



Youth Climate Action in Toronto



Best Practices to Support Youth Climate Action in Toronto

May 15, 2023

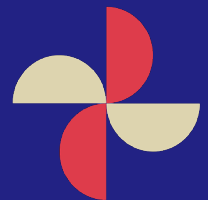


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
What we've learned so far	4
Civic Youth Engagement Pathways in North America Today	6
Youth Councils	6
Youth Engagement Programs (recurring, series)	7
Youth Workshops and Showcases (one-time)	9
City and Youth-led Organization Collaborations	10
Land Education	11
Key Principles for Engagement	13
Principle #1: Let youth lead	13
Principle #2: Be inclusive and equitable	15
Principle #3: Make engagement fun	17
Principle #4: Partner up	18
Principle #5: Reach young people where they are	20
Principle #6: Engage young people as meaningfully as you would other stakeholders	21
Principle #7: Provide resources to build capacity	24
Principle #8: Create community and use trusted messengers	25
Next Steps	27
References	28

Royalty free photos courtesy of Unsplash

Authors

Laura Tozer, Shalen Chen, and John Pierre Craig, University of Toronto

Recommended citation: Tozer, L., Chen, S., and Craig, J.P. (2023). *Best Practices to Support Youth Climate Action in Toronto*. University of Toronto and the City of Toronto.

Land Acknowledgement

Tkaronto is on the land and waters of the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee Nations, the Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Tkaronto is covered by the Dish with One Spoon wampum belt treaty between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee nations, an agreement open to all for the peaceful sharing and stewarding of these lands. Tkaronto is also covered by Treaty 13, established in 1805 between the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the Government of Canada. This land acknowledgement is important not only to acknowledge the peoples on whose land the City of Toronto is located but also because climate change intrinsically connects to the settler-Indigenous Peoples relationship. Working towards climate justice means righting relations between settlers and Indigenous Peoples and transforming relationships between humans and the land, waters, and the more-than-human world.





INTRODUCTION

As a part of the TransformTO Net Zero Strategy, the City of Toronto and a team from the University of Toronto together with Toronto's youth leaders and community are developing a strategy to support broader youth engagement in climate action. This report is an overview of what's been done so far and how it will inform the consultation and strategy building process going forward.

Work to date includes a jurisdictional scan and literature review of relevant best-practices, as well as interviews with relevant stakeholders including City staff, youth climate activists and youth engagement specialists.

Our findings will inform the upcoming year of consultation and strategy building by identifying:

- processes, messages, and principles we should pilot during consultation
- options for resulting programs that we should ask Toronto youth about

The first section of this report provides an overview of potential pathways for civic youth engagement in climate action drawing on examples from existing programs in North America. The second section outlines key principles to support broader youth engagement in climate action. The final section outlines our next steps. This report is the first step before a year-long engagement process with youth (ages 10–25) to develop a Youth Climate Action Engagement Strategy for Toronto.

What we've learned so far

Young people have strategic power when it comes to action on climate change, but they have rarely been made to feel powerful.

Supporting broader youth engagement in climate action will help them to overcome feelings of powerlessness and that their personal actions won't make a difference.

Young people are taking action on climate.

Across Toronto, young people are already leading climate actions and calling on governments and institutions to do what is necessary to respond to the climate crisis.

Still, many young people don't know where to start when it comes to acting on the climate crisis.

Young people are busy and don't know how climate action fits into their lives. Climate information is not communicated in relatable ways and it's not clear how they can make a difference.

Young people are concerned about climate change, and it's taking a toll on their mental health.

Young people have feelings of anger, abandonment, and betrayal by older generations (1). They are less skeptical about climate change than adult populations, yet many studies have found that youth were struggling with anxiety, stress, and despair in relation to climate change. A survey of 1,000 Canadian young people found that 56% reported “feeling afraid, sad, anxious, and powerless”, and 78% said that climate change impacts their overall mental health (2). Youth reported that they believe governments should be responsible to create climate solutions, but they hold low levels of trust towards governments and political processes (3).

Youth are interested in civic and political issues, but encounter barriers to getting involved.

There are multiple pathways for youth civic engagement, including public policy consultation, community coalition involvement, youth in organizational decision making, youth organizing and activism, and school-based service learning (4). But there are barriers to that involvement. In CityHive's What Youth Want report (2022), a survey of youth in Metro Vancouver showed that the most commonly reported barriers to youth civic engagement were time constraints, a lack of faith in civic action to address the issues they care about, and a lack of information or knowledge of engagement opportunities.

Youth engagement in climate action should focus on stage of life, not just age.

It should also recognize that not all youth are climate activists or are looking to take action in the same way – “We’re not all Greta!” shared one youth climate activist interviewed for this report.

CIVIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PATHWAYS IN NORTH AMERICA TODAY

Our research on existing youth engagement programs in North America will help consultation going forward. The following highlights some of our learning.

