes casual dress, a relaxed environment, and social time before and after meetings.
- Eliminating patronizing attitudes that reflect adultism or tokenism, rather than honestly valuing youth opinions, skills, and abilities in all their diversity.
- Finding a common language that all members of the board can use. Expressions and colloquialisms need to be explained when not understood by members—youth or adult.

- Equal voting rights for young participants. Provincial, federal, and international laws often have age requirements for voting on legal issues. Signing binding agreements and contracts can be a barrier to equity for youth.
- Recruiting youth to boards and councils may not reflect the diversity of youth as individuals. Academic proficiency is only one of many criteria. New methods for finding young members must be implemented to ensure that representatives include young parents, students who attend alternative school programs, and young people living in poverty or on the streets.
- Terms of office may not be the same as adult board members because of limiting school terms or because boards want to allow other youth a chance to participate and learn. Unequal terms on boards increase the inequality of youth as board members.
- Young members need leadership roles on boards and opportunities to participate in public and media events as equal board members.

It is important to show the real agendas of agencies and the models used to involve youth on boards and councils. The following framework describes the levels of involvement, taken from R. A. Hart's *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*.

Models of Youth Participation in Governance

8. Young person-initiated, shared decisions with adults (usually older youth incorporating adults into projects they design and manage)
7. Young person-initiated and directed (young people beginning and managing their own project without adult participation)
6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people
5. Young people consulted and informed (projects designed and run by adults but youth understand the process, and their opinions are treated seriously)

4. Assigned but informed (adult-initiated and run but young people understand the intentions, know who made the decisions and why, have a meaningful role, and volunteer after the project is explained)
3. Tokenism (adult-initiated and run. Young people seem to have a voice but no choice of subject or opportunities to form opinions.)
2. Decoration (adult-initiated and run with young people lacking understanding about events and organization. Adults use the presence of youth.)
1. Manipulation (adult-initiated and run with youth having no understanding of issues and actions or young people consulted but given no feedback. Adults pretend youth are involved.)

In 1998, at the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, world leaders agreed to ensure active participation of youth in decision-making for society, at local, national, and international levels. Further, they resolved to ensure gender parity of youth and to provide opportunities to youth for education, training in democratic processes, and the spirit of civic duty. They had many shining examples to inspire them:

- **Joan of Arc was 17** when she led 3,000 knights to win the Battle of Orleans.
- **Danny Seo was 12** when he formed Earth 2000—a national organization for young people concerned about animal rights and the environment.
- **Craig Kielburger was 12** when he started a campaign called “Free the Children” to end child labour.
- **Einstein, at 16**, wrote his first paper on the theory of relativity.
- **Mozart, at 6**, composed a symphony.

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With access to legislative and decision-making bodies through legislative representatives, young people can help design and monitor programs and participate in their development.

In both the United States and Canada, there has been an increasing interest in youth governance.

- In 1996, two American groups, “Community Partnerships with Youth INC” and “Youth on Board,” drew up blueprints for a national movement for youth governance. These bodies planned for young people to be full partners in decision-making concerning their own affairs.
- In 1998, youth leaders and young people attended the “National 4-H Council Centre” to forge their vision, identify needs, and design a partnership agreement for organizations and individuals.

Groups interested in youth involvement are discussing why organizations should engage youth in governance; how and where should youth be involved; who is getting involved; and what strategies should be employed to break down existing barriers and engage other young people.

The United Nations “Convention on the Rights of the Child” has declared that countries shall grant children the right to express views in all matters affecting them, considering each child’s age and maturity.

“The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, or in print, in the form of art or through any other media of the child’s choice.” (Article 13)

(Effective Strategies for Youth Engagement in Governance and Decision-Making...in Recreation, A Laidlaw Foundation Project, November 12, 1999, p. 10)

At an International Youth Foundation meeting, young participants described how they participate in governance:

- **Planners.** Youth assist in planning programs designed to serve them.
- **Monitors and evaluators.** There are instances of youth in monitoring roles.
- **Fundraisers.** Young people participate in fund-raising events for their organizations. There can be long-term projects to raise funds as well.

- **Decision-makers.** Some youth lead structures within organizations designed to serve them.
- **Counsellors/ Peer Support.**
- **Advocates.** Youth can have a significant role in advocating for their own and other social issues.
- **Administration.** Youth in this role can perform duties that range from inputting to conducting research and collecting data.

In Canada, youth councils, youth advisory bodies, and youth advocacy groups are emerging. With changing trends in public policy and growing awareness for the need to engage them, young people are participating on school boards, Ad-Hoc Committees, and other agency boards.

The level of autonomy for young people in governance varies. It may involve:

- organizations created for youth by adults
- a combined youth—adult body
- a youth wing of an organization
- an organization entirely run by and for young people.

There are many examples of youth participation in governing bodies in Canada. In the area of recreation programs, organizations are mostly youth-run. Examples of an array of Canadian programs follow:

British Columbia Provincial Government

Premiers' Youth Office sponsors a Youth on Board initiative to place young people on government boards, committees, and advisory bodies.

Vancouver Youth Voices

A coalition of more than 20 agencies to serve youth, seeks input from young people. Youth-driven, this is a connection between government and youth service organizations.

Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board, Youth Reference Group

A youth coordinator organizes meetings for youth to report on youth career needs and to make recommendations to government.

Brandon, Manitoba Youth Council

A council established to implement youth activities and events. Participants include young offenders, religious youth groups, and Aboriginal youth.

Boys and Girls Club of Canada

A national youth council provides youth representation at the national level.

London Boys and Girls Club

Youth sit on the council overseeing a teen centre, The Zone.

Newmarket, Ontario

Youth design the program and run a youth centre.

