



Collaborative

Report & Recommendations

June 30, 2021

**NYC Administration for
Children's Services
Division of Youth & Family Justice**

with

Prison Writes

The Kite

Youth Communication

Report prepared by Youth Communication, based on writing by teens.

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Introduction

Change is hard—for individuals and for systems. This report looks at ways that the juvenile justice system can create conditions that will support positive change among the young people in its care and among the staff who care for them. It is based on the experiences of young people themselves in their own words.

Beginning in late 2019 and continuing through 2020, Prison Writes, The Kite, and Youth Communication collaborated on a writing project to support self-expression among young people under the care of the New York City Division of Youth & Family Justice, with assistance from the Center for Community Alternatives. Among other things, staff from the partnering agencies were looking for elements of expression that could be helpful for those working in detention and placement facilities in better understanding the experiences and goals of young people. And we looked for experiences that included ideas that were suggestive of how staff could be more helpful in supporting positive change among young people.

Based on the young people's writings, we identified 10 themes that show ways that the young people think the system could be more effective in helping them. To illustrate the themes, we quote or paraphrase the words of one or more young people. Many of the things that the young people say are supported by youth development research. Where it was readily available, we include references to resources and research that staff may find helpful.

We hope the results of this project will support the strong, trusting relationships between staff and young people that lead to positive change, and will support changes in policies and practices that help build a culture of caring.

There is much wisdom here. And there's a lot more where it came from. Our hope is that this project is a just a first step toward new institutional practices of listening to young people, learning from them, and implementing new practices, programs, and policies that are informed by their experiences. If regular programs that distill young people's experience into formal feedback can become part of the system's continuous improvement process, it will result in a better system for all.

Theme #1:

Safety Is a Precondition for Change

“They act hard, but feel unsafe.”

“I am a tall black man. ...I just want to feel safe and be treated like everyone else. Right now, we are not free. We still are hurt and scared.”

“I just want to be happy, and I can better my community by helping the people keep the community safe....”

“More problems are happening and I’ve lost family due to the pandemic; and it’s been a lot to deal with. Not only do we have to worry about the current pandemic taking away the people we love and care about, we also have to worry about the cops and people in the street taking away the people closest to us. All of it causes a world that no one, including me feels safe in.”

“Another hard part of being me is telling people things that they want to hear instead of what I can do [because I don’t feel safe revealing that].”

DFYJ works hard to provide programs that will help young people change, but that work may be in vain if it is provided in settings where young people do not feel that is safe to open up to each other or to staff. When young people feel safe, they are more likely to ask for help and participate in positive activities.

Recommendations

- *Regularly provide opportunities for teens to talk and write about what makes them feel safe and unsafe in their institution and make their concerns available to staff and supervisors. For example, run structured groups—such as those offered by the agencies in this project—in which teens (and staff) can get to know each other better and talk about what makes both groups feel safe in the institutions.*
- *When needed, change practices (or even policies) to increase feelings of safety.*

Resources and Research:

Prison Writes, the Kite, Carnegie Hall, and other DYFJ contractors have staff who are trained to create the kind of safe spaces where young people are not afraid to try new ways of thinking and acting.

Youth Communication also offers resources and professional development for staff, <https://youthcomm.org/curriculum-training/#curricula>, that are designed to create spaces

that are centered on young people's experiences while helping staff build a climate of trust and support among teens and between staff and teens.

There has also been a lot of research in education on how to create safe spaces. Though this work focuses on schools, the "best practices" it describes are the same ones that Youth Communication, for example, uses when working with youth in detention.

In the book *Identity Safe Classrooms*, Becki Cohn-Vargas and Dorothy M. Steele write about classroom settings that promote a sense of belonging and value for students of all backgrounds. Their research found that to create identity safe classrooms, staff should: (1) teach in youth-centered ways that promote autonomy, cooperation, and youth voice; (2) convey high expectations for all young people; (3) ensure that young people treat each other kindly and fairly; and (4) support the social and emotional well-being of young people through social skill building activities designed to promote positive peer relationships. Sites such as @TeacherToolkit (www.teachertoolkit.co.uk) and Identity Safe Classrooms (www.identitysafeclassrooms.org) provide useful and practical information that could be informative and/or adapted for professional development for DYFJ staff.

