

**Think City, Dream Vancouver:**

**Policy Brief**

**The Engagement of Youth in Vancouver's Civic Society**

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## **Executive Summary**

### Introduction

This paper describes the current state of civic engagement (defined as “participation in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future”) by youth (ages ~15-29) in Vancouver. Programs created by the City that encourage such engagement are described, as well as a sampling of the youth organizations at work promoting community connectedness.

### Policy Problem

Citing various statistics, the paper describes the lack of measurable engagement of youth within their own communities. This is highly problematic, it is stated, as such engagement is important to the long-term sustainability of civil society (that sector of life outside 'market' and 'state').

Three main groups are identified as being important in this debate: the municipal government, the public sector, and the civil sector (including NGOs, cultural organizations, community groups, etc).

### Policy Options

Following this analysis of the problem, and description of the current state of youth engagement, this paper describes three potential options for further actions.

#### *i) Municipal Support – Re-Instating the Elements of the Civic Youth Strategy*

Measures here identified include the re-introduction of the position of Child and Youth Advocate, the creation of a youth body to provide input to city decision-makers regarding the

issues concerning young people, and the expansion of youth program funding beyond (but still including) the Youth Outreach team. Such a solution, while highly practical and cost-effective (many of the necessary structures are already in place), suffers from history. Previous attempts at such municipal support have frequently failed for lack of funding or political support – the Child and Youth Advocate's position, for instance, has been eliminated twice previously.

*ii) Public Sector Support – Service-Based Curriculum*

The second option identified is the institution of service-based curriculum within the Grade 11 Civics class in B.C. secondary schools. With such a program, schools would partner with various charitable organizations to create opportunities for students to create students to apply their knowledge of civic engagement within community settings. This program is shown to provide the opportunity for very high levels of inclusiveness and engagement quality; the administrative costs, however, may be prohibitive.

*iii) Youth Sector Involvement – Youth Innovation Centre*

As described previously, Vancouver has a vibrant, if under-funded, youth sector, with many organizations working towards the goals of engagement. Thus, as a final policy option, the paper describes the concept of a 'Youth Innovation Centre' – a single location (plus online presence) in which various NGOs, support groups and youth organizations can gather to offer joint programming and construct strategic alliances. While this option is faces a large start-up cost, it is possible that subsequent to its establishment very few public funds will be needed for maintenance, as high-quality, effective youth programming will be developed by its various youth sector partners.

## Recommendations

The paper finishes by evaluating the proposed policy options on 5 criteria: cost efficiency, ease of implementation, longevity of the program, inclusivity of the program, and quality of engagement. It is determined that ultimately, the Youth Innovation Centre provides the highest quality of engagement, inclusivity and longevity, and that these benefits outweigh the high set-up costs of the program. It is recommended, then, that the City of Vancouver give serious consideration to the creation of such a Centre, and that the currently in-development Urban Native Youth Centre be used as a model.

## **The Engagement of Youth in Vancouver's Civic Society**

The term 'civic engagement' has taken on various meanings within academic circles; some define civic engagement as community service (see Diller, 2001), others as collective action (Van Benschoten, 2001, as quoted in Adler and Goggin, 2005), and yet others as political involvement (Ronan, 2004). Perhaps the most encompassing definition, however, comes from Adler and Goggin (2005), who state that, "Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future." Adler and Groggin's understanding of civic engagement (which will be the working definition used in this brief), positions the concept as the cornerstone of a fully functional civil society.

This brief will use a working definition of civil society from the London School of Economics, which describes the term as referring to the third sector of the world (the other two being economy (market) and government (state)) sometimes overlooked by social scientists, encompassing "uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values" (LSE, 2004). Charities, NGOs, cultural organizations, community and advocacy groups, trade unions and professional associations, and a myriad of others populate civil society. Almond and Verba (1989) recognized the importance of such entities, noting that the political element inherent to many of these groups can lead to a better aware and more informed electorate. More recently, Putnam (2001) has recognized that non-political organizations also play a vital role in civil society, building valuable social capital, trust and shared values. An ideally-operating society will thus contain a vibrant civil sector; this latter quality, however, requires a strong ethic of civic

engagement in the populace.

