

Guide to
**Youth-Adult
Partnerships**
for
Democratic Schools

A way to make all voices heard

New York City Public Schools

Kamar H. Samuels

Chancellor

Danielle Giunta

First Deputy Chancellor

Miatheresa Pate

Chief Academic Officer

Cordelia Veve

Chief

Curriculum and Instruction

Department of Social Studies & Civics

Brian Carlin, Director

Jenna Ryall, Director of Civics for All

Meghan Casey, Rosy Castillo, Jesse

Colantuono, Chris Curmi-Hall, Amanda

Hicks, Marc Lapointe, Guy Rouchon, Margie

Schikman, Joseph Schmidt, Caitlyn Wilson-

Steiner

Mikva Challenge

Verneé Green

Chief Executive Officer

Jill Bass

Chief Strategy Officer

April Buckner

Chief Program Officer

Cristina Pérez

Senior Partner Site Director

Kenneth Porter

Partner Site Director

Kevin Lewis

Partner Site Director

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**Special thanks to the youth committee for their hard work and
incredible insight and wisdom as co-authors of this guide:**

Abby E., Affelia S., Ali J., Emily V.B., Fatima B., Hadisa T., Jaiden T.,

Jenna H., Julio Z., Mariam J., Alex S., and Zarif A.

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Overview

History and context

New York City Public Schools and Mikva Challenge believe that authentic youth voice is an essential component of a thriving school community and a critical element of preparing our young people to participate fully in our democracy. Each school year students across New York City demonstrate their capacity to lead, contribute, and partner with adults in meaningful ways. This work is well represented by the committed NYCPS Chancellor’s Student Advisory Council and the dedicated NYCPS Student Voice Manager who have continually elevated the importance of student participation in citywide decision-making. Their leadership has helped establish a foundation upon which we now seek to build a more coherent and equitable system of youth–adult partnership across New York City Public Schools.

Commitment to equity

Powerful examples of young people engaging alongside educators to shape school culture, strengthen community, and address issues impacting their daily lives exist across New York City Public Schools. This shows what is possible when students are positioned as partners rather than subjects, and when adults create space for young people to bring their insight, creativity, and lived experience to have a positive impact.

Too often, however, this work is limited to certain schools, certain classrooms, or certain adults who understand the transformative potential of elevating youth voice and engaging in youth-adult partnerships. In other instances, students are unintentionally tokenized, invited to the table without being given the opportunity to influence the conversation or shape the outcome.

These examples remind us how much intentionality and systemwide support are required to build environments where all students are heard, respected, included, and empowered.



The vision

New York City Public Schools is committed to moving beyond episodic examples of youth-adult partnerships and towards a coherent and sustainable model embedded throughout every school. This means creating structures that honor student expertise, providing opportunities for young people to participate in shared decision-making, and cultivating a culture where students’ perspectives are treated as essential, rather than supplemental, to the work of school improvement.

The creation of democratic classrooms and school structures that integrate youth voice and expertise while allowing young people (of all ages) to practice democracy is a goal of the district. This guide is a piece of that larger vision, as are the Chancellor’s Student Advisory Council, student advisory councils at the district level, Participatory Budgeting, authentic student councils, Student Voice Committees, Project Soapbox, and Take Action! projects.

How to use this guide

This guide is designed to support the cultivation of democratic classrooms and schools through the integration of youth voice in classrooms and schools. It offers educators, school leaders, and young people a clear understanding of the district’s approach to youth-adult partnerships. This guide can be applied to youth at all grade levels. It includes the developmental considerations that ensure students are engaged appropriately and meaningfully, and provided with concrete structures, strategies, and examples that help bring this work to life.

Our goal is to build a system in which all students see themselves as valued contributors to their school community, and where adults are equipped to cultivate the skills, mindsets, and relationships necessary to honor and elevate student voice in every grade, every classroom, and every school across the city.

How this guide was created

Appropriately, this guide was written through a collaboration between youth and adults and integrates both perspectives. Thirteen students from twelve NYC public schools collaborated with the Mikva Challenge and Civics for All teams from Summer 2025 through the 2025–2026 school year to develop this iteration of the guide, seeking peer and adult feedback throughout the process.

