

# CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT

A Toolkit for  
Afterschool and  
Summer Program  
Providers



**ACTNOW!**  
Afterschool for Children and Teens



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# WHAT IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

In the last several years, there have been many difficult and important events that impacted **communities** and **afterschool providers** throughout the country. These events have shed light on existing **inequities** within this country and have outlined the dire need for **mobilization** and **collaboration** among communities to lift up experiences, include more voices, and enact **tangible change**.



**Civic engagement** encompasses a wide range of activities that allow individuals to get involved! Civic engagement may include

- **political participation**
- **volunteering**
- **collective action**
- **community outreach/organizing**
- **advocacy**
- **education**

All of these actions aim to achieve positive change and address group needs.

Civic engagement opportunities are essential to supporting young people in becoming more involved in their communities and **empowering individuals** to **amplify** their **voices** to **shape surrounding institutions**.

We recognize that out-of-school time (OST) providers have been fundamental to addressing youth's needs and identifying issues in diverse communities in Illinois.

**ACT Now** developed this toolkit to serve as an **additional resource** to support program providers in facilitating these opportunities for youth! We hope that this document will also help in **bridging the gap for marginalized groups** that face barriers to civic engagement activities.

## HOW ARE YOUTH INVOLVED ALREADY?



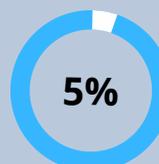
Between **9-10 million youth** and young adults under age 25 **volunteer** their time yearly to work with organizations that provide needed services to neighborhoods and communities [4]



**12%** volunteer through **youth leadership organizations** [10]



**18%** of youth volunteer through **school-based groups** [10]



Only **5%** of youth saying they volunteer due to **school-based requirements** [10]

# WHY AFTERSCHOOL IS THE PERFECT PLACE FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES!

Afterschool programs provide a plethora of **services** for youth, such as mentoring, skills building, career exploration, academic support, health and wellness programming, etc.

Many working families rely on OST programs to provide safe and educational spaces for their children. OST programs also provide services beyond the academic and social and emotional needs of their students by

- aiding food insecure families
- connecting families to financial aid opportunities
- providing legal support

and more!

Therefore, **OST programs are the perfect place for youth to get civically engaged as programs already have well-established connections in the community.**



## Benefits to Civic Engagement



Stronger connections to local leaders and the ability to help youth foster relationships



Linked to positive developmental outcomes in the form of greater academic engagement and enhanced well-being [6]



Engage more youth in OST programming to get hands-on experience in service projects



Education around voting rights and voice in the political system as young people [7,8]

Increased voter turnout during elections and life-long participation [3,12]

## Barriers to Participation



Students of color face financial constraints, transportation barriers, etc. [1]



Marginalized voices are underrepresented in civic and political arenas causing a lack of role models



Students with high socioeconomic status are more likely to learn about how laws are made in school and participate in service activities - lack of access to programming is a large barrier [5]

# YOUTH VOICE & IDEAS FOR STUDENT LEADERSHIP

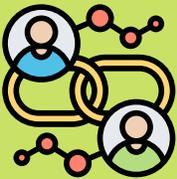
Incorporating **youth voices** into your organization's work will help inform **new perspectives** and **guide** your mission as a whole. Below are a few strategies for elevating youth as leaders. These ideas will also help your program understand young people's needs and interests in civic engagement and overarching afterschool programming.

**Autonomy:** Giving youth greater leadership opportunities within projects is important as they are more likely to want to participate if their ideas are being supported. Youth should certainly receive guidance and feedback along the way, but they should be able to pursue and develop ideas pertaining to issues that they care about.



**Youth Council:** This is a group of young people that serves as an advisory or advocacy body to raise awareness on issues that affect young people. A youth council brings together diverse people from distinct backgrounds and creates a space for youth to develop short and long-term solutions to problems in their lives.

**Youth participatory evaluation:** This is an approach that allows youth to evaluate the programs that they participate in. This is an effective strategy to gain insight into youth experiences, increase youth voice in program decision-making, and transform program culture.



**Establishing a liaison between your current coalition and students:** Connecting with organizations that directly work with students is a great way to amplify those voices. Establishing a youth liaison can make it easier to increase participation. This is beneficial for highlighting youth stories and creating changes in programming and policies.

**Fostering opportunities:** It is important for youth-serving organizations to provide opportunities for young people to get involved and learn skills for the workforce or future careers. If your organization has the capacity, support a volunteer, internship, shadowing, or research opportunity!



