

Engaging Youth as Peer Leaders for Promoting Instant Recess in Schools and Communities- Using a CBPR Approach

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Background:

Generation With Promise (GWP) – Henry Ford Health System (HFHS) aims at increasing physical activity and reducing obesity in low-income schools and communities in urban Detroit through innovative, youth-led practices.

This paper describes a case study of a youth leadership effort to increase physical activity in schools and communities. Drawing on the research of Dr. Yancey and Instant Recess®, youth leaders conducted assessments, created and piloted peer-developed modules, and led workshops to engage youth in replicating the modules in 13 middle and high schools in the region. This paper discusses the process and lessons learned.

Over the last years, GWP in partnership with the Michigan Youth and Community Program at the University of Michigan has developed a youth leadership effort to engage youth as wellness ambassadors in promoting and engaging youth-led health changes in schools and communities.

Overview of Activities:

We worked with small teams (8-10 youth) of youth wellness ambassadors in three schools. Students were recruited to the teams through previous participation in Generation With Promise programs or through teacher/school leader recommendation.

Students met regularly to discuss leadership, prepare materials for disseminating to their peers, and develop leadership skills for facilitating workshops with middle and high school students around health and wellness.

Specific activities of the Youth Wellness Ambassadors:

- Conducting school assessments of physical activity in their schools and communities
- Building interpersonal skills and group leadership skills through workshops and experiential activities
- Planning physical activity routines to share with their schools
- Pilot testing the routines with other youth to get feedback and make changes
- Developing a peer-led curriculum/guide book for middle school youth on developing physical activity routines
- Facilitating peer-to-peer workshops and leading trainings
- Evaluating impact
- Developing curriculum for dissemination broadly

Lessons Learned: Findings suggest that young people have influenced physical activity in their schools and communities. Lessons learned include the importance of peer-developed training and materials, the importance of youth leadership, and the critical role of adults in facilitating youth participation.

Importance of Youth Leadership and Peer-Developed Training Models:

A major lesson from the project is the importance of youth leadership and the development of peer-created training models. In particular, our project's evaluation found the importance of opportunities for young people to develop skills in:

- Being able to understand the underlying context in the school and then strategize about how best to approach creating change
- Developing peer facilitation skills- learning how to develop a workshop and train others
- Developing public speaking skills and learning to speak in front of school assemblies
- Learning to work in time crunches and being flexible in the process
- Putting aside perfection in order to make something happen
- Working with people who have differences and learning to find common goals and purpose
- Learning to plan meetings, set goals, and all the steps needed to make an idea happen, and
- Learning to step forward as a leader- knowing that you have the confidence to make something happen
- Evaluation skills - learning how to ask questions and create survey tools

Critical Role of Adults

Supportive adults who can serve as allies for the students are critical for youth leadership efforts to emerge and thrive. In our project, allies were teachers, social workers, program staff, and administrators. Critical to GWP was the ability for students to build relationship with adult leaders in the school and the community who could help move forward their ideas.

Advice to Other Youth

Important to our evaluation was assessing the program from the youth's perspective. Through interviews with youth leaders about "what advice they'd give to other youth," the youth leaders responded with the following ideas:

- Have patience. People aren't going to warm up that easily so stick to your guns.
- Get avid supporters and a great team to work with. Without a good team and support you won't be able to get very far.
- Build relationships with teachers.
- Make sure to have a voice in your school.
- Kids listen to each other more than adults. The biggest way to change kids is to have them listen to one another.
- Having students involved helps get the other students on board—students influence students.
- Keep going and push until you get it done.
- Look for someone to support you.
- No idea is too big.

Conclusions: Young people can and should play leadership roles in shaping policies and practices to improve health in their schools and communities. Young people are in a unique position to serve as role models and leaders which can help facilitate healthy behaviors in ways that are different from adults.

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