Previously created resources for youth-adult partnerships created by the NYCPS Chancellor’s Student Advisory Council served as inspiration for parts of the guide.



This guide is being published digitally to enable continuous refinement and revision as more voices join the conversation.

If you have questions or suggestions, please email civicsforall@schools.nyc.gov.



Youth-adult partnerships and authentic youth participation

Why is it important for young people and adults to work in partnership?

The incorporation of these partnerships is a commitment and an investment. We believe that decisions made with students rather than to them, are ultimately more effective, making the investment worth the time. Additionally, the process helps young people develop their own agency, efficacy, and leadership skills and improves the overall culture and climate at a school.

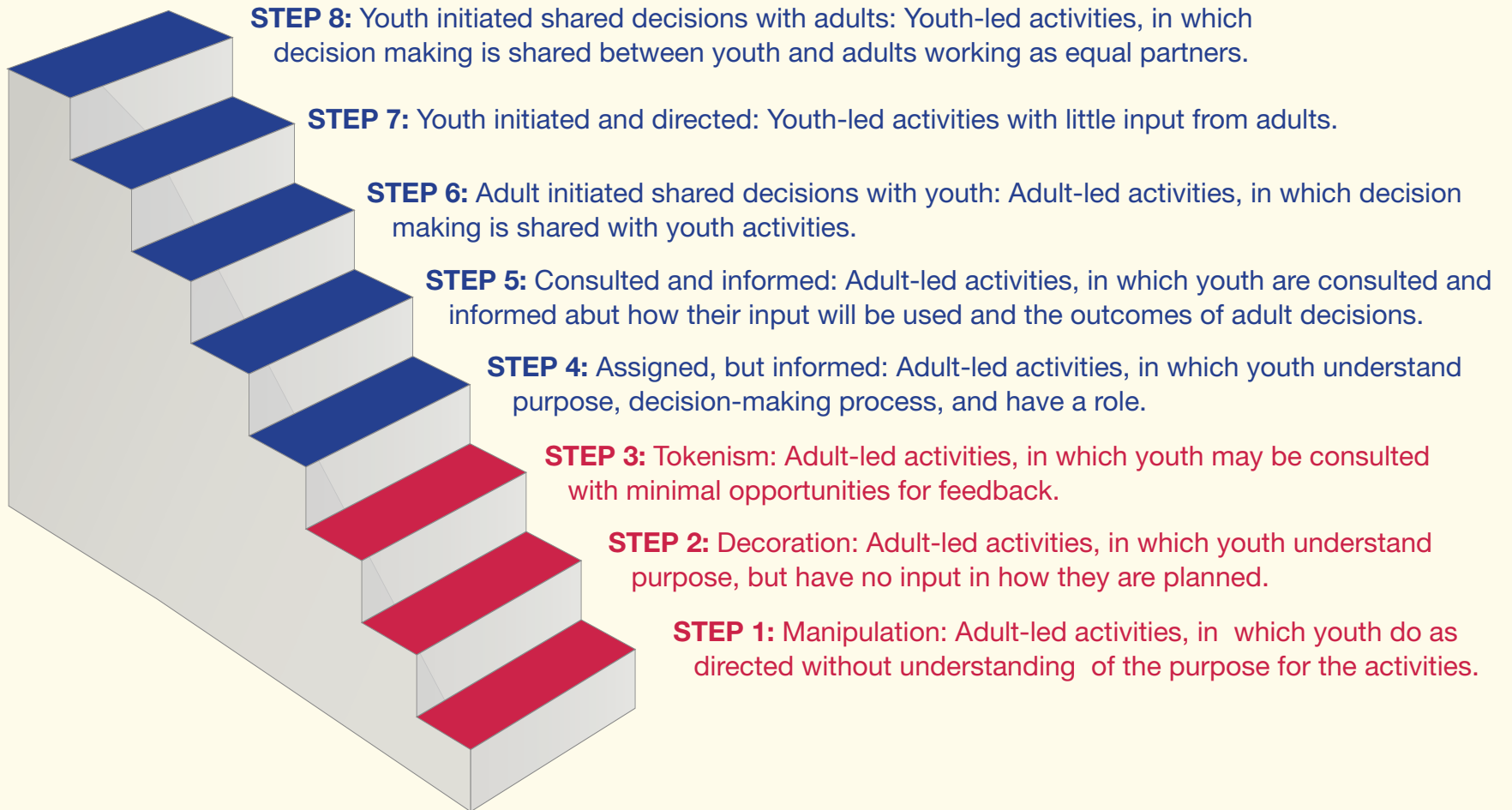
Schools are not traditionally structured in a way that cultivates shared power and collaboration in this way. Engaging youth voice in decision making ensures that concerns of youth are taken seriously. Young people enter school with a wide range of lived experiences that shape their understanding of the world. They also experience school differently than adults. Their contributions are essential to developing schools that are responsive to their needs and perspectives.

