

**YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND ACTION IN HAMILTON  
COMMUNITY CHECK-IN**

**JUNE 18, 2008 – PROCEEDINGS**

Prepared for:  
**The Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton Project**

**YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington**

July 2008

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1.0 BACKGROUND: WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND ACTION IN HAMILTON? .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2.0 CHECK-IN DESIGN.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3.0 SMALL GROUP EXERCISE #1 – HOW IS HAMILTON DOING AT ENGAGING YOUTH? .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>4.0 SMALL GROUP EXERCISE #2 – THE STORIES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN HAMILTON - WHAT HAS THE COMMUNITY LEARNED AND EXPERIENCED IN ENGAGING YOUTH? .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5.0 CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>6</b>

## **1.0 BACKGROUND: WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND ACTION IN HAMILTON?**

Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton (YEAH) is a collaborative project run by the YMCA of Hamilton-Burlington which aims to improve youth engagement outcomes in our community. Supported generously by the Hamilton Community Foundation, Heritage Canada and the Hamilton Spectator, much of the focus in the first year of work has centred on addressing three notable gaps in the Hamilton community: 1) lack of youth space for connection and communication; 2) the underrepresentation of youth voice in decision-making processes and 3) work on issues that impact youth is happening in silos.

Efforts to address those gaps have included a number of innovative responses from the YEAH project:

- The development of a Youth Engagement 101 manual for community and social service workers;
- The development and delivery of Youth Engagement 101 training sessions for interested agencies;
- A youth-led catalyst grant process to help move youth-led initiatives on poverty forward;
- Direction, advice and guidance to organizations and youth advisory committees around youth engagement best practices;
- Liaising with existing with local agencies and committees and connecting with outside communities to draw resources and attention to the issue of youth engagement.

As the first year nears the end, the Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton project staff wanted to check in with the community to talk about the successes and learnings of the project and to hear from the community about their perspectives on youth engagement. This report reflects proceedings from that check-in event.

## 2.0 CHECK-IN DESIGN

On June 18, 2008 twenty community partners came to an afternoon event to discuss the Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton project (YEAH). The YEAH project had commissioned the Social Planning and Research Council to design an exercise that would illicit the insights of both youth and service providers about youth engagement in Hamilton.

Mike Des Jardins, project coordinator of YEAH, began with an overview of the projects goals and learnings.

The group watched a documentary film, “Hear the Story” about a video-based youth engagement project in Toronto.

After two icebreaker exercises, four groups worked together to answer some questions. The groups had both youth and adults.

The first small group exercise had participants reflecting personally and as a group on the question, “How well is Hamilton doing at engaging youth?” A scale indicated by a double headed arrow was provided and people were asked to map where on the arrow – from “not engaging” to “totally engaging” – Hamilton was.

The second small group exercise had participants telling their stories of being engaged, engaging or seeing engagement happen with youth. Participants were asked as a group to reflect on both the successes and challenges of these examples.

Finally, participants were asked to fill out a feedback form which provided the opportunity to name ways they’d like to connect with YEAH and indicate projects and events that YEAH should be aware of.

### **3.0 SMALL GROUP EXERCISE #1 - HOW IS HAMILTON DOING AT ENGAGING YOUTH?**

Participants were divided into four small groups and asked to answer, first personally and then as a group, the question – How is Hamilton doing at engaging youth? The following reflects themes drawn from the materials collected from all four groups.

Since the participants were asked to identify the successes and challenges personally before engaging in a group discussion, some of the themes are pulled from these personal reflections. Where possible, youth comments are identified separately to give special space to this critical perspective.

#### ***Successes***

The small group exercises highlighted a growing enthusiasm and commitment to youth engagement work in Hamilton. Foundational to this growth, participants recognized that there are a wide variety of youth programs and organizations serving youth's basic needs, including employment. Hamilton is rich with youth serving organizations. Further to this, participants recognized that these youth serving agencies are working to network, communicate and build partnerships. While providing service to young people is not the same as youth engagement, having a community that cares and strives to meet the needs of their youth population is an important starting point for youth engagement.

