



America's Promise High School Dropout Prevention Summit

LEARN Youth Engagement Handbook

Developed for the America's Promise Alliance Dropout Prevention Initiative
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Dear Summit Planning Team,

As you may know, in March 2006, a report produced for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation declared that high dropout rates are a “silent epidemic” afflicting our schools, our communities, and our country. Each year, almost one-third of public high school students—and nearly one half of all blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans—fail to graduate from public high school with their class. Some experts are predicting that the dropout problem will increase substantially over the next 15 years unless significant improvements are made.

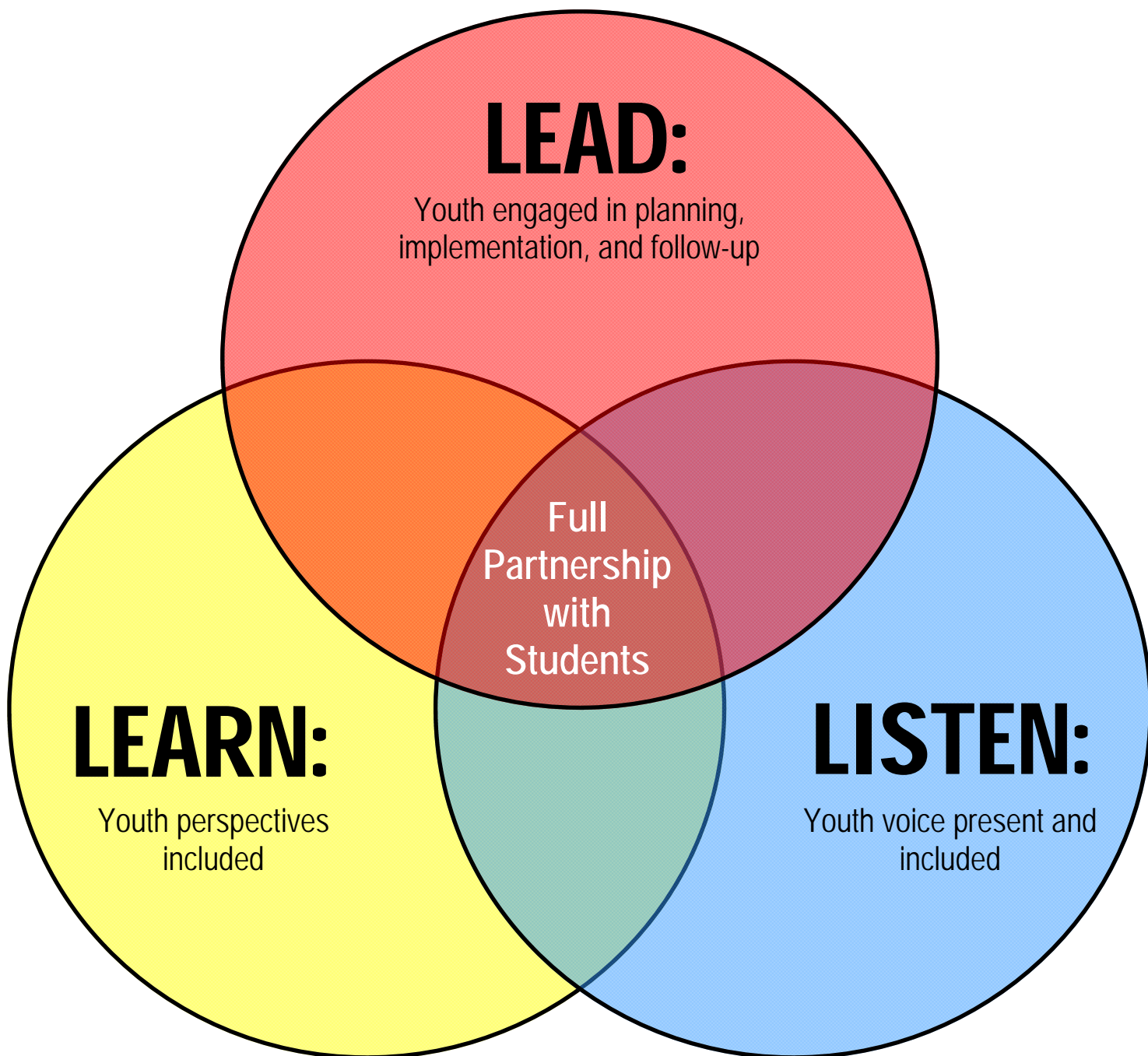
In most states, the status of our high schools is poor enough that turning the tide cannot be accomplished through piecemeal, incremental approaches. Progress can only be made through “big tent” partnerships that understand how to address problems with our schools at individual, interpersonal, and systemic levels. Individual students need motivation and support to stay in school; relationships between students and adults within school buildings need to be strengthened, and schools need to become places that students see as safe, relevant, and the very best path to a healthy, productive future.

A key stakeholder to addressing the dropout crisis is young people themselves. No one knows this issue as closely or with the same perspective as the young people. No other member of our schools or of our community knows the daily experience of starting at home, going to school, spending the day in a classroom, spending after-school hours in the community and returning home every single day. The youth are our sole experts on what it is like to be a student.

For this reason, we are pleased to offer you this series of strategies and tools to help you engage student perspectives in the planning and execution of your dropout summit. The materials are organized in three sections: 1. Learn, 2. Listen, and 3. Lead. Each section provides descriptions and sample references and tools to engage the students in your community. The tools in each section can be utilized independently of each other but will offer the most depth of student perspective if used together.