Hart's Ladder of Participation

This guide uses Hart's Ladder of Participation, developed by Roger Hart for UNICEF in 1997, as a foundational framework to discuss the ways in which youth and adults can exist as partners. The ladder includes 5 levels of participation and 3 levels of non-participation.

The authors of this guide iterated the ladder to a staircase with the rationale that a staircase can hold groups of people on the same step at the same time while a ladder implies a single individual climbing, and the authors felt that this work is collective, not individual. In addition, the authors assert that if someone were to fall off a ladder, they would have to start from the beginning, while on a staircase, it is possible to step backwards just one step. It is possible to skip steps on a staircase, implying that someone does not necessarily need to take each step towards their goal.







STEPS 1–3:

Non-participation

“Being on steps 1–3 of the ladder can feel frustrating or disappointing. You might feel like your voice doesn’t matter, like you’re just being used to make something look good. It can also feel confusing if you’re invited to be part of something but not actually doing anything.”

Step 1: Manipulation

Adults use youth to support causes without youth understanding the purpose.

Manipulation is when adults use students to promote their own initiatives and ideas for their own benefit while creating the illusion that the work was student-led. This is often done without youth consent, input, or understanding of the project or cause.

Step 2: Decoration

Youth are used as props to bolster a cause, with little understanding of the planning.

Decoration exploits the appearance and presence of young people to appear youth-friendly without their meaningful involvement in the planning or decision-making process.

Step 3: Tokenism

Youth seem to have a voice but have no real choice in what they do or how they participate.

Youth are given a superficial or symbolic role to give the appearance of youth voice, but without any decision making power. Similar to steps one and two, students are only there for show and to advance an adult agenda.

Examples

- A group of teens are invited to a press conference and stand behind the speakers but are not informed what the press conference is about, nor do they have any role or contribution.
- A young person is put on a panel without giving them a meaningful role or preparation.
- A student is asked to sit on a planning committee for a school event but, during the meetings, the adults monopolize the conversation and never engage the student's opinion. The student is included in photos and announcements even though they were not really able to contribute.

Impact

Tokenism, decoration, and manipulation most often result in students withdrawing from attempts to participate due to feeling undervalued and taken advantage of. These forms of non-participation are never appropriate towards building meaningful partnerships. They are provided here as examples of what to avoid.



STEP 4: Assigned but informed

“It feels good to know why I’m doing something and if I understand and agree with it then I would want to be involved but if I don’t agree with it and aren’t allowed to voice my opinion it is discouraging.”

Youth understand the purpose and have a defined role, but the project is adult-initiated.

Young people have been assigned a task and understand the intent, but have limited influence or input. Some degree of youth ownership is possible if youth are given meaningful roles and choose to participate of their own will, but tasks can easily slip into one of the steps of non-participation if adults are not careful.

Examples

- A teacher chooses student roles for a group project instead of letting them choose their own roles. She explains that she wanted the students to step out of their comfort zone and try on a role they might not pick for themselves. Even though students lack choice, they understand intent behind the decision.
- The principal asks youth to share information in a school assembly on the new safety policy in the school. While the students did not write the policy, they are informed of the purpose and agree that it is important and that they will participate.
- In an effort to get students more civically engaged, a teacher plans a service learning project for students to participate in without involving them in deciding what the project will be.

When is this appropriate?