In order to create an ethic of engagement, citizens should be encouraged toward participation at all times, and at all ages. It is of particular importance to engage the youth of a community, in order to both create a normalization of participatory action within them and add the particular qualities of the youth voice to decision-making processes. Young people are able to restore vitality in organizations, bringing in new energy, new ideas, and a new sense of connectedness to the world. This renewal is also important to the prevention of organizational stagnation, which can be the natural tendency within long-lived groups. However, even if renewal was not a required element of civil society, organizations would have a responsibility to engage youth with the understanding that it is into their hands that society will be passed. Youth is a temporary condition; engagement need not be. Experience has shown that civically-engaged youths will generally become civically-engaged adults (Oates McMillan, 2007), and that training and mentorship programs are highly effective at encouraging the long-term sustainability of civil society.

Thus, youth civic engagement is not a limited-scope issue. It is not a matter to be resolved by only a special interest group, nor is it a problem to be solved through government action alone. It will, to quote an old proverb, take a village to raise this child.

## **Background**

Having determined the importance of youth civic engagement, we must examine the extent to which young people in Canada (and, where statistics allow, in Vancouver or British Columbia)

are, or are not, currently engaged. The efforts of the City of Vancouver<sup>1</sup> to involve youth and youth voice in community matters will also be described.

## **Are youth engaged? - Traditional Measurements**

### i) Voter Turnout

One of the most frequently cited measurements of youth engagement is a direct measure of political engagement – voter turnout at elections. The youth (18-24) vote has seen a rapid decline in recent years, hitting a low of 25% in the federal election of 2000 (Elections Canada, 2005). Significant initiatives (media campaigns, direct mailings to youth, etc.) put in place before the 2004 campaign resulted in a reported increase in the youth voter turnout rate (to 39%) (Elections Canada, 2005). A similar rise was seen between 2001 and 2005 in the provincial elections in British Columbia, with the youth turnout rate increasing from 27% to 35.2% (Elections BC, no date). [Data on youth voter turnout at the municipal level are not available for Vancouver (Dang, 2008).] These increases, if accurate, are encouraging, but the youth voting rate remains below the comparable rates in both the U.S. and the U.K.

### ii) Volunteerism

Volunteer rates among 15-24 year-olds are an alternative measure of engagement. This criterion is more in line with our definition of civic engagement as, in part, participation in community life in order to improve conditions for others. The volunteer rate among Canadian youth far outstrips the voter turnout rate, with 55% of 15-to-24 year-old respondents to a Statistics Canada survey self-identifying as having spent at least some time volunteering in the past year; the median

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<sup>1</sup> Here, City with a capital-C will refer to formal government, where small-c city will reference informal structures within a region.

amount of time given is 50 hours. (Hall, 2006) In British Columbia, only 50% of 15-to-24 year-olds reported having donated their time to a charity or non-profit organization, but the median time contributed was 60 hours (Hall, 2006).

While these numbers are initially encouraging, there are some undesirable trends. For instance, when the 15-to-24 age range is further broken down, we find that 65% of 15-to-19 year olds were volunteers, as opposed to only 43% of the 20-to-24s (Hall, 2006). The dramatic drop-off in volunteerism between the 15-to-19 and 20-to-24 year-old groups may reflect the individualistic and egocentric nature of youth engagement reported by some researchers (e.g, Miklosi, 2007); two-thirds of 15-19 year-old volunteers, for instance, reported ‘improved job opportunities’ as a primary reason for volunteering (Hall, 2006).

### iii) Group Membership

A final measure of engagement that is sometimes used is group membership. In Canada, 65% of youths aged 15-24 belonged to at least one of a sports or recreation club, a professional association, a religious, cultural or hobby organization, a political, advocacy or environmental group, or other type of association (Hall, 2006). There are two main observations that can be made in regards to this participation rate; first, fully one-third of Canadian youth do not claim membership in *any* group, organization or association. This is not to imply that these individuals are not participating in society; it is to say, however, that they are not participating in an organized, long-term manner. The second point that must be raised is that even the 65% participation rate quoted is deceptive; only 58% of the individuals in this group participate with

their identified organization at least once a month, and 20% report never actively participating, and instead remaining content with holding membership in name alone (Hall, 2006).

Manipulating these numbers reveals that 6 in 10 15-to-24 year-olds in Canada do not have an organization in which they participate more than a few times per year. This again points to the highly individualistic nature of current youth civic engagement.

