



Community Engagement: Working Together for Change

Getting people talking “in their own backyards” is an invaluable step in tackling challenges locally.

Airing issues, discussing challenges, sharing approaches, and brainstorming solutions elicited from diverse community stakeholders are critical to community involvement and engagement — engagement that can drive real action.

Community engagement has been identified by organizations of many kinds — nonprofits, educational institutions, multinational corporations — as a way to assemble diverse stakeholders, tackle thorny challenges, frame issues, share resources, generally deepen understanding of topics, and explore potential solutions. Why? Because genuine involvement of communities — of *people* in the community — is a necessary element in achieving



social impact and positive change.

GENYOUth has used a Town Hall model — local convenings of stakeholders around school and community wellness — to foster community engagement. Supported and

hosted with state and regional Dairy Councils, GENYOUth Town Hall gatherings invite health and wellness professionals, educators, businesses, civic and government leaders, sports figures, the media, parents, and, especially, *students* into the dialogue around empowering youth to be the stewards of their own healthy, high-achieving futures.

But what exactly is “community engagement”?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has defined it as “the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest or similar situations, to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes.”*

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has identified Community Involvement as one of ten components of its **Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC)** framework — pointing out that “[A] school, its students, and their families benefit when leaders and staff at the district or school solicit and coordinate information, resources, and services available from community-based organizations, businesses, cultural and civic organizations, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, health clinics, colleges and universities, and other community groups.”

And in a spring 2016 article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, **“Community Engagement Matters (Now More Than Ever),”** Melody Barnes and Paul Schmitz suggest that “leaders must avoid the temptation to act in a top-down manner. Instead, they should design and implement programs in ways that *engage community members* directly in the work of social change.”

**Principles of Community Engagement*, Second Edition; Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium Community Engagement Key Function Committee Task Force on the Principles of Community Engagement, NIH Publication No. 11-7782, June 2011, Dept. of Health and Human Services. Available at https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/communityengagement/pdf/PCE_Report_508_FINAL.pdf.



GENYOUth has applied and tailored the Town Hall model in engaging local stakeholders across the country. In so doing, we’ve learned a good deal about the numerous ways in which these events can be productive, and why.

Three Years of Local Events

As a nonprofit focused on youth and school wellness, a big part of GENYOUth’s work involves bringing constituencies together around nutrition and physical activity to serve our overall mission of empowering youth to help create healthy school communities. While we convene on the national level through summits, leadership roundtables, and publications, we know that real change happens at the local level. That’s why

GENYOUth’s regional Town Halls play a role in achieving our mission.

Settings for GENYOUth’s Town Halls over the past three years have included medical-center conference facilities, university campuses, NFL stadium conference rooms and training centers, and other locales. Initially themed around “the learning connection” — the positive impact of improved nutrition and increased physical activity on academic performance — more recent GENYOUth Town Halls have focused on sharing our youth empowerment mission as well as encouraging local business support of school wellness efforts.

As of this writing, GENYOUth has held 17 Town Halls in cities nationwide, from Boston, to Houston, to Los Angeles. These gatherings have been organized in cooperation with two of GENYOUth’s valued partners — state and regional Dairy Councils and NFL Teams in these markets.

At these gatherings, we’re discovering a good deal about youth empowerment in general; about the opportunities and challenges local schools are facing; about community leaders who are making a difference and how they’re doing it; about the solution-path stakeholders are exploring around school wellness; and about what, collectively, we’ve all accomplished (and need to do more of). We also are learning about what school-wellness stakeholders of all kinds — including students themselves — feel most passionately about and see as action steps.

What True Community Engagement Can Do

Perhaps more than anything else, we’re learning about the effectiveness of Town Halls in general as a community engagement tool. True community engagement...

Strengthens local networks. Town Halls are powerful community convening mechanisms that

Community Engagement through a Town Hall Can...

Uncover collaboration opportunities

Elevate the voices of untapped or unheard-from constituencies

Raise awareness of participant organizations’ leadership and mission

Provide opportunities for attendees to interact with constituents from various sectors

Showcase the impact of organizations’ and schools’ programs

Enhance or strengthen relationships among groups

Garner commitments of support or underwriting for social change efforts

Generate productive local market media coverage, if desired



Guiding Questions

Guiding questions, or a series of prompts for reflection, can focus thought and keep things on track at a Town Hall. For GENYOUth, guiding questions have included:

- How can our community improve student wellness and learning by improving the nutrition and activity environment in our schools?
- How can we empower students to help identify, participate in, and lead school wellness improvements?
- How can we better empower youth to drive healthy change in their schools?
- How can businesses help support students to become the leaders of the future?
- What can we all commit to in 30 days? In 90 days?
- How can you be a role model? A change agent?

generate new networks at the grassroots level and that, in GENYOUth’s particular case, encourage new investment in local schools. We’ve found Town Halls to be notably efficient at galvanizing previously inactive groups and individuals around the cause of youth empowerment.