This step is distinct from Steps 1 through 3 because young people understand the “why” behind the activity, even if there is not space for them to design or run it. Many mandated tasks fall on this step. There are school decisions that are not open to debate, choice, or input. It is also appropriate for a task to be at this step when young people are being introduced to something for the first time and require clear direction. This step can be an important skill building step as young people prepare for higher-level, shared decision making.

Impact

A key element of Step 4 is ensuring that youth are informed about the intent and purpose of what they are being asked to participate in. Youth, like adults, want clear expectations and context for engagement. This step can feel frustrating for young people when they perceive an opportunity for choice and it is not provided, or if they are not adequately informed about the purpose behind the task. Being clear up front, as well as explaining why there may be no room for choice, can yield much better results than sending mixed messages.



STEP 5:

Consulted and informed

“Step 5 makes me feel included and excited to speak my ideas. It feels good because adults listen to you and you feel included, even if they make a different decision in the end.”

The project is designed and run by adults, but youth understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously.

Youth act as consultants for adults on a project that is run by adults but youth understand this process and their opinions are treated seriously.

Examples

- A teacher asks a class what theme they want for spirit week. The students share ideas, and the teacher explains how she will make her final choice. The students know their ideas are being considered, even though the teacher will make the final decision.
- A school principal asks students for ideas on renovating the playground. Students suggest a climbing wall, garden, and basketball court. The principal shares the final decision with the students, explaining how their ideas were incorporated. Students see their suggestions reflected in the plan and understand why some ideas were not possible.
- A student representative participates on the School Leadership Team and their input is solicited. Adults on the team make final decisions, but student input is included and considered.

When is this appropriate?

When adults are genuinely looking to seek and implement youth voice and expertise, while balancing other considerations such as budget, regulation, or outside factors.

Impact

Consulting students but ultimately not sharing decision-making power can have mixed results. Students can feel ignored or unvalued if their input is not clearly reflected in the final decision. Transparency, clear expectations, and clear communication are critical to mitigating disappointment or frustration. Feeling heard and considered is the first step to deeper participation. This step can be necessary at times but should not be overused, especially when deeper levels of participation may be possible.



STEP 6:

Adult-initiated & shared decisions

“Step 6 feels good because your voice matters but not too much responsibility falls on one group. It allows me the ability to collaborate with my peers and adults effectively.”

Projects are initiated by adults, but decision-making is shared with youth.

Although adults initiate the process, this step fosters deeper collaboration, mutual respect, and empowers youth to contribute. Adults and youth work together as partners, each bringing their experience and expertise to the collaboration.

Examples

- A teacher is frustrated with students turning in late homework. She engages the class in a problem solving conversation, explaining the impact that late work has on teaching and learning. The students suggest allowing two days rather than one to turn in an assignment since many of them work after school, have homework from other classes, or have other responsibilities. Both students and the teacher agree that allowing multiple days to turn in an assignment is reasonable and they agree to it.
- A school establishes a Student Voice Committee so that students have a voice in school policy. A Student Voice Committee is a diverse group of students that survey their peers to identify the top school issues and partner with their school administration to address them.

- A school receives funding that can be spent through Participatory Budgeting. A teacher learns the steps of the Participatory Budgeting process in order to guide students through it, but the youth work in committees, make the decisions, and run the process.

When is this appropriate?

This step is well suited to situations where students have the capacity to lead but could use the support of adult allies to get started, or when the initiative is something adults are concerned about and want to engage students in the solution.

Impact

This step allows adults and students the opportunity to develop respect and trust in their relationship. Students are able to appreciate the mix of genuine decision making paired with guidance and support. There is a risk of adults leading the process and decision making instead of decisions being shared.



STEP 7:

Youth-initiated & directed

“Through experiencing this level of participation, I have developed leadership skills and confidence in decision making.”

Youth initiate and run projects, with adults in a supportive, non-directive role.

Youth initiate and lead in Step 7, which requires an environment where young people are trusted to take charge and make meaningful decisions. The role of adults in this step is to provide additional support when requested. The challenge in this step is for the adults to hang back and not step in, allowing students to learn from experience.