### **City of Vancouver Initiatives**

The City of Vancouver has identified both the importance of and lack of youth engagement in civic processes. As such, a number of municipal support structures have been developed over the past 15 years, with varying (though generally small) degrees of success. Some of the most important of these initiatives include the Civic Youth Strategy, the Youth Outreach Team, and the creation of the position of Child and Youth Advocate.

#### i) Civic Youth Strategy

In 1995, the City unveiled its Civic Youth Strategy (CYS), in partial fulfillment of the requirements the City's Children's Policy, adopted in 1992. The CYS had at its core four main objectives:

- Ensure that youth have a place in the City
- Ensure that youth have a strong voice in decision making
- Promote youth as a resource in decision making
- Strengthen the support base for youth in the city (City of Vancouver, 1995)

In order to achieve these objectives, four main actions were taken. At the City level, the position of Child and Youth Advocate was created, as was a core committee of youth participants and departmental representatives. In the community, the City created the Vancouver Coalition of First Line Children, as well as Vancouver Youth Voices, a coalition of individual young people and youth organizations (City of Vancouver, 1995). However, due to lack of resources and challenges in dealing with the diversity found in Vancouver's youth, each of these initiatives folded (IICRD, 2006). In 2001, a new model for the CYS was developed; this model included the development of the Youth Outreach Team.

#### ii) Youth Outreach Team

The Youth Outreach Team (YOT), created in 2002 in fulfillment of a goal of the Civic Youth Strategy, is a council of 18-to-26 year-olds hired by the City on 18-to-24 month contracts, whose job is to act as a bridge between City staff and youth organizations, as well as between youth and the municipal system, and to provide expertise to city staff regarding the inclusion of youth in projects and programs with civic engagement mandates (YOT, 2007). While the peer-to-peer approach to engagement that is allowed by the YOT is beneficial (it is claimed, for instance, that young people are likely to become more easily involved if they are working with individuals near their own ages (IICRD, 2006)), the true impact of the YOT across city departments is questionable at best (IICRD, 2006). Further, the YOT's budget must be renewed annually; the problems that can arise from this situation are described in the next section.

### iii) Child and Youth Advocate

Also created by the Civic Youth Strategy was the Child and Youth Advocate (CYA), who had a mandate to speak out on issues of concern to the City to other levels of government, identify issues and make recommendations, and to work with the community to ensure that a wide range of children's voices were heard in the City's decision-making process (City of Vancouver, 1995). The fate of the CYA within the City of Vancouver is worth noting, as it exemplifies the problems associated with a lack of true commitment to youth engagement that can be found in many political spaces. This office received widespread community support, and was involved in recommending a number of important initiatives to City Council; however, this position was disbanded in 1999, only to be reinstated in 2003, and disbanded once more in April 2006 (IICRD, 2006). The fragile nature of this valuable position only serves to emphasize the risks inherent in reliance on political support..

### **Community Initiatives**

In addition to the efforts currently being made directly by the City to encourage youth civic engagement, there are a number of community groups and initiatives in Vancouver that work to create a connection between young people and their environs. We will here provide a brief profile of three of these groups (Redwire, the Urban Native Youth Association, and the Vancouver Foundation), with the purpose of illustrating the potential for the creation of strong community engagement.

### i) Redwire

The RedWire Native Youth Media Society is an organization dedicated to expression for Native youth. Four times a year since 1997, they have published RedWire magazine, using Native youth writers, publishers, editors, artists, etc; the Society's Board of Directors also consists entirely of youth under 29. The mandate of this organization is to provide Native youth with an uncensored forum for discussion, in order to help young people find their voice (RedWire, 2007).

It is in allowing youth a forum to find voice that RedWire makes its most significant contribution to civic engagement. There is no sense of tokenism of voice, or of inability to make an affective contribution to a widely distributed forum (currently, there are 11,000 subscriptions to the magazine (RedWire, 2007)). Disenfranchised youth are not forced to adapt themselves to a political system in which they may not believe, nor must they have a special training in order to engage a community in discussion. They are presented with an openly available opportunity for engagement – an extremely valuable resource that is best provided within the youth sector.