# TIPS FOR STUDENT-LED CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

**Identifying community needs** is a great way for youth to start brainstorming initiatives. After **finding a cause** that young people in your program want to tackle, identifying personal and community assets is important to leverage **existing resources**. From there, students may begin further fleshing out project ideas and their **action strategies**.

## Step 1: Identify what issue you want to address.

- What problems have you noticed in your community?
- What is the scope of this issue that you want to focus on? Local, national, global, etc?
- Why is this issue important to you?
- What would addressing this issue look like?
- What changes would you like to see made?



## Step 4: Identify Community Resources.

- What assets does your community have that can be helpful for your project and addressing your cause?
  - People, organizations, groups, places, businesses, institutions, etc.
- Has anyone done any work to address the issue?
- What has been done in the past to address this issue?
- What resources will you need for your project?



## Step 2: Conduct research on the issue.

- Learn more about your cause!
- What do you already know about your cause?
- What information do you need to get started on your project?
- What is the current status of the community need you identified?



## Step 5: Choose your action strategy.

- What is the most feasible way for you to address your identified cause?
- EX: Education, advocacy, direct community service, philanthropy, etc.



## Step 3: Identify Personal Assets.

- What are your interests or skills?
- Do you have personal experience or prior knowledge?
- What traits do you have that may be useful in developing and executing your service project?
- How will you use your personal passions and assets to address the community's needs?



## Step 6: Write a project plan with a timeline.

- Plan the details of your project! Identify the resources you will be using and the final deliverables you will produce.
- Now you are ready to get started on your project! Make sure to make notes of your project outcomes and reflect on the experience!



# ACTIVITIES TO ENCOURAGE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

**Community-based learning opportunities** such as **information sessions** and **service learning projects** for youth and families are two tangible ways to get more people civically engaged. Afterschool programs can incorporate some of the following activities into these community-building sessions:

- **Discussions on current events, movements, and policy issues** that pertain to young people's identities and/or demographic
- **Volunteer opportunities/phone banking** with political campaign
- **Participation in local/city council meetings** and engaging during Q&A sessions
- **Hosting mock trials** for youth to step into the process
- **Research projects** on issues that are affecting their immediate environment and/or OST program

OST providers can also integrate larger initiatives and events to get youth interested in being advocates and leaders in the community. Ideas include:



**Donation drives** are a great way to serve the local community's needs. Providers can organize food, clothes, toys, books, or hygiene essential drives. Partnerships with nearby entities, such as businesses and faith-based organizations, could help to make more connections. Have youth take on leadership roles in organizing the drives and reaching out to community members for donations!

Organizing a **park or environmental cleanup** is another way to bring community members together and fight against climate change! This is another educational opportunity to teach people about the environment, environmental justice work, and the harms of plastic waste. Clean-ups help reduce the amount of trash that ends up in the local environment and can be done with very few materials.



**Community gardens** encourage youth to directly do hands-on work by planting trees, plants, fruits, vegetables, etc. This also serves as an educational opportunity to help them learn about agriculture, the environment, and healthy eating. Community gardens also benefit the well-being of the larger community as they may help mediate the impacts of food deserts in low-income regions.

Set up a **mentorship program** for youth! Youth can be paired with one another or with professionals. This is a great way to foster leadership skills and promote interpersonal relationships across the youth of all ages. Having someone to help facilitate conversations between youth is important in ensuring that these are inviting and nurturing experiences for all youth, regardless of lived experience and background.



**Writing workshops** are also a proven way to teach students about policies and laws related to issues that affect them. Students can handwrite letters or create an online/email campaign to highlight the need to take action and make changes. Typically, this type of project's target audience includes local leaders, such as school board members and elected officials, as well as large corporations and regulatory bodies.



**ACT Now** developed a template, below, that can be tailored to any issue that is important to the youth you work with!

**(Month) (Day) (Year)**  
**The Honorable (First Name) (Last Name)**  
**(Room Number), (Location)**  
**City, State, (Zip Code)**

**RE:** State the **topic** or include the **bill number, author, and subject** if you are writing to support or oppose a particular **legislative bill**

**Dear (Legislator's Title) (Last Name),**

**INTRO:** My **name** is **(Your Full Name)** and I am a **(student/family member/service provider/advocate/community member)** who resides in your **district**.