Theme #2:

Respect Is a Precondition for Change

"I know when a person has respect for me when they have it for others, show love, and care and they don't cross any boundaries."

"A way of telling someone respects you is when you're talking in front of a lot of people and you have all their undivided attention; and they're listening to what you have to say without interrupting you."

"I also can tell when I give feedback and they don't take offense to it. Meaning they are respecting what I am saying."

"I admit I do things that get me in trouble. I like to talk in class, argue with the teacher and make people laugh. But I feel like the staff are always waiting for me to do something stupid so they can jump on my case. It's like we're in a war. The only question is who's going to strike first. A lot of times it's me who makes the first strike. I do these little tests to see if a teacher is going to be respectful. If the teacher is cool, I'm not going to cross the line. But if he gets me mad, it's going to be a battle."

For youth in juvenile justice facilities, feeling respected is a close cousin to feeling safe. As we can see in their writing, teens are closely observing staff to see how they treat each other and their peers. They often form opinions about whether individual staff members show respect before they ever have a direct interaction with them. As the young people say, they are looking to see whether staff show love and caring and really listen; whether staff are defensive or quick to anger; and whether staff are sensitive to boundaries that the young people consider important.

This desire for respect is a developmentally normal response for young people, even though to staff it can sometimes feel like insubordination.

Recommendations

- *Talk with teens about what makes them feel respected.* (Provide support to staff in how to hold regular discussions with the teens about how they are feeling respected and disrespected.)
- Based on those conversations, *have staff and teens explicitly identify practices that support respect* and undermine it.
- Then, *work to increase the interactions they consider respectful* and decrease the ones they consider disrespectful. Makes these practices part of ongoing "group agreements."
- *Post these "best practices" for showing respect.* Regularly review and update them.

Resources and Research: See above for Theme #1.

Theme #3: Patience and Non-Judgmental Responses Support Change (and feelings of respect and safety)

“Living with so many people who aren’t what they seem makes me cautious with everyone. I have a fear of people hiding their real, selfish bad selves behind a nice façade. I’m always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“I reject kind gestures and words because I don’t believe them. Former friends who have seen me grow, change, and overcome trials reach out, and I respond, ‘I appreciate it but I’m OK;’ ‘I’m fine;’ ‘Thanks for the offer but I’m managing.’

“I’ve accepted that I’ll never have an adult take care of me. Instead, I hope to find a peer to trust. I’m looking for people who show compassion with their actions, not their words. I’d like a relationship with someone who doesn’t make me feel like a burden. I want us to do and say meaningful things without expecting anything in return. That’s the foundation of a trusting relationship.

“But my past experiences form a wall between me and other people: I have my guard up against everyone I come into contact with. I think if I were able to trust even one person, it would make me more sociable and less pessimistic.

“I know that my fear and suspicion will make me miss out on friends, jobs, and other opportunities. To try and overcome my past and learn to trust the right people.”

“I try to stay open and converse. I join groups I wouldn’t have joined before. I’m not ready to open all the way up, but I’m not ignoring and closing people off either. My path to finding someone to trust is to communicate with others who share my interests: music, art, books, photography, writing, and spirituality. I can’t undo what’s happened to me, but I’m moving forward with slightly open arms.”

When staff are rebuffed by young people that they reach out to help, it is easy to assume that the young person is in denial or unaware of their problem, or not willing to change. But as we can see in this story by C.J., a teen in Youth Communication’s foster care writing program—who was abused at home and by her foster parents—she is painfully self-aware. But that awareness is not like a switch she can turn on that allows her to change overnight.

It's going to take time—and patience from staff. (Many youth in the juvenile justice system have had difficult family relations like C.J.'s that affect how they relate to staff and peers.)