### ii) Urban Native Youth Association

The Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA) is a Vancouver-based non-profit organization that is dedicated to helping youth in an urban setting. The group has grown significantly since its 1989 inception; it currently includes 18 programs (including 4 residential programs), 60 volunteers, 80 full- and part-time staff, and 90 community partners (UNYA, 2007). Throughout this growth, moreover, a commitment to youth involvement has remained strong: at least 4 of the 9 positions on UNYA's Board of Directors are reserved for youth, with the position of Board

President being served by a youth member for the past 4 years; three surveys of the needs of Native youth have been undertaken; and youth are included through community meetings, and as staff, summer students and in practicum positions (UNYA, 2007).

UNYA serves as a strong example of the real value of allowing youth to have a say in determining the programs that affect them. Allowing young people to have a potent voice in decision-making has not had any adverse effect on the organization; rather, this choice has allowed UNYA to flourish.

### iii) Vancouver Foundation - Youth in Philanthropy

One of the more interesting youth engagement programs in Canada is Youth in Philanthropy (YIP), a national program of the Community Foundations of Canada. YIP provides guidance to individual Community Foundations to create Youth Advisory Councils (YACs), which act in the triple capacity of grant-making, fundraising and community leadership. The general YAC is made up of a collection of youths with varying backgrounds, who are given access to a portion of the Community Foundation's endowment fund. This money is then used by the YAC to fund youth-led or youth-focussed organizations through a competitive granting process, adjudicated by the members of the YAC. The selected grant proposals are then submitted to the Community Foundation's Board of Directors for final approval. The adult advisory to the Vancouver Foundation's YAC reports that in the over 10 years that this program has run, there has never been a granting decision overturned, nor does he anticipate any circumstance in which one would be (Gifford, 2007). Of the 43 currently registered Foundations in British Columbia, 19 contain a YAC, the largest of which is in Vancouver (in which is deemed the Youth Philanthropy Council

(YPC)). In 2007, the Vancouver YPC awarded \$92,000 in grants to 19 youth-based organizations.

YACs have numerous benefits for youth engagement. First, because they are encapsulated within Community Foundations, they are often thought of as ‘neutral third parties’, a status which opens many engagement opportunities within a community (Oates McMillan, 2007). They also give youth true fiscal responsibility - \$92,000 is a lot of money to most youth, and they are very careful in their evaluations of its expenditure (Oates McMillan, 2007). Finally, by funding youth-based projects, there is a cyclical nature to the engagement; civically engaged youth are funding youth projects, encouraging other youth to become civically engaged, and so forth.

## **Objectives**

There are seven main objectives for the ideal youth engagement initiative, each of which will be described below: Engagement with a community, program longevity, breadth of engagement, inclusiveness of engagement, strength of voice, the development in participants of a sense of one’s self within a community, and the expansion of participants beyond the triad of self/school/home.

### i) Engagement with Community

Though the objective of ‘engaging with community’ may seem self-evident in a youth engagement initiative, it remains a necessary consideration. An effective engagement program must ensure that participant youth are not mere actors on a stage that they do not understand.

Youth should exit a program knowing not just what they did, but also with a complex understanding of why they did it and of the community in which they participated.

#### ii) Program Longevity

Any effective engagement program must at least exist through the course of the initiative. A program that is interrupted before completion, or that is subject to irregular stops and starts, will create in participants a lack of faith in the initiative in question and, more importantly, has the potential to create a sense of frustration in youth that will preclude future civic engagement.

#### iii) Breadth of Engagement

The ideal engagement initiative will not target participation solely in a particular forum, such as voting in a single election, the clean up of a single park, etc. Participants should instead be encouraged to become generally engaged in civil society, applying lessons learned from a particular experience to a multitude of future endeavours.

#### iv) Inclusiveness of Engagement

Youth engagement initiatives must ensure an extremely high level of inclusiveness in order to be truly pertinent. In addition to the standard non-discrimination based on race, religion, gender, and disability, youth programs must take particular care not to exclude individuals based on age. It must be ensured, for instance, that there is not a dearth of engagement opportunities in Canada for youth in their early-to-mid teens, as programs become increasingly targeted at either young children (10 or under) or the 18-to-24 year old demographic.

#### v) Strength of Voice

A program of youth engagement should aim for a strong voice for both participants and any group of young people that the program claims to represent. A tokenistic group is bound for failure; youth who find that their voices are not heard will quickly become disenfranchised. This strength of voice will often, but not exclusively, be attained through partnerships with adult-run organizations.