Youth Councils

What: Municipal youth climate councils serve as a platform for youth to contribute their voices and recommendations to municipal climate actions.

Where: In Canada: Cornwall (ON), Campbell River (BC), and Toronto. U.S. cities including Los Angeles (California), Portland (Oregon), San Antonio (Texas) and Boise (Idaho).

How: Many of these council programs appoint youth council members for a one- or two-year term via an application, interview, and internal approval process. The programs are often designed to connect youth with municipal boards, committees, and leaders, improve their knowledge of municipal civic processes, and enable them to provide

recommendations and feedback for city climate policies, plans, and priorities.

Programs like the San Antonio Youth Engagement Council prioritize the professional development of youth council members by aiming to improve their communication skills and offering networking opportunities. The city of Boise's program connects council members with students to design and deliver a youth-led climate action project within a one-year term.

Some participants and supporters have concerns about whether these councils are accessible for youth from underrepresented communities, and how much influence these councils have on municipal decision-making. Within the list of youth climate councils we identified, only the youth council serving Los Angeles County has a clear formal ordinance that defines the purpose, duties, and authorities of the youth council within their bylaws.

Youth Engagement Programs (recurring, series)

What: Recurring youth engagement programs offer regular opportunities for youth to participate in civic climate action, gain a deeper understanding of the issues they are passionate about, and initiate their own climate projects. Within our review, the majority of recurring local youth climate and sustainability programs are led by external non-profits, schools, or organizations. While these programs are not run directly by the city, most focus on educating and centre on local climate initiatives that are relevant to municipal, regional, or provincial climate plans. Notable examples include the [Fraser Basin Council Youth program](#), [Essex Region Youth Environmental Ambassador program](#),



and the [Community Climate Council](#) (Peel Region, ON).

Many initiatives also use school-based learning. The [EcoSchools program](#) offered across the province, including by the Toronto District School Board, promotes learning and teaching resources for students to learn about climate change and take action. The TDSB has also developed a [Climate Action Guide](#) to support students who want to do something but may not know how to get started. This can be a good entry point to directly engage with youth in elementary and high school on climate action. University students can take climate action through service-based or experiential learning, as well as through campus activism.

Where: Examples of city-led programs that offer recurring opportunities for youth to get engaged include [Metro Vancouver's Youth4Action program](#), and the [Dufferin County's Youth Climate Activation Circle](#). Examples of university-based programs include [the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions](#) and the [UBC Climate Hub](#).

How: The Metro Vancouver's Youth4Action program targets high school students across the region to develop skills and knowledge to inspire sustainability and livability. Within this program they offer regular workshops and events, leadership clinics and ambassador programs for students who are interested in getting more involved.

In Dufferin County, the new Youth Climate Activation Circle offers a paid opportunity for youth 16-25 to become an ambassador to deliver a climate action project of their choosing, and support to pursue green career pathways.

In BC, the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions' (Victoria, BC) internship program is focused on advancing climate solutions. UBC Climate Hub is a student-led initiative at UBC supporting a range of projects, including training university facilitators to work with high school students on climate change and a Climate Justice Research Collaborative where undergraduate students can work with faculty and graduate students on research projects.

Capacity building and resource provision are essential to support broader youth engagement in climate action. The City of Toronto has partnered with the Toronto District School Board to offer Youth Climate Action Grants where up to \$1,000 per project is available for student-led projects or events that reduce GHGs in their schools or communities. The City of Portland offers grants to support programs that expose youth to climate career opportunities and skill-building opportunities.



Youth Workshops and Showcases (one-time)

What: Youth workshops, events, and showcases can offer smaller commitment, low-barrier participation opportunities for youth. These opportunities offer an easier introduction or ‘entry point’ for youth to understand climate change and city climate initiatives. There are a diverse mix of engagement methods for these events, including climate art showcasing, public booths or workshops, in-classroom engagement at schools, online programs, and outdoor education.

How: An example of an art-based showcase event was the Youth are Climate Leaders showcase in Vernon, BC. This event aimed to showcase student’s description of their vision of, and solutions for, the future in any creative format (written, visual etc.). The city reached out to youth by engaging teachers in Vernon to discuss climate change in class and support their students to work on a project submission for the Vernon Climate Action plan.

In Vancouver, the Young Planners Program engaged with youth across Vancouver through each of the phases of drafting the Vancouver Plan. At each phase, city staff led a mix of different engagement opportunities including youth urban design studio sessions, arts-based youth workshops, and an online youth survey. In Toronto, youth were engaged on the topic of climate change in the development of Toronto’s official plan called Our Plan Toronto.

In Mississauga’s Climate Change Youth Challenge: “Mission to Earth”, the city engaged with high school and postsecondary students to enact their climate action plan, and challenged students to develop sustainable solutions along the themes of Electric City, Connected Communities, Nature and Wellness, and Circular Waste. This six-month program connected students with mentors, explored the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and concluded with a Youth Summit event to celebrate and showcase their projects.