Examples

- Students meet with their principal about installing bike racks at the school to encourage bike transportation. The students research options and present information gathered about the cost and process for installing a bike rack to the principal.
- Students start a recycling club at school. They plan the meetings, organize events, and run everything themselves. They have a teacher sponsor who provides support when students request it.
- Students in a government class are inspired to register their peers to vote and get more young people to the polls. To do this, they organize a voter education and voter registration drive, asking their teacher for support.

When is this appropriate?

This step is appropriate when adults have a high level of trust in their relationship with young people and when the action taken does not require adult involvement or decision making. Youth also have a high level of trust in adults that they can ask for support without fear that adults will take over. This is an excellent opportunity for youth to practice leadership, including hitting bumps along the way and the lessons learned through that experience.

Impact

The opportunity for youth to execute a task fully on their own can build pride and confidence. Students experience agency and responsibility through the execution of youth-led directives. Adults are present for support and safety, which is foundational to building a trusting partnership. Even if the is not 100% successful at accomplishing its objectives, students learn critical knowledge and skills and adults practice fostering shared responsibility and belonging in the school community.



STEP 8:

Youth-Initiated, shared decisions with adults

“This step is motivating because youth and adults work as true equals. Both share ideas, make decisions together, and respect each other’s roles. It is a strong partnership where everyone’s voice matters. It feels fair.”

Youth initiate projects and invite adults to share in the decision-making as equal partners.

In this step, young people initiate and work as equals with adults. Adults are partners, not back up or support.

Examples

- The Student Voice Committee meets with the school administration team at the end of the year to discuss the student initiated project and the future of the program. The administrative team provides ideas to keep it going.
- Students propose a committee at their school to explore the homework policy. The committee is made up of both adults and youth, each group having equal voice and input into the discussion.
- Students are studying about food waste in class and conduct research on how their school produces a lot of food waste. They bring their concern to the principal and work with the appropriate staff to identify ways to lower the amount of food waste at school.

When is this appropriate?

This step is appropriate when trust is developed between adults and youth. This step is most successful when youth have time, resources, capacity, and faith in the youth-adult partnership.

Impact

When adults share power and access, and engage with youth as partners, young people develop an increased belief in their power to create change.



Reflection questions

Consider the reflection questions below as you explore ways in which your school could build stronger youth-adult relationships, integrate more youth voice in school decision making, and become more democratic.

Youth-adult partnerships in the classroom:

- In what ways is the classroom space youth friendly? How do you know? Have youth been included in the design, decoration, or layout of the classroom?
- What strategies do you use to assess classroom success?
 - a. To what extent is youth voice included in those strategies?
 - b. How might youth be engaged in ways that move up the staircase?
- At what step are students currently engaged in any of the following:
 - a. Establishment of classroom rules/norms
 - b. Choice in projects/assignments
 - c. Choice and design of formative assessments
 - d. Progress reporting

Youth-adult partnerships in the school:

- In what areas of the school are students already initiating projects and making decisions? How can your school community use what you've learned in those areas to create more spaces for youth participation?
- At what step are students currently engaged in any of the following and is there an opportunity to move them up to a higher level of engagement?
 - a. School budgeting
 - b. Hiring of staff
 - c. Classroom walk throughs
 - d. Attendance and discipline policy
- In what ways are adults actively working to be inclusive of diverse youth opinions and school experiences and invite youth participation?



- To what end do adults invite young people to participate?
Do adults want youth consultation only or can youth play a larger role? Have adults made it clear to the youth what role they will play?
- What current barriers are preventing youth voice and engagement in the school?
- What beliefs do you hold about the value of youth voice? How are these beliefs showing up in the school community?
- What opportunities currently exist for youth voice to shift from consulting to participating?





Suggested activities for building youth-adult partnerships

Below are examples schools could use to engage youth voice and participation and shared decision making in school improvement. The examples range from Step 5 (where youth are consulted) to Step 8 (where youth are initiating projects and partnering with adults).

- Student surveys
- Youth designed and distributed student surveys
- Focus groups with youth
- Youth designed and led focus groups
- Participatory Budgeting
- Student Voice Committees
- Student participation in class walk throughs
- Student participation in hiring interviews
- Restorative Justice programs
- Town hall forum discussions on school issues
- Student participation on issue committees (e.g., attendance, etc.)
- Allow student choice in projects (content and format)



