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# Shared Decision-Making with Youth: Adding Rungs of Consent, Advocacy, and Incorporation to the Ladder of Citizen Participation



## The Issue

Community engagement and citizen participation have been incredibly important for the success of urban planning projects. Over the field's history, however, many efforts to engage communities have restricted democratic participation or exploited citizen expectations. Though many efforts to engage have become more transparent, youth are still left out of decision-making processes, despite the fact that many urban planning efforts are focused on youth health and safety. Yet there are many youth-centered movements that seek to reverse this trend, empowering youth to participate and civically engage.

This study addresses the following questions:

- » In what ways are youth participating in shared decision-making processes?
- » How are they able to participate in these ways?
- » Are these forms of participation expanding their power and amplifying their voices?

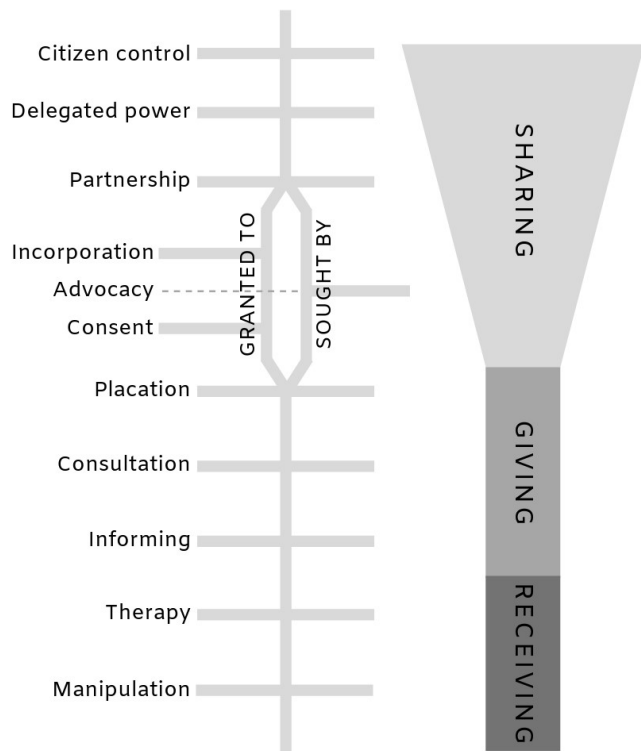
Involving youth in decision-making processes brings many benefits to both youth and adults that work with them, including increasing intergenerational understanding, building competency and leadership skills, and creating stronger, more active, and resilient community spaces. Youth have valuable perspectives to share about the places where they live, learn, and play. Creating space while keeping their perspectives in mind will benefit youth, their parents, and their neighbors.



## Methodology

The authors of this study examined programs that teach youth about urban planning and civic engagement, looking for examples of programs where youth interact with local decision-makers such as mayors, city council members, or school principals. Three stood out—Y-PLAN, YEAH!, and Growing Up Boulder—as outstanding programs that have successfully provided youth with a platform to participate in and influence urban planning projects. These case studies were then analyzed in comparison to Arnstein's **Ladder of Citizen Participation**, a well-known classification of how citizen power can be described, from levels of non-participation to tokenism and then citizen control.

The Ladder of Citizen Participation (developed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969) documented ways that citizens, or people over the age of 18, can participate in decision-making processes that govern their daily lives. Arnstein's eight "rungs" are "manipulation," "therapy," "informing," "consultation," "placation," "partnership," "delegated power," and "citizen control." "Citizens" consist of people who serve on committees, attend neighborhood meetings, and give feedback on projects occurring in their community. Youth are not considered in Arnstein's ladder because of the modes of engagement scripted for this participation. The rungs of "consent," "advocacy," and "incorporation" can describe ways in which youth are involved in shared decision-making processes. Under "consent," youth are given explicit permission by leaders to work on a planning or design project. Under "advocacy," youth bring proposed plans or design changes to decision-makers directly. Under "incorporation," youth participation is a consistent presence throughout all stages of the project, though adults are still the leaders.



This figure is a recreation of Arnstein's original ladder, with new rungs describing youth participation inserted between "placation" and "partnership."

This section of the ladder is divided along two tracks, depending on whether the power to participate is "granted to" youth or "sought by" youth.

On the right is a representation of how youth interact with information from the decision-making process. Though these new rungs do not fall under "citizen control," they do facilitate information "sharing" as opposed to "receiving" or "giving," which align with lower forms of participation.



## Results

Overall, these programs expand participation for youth, but each in a different way. Youth in Y-PLAN advise on plans or designs for a site, sharing their perspective and knowledge of community and proposing solutions they believe would benefit their community. This style of participation is called "consent," based on how adults allow youth to contribute.

Youth in YEAH! develop plans through various activities, with the intention of presenting their ideas for improvement to a decision-maker. Youth choose their own projects to undertake that affect their community. This style of participation is called "advocacy," based on youth petitioning decision-makers for specific actions.

Youth in Growing Up Boulder are considered a formal part of the planning structure and provide their perspective and vision for their communities from start to finish. This style of participation is called "incorporation," based on how integrated youth are to the process.

These rungs fall above "placation" on Arnstein's ladder, which is the highest level of "tokenistic" participation. Youth's feedback is considered in earnest by adults. Yet they fall below "partnership" on Arnstein's ladder, which is the lowest level of participation reminiscent of "citizen control." Youth are still not full partners because without adult "allies" helping them gain access to decision-making processes, they would still be excluded. Youth programs that encourage civic participation are becoming more popular. Typically, these programs enable youth to engage civically through adult "allies" or proxies.

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**Full article published in Journal of the American Planning Association, available at:**

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2019.1616319>

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