



Testimony of

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Oversight Hearing: Youth Civic Engagement Opportunities

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Good morning. My name is Laura Jankstrom and I am the Director of Civic Engagement Programs at Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). CCC is an independent, multi-issue child advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring every New York child is healthy, housed, educated and safe.

I would like to thank City Council Committee on Education Chair Mark Treyger and the Committee on Youth Services Chair Deborah Rose and all the members of the Committees on Education and Youth Services for holding today's oversight hearing on Youth Civic Engagement Opportunities.

CCC appreciates the measures that Council Members undertake in their districts to provide opportunities for youth civic engagement, including youth voter registration efforts, engaging youth in Participatory Budgeting and local Community Boards, offering internships to high school and college students, and other discreet efforts by members and committees to increase youth input and participation.

CCC would also like to recognize Council Member Levin, who recently announced the creation of a Youth Policy Council. Youth in grades 8-12 will work with Council Member Levin, Assembly Member Jo Anne Simon, and State Senators Brian Kavanagh and Velmanette Montgomery to "review existing City and State legislation and propose ideas that affect the lives of young people and all New Yorkers." We applaud this effort and look forward to hearing from the youth who are engaged in this process.

We also appreciate the Administration's commitment to increasing opportunities for young people to engage with policy, practice, and advocacy within their schools and communities:

Department of Education

The Department of Education engages dozens of students citywide through its 7 Borough Student Advisory Councils (BSACs). Each BSAC is made up of student representatives from participating schools in their catchment areas who work with adult DOE staff to identify and address issues that students are experiencing in school. Student and adult leaders from each BSAC engage in ongoing training by CORO New York Leadership Center to gain strategies to bring "greater youth voice to DOE policies and practices that impact student success".¹ Two of these student leaders are chosen annually to participate as non-voting members of city's Panel on Education Policy.

NYC Service

Through NYC Service, the Administration began an initiative in 2015 to engage 10% of the city's high school students in Youth Leadership Councils (YLCs) by the year 2020. Interested students apply online for specific YLCs, which are supported by adult staff at various City agencies and community-based organizations. NYC Service describes the

¹ Coro New York Leadership Center. Youth Leadership Academy Program description 2016. (website) Available at <https://coronewyork.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/YLA-Program-Description-2.pdf>. Accessed June 5, 2018.

program as a way to “give youth across the city the opportunity to grow as civic leaders and advocates for change in their City”.²

CCC is here today to support the expansion of youth civic engagement opportunities and is grateful for the opportunity to share what we have learned through exposing young people to local government and engaging them through public policy research and advocacy.

I. The Importance of Youth Civic Engagement

A healthy and vibrant democracy is dependent upon the participation of its citizens through voting, jury service, and other expressions of engagement with society and community. Yet, in the 2016 presidential election voter turnout was just 56%³ and in the New York citywide elections in 2017, just 21.5% of citizens of voting age cast a ballot. When looking specifically at the youth vote, turnout among 19 to 29-year-olds was 55.4% in the 2016 presidential election and 13.5% in the 2017 citywide elections.⁴

Despite low voter turnout, 61% of Americans believe changes to the structure of our government are necessary to make democracy work today and only 25% express any amount of confidence in elected officials.⁵ These sentiments are demonstrated through a recent surge in protest movements and polarized political discourse in the media, and may represent an opportunity to engage populations that have historically had low levels of civic participation, including youth. By harnessing the energy that exists in this highly charged political climate, we may be able to involve more youth in civic life long before they are eligible to vote.

In addition to the societal benefits that come from the robust civic engagement of citizens, there is evidence that these types of activities also contribute to the health and well-being of individuals. Voting and volunteering correlate positively with health and mental health outcomes, and all forms of civic engagement are positively associated with subsequent income and educational attainment.⁶ Researchers also posit that civic engagement opportunities have the potential to hit all the benchmarks of successful youth development strategies, including problem identification, skills building, connection to community, teamwork, and youth-adult partnership. Youth who are involved in effective youth development programs have demonstrated a more

² NYC Service. NYC Youth Leadership Council Description and History 2018. (web page) Available at https://www.nycservice.org/organizations/index.php?org_id=2947 Accessed June 5, 2018.

³ “The Public, the Political System and American Democracy”. Pew Research Center, April 2018. Available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/> Accessed June 5, 2018.