#### vi) Sense of Self Within Community

In order to obtain extended levels of engagement, programs should allow youth to develop a sense of self within the community; that is to say, they must feel as if they fit. Young people must understand their role within a community in order to engage it; this understanding encompasses both a knowledge of their own position within the group, as well as of the consequences, both positive and negative, of their actions.

#### vii) Expansion of Participants Beyond Self/School/Home

Finally, the most effective engagement programs will encourage youths to expand their frontiers beyond the comfort of self, school and home. True social engagement occurs outside of these realms; children who are able to access 'foreign' institutions – those institutions with which they may, or will, have future engagements – will have both expanded opportunities for training and, after successfully engagement, a stronger understanding of their own potential.

## **Available Policy Alternatives**

In 2006, the *Growing Up in Cities Canada* initiative profiled youth civic engagement opportunities in three Canadian cities: Vancouver, Halifax and Gatineau (IICRD, 2006). In this profile, the three main pillars of support for youth engagement programs in cities were identified as being municipal support, broader public sector support, and youth sector involvement. Using these pillars as foundations for our options, we will here describe a number of the policy options available to address this problem, as well as identifying the actors and actions required for each.

### i) Municipal Support – Re-Instating the Elements of the Civic Youth Strategy

Article 12 of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely on all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” (U.N., 1990) Canada quickly ratified this treaty, and various levels of government, from the federal to the municipal, have developed strategies to create meaningful opportunities for youth civic engagement (such as Vancouver’s Civic Youth Strategy). Though varying levels of success have been achieved through these programs, the recognition of the role to be played by young people in determining the course of a city has been near-universally endorsed.

Various organizations have also written on the importance of taking such strategies seriously, and paying them more than lip service. For example, the Vancouver Working Group (VWG) formed of a partnership between public and private organizations and civil society in preparation for the UN’s 2006 World Urban Forum, has developed a working paper entitled ‘The Youth

Friendly City'. In it, they recognize that youth participation in decision-making is quintessential to the creation of a city friendly to young people, writing:

“A substantial body of research demonstrates that the benefits of child participation are multi-dimensional, essential to a child and young person's own development, and our society as a whole. Overall, child and youth participation significantly improves the quality of the relationships between government institutions and civil society. Child and youth engagement in policy and program design helps initiate programming that encourage young people to realize their full and healthy human development.” (VWG, 2006)

Attempts have been made to put these values into action. In February 2006, Mayor Sam Sullivan put forward a proposal to create a Civic Youth Council, with the goal that by 2010, 500 youth will have passed through the program, having had the opportunity to become engaged in civic government and to have a say in decisions made by City Council, the School Board and the Park Board. (Sullivan, 2006) The result of this proposal was the creation of YouthPolitik, a program run by the City of Vancouver's Youth Outreach Team, which annually selects a group of 100 Vancouver citizens aged 14-to-19 for “an intense series of fun events, workshops and skills-building activities... culminating in youth presentations to City Council.” (YOT, 2007a)

However, one-off events such as these, while sources of knowledge, are not sources of engagement. The youths who are selected for this program tend to be fully engaged in civic structures prior to their experience, and while the individual participants come out more knowledgeable about (and likely better connected to) municipal structures, the foundational issue of the lack of youth civic engagement has not been addressed.

The best policy option available to the City in order to provide municipal support to youth civic engagement is a return to the foundations of the Civic Youth Strategy: re-instating the position of

Child and Youth Advocate, the creation of a youth body to provide a permanent voice for young people in all city decision-making, and funding of programs outside of (but potentially identified by) the Youth Outreach Team.

#### ii) Broader Public Sector Support – Service-based Curriculum

In 2005, the B.C. Ministry of Education introduced a course entitled Civic Studies to its Grade 11 curriculum. The aim of this course was to enhance students' abilities and willingness to participate actively and responsibly in civic life (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2005). The instructional approach of this course is designed to be experiential in nature with an emphasis on active citizenship (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2005), though its implementation varies widely, and often limits focus to giving information about right, responsibilities and democracy (IICRD, 2006).