City and Youth-led Organization Collaborations

What: An increasingly popular method of civic youth engagement is the collaboration between city staff and a youth-led organization to create an engagement opportunity for youth both to learn and to act on climate change. Examples of collaborations include co-creating youth programs that focus on outputs framed around the city's climate action needs or gathering youth input through surveys and events.

Where: Key youth-led organizations that are or have been actively involved with municipalities include [CityHive](#), [EcoRise](#), and [Evergreen](#).

CityHive & City of Vancouver – [Youth Climate Innovation Lab](#)

In a collaboration between youth-led non-profit CityHive, the City of Vancouver, and other community partners, the Youth Climate Innovation Lab engages cohorts

of youth ages 18 – 30 to explore and co-create action to respond to climate change. It supports youth to build practical skills that they can use to take action in their community. It places youth and decision-makers at the same table with the aim of fostering co-creation and lasting influence of youth lived experience and perspectives on climate action. CityHive released a report called [How Municipalities and Youth can Co-Create Climate Action and Solutions](#).

EcoRise – [City Partnerships](#) (U.S.)

As a youth-education non-profit, EcoRise focuses on climate action education, and supported the development of [youth climate councils](#) in San Antonio, Houston, and Austin. Their aim with these programs is to support the next generation of climate leaders by developing greater youth insight and collaboration opportunities between youth and decision makers.

Evergreen – Future City Builders

The Evergreen Future City Builders program invites a cohort of 25 youth ages 18-29 from specific municipalities across Canada to design innovative concepts addressing an urban need in their communities. Past programs have been held in Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge, and Guelph.

Land Education

What: Land education, or Indigenous-led land-based education, reflects Indigenous Peoples’ traditional and intergenerational ways of learning and being that involve reciprocal relationships with the land, waters, and the more-than-human world. Relationality in land education and land-based education fosters practices of care and stewardship, and is a way to take action on climate.

In the Yellowhead Institute’s report on Indigenous land-based education, they point out the profound impacts Indigenous-led land-based programs can have.

These programs foster the wellness and cultural pride of Indigenous youth, enhance the health and knowledge systems of Indigenous communities and nations, and support social and environmental health more broadly. As the report states, there is great “potential for Indigenous-led land-based programming to effect social change for the benefit of all people and living beings in the context of reconciliation and global climate justice”.

Where: Most recently, more collaborations have developed between universities and Indigenous nations and organizations for land education and land-based education around food sovereignty, rematriated lands, and green infrastructures.

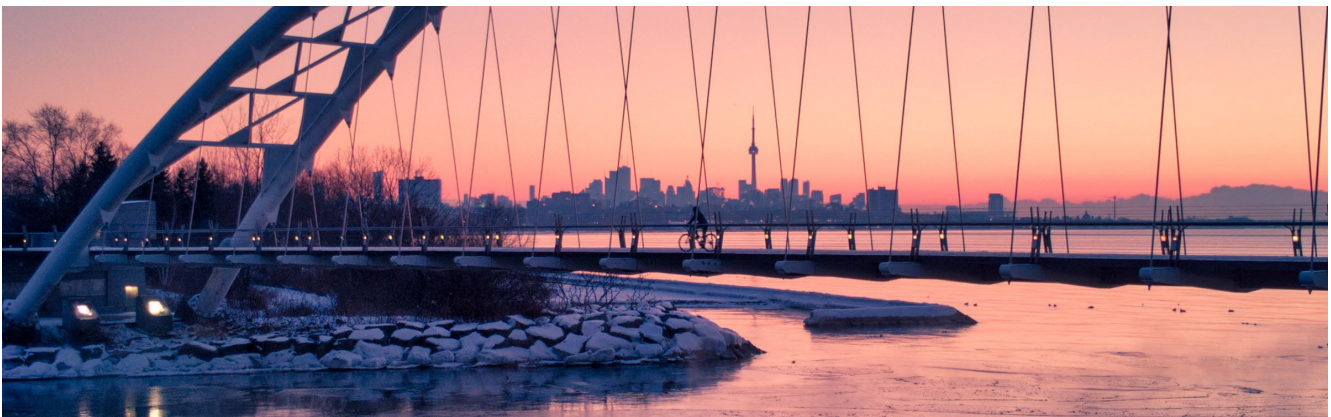
At the University of Guelph, Indigenous scholars and community agencies have created programs like the Wisahkotewinowak garden for youth to learn traditional foodways and medicines from Indigenous elders. At University of Toronto Scarborough, the Indigenous Garden offers a space for students to be mentored in Indigenous

agriculture. At the University of Toronto, the Tkaronto CIRCLE Lab has organized youth land education programs and collaboratively designed the Land Education Dreambook as a toolkit for groups and organizations to create their own youth programs. Other collaborative land-based programs include Nikibii Dawadinna Giigwag, a green infrastructure training program for Indigenous youth, guided by Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers.

