



Nashville, Tennessee

Engaging Youth for Community Change

The key role of young people in creating Nashville's Youth Master Plan.



The master plan is adorned with youth artwork like this.

Leaders in Nashville, Tenn., created a Child and Youth Master Plan that isn't just *about* young people – it *reflects* the ideas of young people.

The city's youth were brought in from the start to frame, build and implement the plan, which serves as a blueprint for revamping youth services and supports throughout the region.

The story begins in January 2010, when Mayor Karl Dean launched a Youth Master Plan Task Force of more than 50 community leaders from all sectors – government, business, education and nonprofit – to build a “roadmap” to focus resources, align constituencies and develop a shared vision for young people in Nashville and the surrounding Davidson County.

Organizers recruited youth members from the Mayor's Youth Council, local nonprofits and school-based groups. Two youths served on each of four committees that over the next five months worked on specific issues (Education Lifecycle, Health and Safety, Mobility and Stability, and Out-of-School Time). Mayor Dean also appointed high school senior Jarius Cater as one of three co-chairs for the overall effort.

At about the same time, Nashville was chosen as one of six communities in the Ready by 21[®]

Southeast Cities Challenge, which provided tools and technical assistance to help leaders fundamentally change how they do business for their young people. The task force was trained in implementing Ready by 21 strategies, which include developing a “Big Picture Action Plan” with input from myriad stakeholders, including young people, who played critical roles on several levels.

The committees took steps to support youth involvement, such as holding meetings outside of school hours, coordinating transportation and addressing communication challenges. Some young people remained deeply involved while others fell away. (The out-of-school time committee, which had the most sustained youth engagement, had several adult committee members who worked with youth-serving organizations.)

Data about Youth

To ensure that committee membership was not the only way for young people to shape the master plan, the task force reached out to the Mayor's Youth Council (MYC), which is composed of youth from public and private schools in the Nashville area. The task force saw that the youth council members' scope, diversity and access to schools meant this group could contribute in many ways.





Youths participate in a data entry party.

The MYC crafted the survey about the activities and concerns of local youth, and worked with adult staff on the task force to ensure that the information being solicited aligned with the task force efforts. The questions concentrated on education, safety and health.

The MYC partnered with public schools to make sure that every high school (including alternative schools) completed enough surveys to be proportionally represented. The public schools distributed and collected the surveys. Students from private schools made sure that their classmates participated as well.

The MYC then organized a series of “data entry parties” in which teams of youth entered survey data into an online system. This was no small effort; there were over 1,100 respondents from more than 30 schools.

Because understanding the state of young people in Nashville required understanding community perceptions of those young people, the task force and city council launched an online community survey as well. Most of the nearly 800 respondents were adults. Among the findings: a strong sense that the community has too few places where young people are welcome and respected, as well as serious concerns about the health, wellness and safety of youth. Findings from both surveys helped inform how young people thought about meaningful strategies for change.

Community Conversations

The Youth Master Plan Task Force hosted 10 community listening sessions around the city, which young people helped to facilitate and which were attended by both youth and adults. The youth co-chair of the task force also hosted a series of peer focus groups.

The Mayor’s Youth Council then used its annual Mayor’s Youth Summit to build on the work of the task force by focusing the discussions on education, safety and health. A full day of youth-designed, youth-facilitated breakout groups with almost 170 student participants from 24 schools helped the council interpret the survey data and hold deeper conversations about key issues. These conversations were organized around three questions: What is working? What is not working? What are your recommendations for improvement?

After processing the statistics and hundreds of recommendations, MYC representatives presented a summary of their findings at a meeting of the full task force, and shared dozens of pages of raw data. This input shaped and refined much of the subsequent work of the task force.

The task force members did not want to produce just another report. They wanted Nashville’s Child and Youth Master Plan to reflect the uniqueness of their process, in particular the depth of youth engagement. So the co-chairs sent out a call for young people to use writing, painting, drawing or photos to answer this question: “If Nashville were the perfect place for you to grow up, what would it look like?” Many creative entries were included in the report.



Young people facilitate a community listening session

Young people gathered in a final focus group to review the task force recommendations. The group assessed the clarity of the recommendations, their viability in the real world of young people, and whether the report responded adequately to the input from the surveys, summit, focus groups and community meetings. Essentially, young people served as a final review panel, and discussed how to take the final product out to their friends, families and schools.

A Plan that Matters

The city launched the plan in July 2010 at the Youth Opportunity Center, a one-stop shop that houses nine youth-serving nonprofits ranging from a health clinic to residential services to counseling and leadership development. Policymakers, nonprofit leaders and dozens of young people joined task force members at the event.