Recommendations

- *Provide staff with opportunities to learn and practice Active Listening.*
- *Provide teens with opportunities to learn and practice Active Listening.*
- *In Active Listening conversations, encourage staff to reflect back to the young people their best ideas and feelings, which will help young people to see their strengths and will build trusting relationships.*

Resources and Research: *Active Listening.* Here are two of many resources available on the web: <https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/ActiveListening.htm> and <https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/ActiveListening.htm>

Theme #4: Recognizing That Behavior Is Often a Response to Prior Trauma Supports Change

Death trauma

Letter to younger self: “[A friend was stabbed.] Then I went to check up on him and he was just there bleeding. They stabbed him up. I brought him to the hospital (and he passed in the hospital). If this never happened to Daniel, I would have never been the kid I am today. I would have probably finished school because before he died; I was a straight A student... never got into trouble. This scarred my life for a long time, and I started to move differently; and didn't think the same. This gave me trust issues and made me second guess who I hang around and who I associate with. It was the first time I experienced someone dying in my eyes. We were really close.”

Letter to younger self: “I know seeing your brother get stabbed in front of you messed up your mind and made you make bad decisions, then get arrested for a year for assault.”

“I just lost my grandmother today. My personal goal now just changed. I want to make sure that when I see my grandmother again she tells me, ‘You did good for our name and respect.’”

Foster Care & Family Breakup trauma

Letter to younger self: “I know when you were living with your aunt you always were thinking about your mom and how you were going to make your way back home and all your mom was doing was going back and forth to court just to fight for her rights to get her kids back. All you had to do was be patient. I know the relationship you had with your parents wasn't the best and you thought by doing different types of programs and having family therapy things will change but it takes more than time. It takes effort.”

Housing Instability trauma

“In 5th grade I started getting into fights and arguments with teachers and girls at school. I would go on rampages—vandalizing bulletin boards, tearing apart displays, and cursing at anyone who crossed my path. I despised my teachers for not questioning my behavior. They never thought: ‘I don't think a kid wakes up in the morning intending to ruin everyone's day and tear everything apart. There must be a valid reason as to why a child is acting out like this’.”

Virtually every teen in the juvenile justice system has suffered from multiple ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences), like loss, violence, and the effects of homelessness, racism, and poverty. Research now shows that these experiences affect brain development in ways that

can make young people less able to regulate emotions and behavior—which can lead to increases in everything from anxiety to impulsive aggression.

But the teen brain is still actively developing. These changes can be interrupted and even reversed by supportive staff and settings.

Recommendations

- *When appropriate, provide workshops for teens on ACEs and the impact of trauma, which also include a focus on healing. (We have found that when teens learn that past trauma often causes overreactions or inexplicable floods of emotion in response to current trauma—they feel less self-blame and more empowered to change.)*
- *Provide staff with basic professional development in how to recognize signs of trauma, how trauma affects children’s brains, and how that can affect their behavior. (This will help staff to depersonalize challenging behaviors and understand their roots.)*
- *Provide staff with basic education restorative responses and settings for teens who have experienced trauma*
- *Provide staff with professional development in normal teen responses to grief and loss—and PD in how to help those teens.*
- *Increase awareness and support for staff suffering from secondary trauma.*

Resources and Research: Developmental psychologist Dr. Gess LeBlanc was very frustrated by negative responses of young people he was trying to help. In his book, “Who’s in My Classroom?” he describes how he used a research-based “trauma-informed” approach to switch from focusing on the behavior to asking the teens what was behind it.

“When I talked with them and learned their personal stories, I saw the stressors behind their reactions. One young man had been homeless for much of the school year. Another had regularly witnessed acts of violence in his home, and another had been the victim of violence in his neighborhood and feared for his safety outside of school. According to Cornell University researcher James Garbarino, traumatic experiences create a lens through which these young men view the world. This lens led to their developing ‘aggressive cognitions.’ They saw the world as an unsafe, aggressive place.... It also [shaped their brains] in ways that make them highly susceptible to triggers.”