Many other groups, nations, and organizations deliver Indigenous land

education but there is a need for more funding from all levels of government to address resource constraints arising from ongoing systemic injustices against First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

Diverse engagement methods are needed to support youth-led climate action by different communities. Land-based education “continues to be a fundamental element of Indigenous knowledge transmission” (5) and can be used to foster Indigenous youth climate action.



KEY PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Our work to date has helped us to identify principles for engagement to guide our consultation process:

1. Let youth lead
2. Be inclusive and equitable
3. Make engagement fun
4. Partner up
5. Reach young people where they are
6. Engage young people as meaningfully as you would other stakeholders
7. Provide resources to build capacity
8. Create community and use trusted messengers

Principle #1: Let youth lead

Youth-led approaches work best (6). Young people should be put in positions of influence. Youth climate councils can exert influence on civic governance and engaging and collaborating with existing local youth coalition groups can also be effective (7). One study on creating space for youth civic action identified four core elements for fostering spaces for youth civic action: 1) create physical space and organizational roles for youth, 2) provide dedicated adult allies, 3) facilitate critical education and skill building for community action, and 4) integrate action and reflection (8).

“The more you empower a young person, the more they'll feel free themselves to voice [their concern]. They won't wait for a consultation, and they'll voice their concern in whatever means they find.”

– Youth Climate Activist





In the examples of youth councils in LA, Portland and other cities, formalized youth councils seem to work well in providing physical space and resources for young people to organize and contribute to civic climate policies. Youth councils should use a democratic process with youth members and communities in deciding how new members are selected and elected (7).

Activities should focus on empowering young people to be involved in city processes that are not just ‘youth-focused’. Building on a framing and focus on climate justice, an intersectional approach to youth engagement should recognize that young people are affected and care about a breadth of different civic issues including but not limited to housing affordability, education, transportation, and more (7).

Transparency and accountability are key principles to follow when seeking to enable young people to lead the way on city-wide climate action in Toronto. Young people need clarity on why they are being engaged and they should be able to see how the engagement will lead to impact. Even with kids under 12, “show them an experience where their feedback actually has mattered and shaped the outcome so they can see that happening in real time” (Youth Engagement Specialist).

**“But if you can demonstrate that you're having an impact, wow!
They get so excited.” – Youth Engagement Specialist**

Toronto's Youth Engagement Strategy recommends working towards both short-term impacts and long-term change: “For youth engagement to be most impactful, it needs to include both quick actions and actions that focus on longer-term, systemic change” (6). For climate action, this can mean demonstrating successes along the way since “having some early small wins is motivating and engaging” (Youth Engagement Specialist). Engagement can look for opportunities for small wins in addition to working towards systemic change.

Principle #2: Be inclusive and equitable

The diverse demographics of youth are an asset to civic climate action. Engagement processes should be inclusive to youth of all genders, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and abilities (7). Cities should work with communities and local organizations to identify ways to include underrepresented voices (7).

**“When you have diverse voices in a room, in a conference space or in activism, it changes the tone, and it changes what you focus on.”
– Youth Climate Activist**

In the existing engagement approaches identified in the previous section, inclusion and equity are often considered in reference to intergenerational equity with less focus on racial or class injustices. Research has shown that, “when compared to their white Canadian peers, the participation of traditionally marginalized youth in formal political structures is generally low” and that “the uneven representation of racialized groups in civic structures is not because of their lack of activity” (9). Youth are interested in systemic and institutional change, however, often encounter participation barriers such as overcoming stereotypes (9).

Community service agencies working with Hispanic residents in Toronto found engagement on environmental topics was generally low, and key barriers to engaging with environmental issues included economic marginalization and participation, narrow understanding of what counts as 'environment' or 'environmentalism', reliance on “expert” and scientific knowledge, and the perceived whiteness of the environmental movement (10).

For any youth engagement initiative, the team itself needs representation and connection to different communities. One approach is to find additional partners from communities and work with them on a regular basis. Youth report their motivation to get involved in community actions is often spurred through positive peer and mentor relationships. This speaks to the important role of identity representation in leadership (9).

“We’re always interested in getting people to the table who aren't typically engaged... Equity deserving communities [are] underrepresented in engagement processes more broadly. So, we're always interested in reaching those groups of people who are underrepresented in our processes.”

– Youth Engagement Specialist

Experts interviewed for this report recommended several specific strategies:

- Be deliberate about targeting activities to equity-deserving communities
- Use metrics and tools to target programs and to analyze whether they are likely reaching equity-deserving communities
- Reach youth through schools
- Offer food and free activities
- Offer compensation
- When creating councils or similar bodies using applications or lottery, control for demographic characteristics that reflect the community
- Work through people with strong community networks, such as youth outreach workers and youth service providers

The [Indigenous Climate Action Summary Report](#) on City of Toronto Climate Strategies offers insights relevant to engaging Indigenous youth in climate action. The report encourages respectful and meaningful engagement that respects Indigenous knowledge and practices. Indigenous views of the world do not have a separate category for ‘the environment’ – their thinking is more integrated. Including full cost accounting will lead to more holistic thinking about climate action. Ongoing engagement and real collaboration are needed, because preparing for what is coming is not just for ‘the experts’.