Brings together truly “unlikely suspects.” Town Halls welcome a mix of people who generally don’t sit down in the same room together to talk — stakeholders in nutrition, fitness, public health, education (including school district leadership), parents, middle- and high-school students, philanthropists, policy-makers, relevant government agencies, nonprofit partners and colleagues, farmers, local businesses, faith-based leaders, and local media. The most successful dialogues emerge from a genuine diversity of viewpoints.

Stimulates action. GENYOUth’s Town Halls have generated innovative, actionable steps to get kids eating better and moving more at school — often with a focus on school breakfast participation and

increasing access to physical activity in schools. Much of this action is based on the model of regional public–private partnerships to garner commitments of assets to launch and fund solutions. Solution-based dialogues often begin at the Town Hall — and continue long after the event.

Showcases valued partners. For GENYOUth, America’s dairy farmers and local NFL clubs are such partners. In each of our Town Hall cities, the events have often actively engaged NFL Teams as co-producers on a community level. Similarly, the events have provided dairy farmers the opportunity to participate as concerned stewards of community and public health, education, the environment, and the local economy.

Serves development goals. Fundraising can be an important element of Town Halls. For example, GENYOUth’s Town Hall events engage businesses in funding regional schools’ efforts to empower youth around nutrition and physical activity. This support can take the form of underwriting **Fuel Up to Play 60** mini-grants for local schools, funding student-designed initiatives through GENYOUth’s **AdVenture Capital** program, supporting the local expansion of school breakfast, and more.

Insights from an Engaged Community

Community engagement events reveal what constituents feel are priorities and challenges, shed light on current thinking on a local level, illuminate how community members see their own roles, and uncover themes and topics that deserve attention. They also make plain the kind of successes that can germinate, take root, and grow from fruitful local interaction.

At the local level, we’ve discovered that **students across the country** understand, recognize, and shape their own role in creating health-promoting schools and communities. Youth are actively helping to promote healthy school meals, redesign cafeteria options, and plant and maintain school gardens. They’re educating themselves around the farm-to-school movement, organizing walking clubs and running events, and getting on committees and leadership panels.

Middle and high schoolers are serving as wellness mentors to the elementary grades, modeling their own improved behaviors around nutrition and physical activity. They are applying creative digital solutions to the development of fitness apps for mobile devices, developing their own wearable fitness technologies, solving drought issues that



WHO ATTENDS?

Diverse community stakeholders and thought leaders can make a community engagement event vibrant and productive. In GENYOUth's case, they include...

- School nutrition directors and managers
- Prominent local pediatricians
- Public health officials
- Prominent local business leaders
- Physical activity experts
- Farmers
- Faith-based leaders
- Local or municipal government officials, including education, health, and agriculture agencies

- Principals, school administrators, and school board leaders
- Parent leaders, such as members of local PTAs and PTOs
- Academics
- Heads of child wellness and hunger-focused organizations
- Registered dietitians
- Key local media
- Motivated educators, such as Fuel Up to Play 60 Program Advisors

NFL Clubs: executives, active and retired players, cheerleaders, and others

Local celebrities with ties to the issue

Local school wellness committee chairs or members



are hurdles to school gardens, and more. The most committed of these students are actively getting in front of both businesses and thought leaders to solicit support.

In short, youth are engaged as problem solvers, solution generators, and leaders in school wellness. As one student leader said, “We not only want to be leaders of the future. We want to be and are acting as leaders *now*.”

Similarly, we’re increasingly seeing **parents as wellness advocates**: Parents who are speaking at monthly school board meetings and other public forums about the importance of school wellness. Parents who are urging officials to make wellness more of a district focus than it currently is. Parents who are learning that eating better at school starts with eating better at home. Parents who are involving kids in meal preparation at home and acting on the desire to set a better example.

“Room parents” in elementary and middle school classrooms are helping ensure that foods offered in vending machines and at classroom celebrations are healthful. Once-uninvolved parents are dropping in on cafeterias to experience first-hand a school breakfast or school lunch — at the same time querying superintendents and school committees about enforcement of district wellness policies.