⁴ New York City Campaign Finance Board, *2017-2018 Voter Assistance Annual Report*, April 2018. Available at <https://www.nycffb.info/pdf/V AAC-2018.pdf> Accessed June 5, 2018.

⁵ “The Public, the Political System and American Democracy”. Pew Research Center, April 2018. Available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/> Accessed June 5, 2018.

⁶ PJ Ballard, LT Hoyt, MC Pachucki. “Impacts of Adolescent and Young Adult Civic Engagement on Health and Socioeconomic Status in Adulthood”. *Child development*. January 23, 2018. Available at Wiley Online Library <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cdev.12998> Accessed June 5, 2018.

successful transition to adulthood and those programs that offer opportunities for civic engagement promote greater lifelong civic participation.⁷

In the United States, there is a vast socio-economic divide in civic participation, and children from wealthier families and communities have more opportunities for civic learning and engagement. Parental education level is a predictor of a young person's exposure to discussions about social and political issues, private schools and public schools with wealthier student bodies offer more civic opportunities, and youth from low income communities have a higher risk of dropping out of school and/or becoming justice-involved, both of which are predictors of low levels of civic participation.⁸ The socio-economic disparities in civic participation are interesting, given the fact that low-income youth may benefit most from the policy changes that participation in the civic practices of advocacy and activism can bring about. In addition, empowering the voices of young people from marginalized communities decreases negative health outcomes associated with poverty.⁹

II. CCC's Youth Civic Engagement Programs

In 1999, CCC became concerned about the alienation of young people from civic life and the lack of opportunities available to them to participate in their community and become educated regarding the responsibilities involved in being a thoughtful and contributing citizen. We came to believe that our public institutions should be more intentional regarding the opportunities offered to young people to support their development as civic participants.

It was at this time that we developed YouthAction NYC, which has grown over the years into a multi-faceted after-school program that reaches hundreds of students each year. Central to our YouthAction programming is the belief that civic engagement opportunities must occur and be supported long before a young person is old enough to vote, and that youth-led advocacy can and should positively influence schools and communities, as well as cities, states, and the nation. Through our YouthAction programming we offer a rigorous introduction to local civic life and experiential training to equip students with the tools to advocate on behalf of themselves, their schools and their communities.

Youth Action NYC is made up of three component programs:

1. **Youth Community Leadership Course (YCLC):** An after-school course for public and private high school students that engages youth in problem identification, problem solving, research and analysis, and improves their understanding of the workings of government and the role that young volunteers can play in making a difference in their communities and the city. The course is a ten-week program (one three-hour session per week) held in the fall and spring and serves up to 50 youth per year.

⁷"Results-based public policy strategies for Promoting Youth Civic Engagement". Center for the Study of Social Policy, November 2011. Available at <https://www.cssp.org/policy/papers/Promoting-Youth-Civic-Engagement.pdf> Accessed June 5, 2018.

⁸ Flanagan, Constance; Levine, Peter. "Civic Engagement and the Transition to Adulthood". The Future of Children, Vol. 20, No. 1. Spring 2010. Available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ883084.pdf> Accessed June 5, 2018.

⁹ Wallerstein, Nina. "Empowerment and health: The theory and practice of community change". Community Development Journal. Vol. 28 No. 3. (218 – 227) July 1993.

2. **YouthAction NYC Membership:** Graduates of the YouthAction Community Leadership Course have the opportunity to stay involved in the program as YouthAction Members and continue to practice fact-based advocacy and research on issues affecting New York City youth. Members meet once a week after school to analyze social policies, current events, and specific community issues, and to develop policy and budgetary recommendations to make New York City a better place for every young person. Over the years, YouthAction Members have played a critical role in advancing specific policy measures, including increased funding for the Summer Youth Employment Program, the passage of Raise the Age New York, universal school meals, expanded after school and summer programs, increased capacity for the RHY system and more. Through meetings with city and state elected officials, the creation of public service announcements, and by convening other youth advocates throughout the city, YouthAction members have helped raise awareness about and move the needle on a multitude of issues.
3. **Peer Training:** Each year, several participants are trained to become peer-to-peer trainers and work with other youth development programs, schools, and after-school programs to provide peer training on advocacy, the city budget process, and issues facing children and families in New York City. Peer Trainers meet once per week and lead workshops and trainings with partner groups throughout the school year. They reach up to 300 young people through these trainings annually.