Another example is [Making Sense of Movements](#) (MSOM), which was a 15-week youth participatory visual research project from the Tkaronto CIRCLE Lab at the University of Toronto. MSOM worked with youth ages 14-18 who identified as Black, Indigenous, or both Black and Indigenous using artistic methods. The project “engage[d] Black and Indigenous youth in thinking about the influence of social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Idle No More in their relationships to Toronto *as a place*”(11). Youth co-researchers took photos of places in Toronto, created maps of their own communities, and created graphic novels (11).

Principle #3: Make engagement fun

More youth will participate when the activity is fun. Social media can be used as a tool to reach youth by informing them about what is happening and to request their input or feedback. Both [Apathy is Boring](#) and [CityHive](#) reports found that young people often rely on social media to follow news and current events. In the CityHive report, they recommend improved access to information through a variety of online media channels, and providing clear, plain-language resources to inform youth of what is happening. Youth engagement specialists have used social media competitions with cash prizes where youth create content that speaks to relevant themes, and engaged influencers for youth engagement on other topics.



“Make sure that the topic is something that they consider relevant to them, and that it's explained in a way that is relevant to them. You need to provide materials in formats that are interesting to use.”

– Youth Engagement Specialist

Engagement can use visual art, spoken word, and poetry to engage young people. Lakeshore Arts runs a [Youth Climate Collective](#) where young people 12-16 are mentored by art and climate professionals to take climate action. A recent cohort produced radio segments about climate topics. The City of Toronto's [Child Engagement Toolkit](#) includes an appendix of fun activities that have previously been used for child engagement.

Principle #4: Partner up

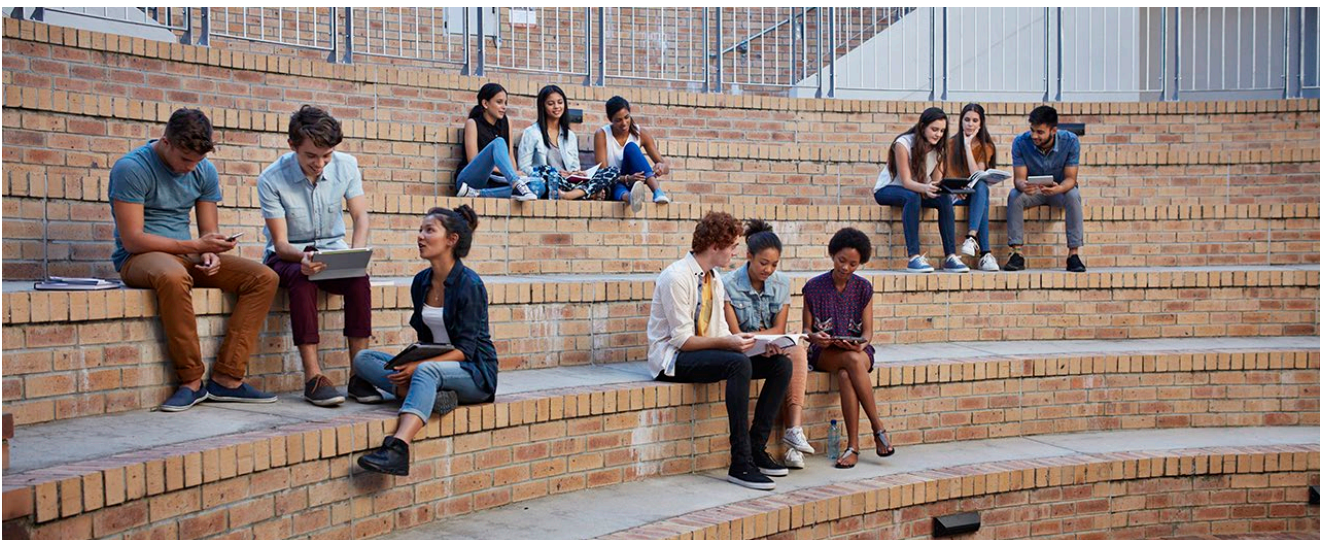
Collaborating with youth-led organizations can help create strong relationships between the city and youth, and reach a broader network. Mapping youth organizations, including ones that are not directly related to climate or sustainability, can be useful to create a more intersectional networking approach for future engagement. There are already many youth-led and youth-focused organizations doing good work.

Youth Climate Lab created an [Infiltration Manual](#) to provide youth with practical knowledge and tools on how to take climate action at the local level. With this resource, they also provide an [Asset Map](#) of Canadian municipal learning resources, opportunities of involvement, and guides to support youth to get involved with their city. Other examples of network maps of youth-related climate initiatives are the [Shake Up The Establishment \(SUTE\) System Map](#), and the [Community Climate Hub Map](#).

