



Realizing the Power of Youth and Young Adult Voice Through Youth Leadership Boards

“Without the voices of young people in foster care—the people who have lived it—the system will not know what is going wrong and what is going right and will not be able to make the changes that are needed.”

Tyneshia Wright, *Native Youth Leader, Maine*



Within the field of child welfare, an increasingly significant movement supports empowering children, youth and young adults in foster care to use their “voice” to ensure adults are truly listening to them. Their authentic engagement enables them to express their views and have their views taken into account in matters that affect them.¹ Youth and young adult “voice” has come to be understood as the ideas, opinions, experiences, attitudes, knowledge, actions, involvement and initiatives of young people and their meaningful inclusion in the creation and implementation of programs, policies and practice.² It is commonly summed up with the powerful adage, “Nothing about us without us.”³ Key components of “voice” are genuine partnerships between young people and adults, ample and meaningful opportunities for young people to plan and make decisions for

1 Nybel, 2013.

2 National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning, n.d.

3 National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning, n.d.

themselves, opportunities for young people to help shape foster care policy and practice, and respect and support for young people as they engage in programs and activities that are relevant to their individual strengths, needs, interests and aspirations (see Text Box).

Key Components of “Voice”

Young People...

- Are equal partners in all aspects of their own individual case planning and decision-making;
- Are equal partners in making decisions and determining the direction of programs and activities, agency policy development, service design, training design and delivery;
- Expect to, and receive, consistent opportunities to set goals, devise strategies, and act;
- Are respected for their ideas and opinions and are free to state them;
- Participate in challenging experiences, with the necessary support to help them succeed; and
- Thrive when adults listen to them, respect them, and engage them in meaningful programs and activities.

Source: National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning, n.d

With the growing focus on youth voice, youth leadership boards have gained increasing recognition as important vehicles for hearing the voices of young people currently or formerly in foster care on policy and practice matters. The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative ensures that young people—primarily those between ages 14 and 25—make successful transitions from foster care to adulthood by working nationally, in states, and locally to improve policy and practice.⁴ A foundational and cross-cutting strategy of the Jim Casey Initiative is youth engagement. Full engagement of young people through authentic youth-adult partnerships undergirds the success of the remaining four Jim Casey Initiative strategies: partnerships and resources; research, evaluation and communications; public will and policy; and increased opportunities (see Text Box). Youth engagement includes developing and maintaining strong youth leadership boards and ensuring all young people are supported in being effective self-advocates.⁵ For more than a decade, youth leadership boards have been implemented at each of the Jim Casey Initiative sites to ensure that the voices of young people in care are heard.⁶ The Jim Casey Initiative’s rich experience with these boards provides a sound body of learning about their role and what makes them successful.

This issue brief explores the Jim Casey Initiative’s experiences in developing and implementing youth leadership boards and includes the perspectives of young people and the adults engaged with them.

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative Core Strategies

Core Strategy	Related Youth Engagement Activities
Youth engagement	Youth leadership boards; young people as effective self-advocates
Partnerships and resources	Engaging young people as partners on community partnership boards and in resource development
Research, evaluation and communications	Young people as evaluators and communicators
Public will and policy	Young people as advocates for improved systems
Increased opportunities	Young people as decision makers for increased opportunities through implementing the Opportunity Passport™ and use of door openers

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4 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013a.
 5 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013b.
 6 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013c.

“If young people are involved in the planning and structure of the foster care system, you will develop a quality system that will work with the youth, not against them.”

Nickie Jenks, *Kalamazoo President of Michigan Youth Leadership Board and college student*



Youth Leadership Boards: Why the Voices of Young People With Foster Care Experience Matter

Engaging all young people as leaders in planning and decision-making reaps critical benefits throughout the process of transitioning into adulthood and beyond.⁷ Adolescence is a critical stage of neurodevelopment during which young people have rich opportunities to optimize their emotional, social and cognitive development. Unlike their peers who are not in foster care, however, young people in foster care often lack natural opportunities to make decisions for themselves and take on leadership roles in their schools and communities with the support of caring adults. Many live in group settings where they are not afforded the usual adolescent growing up experiences. As a result, young people in foster care frequently experience a sense of powerlessness over their own lives and isolation from others, and they miss important skill-building opportunities that are needed for healthy social, emotional and cognitive development.