An important component of our YouthAction programming is when the youth get to meet with elected and appointed officials and their staff. It is hard to overstate the profound effect that these meetings have on young people, especially when youth realize that their leaders are people who are just like them, with diverse experiences and struggles that young people growing up here can relate to. Our youth have also met with many staff, eager to listen to and learn from our youth. Young people often leave these meetings with a profoundly different, more positive view of government that they had going in as well as a sense of their own agency as citizens. We want to thank the City Council and Administration for giving young people a seat at the table, and we look forward to future meetings.

III. Recommendations for increasing youth civic engagement

In the fall of 2017, our YCLC cohort conducted research on youth civic engagement opportunities that are supported by the New York City Council and Administration, specifically looking at Borough Student Advisory Councils (BSACs), NYC Service Youth Leadership Councils (YLCs), Participatory Budgeting, and Community Boards. Students surveyed 230 New York City youth, ages 13 – 19 to get their opinions and also visited programs and agencies that provide youth with the opportunity to weigh in on policy issues that affect their lives. Their Findings and Recommendations are attached to this testimony.

CCC's recommendations support those that the youth developed and are further informed by our involvement in 2 working groups that have been convened to address the topic of youth civic education and engagement, the Sustainable Strategies Working Group and the New York State Campaign for Civic Education:

A) New York City schools should educate students about city and state government

A section from our YouthAction participants' findings reads as follows: "From our own experiences in NYC public schools, and from what we learned in our discussions with both other students and the adults who facilitate civic engagement programs, it is abundantly clear that New York City schools spend little to no time educating students about the structure and function of New York City government. Very few students could name their City Council Member, articulate the purpose of a Community Board, or name a single city government official outside of the Mayor." There is an obvious opportunity to incorporate learning about state and local government into social studies classes, but educators across disciplines can find interesting ways to include this content. For example, a math class could analyze the city budget, or an English class could do a close reading of a speech made by the Mayor.

B) The Department of Education and NYC Service should strengthen their outreach efforts to get more youth involved in BSACs and YLCs

Of the youth surveyed by YCLC participants, 80% of students had never heard of BSACs and less than 2% had participated. Less than 50% had never heard of Youth Leadership Councils and 97% had never participated. There is no information on the DOE website about BSACS, and it is unclear how schools and students can become involved. NYC Service does have a functional web page for YLCs, but students reported that it is not particularly informative, appealing, or user friendly. Both DOE and NYC service should engage youth in thinking through how to strengthen their outreach to young people, both online and through schools and community-based organizations. YLCs in particular have the potential to reach students that may not ordinarily have access to civic engagement opportunities, as many are run in NYCHA facilities and police precincts low-income communities.

C) All Council Members should participate in Participatory Budgeting and allow youth to be a part of the process

According to the City Council website, 26 Council Members offer Participatory Budgeting in their communities¹⁰. In those districts, starting at age 11, youth can vote, volunteer, and facilitate the process. Through a partnership with Coro New York Leadership Center, participating Council Members can also nominate youth from their districts to participate in the Participatory Budgeting Youth Fellowship, which "offers high school students intensive training, hands-on experience, and ongoing support to promote greater youth involvement in Participatory Budgeting (PB) in their communities and citywide."¹¹ Participatory Budgeting is one of the most authentic opportunities that young New Yorkers have to be a part of civic life, and should be expanded to all districts.

D) Public Hearings related to youth issues should, whenever possible, be held when school is not in session

While we recognize that it is not feasible to have all public hearings outside of normal school hours, we believe greater efforts can be made to hold hearings on issues related to youth on days

¹⁰ New York City Council. Participatory Budgeting (website). Available at <https://council.nyc.gov/pb/participate/> Accessed June 5, 2018.

¹¹ Coro New York Leadership Center. Participatory Budgeting Youth Fellowship Program description 2018. (website) Available at <https://coronewyork.org/coro-programs/pbyf/> Accessed June 5, 2018.

when school is not in session, such as school breaks, professional development days for teachers, and days set aside for testing. Though they are not yet able to vote, youth should be allowed to weigh in on the issues that impact them.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, CCC is grateful to the City Council and Administration for its interest in increasing youth civic engagement in New York City, and look forward to working together to strengthen and improve opportunities for young people to participate in their communities and their city in meaningful ways.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.