Youth-led organizations like Youth Climate Lab and others mentioned above are actively creating resources and opportunities to support youth involvement in civic climate action. Partnering with these organizations can lend cities strong support in identifying and engaging youth-based networks.

“We developed more meaningful partnerships with our core outreach partners. We paid those outreach partners, recognizing that many service organizations are small grassroots groups without a lot of money or staff resources and then we also involved them in the work – invited them to opportunities that we have or workshops or sector specific training or conferences. We ensure that they are actual partners in our program.”

– Youth Engagement Specialist



Principle #5: Reach young people where they are

Supporting youth climate action means reaching youth where they are – physically, mentally, and emotionally. Engagement should consider positive change and opportunities for a better future to be mindful of youth mental health and climate anxiety, as well as to avoid placing undue burden on youth to be climate leaders. Consistent with findings related to people of all ages, “a ‘gain’ frame (emphasizing the benefits of action, rather than the negative consequences of not acting) produces more positive attitudes toward taking action on climate change” when working with young people (3).

Learning about climate change is not just an intellectual exercise – it is also an emotional one. Climate education and engagement is not inherently empowering. One study in Australia found the majority of their participants felt their climate change education experiences were disempowering, reporting feelings of helplessness or limited power and agency (1). Other negative emotions and reflections included feelings of betrayal, generational gaps, disillusionment with authority, and grief relating to the future. The authors conclude that education is not enough to develop social consensus and action on climate change, and emphasize the importance of integrating cognitive, affective, and emotional experiences with climate change schooling (1).

Youth organizers see the way that eco-anxiety can fuel apathy when they are asked by other young people: “The world seems to be ending in five different ways. So why does this one matter?”
– Youth Climate Activist

Youth engagement in climate action can also use strategies to reach young people where they are physically, such as in schools, community centres, and post-secondary education institutions. School-based programs can help to reach a wider range of students, including

those who haven't already identified climate change as their priority. This might be accomplished through creating materials that can be used in classrooms, such as the [Our Plan Toronto climate change activities](#), or through programs that link students completing their volunteer hours with climate action activities.

Reaching young people where they are also means demonstrating the ways that climate action is aligned with their priorities. Surveys and reports led by organizations like [Apathy is Boring](#) and [CityHive](#) have identified what issues are most important to youth, what engagement methods youth want to see, and what potential changes can be useful. It is critical to communicate in accessible ways that are relatable to kids, for an example see the [TDSB Youth Climate Action Guide](#). Youth engagement experts recommend matching engagement to the objectives young people have. For example, if they want to improve their skill set, have them join the project team as a paid intern and if they are interested in something creative, pay them to make a short film that explores the topic from their perspective. For younger people, it can be helpful to take something abstract and make it concrete so that they can give meaningful input (e.g., thinking about changes to their neighbourhood).

Principle #6: Engage young people as meaningfully as you would other stakeholders

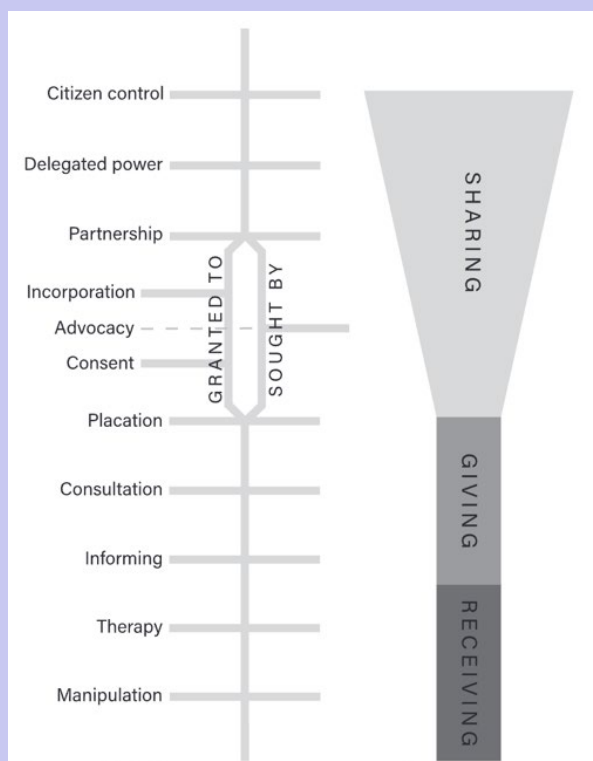
Decision makers should consider youth as important as other civil society actors, such as businesses and labour groups. In our review, we found that while youth organizations are commonly referred to in municipal climate action plans as important groups that should be consulted with, there is little mention of youth-centered engagement strategies or inclusion targets in these plans. Even in cities with formalized youth climate councils, climate action plans are lacking any explicit mention of youth engagement.