Frequently, young people in the foster care system are not acknowledged as experts on their lives and the realities of the foster care system. Adults facilitating case

planning processes tend to make decisions for young people based on what they believe is in the young person’s best interest without soliciting their input. Foster care policies and practices are often developed and implemented in the absence of any input from the very people they are designed to serve. Young people’s important vantage point is not taken into consideration. Yet, research and experience document the benefits when young people are fully engaged and are able to contribute their knowledge and understanding of the foster care system to policy and practice development and implementation. With these opportunities, young people are supported in developing the knowledge and skills they will need to lead a healthy and successful adult life.⁸ At the same time, when young people actively engage in informing foster care policies and practices, they help ensure that services are more responsive to and reflective of the needs of other youth in care.⁹

Young people in foster care need intentionally created opportunities to assume leadership and community roles that allow them to develop skills that will serve them well throughout adulthood.¹⁰ Youth leadership boards provide some of these very opportunities that young people need to become effective advocates for themselves and others.

Adolescent Brain Development.

Neuroscientific research establishes that during adolescence, the brain undergoes a significant developmental process that is second only to early childhood.¹¹ During this period of maturation, young people’s brains become faster, sharper and more specialized. Young people begin to develop executive functions that include advanced reasoning abilities, expanded capacity for abstract and critical thinking, an understanding of ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, analysis of complex issues, and evaluation of alternatives before making decisions (see Text Box on the next page).¹²

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8 National Resource Center on Youth Development, n.d.
9 National Resource Center on Youth Development, n.d.
10 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012.
11 Tau & Peterson, 2010.
12 Chamberlain, n.d.; Giedd, 2004.

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7 Paul & Lefkowitz, 2006.

Developing Executive Functions During Adolescence and Early Adulthood

- Focusing attention
- Organizing thoughts and problem solving
- Foreseeing and weighing possible consequences of behavior
- Considering the future and making predictions
- Forming strategies and planning
- Balancing short-term rewards with long-term goals
- Shifting/adjusting behavior when situations change
- Controlling impulses and delaying gratification
- Modulating intense emotions
- Inhibiting inappropriate behavior and initiating appropriate behavior
- Simultaneously considering multiple streams of information when faced with complex and challenging information

Source: Giedd, 2004

Science tells us that during adolescence and young adulthood, the brain is very “plastic”—nimble and adaptable in the face of challenges posed in the environment and highly subject to molding by experience.¹³ The “use it or lose it” principle applies because neural connections that see little use wither away and those that are used become stronger.¹⁴ The circuits of the brain are shaped through experience and practice as the brain consolidates learning.¹⁵ Neuroscience demonstrates that young people need ample opportunities to practice the range of skills that they will need as adults. Research underscores the importance

of adult guidance and support as the adolescent’s brain continues to develop.¹⁶ When young people are provided with opportunities to test their fledgling executive functions, make assessments about what they need and what is or is not working for them, and learn through both successes and challenges, they are able to consolidate learning in healthy ways that support successful adulthood. One study showed that when youth have meaningful involvement in decision-making about their lives early in high school, they are substantially more likely than other youth to meet key developmental milestones by the end of high school.¹⁷ It is through regular and ongoing opportunities to express themselves and be heard that young people are able to prime their own brain development and optimize their ability to function later as successful adults.

Positive Youth Development.