Part of a “trauma-informed” approach is looking beyond the immediate behaviors to regularly ask young people about the experiences that may be influencing their behavior.

Probation Officer and psychology instructor Kirsten Lewis’s article “Secondary Trauma: The Personal Impact of Working with Criminal Offenders,” has helpful information about the impact of secondary trauma on staff. It also includes information about one program that has helped reduce the impact of secondary trauma so staff can be more effective: <https://nicic.gov/secondary-trauma-personal-impact-working-criminal-offenders>

Theme #5: Clarity and SMART Goals

Support Change

“The hardest part of being me is that I don’t know what’s expected of me. Me not knowing what I want so I can have it in my life.”

“[Advice to self] “Now that you are getting back on track, I want you to start making better decisions for yourself, communicating with your mom and seeing how we two will work things out. I see you getting into programs to benefit yourself and to earn money in the correct way so all I want to say is keep up the good work and focus on what is important and you will succeed.”

“What I really wanted to write about today is about how much I want to do when I go back into the community and live independently. I want to change my life for the better and I think making the world better starts with making yourself better, day by day. I think I have started to do that and I’ve seen how it has helped me so far.”

Youth in the system want to change, and they can often repeat the empty slogans about how they should change. What they lack are concrete strategies for turning slogans or hopes into practical strategies. Learning those strategies feels empowering them.

One common goal-setting strategy is the creation of SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound). SMART goals help young people identify specific steps that they can take to achieve a personal objective. For example, the second writer wants to get along better with his mom and earn legal money. Those are worthy goals, but he probably does not know the steps he could take to make it more likely he would achieve them. A series of SMART goals with his mom might be: Find a therapist we could go to together; agree to be calm in the sessions, and to talk about the things that we like about each other and that bother us about each other; attend at least five sessions before deciding whether it’s working and we can live together again.

Recommendations

- *Train staff in setting and practicing SMART goals for themselves in their work with young people (or in another important area of their life).*
- *Train staff to work with teens to set and follow through on SMART goals for themselves.*

Resources and Research: The Nevada Center for Juvenile Justice Innovation uses SMART goals with juvenile offenders as part of its case planning system. They briefly describe that work here: http://ncji.ncjj.org/Files/pdf/NCJJI_08_19_20.pdf

Theme #6: It Takes More Than Will: Supports Are Needed for Change

“My transition home without a phone or a tablet to do any of my assignments or call in for a check in [reduced my chance to succeed].”

If we want young people to succeed, we need to help create the conditions for success.

We ask a lot of young people in the system, including that they change ingrained habits in a short time, break connections with longstanding friends, and generally take a different approach to life. The least we can do is provide them every possible support that will increase the likelihood that they will succeed. To do otherwise is setting them up for failure.

Recommendations

- *Ask young people explicitly what they need to succeed—at intake, at selected intervals during their time in the system, and on exit. Work to ensure that there is a system to provide the most common needs. Also, create a personalized assessment of each young person’s needs and have the flexibility to meet those needs, within reason.*
- *Provide opportunities for youth and staff to offer feedback about what resources they need to succeed. For example, track the needs that young people mention over time. For needs that the system cannot currently meet, make changes in policy and practice over time to ensure that the system adjusts to meet the most important needs.*

Theme #7: Praise Increases the Likelihood of Change

"I measure success when someone points out I am doing a 'good job'."

Being in detention or placement is a severe blow to a young person's confidence and self-esteem. Being held in a facility is an extremely vulnerable position for a young person to be in. They may strive to gain agency through negative behaviors as simple as refusing to comply.

Genuine praise and positive feedback, even for the smallest achievements, can be very meaningful and motivational, and can build stronger, more trusting relationships.

Recommendations

- *Find many ways to catch young people doing something good (as part of an overall culture of positivity—see "New Beginnings" recommendation, below).*
- *In staff meetings, have a standing agenda items in which staff share examples of young people doing something good. After the meetings, let young people know that their positive behavior was recognized and appreciated.*

Theme #8:

Helping Youth Develop Their Unique Identities Supports Change

“I can use my voice as a young person by trying to protect my Black people and telling them to watch their backs.”