Such a course seems to be a first attempt at offering service-based curriculum. Service-based learning is described as,

“[Combining] service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity changes both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content.” (NSLC, 2007)

The example provided by the United States' National Service-Learning Clearinghouse serves as an effective tool for understanding what is meant: students who collect trash from a local stream

are providing a highly valued and important volunteer service to a community; students who, in the course of a science class, collect trash from a local stream, analyze what is found and describe to the community possible sources and means of prevention, provide the same service, but are also able to learn about water quality, pollution issues, interpretation of science issues for the public, and communication with effected groups and individuals (NSLC, 2007) In the course of learning, a child in the second, service-based curriculum will find and explore means to control his or her learning and volunteer experience, leading to the potential for stronger ties to school, community and society through this self-definition.

While matters of practicality do not allow for a service-based learning experience in all relevant courses in the B.C. education system, it seems reasonable to suggest such a project for the Grade 11 Civic Issues class. Currently, the only government-mandated requirement for graduation from this course is a final exam, to be worth 20% of a student's grade (BC Ministry of Education, 2005). The incorporation of a required service-based project, in which a student, having been taught the theory behind civic engagement must perform a service to the community and develop a report on the experience, seems both highly viable and extremely valuable to a student's true understanding of participation in civil society.

### iii) Youth Sector Involvement – Youth Innovation Centre

In general, the youth sector refers to those organizations that provide, strengthen and enhance services specifically targeted at young people. These organizations will generally have consultations with youth in regards to decision-making, or have young people in positions of

direct authority. This group includes those organizations profiled earlier in this work (Redwire, the Urban Native Youth Association, and the Vancouver Foundation).

In general, the youth sector is able to provide numerous and varied opportunities for youth civic engagement. There are issues, however, that arise in regards to funding and co-ordination.

Many youth organizations (and, for that matter, many of the organizations that make up civil society) face a chronic shortage of both manpower and resources. Groups are forced to rely on strategic partnerships with either corporate sponsors or amongst the associations themselves.

This is to ensure that work is not being repeated, and that smaller organizations are not marginalized due to a lack of capacity to, or the lack of a forum in which to, present their message. This resource sharing is a very time intensive process. The policy alternative which is here identified, then, is the creation of a Youth Innovation Centre, a centralized node in the youth sector with the aim of providing for more effective delivery of services. Such a centre would be created with financial aid from the government, but would ultimately be run and maintained by a coalition of youth sector, community, cultural, and educational actors.

### **Evaluative Criteria**

There are a number of criteria against which the above described policy alternatives must be measured. In addition to standard measures of cost and ease of implementation, the alternatives' effectiveness in meeting the objectives previously described in this paper must be weighed.

Thus, the criteria that will be used to evaluate the above policy options are as follows:

- Cost efficiency
- Ease of implementation

- Longevity of the program
- Inclusivity of the program, and
- Quality of engagement

## **Policy Evaluation**

### **i) Civic Youth Strategy (CYS)**

The first option that will be evaluated is the re-adoption of various aspects of the City of Vancouver's Civic Youth Strategy. Such a strategy will be very cost efficient and easy to implement, primarily due to its prior existence. The Youth Outreach Team can be used in a manner similar to a grant-making organization, ensuring efficiency through competition. The reinstatement of the Child and Youth Advocate should cost little more than the individual's salary (as the requirements of the position will not need to be redefined), and volunteer and recruitment time will be the largest costs to the development of a youth advisory council within the structure of municipal governance. The difficulties in these structures are found in ensuring that they are effective, rather than cost efficient. The CYS also has, in its past, a very poor record of program longevity; twice, for instance, the position of Child and Youth Advocate has been discontinued. Without some assurances that go beyond the current political motivations, there is little reason to feel that the CYS will be implemented in a long-term, sustainable fashion.

The measures taken by the CYS may also lack an element of inclusivity. Existing programs, such as YouthPolitik, require the filtering of interested individuals through a rigorous application process; this makes it likely that the youth who are engaged by the program are those who are already active within their communities. There are also difficulties encountered in true

representation when having a single advocate, or a youth council, speak as the voice of a very large and diverse collection of young people, such as that found in the city of Vancouver.

Of the three alternatives, the quality of engagement found in the Civic Youth Strategy will be the lowest. It aims to create a politically-engaged youth population, rather than a civically-engaged one; this is a crucial difference. Surveys have found that while youth feel that they have little say in local council or the electorate, the majority also “seldom or never” want more say in these arenas. (Harris, 2007) Rather, youth desire a stronger voice within their families, their schools, and with friends (Harris, 2007) – this is, of course, the triad beyond which it is our objective to extend youth. The desirable effect of expansion in this case, however, will be tempered by the fact that the development will be into an arena that seems of little interest to young people, thus bringing again into question the extent of the youth population that will see benefit from this program.