Planning approaches may create challenges when standard practices (or inadequate resources) lead to information sharing with youth rather than participation or when youth are not seen as actors that can be useful for planning efforts (12,13). While there were many successful one-off instances of youth participation for certain planning initiatives, youth participation is not often sustained (13).

Young people need “clarity in terms of ‘why am I being engaged? Why, what is this time for, and how is it going to be used on the other side of it?’ So that we can erase those feelings of tokenism, which is very, very common in the environmental space” – Youth Climate Activist

It can be difficult to convince young people they will be heard. Engagement can be time consuming and disheartening. Young people expect to be told how it is rather than listened to in ways that will generate impact. Previous experiences of tokenism may have harmed trust and increased feelings of powerlessness. Youth climate activists and engagement specialists interviewed for this report were unanimous in their call to avoid tokenism when engaging with youth.

“There's a quite a bit of tokenization that tends to happen... they'll put us on their website, and they'll ask us to do interviews for their YouTube videos. Or they'll let us join meetings. But then we don't actually get any meaningful contribution” – Youth Climate Activist



Arnstein's ladder of participation is a well-known theory of civic engagement. Botchway et al. (2019) identified three new 'rungs' on the ladder for youth participation: **consent, advocacy, and incorporation**. Their updated ladder also differentiates programs based on the "power flow", asking whether the program was designed for youth, or developed by youth. This framework may be useful for future youth program designs and analysis, especially in understanding the directionality of decision-making power for youth participation (14).

The bottom rungs do not represent meaningful engagement:

- Manipulation and therapy are when youth receive information from adults.
- Informing, consultation, and placation are when young people give adults information without control over how it is used.

Starting at consent, youth and adults start to share information and decision-making, with youth gaining more power as you ascend the rungs:

- On the left side of the fork, power flows from adults who are giving space to youth to participate through consent and incorporation.
- The right side of the fork shows power flowing from youth to adults and institutions, where youth are taking space for themselves to participate through advocacy.
- Young people gain more influence and decision-making power at higher rungs.

Principle #7: Provide resources to build capacity

Pathways for leadership development or career opportunities are crucial to support youth to create even more impact and to sustain ecosystems of youth climate action. As young people transition out of the movement as they grow up, they train the next generation of leaders. Opportunities include giving youth platforms to practice their leadership skills, including them in civic governance, and integrating climate education and action in school curriculums (7). It is important to support a leadership pipeline in order to sustain youth-led action through both organizational infrastructure and social capital among individuals (15). Our research found a particular emphasis on the need for sustained capacity over time.

“Create a backbone with community that people can come and go from with enough flexibility that it can support when people come with an idea and want to go for a grant” – Youth Climate Activist

Resources can support the ecosystem of youth-led climate action, but they can also support youth directly through payment for their time (e.g., internships, one-time compensation etc.). Paying for young people’s time is important in engagement and can address barriers, but creating community is also important to young people taking climate action.

Young people are busy and feel they have a lot of things to worry about already: “When you're a young person you have a lot more time than adults, but you also are using a lot of that time trying to figure out how things work. You need a lot more time to process. Their brain is just busy trying to grow up and figuring it out” (Youth Climate Activist). They are also bombarded as a highly sought-after target audience.

Finally, support through resources and capacity building can be used to help bring to fruition the ideas that youth have. For example, community development officers do this in their

communities on a range of topics. Creating a retail store, creating a performing arts festival, and creating a magazine were all examples shared by a youth engagement specialist. Support may mean help with accessing grants, logistical help booking space, project management, or booking meetings, “but the ideas really were driven by the youth leaders in the community” (Youth Engagement Specialist).

Principle #8: Create community and use trusted messengers

Why do youth join youth-led climate organizations? Why do they stay? Because of the community they find there. When people join youth-led climate organizations, they often express relief to have found a community of like-minded people when “none of their friends really care” (Youth Climate Activist). According to research, key conditions for involvement in a youth-led organization were mainly due to family and friend relationships, entry into welcoming and supportive spaces, and leadership development opportunities that offered a breadth of transitional roles for both newcomers and experienced organizers (16). For youth involved in climate organizing, engagement often begins before high school (16). Youth stay involved in climate organizing spaces when they are welcoming and inviting, but they also stay because for many it is the first time they see real evidence of their power to make change (16).

“We’d attend these marches and I felt really empowered by that. There's just something so powerful about taking the streets, especially at that age for me.” – Youth Climate Activist

Youth-led climate organizing is challenged by a high prevalence of burnout and frustration. There are also frequent capacity constraints and high amounts of turnover, which makes it difficult to sustain momentum.