I’ve recently enrolled in psychotherapy and am working toward overcoming my mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and PTSD. I take part in supportive groups at a place called STEPS to End Family Violence. I can be opinionated and understood there, which makes it feel like a safe space.”

Youth in juvenile justice facilities are at the age and developmental stage when they are forming significant personal identities—based on “fixed” characteristics like race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, and on characteristics they choose, like rapper, reader, gamer, etc. Reflecting back the positive elements of those identities makes young people feel seen and safe and helps them consolidate the best aspects of themselves. Recognizing and supporting positive identities also helps young people to crowd out or let go of some of the unhelpful identities that may have contributed to getting in trouble.

Recommendations

- *Support staff in understanding the positive aspects of young people’s multiple identities (especially identities that may be new or unfamiliar to staff around gender, for example).*
- *Use activities like the ‘Where I Am From’ poem and other writing exercises to help young people identify and show pride in their identities and share them with each other and staff in safe ways.*
- *Build an identity scaffold and make it visible in the space so youth feel a unique presence. This will help them to feel supported and recognized as individuals.*
- *Tap the expertise of consulting agencies to provide professional development and direct-to-teen workshops on identity-related topics.*

Resources and Research: Research suggests that “interventions tailored to increase in-depth exploration in adolescents may help to prevent adolescent delinquency.” Activities like those describe in the recommendations, plus therapy, can support the building of positive identities.

Theme #9: Providing Opportunities for Success Supports Change

Every teen in detention needs opportunities to succeed. Because many of these young people have tasted too little success in their lives to date, providing opportunities for success can be especially powerful. However, young people may not feel safe enough to admit it to staff or the group or even to themselves that they want to succeed. They may not have a vision of a self that is successful in new ways. And even if they have a vision, they may not know which path will get them there. But even if they are reluctant to reveal their knowledge and feelings, we should assume they know more than we may be aware and find ways to tap their wisdom.

Here are several wise suggestions from young people in detention. For each Program Idea, we include the writer's suggestions as they wrote them. Then we convert their suggestions into "system" language.

My Program Idea: "Bronxville Custom Tutoring"

- The program would work with the kids by teaching them how to rap and how to be creative with their writing.
- The tutoring program will also help kids with their communication skills and to help them improve communication and compromise with their family and friends to prevent conflict.
- Students will work with their tutors to improve their use of the internet as a learning tool.
- Students will work both independently and as part of teams, and students will learn how to compromise and work together. This will also allow students to socialize with each other.
- Unlike other programs, students and tutors will work together to decide when the student is "finished" with the program, based on how much the student has learned.
- This program is different from other tutoring programs because it focuses on giving students the opportunity to decide for themselves how to learn by using creative tools. For example, tutors and students will watch educational videos that include art and music, and then use what they learned in the student's own writing of a rap song.
- Students get a chance to be themselves and learn what they want. This will motivate students to participate.
- Students will also improve their listening and communication skills and learn partnership skills, teamwork, and cooperation.
- Students will participate in the program 3 days a week, and meeting more often will help students focus.
- Supplies that will be needed include paper, pens, computers/internet, books that teach people how to do what they want to do

- This program will also provide Metrocards for travelling to the tutoring sessions.
- It is important that the tutors that are hired can understand and get along with the kids in the program. In particular, the program will hire tutors who are from the streets because they will likely be more motivated.
- As an incentive, kids will be provided a Visa gift card when they finish the program.

The writer's Recommendations (in system language)

- Offer programs that are relevant to youth interests.
- Offer programs that strengthen communication skills.
- Offer programs that strengthen conflict resolution skills.
- Help students learn to use the internet as an educational tool (beyond Tik Tok, Facebook, etc.)
- Use team-based and project-based learning styles to build cooperation skills
- Use a "mastery" approach to assessment, not grades.
- Integrate voice and choice into the lessons.
- Integrate the arts, including speaking, writing, music, video, etc.
- Meet often enough to make real progress.
- Ensure that having supplies is not a barrier to participation.
- Ensure that transportation is not a barrier to participation.
- Use near-peers and credible messengers as teachers.
- Provide a small incentive for completion.