**BODY:** State **why you support or oppose the bill and/or the issue** here. Choose up to **three** of the strongest **points** that **support** your position and state them clearly.

Include a **personal story**. Tell your representative why the issue is **important** to **you** and how it **affects you**, your family members, and your community.

**ASK:** Tell your representative how you want her or him to **vote** on this issue and ask for a **response**. Be sure to include your name and address on both your letter and envelope.)

**Sincerely,**

**SIGN YOUR NAME**

**Print Your Full Name**  
**Street Address**  
**City, State, (Zip Code)**



On this page, **ACT Now** has provided sample language for a letter in support of OST funding, civic engagement, and access to high-quality support services for youth and communities.

October 20, 2022  
The Honorable J.B. Pritzker  
Office of the Governor  
555 W. Monroe St., 16th Floor  
Chicago, IL 60661



Dear Governor J.B. Pritzker,

I am writing to you with regard to **expanding civic engagement opportunities for youth across the state**. I am the **Policy and Communications Manager at Afterschool for Children and Teens Now (ACT Now) Coalition**. We are a diverse statewide network of more than 2,100 members from across the state. We believe that an increased commitment to young people beyond the traditional school day is a crucial part of their growth into productive, healthy adults. ACT Now leverages best practices, resources, and partnerships in order to ensure that young people in Illinois have access to quality, affordable afterschool and youth development programs.

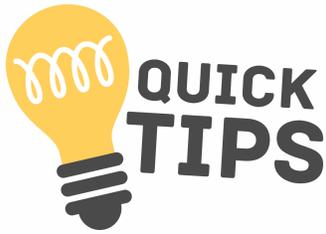
As your **constituent**, I want to **thank you** for championing **out-of-school Time (OST) opportunities** for Illinois **youth**. OST programs are also essential to supporting **youth civic engagement opportunities** and bridging the **opportunity gap** for **marginalized youth** that face **barriers** to educational opportunities, participation in service activities, and political involvement. OST programs help **combat these disparities** by providing **enrichment activities** for youth that affords them political and social capital while **empowering** them to be **active** and **vocal participants** in issues affecting their communities. OST programs can serve to ensure that **all children** have the opportunity to engage in civic engagement opportunities and programming. Engaging youth in civic engagement participation early is conducive to **equipping the next generation of leaders** with the **skills** and **tools** needed for **life-long civic participation**.

I ask that you **continue** to **support OST** opportunities for youth in Illinois as they provide **crucial support services** for communities. Investing in youth will better equip and empower the next generation of changemakers. With your **sustained support**, we can ensure all young people in our community and across our state have the **tools** they need to successfully **transition** into educated, self-sufficient, accomplished adults.

Sincerely,  
Emma Spencer

Afterschool for Children and Teens Now (ACT Now) Coalition  
101 North Wacker, 17th Floor  
Chicago, IL 60606

# PERSONALIZING LETTERS AND EMAILS



Here are a few tips and tricks for youth to leverage in their letters and/or email campaigns. **Encourage youth to:**

**Be targeted** when addressing letters to the recipient. This may be based on where you live and where your organization is located.

**Be brief.** Try to keep correspondence to two pages by explaining the issue, its importance, and its impact. When writing to elected officials, many times correspondence is reviewed by legislative aides. These individuals read many letters on different issues during a given day, so your letter should be as concise as possible in order to grab attention!

**Hit the three most important points.** Help youth choose the three strongest points that will be most effective in persuading legislators to support your position and flesh them out. Typically, adding a statistic or two will cause the reader to pause and think about the consequences - just try not to overload the letter with data.

**Make sure to guide youth as they:**

**Personalize their letters.** Personalized messages are more likely to influence legislators to learn more about a young person's cause. Help students share stories about why these topics matter to them and their experiences - both negative and positive!

**Establish their relationships with the recipient.** Have these students ever voted for this elected official? Are they familiar with them through any business or personal relationship? The closer the recipient of this letter campaign feels to the sender, the more powerful the argument.

**Finally, try to remember that**

**Youth are experts!** Youth participating in this project will bring their own ideas, identities, and flare to their advocacy. Youth should be courteous and to the point in their advocacy but they should not be afraid to take a firm position.