Young people can act as trusted messengers to bring more young people into climate action communities. Information and messages that speak to the interests of youth groups are most effective in engaging youth, especially through channels of trusted messengers such as peers, parents, and teachers. Peer networks and social media are important sources of information and young people often distrust big media (3). One study of a peer-to-peer education program found that key factors reported by youth interviewees that positively influenced their experience in the program included peer support, meaningful contribution, teacher/leadership role, and student ownership (17). Peer-to-peer is particularly effective where young people teach younger groups (3).

“If you are really investing in the seeds (the leaders that are already invested in [taking climate action]), they're going to be most effective at engaging their peers.” – Youth Engagement Specialist

NEXT STEPS

Our goal is to develop a city-wide youth engagement strategy that will inspire and enable youth leadership in climate action in Toronto. It's not possible to do this in a vacuum, so over the next year we will be working together with youth-led and youth-focused organizations to consult with young people in Toronto. Going forward, the project team will co-design a consultation process with youth-led organizations. We will conduct a year-long engagement with young people ages 10–25 and deliver a final report and a strategy in late 2024.

Along the way, the team will:

- Identify and connect with key youth-led and youth-focused organizations in Toronto
- Together with these key youth-led and youth focused organizations, co-design a city-wide consultation process
- Coordinate the delivery of a city-wide consultation with Toronto's young people

We will develop a Youth Climate Action Engagement Strategy for Toronto and work together going forward to implement key recommendations, such as the design and launch of a city academic innovation hub to support youth-led climate initiatives. We look forward to getting this work started.

REFERENCES

1. Jones CA, Davison A. Disempowering emotions: The role of educational experiences in social responses to climate change. *Geoforum*. 2021 Jan 1;118:190–200.
2. Galway LP, Field E. Climate emotions and anxiety among young people in Canada: A national survey and call to action. *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*. 2023 Jan 1;9:100204.
3. Corner A, Roberts O, Chiari S, Völler S, Mayrhuber ES, Mandl S, et al. How do young people engage with climate change? The role of knowledge, values, message framing, and trusted communicators. *Wiley Interdiscip Rev Clim Change*. 2015 Sep;6(5):523–34.
4. Camino L, Zeldin S. From Periphery to Center: Pathways for Youth Civic Engagement in the Day-To-Day Life of Communities. *Appl Dev Sci*. 2002 Oct 1;6(4):213–20.
5. McDonald M. Indigenous Land-Based Education in Theory and Practice [Internet]. Yellowhead Institute; 2023. Available from: <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/YI-Land-Based-Education-Special-Report-2.2023-1.pdf>
6. Toronto City Planning. Youth Engagement Strategy [Internet]. City of Toronto; Available from: https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/98d2-YES_FINAL_Short_accessible_sm.pdf
7. C40 Cities. Youth engagement playbook for cities.pdf [Internet]. C40 Cities; 2021. Available from: https://www.c40.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/C40_GYMF_Report4.pdf
8. Richards-Schuster K, Dobbie D. Tagging Walls and Planting Seeds: Creating Spaces for Youth Civic Action. *J Community Pract*. 2011 Jul 1;19(3):234–51.
9. Nombuso Dlamini S, Kwakyewah C, Hardware S. Youth Perspectives on Community Activism: From the Personal to the Political. In: *Tikkun Beyond Borders: Connecting Youth Voices, Leading Change*. University of Windsor; 2019. p. 189–212.
10. Gibson-Wood H, Wakefield S. “participation”, white privilege and environmental justice: Understanding environmentalism among Hispanics in Toronto. *Antipode*. 2013 Jun;45(3):641–62.
11. Tuck E, Habtom S. Unforgetting place in urban education through creative participatory visual methods. *Educ Theory*. 2019 Apr;69(2):241–56.
12. Derr V, Sitzoglou M, Gülgönen T, Corona Y. Integrating Children and Youth Participation into Resilience Planning: Lessons from Three Resilient Cities. *Can J Child Rights*. 2018 Nov 9;5(1):173–99.
13. Palmy David N, Buchanan A. Planning Our Future: Institutionalizing Youth Participation in Local Government Planning Efforts. *Planning Theory & Practice*. 2020 Jan 1;21(1):9–38.
14. Botchwey ND, Johnson N, O’Connell LK, Kim AJ. Including Youth in the Ladder of Citizen Participation. *J Am Plann Assoc*. 2019 Jul 3;85(3):255–70.
15. Ginwright S. Building A Pipeline for Justice [Internet]. 2010 [cited 2023 Apr 25]. Available from: https://fcyo.org/uploads/resources/6252_FCYO_OPS_10_ScreenVersion.pdf
16. Christens BD, Morgan KY, Cosio M, Dolan T, Aguayo R. Persistence of a youth organizing initiative: Cultivating and sustaining a leadership development ecosystem. *J Community Psychol*. 2022 Jul;50(5):2491–507.
17. de Vreede C, Warner A, Pitter R. Facilitating Youth to Take Sustainability Actions: The Potential of Peer Education. *J Environ Educ*. 2014 Jan 1;45(1):37–56.