My Program Idea: "New Beginnings"

I would call my program "New Beginnings" because I want youth to understand that my program could be a start in a new direction, and a real commitment to change that is needed. My program would help bring the youth up, by giving them hope for a better life rather than use the program to make them feel worse about their circumstances. I would like to build a program that constantly encourages "Better."

I would like the program to ensure that treatment consist of youth having knowledge of what the program is meant to do. Youth should understand what they can gain from program if they fully engage in treatment.

I will include job placement, independent living, and education support in my program to ensure that the youth can gain some of the things that they are lacking that may contribute to their behavioral problems.

My program would help individuals who are suffering from PTSD, depression, aggression, bipolar, and anxiety. The sole purpose of my program is to let the youth know that they are

not alone, and they can have some type of support as they are coping with certain issues in their homes and communities.

I would want my program to assist the youth as much as possible by helping them find education and jobs and learn some etiquette that will help stabilize the youth to keep them out of trouble.

The writer's Recommendations (in system language)

- Programs should be future-focused.
- Programs should not dwell on problems of the past.
- Treatment (psycho-social) programs should be transparent about their methods and goals.
- Treatment programs should focus on the most common challenges facing youth in detention: PTSD, depression, aggression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder.
- Treatment programs should include groups, so young people know they are not alone
- Programs should include job training, education, and social skills.

My Program Idea: Exercise and Movement

"I also came to the realization that I have love for exercising. Exercising helps me cope with being in placement and is a stress reliever. I hope when I leave, I am able to stay consistent with my workout regimen."

The writer's Recommendations (in system language)

- Ensure that youth in juvenile detention and placement have regular access to exercise, sports, dance, and other physical outlets.

Recommendation

- ACS should create a program in which the most thoughtful teens (like those here) can be hired as consultants to help design and review programming!

Theme #10: Listening Closely to Youth Voices (and responding) Supports Continuous Improvement for Youth—and for the Agency

“If they have good programming ideas, use them and give them credit. Ask them what’s working and what isn’t, and adjust in response.”

“Sometimes it’s challenging getting your point across, and sometimes it feels like you aren’t being listened to. Even when you may or may not have a valid point it may just be disregarded because of your age or your position at the current time. Unfortunately, there have been many times that I have struggled with this throughout my whole life whether it is from being a child, and through my transition into a young adult. No matter where I was, there was always a situation where I felt like my voice wasn’t heard, or even when it was heard, I feel like what I said didn’t matter.

“For instance, there was a time recently when some staff members misunderstood me. The staff didn’t understand when I was trying to get my point across about going to the bathroom. The staff wanted all my peers to go to the bathroom with me even though I was the only one who had to use it. My peers were moving sluggishly. The staff didn’t understand why I was so upset, and why one person should be able to use the bathroom by themselves. This affected my relationship with the staff because I may have come across as disrespectful, causing people to be upset with me. It could have gone a bad route, but fortunately for me, I was able to calm down and explain my point of view. In the end, I got what I felt was right, and the fate was changed. I got to use the bathroom by myself.”

Recommendation

The system should create multiple ways for soliciting youth voices, tracking what they say, and monitoring the extent to which young people’s concerns and suggestions support observable and measurable changes in practice and policy.

Youth Voices Are a Secret Ingredient for System Improvement

Studies of professional development show that what professionals learn in PD—and what they do in response to what they learn—is significantly influenced by their prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs.

Centering youth voice in professional development can help staff examine and question their prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs about the young people they work with and help staff see more clearly how to make their work effective and satisfying. Listening to young people can help staff become more aware of the gaps in their knowledge and inspire them to adopt new practices in countless ways: practices that result in better outcomes for young people.