Youth and community partners also recognized the evident drive to make Hamilton a more youth-engaged community. And with this drive, the participants find more opportunities to identify prospects for youth to become involved beyond receiving services. Many participants attributed the increasing awareness around opportunities to the Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton project.

#### ***Challenges***

Participants identified that true, meaningful youth engagement work is challenging. The participants identified many of these challenges through the conversation about how Hamilton is doing at engaging young people. First and foremost, youth and community partners identified that opportunities for youth engagement are not well known. Community partners identified not knowing how to 'get the word out to youth'. Similarly, youth identified that they and their peers do not know where to go to find out about opportunities to become engaged.

This lack of widespread community knowledge connects to the second major challenge raised – many of the same youth are engaged in all of the leadership opportunities.

Participants also had concerns around the level at which and ways in which youth are being engaged. Many youth and community partners agree that youth are still being engaged in token ways. According to some of the youth in particular, 'adults take over', 'they (adults) need to let youth speak more' and 'there does not fully exist positions for youth to take on full leadership opportunities'. Related to this concern is that youth are often expected to volunteer their time without opportunities for meaningful employment or at least compensation.

Finally, participants identified structural concerns. Young people are often engaged around issues and in contexts with bureaucracy and long time lines. One group in particular named the lack of flexibility in some organizations – ‘we have always done it that way’ – as thwarting true youth engagement. Additionally, duplication of services and efforts were described as particular challenges for our community.

#### **4.0 SMALL GROUP EXERCISE #2: THE STORIES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN HAMILTON - WHAT HAS THE COMMUNITY LEARNED AND EXPERIENCED IN ENGAGING YOUTH?**

The small group participants identified a number of projects and initiatives in the community that are youth engagement focused:

- Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton
- The Peer Mentorship Project
- Wilma's Place Mentors
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters
- The Couch Project
- Text for Change
- Throw'n the Horns
- Hamilton Community Foundation – Youth Advisory Committee
- City of Hamilton – Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee
- Youth Net Hamilton
- Hamilton Police playing basketball with youth
- Health Initiatives for Youth Hamilton programming
- Hamilton Youth Arts Network

Participants also identified what they had learned either by being engaged, engaging youth or witnessing youth engagement projects in action. The following two lists reflect both successful youth engagement strategies and the challenges that can hinder youth engagement. These themes are drawn from the four small group discussions:

##### Successes:

- ✓ Youth deciding on the project direction
- ✓ Everything is organized and managed by youth
- ✓ Youth making funding decisions
- ✓ Adult allies being clear and realistic about what can and cannot happen
- ✓ Adult allies doing activities with youth
- ✓ When youth are given responsibilities and can set goals
- ✓ Youth and youth serving organizations working collaboratively
- ✓ Youth supporting and helping other youth
- ✓ Tapping into the enthusiasm, creativity and energy of youth

##### Challenges:

- × In the first few meetings youth seem excited but their motivation drops off
- × Not enough adult direction to see difficult projects through
- × Timing – finding meeting times when both youth and adults can attend
- × Unrealistic expectations of the youth
- × When youth are treated as tokens
- × Bureaucracy – the energy of youth is held back by paperwork and lengthy processes

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton Community Check-In was an opportunity to share learnings from the first year of project work and to find out how Hamilton is doing at reaching full community youth engagement. Every opportunity to have young people talking to adult allies about broad youth issues is important. Through the two small group discussions we learned about successes and challenges in youth engagement work as identified by the participants at two different levels: systems or community-wide and individually or project specific. The young people worked very well with the community partners to highlight how we are doing, what we need to celebrate and where more energy and focus needs to be paid.

It is important to remember that true youth engagement requires a cultural shift. This is long term and incremental work. The Community Check-In reminded us that we are on the right path but that there is still work to do.

In conclusion the Hamilton community is demonstrating a clear commitment to working toward true youth engagement in Hamilton and youth and community partners alike are seeing more opportunities emerging. However, cultural and systems barriers around bureaucracy and 'old ways of doing things' need to change to make room for meaningful youth engagement work. We need to find strategies as a community to engage more young people in more meaningful ways.