Young people frequently describe their involvement with Jim Casey Initiative youth leadership boards as a profoundly life-changing experience that altered their life trajectories and greatly improved their well-being. Their reports are not surprising when considering that research on resilient youth and the process of growing into adulthood tells us that youth participation—a broad category that encompasses youth leadership—is a critical component that supports positive youth development.¹⁸ Youth leadership opportunities bring a range of benefits for young people. These opportunities can help them achieve the delicate balance between having a sense of belonging and a sense of autonomy, develop needed social and decision-making skills, build social competence, and persist in efforts to achieve their goals.¹⁹ They can make further connections with their communities and enlarge their support networks, “learning that they are not alone in their child welfare journey and gaining friendships with other young people who can truly understand.”²⁰ Peer and adult

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16 Taluker, 2013.
17 Gambone, Klem & Connell, 2002.
18 Lerner, et al., 2005.
19 Benard, 2004.
20 Muskie School of Public Service, 2010.

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13 U.S. Department of Human Services, 2012.
14 Giedd, 2004.
15 U.S. Department of Human Services, 2012.

connections developed through youth leadership board involvement provide invaluable sources of social capital for young people that can promote resilience. The social aspect of youth leadership boards plays an essential role in providing young people with opportunities to develop social competence, which in turn, promotes optimal brain development and strengthens the very skills they will need as healthy and productive adults. Youth leadership opportunities also can provide youth with the chance to develop skills that employers most want for their emerging workforce. Employers often specifically seek individuals who are self-motivated, successfully manage time, have oral and written communication skills, effectively work with a team, show leadership potential, demonstrate problem-solving ability, and know how to gather and use information.²¹

As young people prepare for adulthood, their roles change. Instead of always being cared for, they increasingly take care of themselves. Not all young people will assume traditional leadership roles as they grow older, but they do become the leaders of their own lives. To be successful as adults, young people need to be able to rely upon and advocate for themselves and take initiative, including making the right decisions that lead to success.²² As noted by the Forum for Youth Investment, youth engagement is essential in developing strategies for long-term, sustainable change in order to improve outcomes for young people.²³

The Development of Youth Leadership Boards

In Jim Casey Initiative sites, youth leadership boards are the primary means of engaging young people. These youth-led boards benefit the young people themselves by connecting them with caring adults and peers; helping them understand their foster care experience; providing training and support to young members; supporting them

in healthy risk-taking; teaching self-advocacy, relational, and public speaking skills; and creating opportunities for them to advise child welfare decision-makers on policies and practices. Youth leadership boards also provide young leaders with opportunities to connect with and benefit their communities through service projects and grant-making, which can ultimately result in an increased sense of belonging for young people who previously felt disconnected and isolated.

“For young people [on youth leadership boards], this can be the first time in their lives that they recognize the personal strength their time in placement has pushed them to gain. It can also be the first time they are formally acknowledged by adults as having unique and important knowledge to contribute.”

Maine Youth Leadership Advisory Team, 2010

Youth boards, like adult boards and other voluntary group efforts, undergo a natural developmental process. One group developmental model suggests that four phases—forming, storming, norming and performing—are necessary and inevitable in order for a group to grow, face up to challenges, tackle problems, find solutions, plan work, and deliver results.²⁴ It is essential in the early development phase that the youth leadership board has a strong adult partner who provides a clear supportive structure as participating young people define the mission of the board, develop by-laws, clarify expectations for board members, and establish procedures that the board will follow. Key issues such as frequency of meetings, attendance expectations, transportation for board members, and compensation for young people’s time and contributions must be addressed. Taking on these tasks provides young people with opportunities to practice decision-making and

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21 Coplin, 2005.
22 Paul & Lefkowitz, 2006.
23 Forum for Youth Engagement, 2007.

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24 University of Oregon, 2014.

consensus-building skills through normal activities.

Each youth leadership board builds over time as the group gains identity and cohesion, and young people identify and build on their individual strengths and capacities as board members and contributors to the mission of the board. Youth leadership boards require time and ongoing commitment on the part of both the young people and their adult partners. In the early developmental stages, like adult boards, youth leadership boards are learning and growing. Young people and their adult partners are getting to know one another and exploring effective ways to work together. Young people are developing skills and the capacity for collective thinking about how they will go about setting the priorities and agenda for board activities. They are exploring their individual roles on the board, whether as leaders or in other roles.