#### ii) Service-Based Learning (SBL)

The costs for the development and implementation of a service-based learning curriculum are unclear, but could range from small to high. The relative affordability of this program will depend heavily on the infrastructure available; for instance, in the United States, Learn and Serve America grants are available to “schools, higher education institutions, Native American tribes, community-based organizations, and others to assist in the planning and implementation of service-learning programs” (NSLC, 2007a); training and technical advice for such programs are also available through the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. If SBL curriculum design can utilize the resources available through this clearinghouse, program costs can be significantly

reduced. If, however, a uniquely British Columbian, or Canadian, program is developed, there is potential for a very high price-tag. Similar to the CYS, a SBL approach to civic engagement will also depend on political support to remain viable. However, should a school board successfully attempt such a program; it will be less vulnerable to municipal budget cuts than the CYS's various elements. The budget required for the maintenance of this program will come from school boards; thus, it will require concrete measures of success to ensure longevity.

This program, further, will not be simple to implement for a number of reasons, including the necessity of involving the provincial government to ensure the scheme's true effectiveness, the training requirements for teachers, and the requirement of setting up community partnerships. While individual schools are able to act alone in the inclusion of a service-based learning aspect in the Civic Studies curriculum, this will create unequal levels of engagement opportunities between schools, and reduce the program's inclusivity.

If available to all students, service-based learning initiatives can create a high-level of inclusiveness; this availability, though, is not simple to achieve. Communities and demographics that suffer from high-drop out or absenteeism rates are likely to be under-represented in such a program, as may be working students, as well those without an existing appreciation of the importance of civic engagement. If such a course is not made mandatory, there exists a self-selection bias, which, as with the various CYS programs, may create an environment where *newly* engaged youth are not created, but rather those individuals who are already highly participatory make up the program's majority. These provisos being mentioned, though, a service-based learning curriculum does still have potential to be largely inclusive.

Perhaps the greatest positive aspect of implementing an SBL curriculum is that, as opposed to the CYS, the quality of the engagements found in service-based learning is quite high. This is due to the dual nature of the program; while there is a focus on active participation within the community, students also receive training on the proper and most effective means of engagement, on how to powerfully position themselves within a community, and how to find a strong voice in the decisions which effect them. The variously identified objectives pertaining to personal development are all here met, with one exception. The only major issue to be identified with the SBL model of engagement is that while students are participating within the broader community, they may be left with a sense of doing so only within the comfortable confines of the school environment – thus allowing for the possibility of a sense of ‘un-reality’ in the experience. It should also be noted that in Ontario, where community service is a mandatory component of the high-school curriculum, it has been found that attitude toward future participation has not changed between cohorts with and without mandated volunteer time (Henderson et. al, 2007).

### iii) Youth Innovation Centre

The final option to be considered is the creation of a hub for youth sector activities – here named the Youth Innovation Centre. Such a centre would be costly in the short-run, but over a longer period will become extremely cost effective, for both the government and the youth sector itself. The proposed governmental contribution to this hub will be two-fold; first, it will aid in the high initial costs necessary for the set-up and/or creation of the physical space, and of matched program funding for the first two years of the hub, while partnerships between civil society groups are developed. Following this, governmental support for the hub will be reduced to

covering some small basic costs of the centre itself (maintenance, property tax, etc.), while the programming which occurs is funded by the various youth sector partners. This lack of a large continuing commitment make the program highly cost-effective for government, and the sharing of resources and provision of physical space for youth sector groups ensures that their overall costs can also be reduced.

There are three main positives associated with the creation of a Youth Innovation Centre. First, such a central hub for the youth sector will be the option most likely to see long-term commitments. Simple economics dictate that the high initial outlay costs required for such a venture will lessen the likelihood of this centre losing the variable funding required to operate. Additionally, as the operational costs for such a program will be borne by the coalition of civil society organizations associated with the hub, funding clawbacks from any individual group will not necessarily force the program's closure. Finally, civil society organizations will in general have a mandate that can be fulfilled, in part, through work accomplished through the partnerships developed within this hub; thus, it is less likely that they will abandon such a plan.