The plan articulates 14 desired outcomes to ensure all children and youth have a successful future. These outcomes include safe and stable homes, safe places in communities, self-confidence, leadership and engagement opportunities, social equity, caring school environments, physical health and high-quality afterschool programs. The plan provides strategies to achieve these outcomes, serving as a blueprint for government agencies and private organizations to work together, coordinate resources and reach shared goals.

One example of an idea turning into action: When a task force committee discussed the lack of youth jobs and the need for more opportunities to develop critical skills, build résumés and gain work experience, a youth member suggested more certification opportunities for jobs like babysitting and for certifiable skills like CPR. That would legitimize and professionalize jobs that are available to youth and build skills that are critical to job readiness. The recommendation made it into the Child and Youth Master Plan; city leadership then integrated such training and certification options in the annual citywide job fair.

Key Steps to Community Change Management

Community partnerships or collaborations can use these five steps to identify community work and partners, gain a clear understanding of priority issues, identify root causes, achieve consensus for change, and develop and adjust strategies. Here is how young people were engaged in each step to help guide the development of Nashville's Youth Master Plan:

Take Shape

- Youth were involved from the outset and had visible leadership positions.
- Adults and youth addressed some of the logistical challenges related to youth involvement.

Take Aim

- Many of the objectives in the master plan were based on needs identified by youth, even if the objectives were difficult to measure or not in line with the kind of goals seen in a typical strategic plan.
- For example, increasing access to positive and caring relationships with adults was such a prevalent theme in the youth-led data that it became a goal for the city.

Take Stock

- The task force tapped existing youth groups to draw input from a broader youth audience.
- Youth developed and facilitated surveys, focus groups and a youth summit.
- Adults supported youth to ensure that the youths' work aligned with the task force's process.

Target Action

- Youth-proposed strategies are embedded throughout the master plan.
- For example, putting college and career counselors in every high school, increasing access to driver's education and creating a youth advisor for every city council member.

Track Progress

- The Mayor's Youth Summit focused on issues in the plan.
- The Mayor's Youth Council remains involved in implementation of the plan.

Young people play a critical role in implementation, although sustaining meaningful engagement past the planning stage is easier said than done. Initially, the Mayor's Office appointed a Child and Youth Master Plan Advisory Council made up of seven youth and nine adults. Youth-adult committees were re-formed based on the key areas of the planning process with the goal of continuing to take the pulse of what is and is not working for young people and to track progress against the plan. However, due to staffing changes at the Mayor's Office the advisory council was put on hold, and a scaled-back Child and Youth Master Plan Leadership Council was created. Although this new

group does not include youth as formal members, the MYC will remain engaged with the new Leadership Council on the implementation of the Master Plan.

"Youth voice will be important to include as the community comes together to plan action," said Laura Hansen, formerly of the Mayor's Office of Children and Youth, and now supporting implementation of the master plan from her position with the Metro Nashville Public Schools. "Collecting youth thoughts and perspectives and empowering them to take action on behalf of issues that directly affect them are both powerful strategies."

Nashville's Keys to Success:

Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change

1. **Design an Outreach Strategy** – Nashville leadership sought diverse input, and found young people who had access to adult support via a community organization or another mechanism.
2. **Create a Home Base** – Choose convenient and consistent meeting locations so that young people develop a sense of familiarity with their surroundings. Meet in youth-friendly places to help young people feel safe.
3. **Convey an Intentional Philosophy of Change** – It is important for leadership to state the importance of meaningful youth involvement openly and frequently. The mayor and his staff made it clear from the beginning that young people needed to play a critical role in the process.
4. **Identify Issues** – The Mayor's Youth Council identified issues that were important to young people. This created authenticity and coherence for the plan, and insured that it targeted changes that young people want and need, not just what adults think they need.
5. **Create Youth and Adult Teams** – Having two members on each of the planning committees was important. Moving out of the planning phase, leaders are creating pathways for the Mayor's Youth Council to partner with adults who are involved in implementation.
6. **Build Youth and Adult Capacity** – This is difficult in such a short and intense planning process, but is an important longer term goal in order to build community capacity across generations.
7. **Provide Individual Support** – On task force committees where adults had experience supporting young people, the young people felt more supported and therefore stayed more involved.
8. **Create Opportunities for Sustained Access and Influence** – Nashville did not stop at engaging youth in planning; it created mechanisms for youth to participate in implementation as well.

Core principles referenced from *Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change*, Forum for Youth Investment 2007.
www.forumfyi.org/content/core-principles-engagi

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The Child and Youth Master Plan for Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County is at www.nashville.gov/mocy/masterplan.asp.

This report was written by Anderson Williams, a consultant involved in community and youth organizing work in Nashville, and Nicole Yohalem, special projects director at the Forum for Youth Investment.