“It is important that the adults acknowledge the reality that they have agendas, as set by their agencies or the Jim Casey Initiative. By owning up to these agendas, the adults can let them go so they do not play out with the young people on the youth leadership board.”

Anna Gennari,
*Community Engagement Coordinator, Building Futures
& Foundations, New Mexico*

Anna Gennari, community engagement coordinator for Building Futures & Foundations, the Jim Casey Initiative site in New Mexico, highlights the importance of the active engagement of two or three young people from the very beginning of the youth leadership board process. These young people play critical roles in shaping the framework that the larger group of young people will use to develop the mission of the board and specific tools such as bylaws and a work plan. She emphasizes the importance of building in time for reflection throughout the early stages of the process to identify strengths and any needs for course adjustment. In her words, “be prepared but flexible.” Ms. Gennari identifies three key strengths in supporting the

early development of youth leadership boards: authentic youth-adult partnerships with established reciprocity and trust; doing the work and truly preparing young people to be successful in achieving their own vision; and a clear planning process so that young people know where the effort is going.

In Mississippi, work is underway to build on and strengthen an existing board, the statewide Teen Advisory Board comprised of young people who represent the 13 Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) regions. Shannon Malone, program associate, Foundation for the Mid-South, the Jim Casey Initiative site, and Mario Johnson, division director of Independent Living Services, MDHS underscore the importance of providing young people with ample opportunities at the beginning of their work together to vent their feelings and frustrations about their time in foster care. This process requires time but provides the foundation for young people’s buy-in as the group moves toward identifying key issues and action steps that will improve foster care for other young people. In this early board development stage, young people have seen small changes in practice—early wins that have more deeply engaged board members.

The Work of Youth Leadership Boards

As youth leadership boards develop, young people have opportunities to identify concerns, make suggestions for change, and work on projects and initiatives they deem important. Youth leadership board members can offer recommendations that influence child welfare law, policy and practice, provide testimony before legislative hearings, and participate in media interviews and other advocacy activities. Some examples:

The Delaware Youth Leadership Council included in its policy agenda for 2013 a focus on youth participation in legal proceedings, client-directed legal representation, early transition planning and independent living services at a younger age. The Council made

a series of recommendations for the extension of foster care to 21 based on the Jim Casey Initiative’s *Success Beyond 18*. These recommendations shaped the state’s design of the extended foster care program.

Members of Georgia’s Teen Parent Connection Program, EmpowerMENT, defined as a policy and practice priority the needs of teen parents in foster care to remain with and care for their children. The teen parent members worked with supportive adults in researching and developing an advocacy plan to meet these needs. They collaborated with state partners, including the Department of Family and Children Services leadership, in strengthening policy language to promote a shift in practice and organizational culture. Under current policy, children born to parents in foster care are not removed from their parents unless a specific exception applies.

Michigan’s Youth Leadership Board issued its Fifteen Statements from the Youth Board. This policy and practice document states that youth must be a part of the decision-making process every time there is a placement change and that priority must be placed on young people’s connections with their birth families and having mentors or other caring adults support them.

Members of the Hawai’i Helping Our People Envision Success (HI H.O.P.E.S), Hawaii’s Youth Leadership Board, were instrumental in the successful passage of state legislation extending foster care to age 21. They worked closely with Department of Human Services Director Pat McManaman to extend Medicaid in Hawai’i to age 26 for young people formerly in foster care.

Members of youth leadership boards also concretely demonstrate to the community that they are resilient, productive young people giving back to the community. As an example of youth board direct community service, members of the Iowa Youth Leadership Board, InSight, drawing on their own experiences, identified the essential start-up needs of young people transitioning from foster care and

renting their first apartments or buying their first cars. InSight developed a program of Starter Kits to support young people transitioning from foster care to life on their own. Initially the board created First Apartment Starter Kits containing a broom, laundry basket and other household items to equip first-time young apartment dwellers. Next, they created a First Car Start Up Kit, which includes car cleaners, a gas card and other car-related items. In development is a Start Up Kit for new mothers transitioning from foster care with their infants.