GENYOUth’s Town Halls encourage **local business involvement**, and most schools are very open to public-private partnerships around nutrition and physical activity. Some school districts are actively encouraging business leaders in the community to come to schools to share what they do — a kind of open-house day for local businesses. Others are instituting “lunch and learn” sessions for businesses and students to share and interact over school meals. Still others are considering adopt-a-school initiatives for business to support climates of wellness in a specific school.

But the concept of business engagement in education goes further. As one Town Hall participant commented, “It’s not just about financial support — businesses have to incorporate health and wellness messages to their employees, and encourage volunteerism on the part of employees in schools and communities. Companies need to care.”

Whatever form it takes, local schools and school districts are realizing that **development and fundraising** are now essential if schools are going to be healthy, high-achieving places. In the words of one Town Hall attendee, “You don’t get what you don’t ask for. Whether it’s financial support or volunteers or other resources, we’ve got to reach out to business stakeholders in the community to support school wellness.”

The growing trend of **corporate volunteerism** isn’t lost on local school-wellness advocates, either. Commented one GENYOUth Town Hall attendee, “I’m going to ask local businesses to allow employees time off, perhaps a half day a month, to work with our youth around nutrition and physical activity — as recess monitors, fitness mentors, etc. We could start a kind of corporate big brother or big sister program specifically around nutrition and physical activity.

“Just think of the categories of businesses that have an interest in healthy, active kids, and that could support school-wellness efforts: grocery chains, sporting-goods stores, farmers’ markets, culinary schools, and health-focused fast-food vendors.”

Significantly, business attendees at Town Halls repeatedly reinforce that investing in students today helps ensure business and industry a truly **ready workforce**, as well as a vibrant customer base for products and services in future years.

The theme of **collective impact** and organizational “connectedness” emerges frequently at GENYOUth Town Halls, as stakeholders working at the grassroots level discover that working together is the way to go. With so many and varied groups now working to improve school wellness, no single organization can, or should, “go it alone” anymore. We all must work for large-scale social change of the kind required in creating healthier kids and healthier schools.

“There are so many people and groups focused on nutrition and physical activity for kids now,” one Town Hall attendee observed. “We should be getting together and sharing best practices, and mobilizing together with one voice.”

Youth: Always Valued Participants

GENYOUth works to empower students themselves to lead and innovate around nutrition and physical activity in their school communities. That’s why the student voice is always an important part of our Town Halls — and we contend that it can contribute meaningfully to community engagement. We are careful to involve students as:

- Members of content and logistics planning committees
- Members of moderated panel discussions
- Solo presenters of compelling, single-topic stories or perspectives related to the event theme
- Breakout-session moderators and share-back presenters
- Fitness break leaders
- Hosts of student “expo” showcases featuring student-led projects and initiatives

No Two Communities Are Alike

Communities are unique, with varying histories, demographics, traditions, and challenges. No single model of community engagement fits all — but the Town Hall can be uniformly effective at producing results that range from simple awareness building to garnering commitments of financial and other resources. And yet no one Town Hall model fits all, either. Whether a gathering features a panel discussion, guest speakers, open forums, breakouts, or even live streaming for remote access is all dependent on the situation.

But a well-staged and produced Town Hall will inevitably engage a community by providing a setting for interchange, informality, genuine and respectful exchange of ideas, and free flow of communication in all directions.

In that tradition, GENYOUth’s Youth Empowerment Town Halls enable change at the local level for the benefit of youth and communities as a whole. Learn more about GENYOUth and our work at www.genyouthnow.org.

RESOURCES

VIDEO: **The Learning Connection: Bringing Town Halls to Your Home Town**

www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFyRRpIsSVA

GENYOUth’s report on ***The Wellness Impact: Enhancing Academic Success through Healthy School Environments***
www.genyouthnow.org/reports/the-wellness-impact-report

GENYOUth’s report on ***Empowering Youth: Students as Change-Agents in Schools and Communities***
www.genyouthnow.org/reports/2015-empowering-youth-report

GENYOUTH[®]

EXERCISE YOUR INFLUENCE™

Founded in 2010 through a public-private partnership with the National Dairy Council and the National Football League, GENYOUth empowers students to exercise their influence, develop as leaders and social entrepreneurs, and create a healthier future for themselves and their peers. To support students and schools, we convene networks of private and public partners and raise funds for a range of nationwide nutrition and physical activity initiatives that bolster healthy, high-achieving students, schools, and communities. Building on a legacy of passionate and empowered American youth, we believe that all youth, students in particular, are change agents who deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential by identifying and leading solutions that positively impact nutrition, physical activity, and student success across our nation. Learn more about GENYOUth partnership, volunteer, funding, and donation opportunities at www.genyouthnow.org or contact us at info@GENYOUthnow.org.