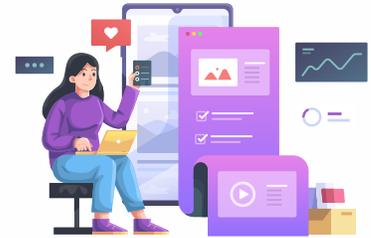
**Be Respectful.** The easiest way to not have a letter read is to be disrespectful. Taking a firm position on an issue is fine. Do not use profanity. Even if the recipient is not the person that youth in your program may support, remind them to be respectful. Instead, encourage them to express appreciation for past, current, and future support!



# SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TOOL

OST providers can also **engage in social media campaigns** to:

- inform youth about opportunities to get involved in their **communities**
- promote **collaboration** among organizations
- **highlight youth and family voices**



Since 2015, young people have **spearheaded** social justice movements, leading climate strikes, March for our Lives walkouts, Black Lives Matter protests, and more[2]. Across **youth-led movements**, social media has been a powerful **tool** used to **organize** and **mobilize** people and families.

Below, and on the next page, you will find **strategies for leveraging the different types of social media platforms**.



**Keep in mind that your students may already know how to be online activists!**

**Leverage Facebook** to connect with **partners, organizations, families, and community members** to promote your organization’s events, share stories, and highlight youth voices and experiences!

- **Create a Facebook “Business” Page** that will connect you to a broader audience than your personal Facebook profile.
- **Facebook Insights** helps you view analytics data to understand engagement.
- Add a **Call to Action Button** to your page. Select ways for people to interact with your page: Contact Us, Book Now, Sign Up, etc. You can also link your organization’s website, a petition, a sign-up sheet, registration form, etc.



**Instagram** is a photo-sharing platform that is useful when engaging with **youth** campaigns and community members. Research suggests that more young people utilize this app than Facebook and/or Twitter.

- Use **Quality Photos and Graphics** and ensure graphics are captivating and not too text-heavy to engage users!
- Create a **Public Account**. This allows more people to more readily access your page.
- **Update the link in your bio**. On your Bio, you can include a link to direct followers to other sites such as your organization’s website, petitions, relevant news, etc., or all of the above by making a link tree!



**Twitter** allows you to share updates within its 280-character limit. This is a great resource to **spark discussion** and engage in **dialogue** with others.



- **Keep your message brief and concise.** You can also use threaded tweets that appear in succession after one another, which is a way to work around the character limit.
- **Retweet.** This is a great way to share what others are doing, share relevant information, and keep followers engaged.
- **Live tweet.** This is tweeting a reaction at the moment as an event is happening. Organizations may tweet updates during their events.

**TikTok** is a video-sharing platform that allows users to create, watch, and share short videos, typically between 15 seconds to 1-minute long. Organizations can engage with this platform with short informational videos to connect with **youth**.



- **Post consistently:** Accounts that seem to get more engagement are those that post regularly
- **Use hashtags:** Adding relevant hashtags can increase engagement. #fyp is a common hashtag used for content to appear on feeds.
- **Post informational videos:** This is a great way to share more about what your organization does, introduce staff, and show behind-the-scenes work to connect with your audience.

## GETTING FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES INVOLVED

Facilitating civic engagement programming is also about involving **families** and **community members**. Teens from families in which at least one parent volunteers are almost twice as likely to volunteer as those with no family members who volunteer. In families where both parents and siblings volunteer, 86% of youth also volunteer, and 47% volunteer on a regular basis [10]. **Sustained communication** and **engagement** are vital for increasing family engagement. These are a few ways to get family members involved with your programming!





### Information Session

Hosting informational **workshops** where families can engage in **skills building** is a great way to help identify issues that affect youth in your program.

These workshops can also serve as **brainstorming sessions** for family and community members to **share** with one another the **challenges** they see within the community, while also highlighting the **existing assets**. This can be helpful in building out **connections** and fostering **collaboration** across community organizations and local businesses.



### Host Family Nights

Creating events that families can participate in with their children is a great way to continue **fostering ongoing relationships with families**. This builds a welcoming environment for families and can allow providers to get to know them more informally. These relationships allow program providers to **learn more about families' diverse experiences, needs, and community challenges** that they would like to address.



### Feedback

Providing evaluations for family and community members is important in order to **receive feedback** on the programs they have participated in. This can be useful for future family engagement programming. Asking for feedback from staff is useful as well to better understand what support they need to foster family engagement.

**ACT Now's Family Engagement Toolkit** is a great additional resource for OST providers to learn more about how to make programs more **inclusive, accessible, and welcoming** for all families. Family engagement is beneficial for both families and youth! Families can learn more about the work that their students do in OST programs and become better connected with organizations. Students benefit as well as family engagement is shown to improve student outcomes and the development of positive behavioral and social-emotional skills.