A unique aspect of Jim Casey Initiative youth leadership boards is that they are provided with funds each year to make small grants to individuals and non-profit organizations in their communities. Private supporters, local fundraising or the Jim Casey Initiative provides the funding. Grant making empowers young people by placing them in the role of allocating resources, much like their adult counterparts. Board members fully participate in the process—developing requests for proposals, reviewing applications, and making decisions about choosing grant recipients who will best serve the community with needed services and supports. Funds are typically dedicated to education, housing, transportation, emergency needs, childcare and community engagement. One year, the Connecticut board granted \$2,300 to three youth-serving homeless shelters in the community, and the Michigan board granted \$1,635 to the Goodwill Youth Microenterprise Academy to pay for scholarships for youth. Boards typically set aside flexible funds for young people’s emergencies that may include stays at a motel, windshield repair, baby gates for an apartment, clothing and food.²⁵ This work anchors the youth leadership boards in their communities.

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25 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, n.d.

“The way that foster care is set up, many young people shut down or do not talk at all. They need the support of caring adults to be there for them — adults who know what to do and support young people each step of the way.”

Eddy Vanderkwaak,
Drake University, Class of 2015
Sociology, Anthropology, Women's Studies



The Essential Foundation for Youth Leadership Boards

First and foremost, youth leadership boards must be grounded in authentic youth engagement. At its core, the authentic engagement of young people is a youth-centered process that fully takes into account each individual young person’s unique strengths, skills, interests and needs. It incorporates multiple opportunities and venues to support each young person in expressing his or her voice.

In order to achieve authentic youth engagement, youth leadership boards must create *equal partnerships between young people and adults*.²⁶ The Maine Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT) model likens the youth-adult partnership to a crescent (illustrated in orange in the Text Box), holding up and embracing the entire youth engagement approach that the model uses.²⁷ In the YLAT model, engagement of each young person and his or her adult partner(s) begins with individual meetings in which the youth is met where he or she is—emotionally, socially, cognitively and physically. The goal is to identify the young person’s skills and what he or she is able and willing to do in order to express his or her voice. Adult

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26 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012.
27 Muskie School of Public Service, 2010.

partners must “be there” for young people throughout their work together, supporting them and challenging them in developmentally appropriate ways to build the skills they need to care for themselves and mature into healthy and productive adults.



Strong adult staff committed to authentic youth-adult partnerships are also critical.²⁸ They must fully embrace the principles of youth-adult partnerships:

- A strong sense of interdependence with a focus on identifying a range of opportunities that young people and adults work on together.
- Young people and adult partners alike listening more than talking.
- Adults’ ability to acknowledge their own mistakes and recognize that what they believe may be important or may not be important to the young person.
- Adults seeking young people’s opinions.
- Adults actively recognizing young people when they have done a good job and giving constructive feedback when they can improve.

Young people serving on youth leadership boards need the adult partners to provide a clear structure for board functions, activities, mentoring and support as they become members of the board and participate in board activities.

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28 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2012.

What Young People Want from Adult Partners

- Someone with whom they can have a professional relationship
- Someone to look up to
- Well-connected to the community
- Experience with the foster care system and understands what needs to be done
- A high energy level
- Expectations of the best but with reasonable expectations

Delia Ulima of EPIC ‘Ohana Inc., Hawaii’s Jim Casey Initiative site, underscores the importance of the adult staff leader dedicating a significant portion of his or her time to developing and sustaining the board. This individual must bring passion and a firm commitment to cultivating the voices of young leaders and actively serve as a champion and advocate for them. Young people must be able to rely on the adult leader to “have their back.” At the same time, the adult leader must actively explore opportunities for the voices of young people to be heard through strong relationships with the public child welfare agency and other key stakeholders.