Toronto, Parks and Recreation

Youth run the HEYY Line (Health Line for East End Youth).

Youth Round Table on the Environment, Environment Canada

Youth members of the round table have input into environmental issues important to young Canadians.

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Nova Scotia Youth Advisory Council

Youth make recommendations to government.

The Institute on Governance in Ottawa has a goal to promote effective governance. It currently focuses on several themes, one of which is youth governance.

The Institute on Governance and the Ontario Secondary School Students' Association have compiled *An Annotated Sampling of Youth Organizations* (June, 1999) to show the breadth of youth involvement in governance at international, national, and provincial levels. The list is extensive, confirms changes in public policy around the world, and should be read by any organization needing encouragement to include young people on boards and committees at all levels of governance.

Government-Sponsored Youth Bodies

International government-sponsored youth bodies are groups initiated by adults to bring youth opinions and concerns to the attention of governments and to help with the formulation of policies on a variety of matters. These include:

- *All-China Youth Federation (Beijing, 1949)*—A federation of 12 national and 33 regional Chinese youth organizations affiliated with the Communist Youth League of China promotes international student exchanges and Chinese patriotism.
- *Conseil Permanent de la Jeunesse (France, 1998)*—A government-sponsored youth council with youth representatives from national, local, and special-interest organizations develops policy positions on subjects affecting youth.
- *Consejo de la Juventud de Espana (Spain, 1983)*—A group created by the Spanish Government serves as an umbrella organization for 70 youth organizations.
- *National Youth Council for Environment and Development (Netherlands, 1992)*—A group including members of various youth organizations consults with government on environmental policy. The group promotes community-based youth projects.
- *Movimiento Nacional de Juventudes (Costa Rica, 1965)*—Encouraging social and political participation, this group promotes training and volunteer service for personal and community development.
- *Prime Minister's Youth Advisory Forum (New Zealand)*—Young people, aged 12 to 25, meet the Prime Minister three times a year to discuss relevant issues.

Canadian Organizations

In Canada, some groups are completely youth-driven or have significant opportunities for young people to have input.

- *The Students Commission: The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (Ottawa, 1991)*—This became the Centre for Excellence in 2000. This commission works with 27 individuals and organizations to research and develop effective models for engaging youth. It has an “open door” policy for organizations interested in collaborating on authentic youth engagement. They were selected by Health Canada to administer one of five Centres of Excellence for Children’s Well-Being.
- *Association Jeunesse Fransaskoise (Saskatchewan)*— A group of francophone youth in Saskatchewan, Association Jeunesse Fransaskoise sponsors youth parliaments, leadership workshops, sports, and cultural events.
- *Canadian Federation of Students (Ontario, 1981)*—A national organization that lobbies for high-quality post-secondary education in Canada. It keeps education issues before the Canadian public.
- *Conseil jeunesse provincial du Manitoba (Manitoba, 1974)*—An organization run by and for francophone youth, aged 14 to 25, it promotes use of the French language and skill development for francophone youth in politics, education, employment, sports, and culture.
- *Cree Nation Youth Council (Quebec, 1997)*—This organization promotes youth input into community decisions and holds youth activities to enhance Cree customs and identity. It began as the Cree Youth Assembly in 1985.
- *Free the Children (Thornhill, ON, 1995)*—With members in 23 countries, this organization educates the public about oppressed children suffering in deprived conditions.
- *National Youth-in-Care Network (Ottawa, 1985)*—A group of youth, aged 14 to 24, who have been or are in the care of provincial welfare authorities in Canada. This group focuses on the development of children in care and acts as a liaison between youth in care and adult service-providers.

- *Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Students (1985)*—An organization representing more than 25,000 post-secondary students that lobbies for improved education, lower tuitions, debt relief, and student employment.
- *Youth Canada Association (YouCan) (Ottawa, 1992)*—A group that promotes youth peer mediation and conflict resolution, and provides young people with training for this role.

It is obvious that agencies, community boards, and governments are changing their attitudes to youth. An American project, *Activism 2000*, has gathered some impressive statistics to help us understand the imperative to change our thinking about young people:

- More than one quarter of the United States population is under the age of 18.
- Twenty-six per cent of the United States population participates in school and community activities.
- Twenty-six per cent of the United States population, American youth, spends \$150 billion a year.
- Twenty-six per cent of the United States population cannot vote.

When such figures are told, we begin to see how important it is for all countries to rewrite laws, include young people in governing bodies, and work at individual and community development to effect meaningful change.

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Today, youth governance is a concept on many agendas. It should be. It is a concept long overdue. There is overwhelming evidence that youth involvement offers solutions to fragmented and fractured societies. Not through tokenism or patronizing lip-service on the part of adults, but with genuine interest, concern, and effort to understand each other, adults and youth can create equal partnerships to build stronger, more supportive, and more dynamic societies in which youthful members have a vital role. When young people see their efforts and involvement making a real difference, their commitment to themselves, to their communities, and to the future will grow stronger. Without doubt, youth will bring positive change.

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The Muttart Fellowships



Wayne Weins

1999 Muttart Fellow

Wayne Weins has been executive director of the Big Brothers of Saskatoon, an agency he has served for 20 years. He was drawn to the agency's work and the hope it provides children after working for two years with disturbed boys in New York City where often there seemed to be no hope.

"I find it very rewarding to see the impact that a volunteer can make on the lives of children and the impact children can make on the lives of adults."

His interests include family activities, reading, fixing things and tinkering, golf, enjoying the outdoors, woodwork, and sports.

He and his wife Ericka have been married 22 years, and they have two sons, Daniel and Eli. And the family includes one dog and two cats.