When working with both youth and families, icebreaker activities can be a great way to begin and allow people to get to know one another. These opening activities help youth and families to practice different communication styles, make group decisions, solve problems, work with people they may not normally interact with, and have fun!



## SPOTLIGHTS: ORGANIZATIONS FOCUSED ON YOUTH VOICE

**ACT Now** has created a list of organizations across the country that are doing amazing work with youth and facilitating robust civic engagement opportunities! These organizations are also collaborating with families to ensure that the needs in the community are identified and met.



**Mikva Challenge (IL)** brings Action Civics programs and curriculum to young people across Illinois. It strives to develop youth to be empowered, informed, and active citizens who will promote a just and equitable society. The Mikva Challenge facilitates hands-on and project-based learning opportunities that transform students' civic attitudes, skills, and sense of agency.

**Youth Service America (YSA)** engages youth in solving community problems through service-based initiatives. YSA has plenty of resources to guide educators and providers on how to get youth more involved in service learning and in developing projects! YSA also has free webinars and resources available for providers to use.



**Youth Action (PA)** produces socially-responsible leadership among middle & high school students by providing them with training, mentoring, and funding. Youth Action aims to increase students' social awareness of community concerns and help youth lead service initiatives in their communities. The organization aided youth in creating a webinar series designed by, and produced for, youth.

**The National Youth Leadership Council (MN)** strives to create a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world with young people, their schools, and communities through service learning. This council supports educators with resources/training and supports youth in developing their leadership skills. This organization has plenty of professional development materials to guide educators through service learning projects.



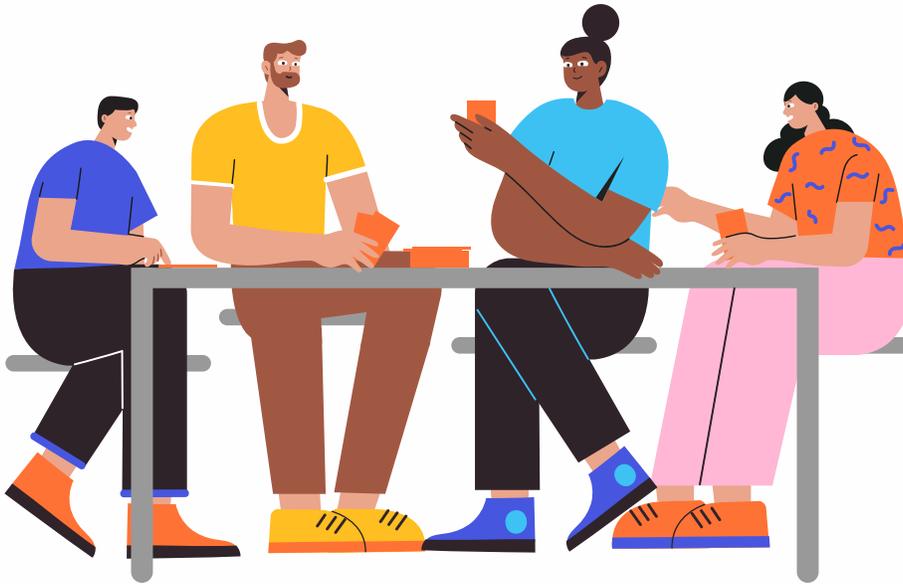
**The California Center for Civic Engagement (CA)** engages high school students by sparking their interest with exposure to the democratic process. Through the Center's programs, thousands of young people have become active players in the public policies affecting their communities, cities and states.



## CONCLUSION

**ACT Now** deeply appreciates your organization's interest in developing and facilitating civic engagement activities for youth and community members. We know that youth are leaders and may need some assistance in identifying the causes they want to learn more about and address.

We hope that, whether your program is just beginning its civic engagement journey or is looking to refine its current practices, our toolkit provided insights, examples, and resources to support your program with this work.



**ACT Now** would like to thank our Summer 2022 Policy and Communications Intern, Jasmin Flores, for her significant contribution to the creation of this toolkit.

If you have questions regarding civic engagement in afterschool or summer programs or have feedback regarding this Civic Engagement Toolkit, please contact **Emma Spencer** (Policy and Communications Manager) at [spencere@actnowillinois.org](mailto:spencere@actnowillinois.org).



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