Preparation and support are essential to young people being able to effectively and safely express themselves and be heard as members of youth leadership boards. Young adults formerly in foster care point out that young people deserve to have a voice but that having a voice must be fully supported through careful preparation. A core value of the Jim Casey Initiative is that young people are effectively prepared and empowered to make informed decisions about matters that affect their lives.²⁹ Authentic youth-adult

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²⁹ Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013b.

partnerships, key to effective youth leadership boards, must undergird preparation activities through relationships of mutual trust and a clearly established process. Adults must help young people recognize their strengths, leverage their expertise, assess their level of understanding, address their knowledge deficits, and assert their leadership in making decisions. As an example, an adult partner will spend significant time preparing a young person for a speaking role on a panel by reviewing materials with the young person for better understanding, fully informing the young person about what can be expected, providing time for the young person to develop key messages, and supporting the young person in practicing the presentation. Most importantly, preparation must give the young person ample time to identify and process feelings and concerns about the presentation and develop, with the support of his or her adult partner, self-care (see Text Box).

Youth-Adult Partnership Preparation Checklist: Public Speaking

The adult partner:

- Informs young person about the upcoming event, learn about his/her interest, and confirm that timing is right for their participation
- Provides information on the subject matter to the young person
- Brief the young person on who will be at event

The young person:

- Develops key messages
- Practices the presentation with the adult partner

Together:

- Adult partner assists the young person in asking any questions
- Young person and adult supporter debrief after the event to learn from the experience

The Voices of Young People: What Makes Youth Leadership Boards Successful

Successful youth leadership boards are based in organizations that are committed to true youth leadership opportunities. These organizations provide staff and young people with the training and support they need to serve in their respective roles, and they have an infrastructure in place to support authentic youth engagement and leadership. Successful youth leadership boards build on the solid foundation of strong partnerships between young people and adults in which young people are recognized as equals. The focus is on young people's assets, including their expertise based on their experiences in foster care. Adult partners encourage success and permit failure, using both as teaching tools and acting as supportive coaches.³⁰

Successful youth leadership boards attend to logistical details. Transportation or a stipend to cover transportation costs is provided; the appropriateness of stipends for board members is assessed; arrangements are made for community services or class credit for young people's involvement; meeting times and places are sensitive to young people's schedules; food is provided at meetings; and other incentives are developed to recognize young people's participation, such as field trips or award certificates.

Young people with experience serving on Jim Casey Initiative youth leadership boards highlight the following as important in creating and maintaining successful youth boards:

- An environment that supports young people in making decisions together, jointly leading the board, and developing close, trusting relationships with one another both within and outside the board

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³⁰ Paul & Lefkowitz, 2006.

- Young people's openness to the different styles and personalities of fellow board members from a strengths-based perspective
- Young people having fun while engaging in board activities
- Young people's ability to see the concrete outcomes of their work together and celebrate their accomplishments

Successful youth leadership boards are composed of a diverse group of young leaders who represent the local youth foster care population. Young leaders emphasize that each youth leadership board is different—members bring a variety of knowledge, experiences and interests to the table. They are likely to have different styles of communicating and relating to others and distinctive personalities. They will select different board activities based on their individual interests and preferences. As a result, youth leadership boards will reflect diverse cultures. Over the course of time, the membership of youth leadership boards will change, just as it occurs with adult boards. In some instances, young people, like their adult counterparts, will need to focus on personal or family matters that require their attention. In other cases, members will graduate from high school, leave for college, take on full time jobs and form families as they enter adulthood. Just as with adult boards, expected and planned board member turnover can represent a healthy change; introduce fresh, innovative ideas and new energy; and provide others with opportunities for leadership growth.

The Voices of Young People: Challenges for Youth Leadership Boards

Youth leadership boards should anticipate certain challenges as inherent in the nature of the work they do and the real-life circumstances of young people who serve on the boards and those of their adult partners. These challenges include: maintaining the principles of authentic

youth-adult partnerships as changes occur in board composition and adult staffing; maintaining an engaged youth leadership board over time; supporting the commitment of young leaders while avoiding burnout; including the voices of as many young people as possible, not only those who serve on boards; and ensuring that young people receive feedback on the policy and program changes they recommend.