We look forward to continuing to work together to help solve our nation’s “silent epidemic”.

Our Youth Engagement Framework



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Goal: to solicit the ideas and perspectives of students around the core issues related to the dropout crisis in their community so that their views will help inform and guide the broader conversation before, during, and after the summit.

Learn Strategy #1: The Youth Survey

Description: A student survey will allow you to gather student input around the causes and impacts of the dropout crisis in your community. This input is limited to the wording and breadth of the questions asked, but can be a quick and easy way to find out what students are thinking. Surveys could be done online through an engine like www.surveymonkey.com or done via paper survey and distributed through school and community-based networks. Results would need to be tallied and organized by the planning committee for the summit (or someone or group selected by the committee to do this on their behalf). Results would then be presented at the summit either through a broader general session format or through breakout sessions. Presentation of the work should message the importance of student voice in understanding the dropout crisis.

Pre-Summit Work

1. Create the survey that is right for your community
2. Connect with your partners/schools to develop an understanding of what the survey is and what it will be used for
3. Recruit partners who will help gather surveys with clear directions and a deadline for submission to the summit planning team (online surveys would just require a deadline)
4. Planning team or proxy analyzes the results of the survey. Online engines have the capacity to do this for you and can eliminate much work.
5. Planning committee develops its messaging and presentation for the summit and integrates it into the broader summit content.

Summit Event

1. Integrate survey findings into the summit through a formal presentation or through breakout session dialogue.
2. Be sure to message the importance of learning from our students.

Summit Follow-Up

1. Identify key gaps in your information from the summit and consider either following up with more student surveys or with focus groups (see Learn Strategy #2).
2. At the close of the summit, consider asking attendees what issue they would most like to hear student perspective on, and follow up by seeking that information to round out your knowledge of the dropout issue in your community.

Learn Strategy #2: Youth Focus Groups

Description: Student focus groups have the opportunity to help summit attendees learn at a deeper level about student perspectives on the dropout crisis. Focus groups could be done in addition to the Student Survey and are very helpful in further understanding the findings of the survey. If you are planning on doing focus groups instead of surveys, simply formulate your questions for the focus group that would address the core causes and/or impacts of the dropout issue. Efforts would have to be made to coordinate a minimum of 3-5 focus groups with diverse schools and community partners. Focus groups should be led by members of the summit planning team or a proxy facilitating the groups. Two members of the team would ideally facilitate for the practical reason of having a person to ask the questions and a person to take note. Additionally, the two would offer differing perspectives on what they hear in the groups and would therefore create more balanced reporting. Results would then be presented as part of the summit either through a broader general session format or through breakout sessions. Presentation of the work should message the importance of student voice in understanding the dropout crisis.

Pre-Summit Work

1. Create the focus group questions that are right for your community
2. Recruit partners who will help coordinate and organize groups of students to take part in these focus groups and set clear dates and times for the groups.
3. Planning team or proxy analyzes the results of the focus groups.
4. Planning committee develops its messaging and presentation of the focus group findings for the summit and integrates it into the broader summit content.

Summit Event

1. Integrate the student perspectives through a formal presentation or through breakout session dialogue.
2. Help message the importance of learning from our students.

Summit Follow-Up

1. Identify key gaps in your information from the summit and consider following up with more focus groups or surveys.
2. Consider at the close of the summit asking attendees what issue they would most like to hear the student perspective on, and follow up by seeking that information to round out your knowledge of the issue.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Sample Youth Survey
2. Sample Focus Group Questions

ATTACHMENTS: LEARN

SAMPLE YOUTH SURVEY

For each statement, please circle the response that best represents your experience at school.

1. I feel motivated to learn when I am at school.

disagree disagree somewhat no opinion agree somewhat agree

2. I feel safe at my school.

disagree disagree somewhat no opinion agree somewhat agree

3. My school is doing a good job preparing me for my future.

disagree disagree somewhat no opinion agree somewhat agree

4. My school holds high expectations for all students.

disagree disagree somewhat no opinion agree somewhat agree

5. My school grounds are clean and well-maintained.

disagree disagree somewhat no opinion agree somewhat agree

6. I feel like I belong at my school.

disagree disagree somewhat no opinion agree somewhat agree

7. There is an adult at my school who I can talk to if I am having personal problems.

disagree disagree somewhat no opinion agree somewhat agree

8. My teachers understand how to relate to students.

disagree disagree somewhat no opinion agree somewhat agree

9. My school respects the opinions of students even when we disagree.

disagree disagree somewhat no opinion agree somewhat agree

10. There are opportunities for students to voice their opinions on important school issues.

disagree disagree somewhat no opinion agree somewhat agree

SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Think of a time when you felt motivated to learn. Describe that experience and what about it motivated you.
2. Has there been an adult in your life who has positively supported your education?
If so, how did this person support your education? What did they do? Who were they (teacher, parent, coach etc.)?
If not, what support would you have wanted from an adult? How could they have showed you this support?
3. From a student perspective, what does a good school look like? What does it feel like?
4. In your opinion, why do students drop out of school?
5. What could your school do better to increase the graduation rate?
6. What could your community do better to support your educational goals?
7. What can you and/or other students do to increase the graduation rate?