As a second positive, once fully implemented, a youth sector central hub will function as a model of inclusivity. Working with the assumption (which may, of course, be faulty) that the current youth sector is highly inclusive, it must be concluded that the development of an institution in which associations can share resources and create strategic partnerships will not serve to exclude youth. A well-formed virtual environment for such a centre would also be required, however, to help to alleviate any barriers created by the physical location of the Centre.

Finally, as is the case with inclusivity, the youth sector central hub will be able to act as a model for quality engagement. The envisioned breadth of participation from cultural, educational, scientific, community and youth sector organizations, and the opportunities created for strategic partnerships, will create a litany of means of civic engagement for youth. The centralization of services will also provide an opportunity for exposure to many elements of civil society that were perhaps previously considered inaccessible to some individuals.

### **Evaluation of Trade-Offs**

Having evaluated the proposed policy options using the six identified measurement criteria, we will now summarize and compare the trade-offs associated with our various options.

#### Trade-Offs:

##### Civic Youth Strategy

- Cost: Low – many of the structures are already in place.
- Ease of Implementation: High – see above.
- Program quality: Low – while the program may be effective in a limited sphere, is it neither broad nor inclusive, and if past history is any indicator, will have problems with longevity.

##### Service-Based Learning

- Cost: Mid-to-high – while set-up and training resources do exist, they must be distributed, and evaluated for effective translation into a Canadian context.
- Ease of Implementation: Low – major curriculum changes will not come easily, and if individual initiatives are undertaken, inequality of access will result.
- Program Quality: High - if correctly implemented, youth can come out of the program with an appreciation for civic engagement, a strong sense of self, and with engagement training

that could be used throughout life. A danger exists, though, of the program not translating outside of the school environment.

#### Youth Innovation Centre

- Cost: High initial cost, low residual costs – once created, the civil sector will be responsible for program creation.
- Ease of Implementation: Mid-to-low – Co-ordination of initial design details will not be easily undertaken.
- Program Quality: Extremely high – the breadth of engagement opportunities available, as well as the inclusivity, longevity and quality of engagement with youths will create a vibrant and active community.

#### **Recommendation**

Ultimately, this report recommends the creation of the Youth Innovation Centre (YIC); a central hub for the youth sector and all other civil society organizations that wish to collect resources, form partnerships and generally engage with the young people of Vancouver. The mandate of such a Centre would be the encouragement and development of civically engaged youth, as well as the personal development of the young people of Vancouver via the various programs and partnerships that would be made available.

This recommendation is based on the quality of programming that such a program can offer.

The mere potential for broad-based learning experiences, with cultural organizations partnering with educators, community activists, social workers, and a host of others outweigh any initial costs that may be incurred. Further, the potential for youth to develop a strong voice, whether it

be through volunteerism, political activism, or the opportunity to discuss or display the ideas of concern to them create a higher value in this program than would be possible in a wholly school-based experience.

Finally, such a Centre would not be without precedent. The Urban Native Youth Centre (NYC), an initiative of the Urban Native Youth Association, is envisioned to be a “neighbourhood house-like facility that will help fulfill the social, educational, spiritual, recreational, and artistic needs of the urban Native youth community” (UNYA, 2007a). The NYC will be constructed in East Vancouver, after consultations with youth determined the most appropriate and accessible (by public transit) location for the target audience; youth have also been involved with all other aspects of the NYC’s design. While the \$50 million project is currently still in the development phase (largely due to the need to fundraise the majority of the money required), the work that has been accomplished shows great hope for a similar Youth Innovation Centre, primarily due to the positive response of all levels of government; the City of Vancouver has come out in favour of the principle centralized ‘hub’ models of youth services, and has contributed a \$2 million land purchase to the NYC (NYC, 2007). The Provincial and Federal governments have also contributed \$1 million each to the project, and are currently reviewing an additional \$15 million in funding proposals (NYC, 2007). It is hoped that the progress made by the Native Youth Centre project will provide a framework for the design, funding, and youth involvement in decision-making for the proposed Youth Innovation Centre.

The political will for a centralized hub of youth services and the various organizations that compose civil society is currently strong, and the benefits of such a centre have been established.

It is thus strongly recommended that a project champion (or champions) be identified within both City Hall and the youth sector, in order to capitalize on the opportunity that is currently available.

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