Actively Maintaining Youth-Adult Partnerships.

Initial training of young people and their adult partners on the principles of youth-adult partnerships and best practices is essential as youth leadership boards are being formed. Important challenges arise in maintaining these principles and practices as young people leave the board, new members take their places and there is staff turnover. Current board members and their adult partners need to continually revisit their partnerships to ensure that they are authentic and valued. Ongoing training and support play important roles in maintaining the authentic youth-adult partnerships that are critical to the success of the youth leadership board. Training and support are particularly important when multiple youth leadership boards represent different regions of a state and significant numbers of young people and adults are continuously being introduced into the process.

Maintaining an Engaged Youth Leadership Board.

A key challenge is sustaining an active, engaged youth leadership board over time. As with any board, retention and recruitment are key issues and may be particularly challenging given the many changes that young people in their early twenties experience as they move into new education, employment and life opportunities. Turnover in youth leadership board membership is to be expected.

Retention of young members is enhanced through full implementation of youth-adult partnership principles, ensuring that the board process is genuinely youth-led and that there is equal focus on personal

development as well as group skills. Young people are more likely to remain active on boards when they develop strong interpersonal relationships with one another, set goals together and jointly work toward achieving them, clearly set expectations for all board members, receive individualized preparation, and feel supported irrespective of what decisions they make. It is helpful to regularly review bylaws and board policies to ensure that they continue to be relevant and responsive to the needs of board members. This process provides a “check in” for board members to assess whether the board is doing what needs to be done and to identify any issues that may be impacting the active participation of board members, such as transportation barriers. It must be expected that some young board members will be coping with multiple stresses in their lives—such as homelessness, pregnancy, domestic violence, divorce and food insecurity—which may impact their ability to attend and participate in meetings. In many Jim Casey Initiative sites, the youth leadership boards have processes in place to reach out to members who have not been engaged and offer support as needed and available.

There is universal agreement that the greatest recruitment resource for new board members is current board members. Recruitment is enhanced when board members use opportunities created by presentations, trainings and community service projects to meet young people and invite them to meetings. Through these opportunities, current board members can reach out to and begin to engage young people who bring a variety of experiences and backgrounds. When young people attend a meeting for the first time, current board leaders can provide positive leadership examples and engage newcomers in personal conversations about the individual’s interests and board activities. Steve Havemann, project director at the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa, the Jim Casey Initiative site, reports that young people are likely to join and actively participate on boards if they are personally connected with current board members after attending one or two meetings. A clearly developed recruitment plan is a key resource for youth leadership boards. This plan should address the goals for recruitment, how recruitment will

take place, what resources will be used, and the attributes and expectations of board members.

Supporting Commitment and Avoiding Burnout.

A challenge encountered by some youth leadership boards is an overreliance on a small number of young people who already possess leadership skills and have personal attributes that well position them to take responsibility for board activities and functions. Because they generally require less adult support and preparation, they often become the “go to” board members for many if not most board activities. When youth leadership boards over-rely on certain young leaders, they may fail to foster leadership development among newer and younger members of the board. When the more experienced young leaders move into new areas of their lives, the board may face a leadership crisis. Young leaders who become the “go to” board members may suffer burnout; become overly involved in board activities to the detriment of school, work and family; and/or become so reliant on stipends from board activities that they face financial problems when opportunities become limited.

Broad Inclusion of Voices.

Another challenge for youth leadership boards rests in the reality that many young people do not participate in youth leadership boards. They may find engaging in these organized advocacy efforts to be too demanding given the already challenging circumstances of their day-to-day lives, or they may simply lack the interest or skills to serve formally in these roles. It is essential that youth/young adult voice on foster care policy and practice not be conceptualized solely as “being in a room” or “hearing a voice at a meeting.” Alternative venues must be developed so their input is received and their voices are amplified outside of meeting rooms.