For example, for staff whose background and experiences have not fully prepared them to understand the lives of young people who experience race, gender, or religion differently than they do, *listening to young people themselves is the best way to learn*. For staff who have rosy expectations about how quickly young people should change or how they should behave, listening closely to them can help staff understand the huge challenges that many young people are striving to overcome.

For staff who have become jaded or even cynical about seeing change, really listening to young people and their hopes and dreams for change, can remind them of the better instincts about helping others that they brought to the job in the first place. At first, listening to young people may seem like another burdensome part of the job. But as it becomes institutionalized, staff learn that listening unlocks the secrets about what young people really need to thrive. It gives staff a roadmap to what young people want and need, so staff can provide it.

Listening to young people is the secret weapon for system improvement, for better outcomes for young people, and for more satisfying work for staff.

But listening is just the first step. Staff also need support in learning techniques like Active Listening and creating SMART goals, in running groups that promote feelings of safety and respect, and in understanding the effect of trauma on young people and of secondary trauma on themselves. Like teens, staff also need the resources, flexibility, and support from supervisors to take what they learn from teens and put it into practice.

Partnering with outside contractors is an important strategy for professional development and for running workshops directly with teens on specialized topics. But ideally, DYFJ staff themselves will become expert listeners and facilitators of activities in which young people feel safe talking about what works for them. In addition, only DYFJ staff and supervisors can systematically track youth suggestions and transform them into new policies and practices.

We hope this report will be a catalyst for a continuous improvement process that is driven by the experiences of young people themselves.

Sample Rubric: The recommendations in this report are more likely to be implemented if they are tracked. Here, for illustration purposes only, is a sample of a rubric that the agency could develop to help ensure that youth voices become a regular part of the agency's continuous improvement

	Yes	No
Are there regular opportunities for teens to talk and write about what makes them feel safe?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
When were they observed? _____		
Has there been a change in a formal or informal practice as a result of what teens have reported?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Describe: _____		
Have staff been trained to lead discussions in which teens talk about what makes them feel respected?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Describe: _____		
Are "best practices" for showing respect posted in common rooms in the facilities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have staff received professional development in Active Listening?		
Have teens received professional development (PD) in Active Listening?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have teen received PD on ACSs and the impact of trauma on young people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have staff received PD on recognizing and responding to trauma?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have staff received PD in restorative practices?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have staff received PD in normal teen responses to grief and loss?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have staff received PD and support in managing secondary trauma?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have staff received PD and practice in implementing SMART goals for themselves in their work with youth?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have staff worked with teens to help them set SMART goals for themselves?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have teens been asked what they need to succeed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has the information about what teens report they need been documented, in general, and for each teen?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do staff regularly catch teens doing something good?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the positive actions of teens shared and applauded in staff meetings?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do staff get professional development around youth identity formation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are staff trained in and comfortable using techniques for supporting youth identities, like Where I'm From poems and identity scaffolds?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the agency use outside experts to help staff strengthen their capacity to support teen identity formation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Note: "The Write's Recommendations" on pages 17 and 18 can easily be turned into their own rubrics.		
Does the agency have multiple ways to solicit youth voices?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
List: _____		
Has the agency developed methods (like this rubric) to record youth experiences and recommendations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
What changes in staff practices have been implemented or observed based on what the agency as learned from young people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
List: _____		
What changes in policy have been implemented based on youth recommendations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
List: _____		
Does the agency have a written plan with SMART goals for listening to young people and integrating their experiences and recommendations into policy and practice?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

We are confident that this report be useful in developing staff training, youth programming, and policy changes; and remain committed to promoting and integrating the authentic voice of the young people in our work across the juvenile justice continuum.

This project would be meaningless without the participation and commitment of the young people who authored hundreds of stories, poems, essays and song lyrics so that the staff who work within juvenile justice systems could better understand their experiences, concerns, motivations, and ideas.

To all of the youth writers, editors and mentors...

THANK YOU!

If you would like to read some of the creative works developed by
Youth Voices program participants, contact:

Courtney Ramirez,
DYFJ Special Projects Coordinator
Courtney.ramirez@acs.nyc.gov

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