In Maine, YLAT member Tyneshia Wright actively reaches out to Native young people in more geographically isolated communities to hear their voices on foster care

issues. She sends information to them directly or via their caseworkers and actively solicits their opinions and perspectives through emails and phone calls. She believes that much more needs to be done to ensure that their voices are heard and observes, “I am their voice until they find theirs.” Other young leaders underscore the importance of nurturing prospective members of the youth leadership board, giving them individual attention when they come to meetings and having a list of questions to ask to solicit their opinions. An example might be, “How would you feel if you woke up next Monday and didn’t have health insurance?”

“Some of the best advice and guidance that I have heard is from young people who do not come to meetings of the advisory team. We engage them in other ways so that they have input on key issues like housing, employment and education. It is our responsibility to find the right platforms so that every youth’s voice is heard.”

*Marty Zanghi, Director of Youth Development,
Muskie School of Public Service, Maine*

Feedback to Young Leaders.

A continuing challenge with youth leadership boards remains in ensuring that young people receive feedback on the policy and program changes they recommend, particularly whether and how those changes will be incorporated into actual practice and policy. Young leaders point out that young people experience a lack of respect for their ideas and recommendations when there is no follow through and no update on the status of their requests and suggestions. When young people’s recommendations will not or cannot be implemented, adult partners need to communicate the reasons for the decisions and, whenever possible, work with young people in refining their recommendations to address system concerns.

“If you can’t do what they suggest, still come back to them and come back with a compromise. It’s give and take.”

David Cocoros, *Chief Executive Officer,*
Youth Development Institute, Phoenix, Arizona

Youth Leadership Board Best Practices

The Jim Casey Initiative has identified a number of best practices that support and promote the success of youth leadership boards. A critical best practice is embedding the youth leadership board within a larger effort or initiative where the young members have access to and impact on all aspects of that effort or initiative. Stand-alone youth leadership boards are often convened for a specific purpose, take on defined work, and issue reports or recommendations, with the board being adjourned when the defined work is complete. Fully integrated youth leadership boards, as developed by the Jim Casey Initiative, continue over time to influence policy and practice, bring new members into learning and social opportunities, and support members in taking charge of their own development and futures.

In summary, best practices include:

1. Ongoing attention to youth-adult partnerships;
2. By-laws and written operating procedures or guidelines;
3. Policies that address payment for young people’s time and other supports such as transportation;
4. Strong focus on board membership retention through the active engagement of current members;
5. Recruitment of participants through board activities and other programs that actively engage young people in foster care;

6. Allocation of funds to create or enhance opportunities for young people currently or formerly in foster care through community service projects and grant-making;
7. Youth advocacy to improve the practices and policies of public child welfare systems and other systems that serve young people in foster care;
8. Relationships with community stakeholders that further the youth leadership board agenda;
9. Regular review of the strengths, opportunities and gaps in the performance of the youth leadership board; and
10. Periodic assessment of the need for training and technical assistance.

Conclusion

As youth voice increasingly has become a child welfare focus, youth leadership boards are receiving greater recognition as key vehicles for hearing the voices of young people on foster care policy and practice. There is a growing understanding of the benefits to both young people and the child welfare system when young people are fully engaged as experts on their lives and the foster care system. Best practices for youth leadership boards have evolved as a result of the experiences of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative—practices that can guide the effective development and maintenance of youth leadership boards. These best practices are grounded in key foundational elements that include equal partnerships between young people and adults and preparation and support for young people. The voices of young people clearly tell us what makes youth leadership boards successful, and what challenges can and should be expected. The best practices identified in this issue brief provide a framework for the successful implementation of an even broader network of youth leadership boards that could make significant contributions to the well being of young people currently or formerly in foster care and the systems that serve them.

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About the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

The mission of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is to ensure that young people—primarily those between the ages of 14 and 25—make successful transitions from foster care to adulthood. We do this by working nationally, in states, and locally to improve policies and practices, promote youth engagement, apply evaluation and research, and create community partnerships. Our work creates opportunities for young people to achieve positive outcomes in permanence, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital.

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