



America's Promise High School Dropout Prevention Summit

LISTEN 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

LEAD:

Youth engaged in planning, implementation, and follow-up

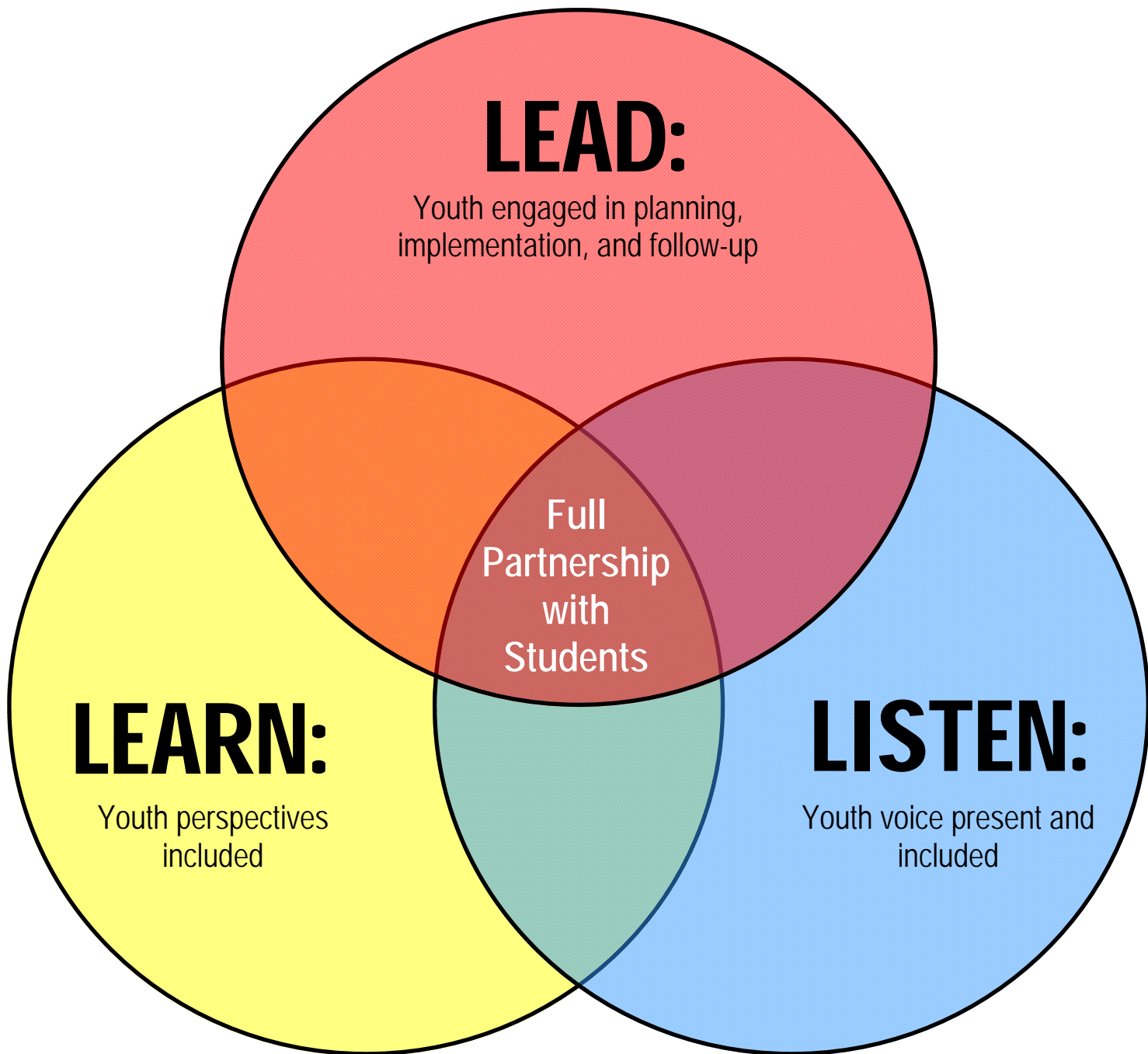
Full
Partnership
with
Students

LEARN:

Youth perspectives included

LISTEN:

Youth voice present and included



LISTEN

Goal: To give everyone attending the summit the opportunity to hear directly from students about the causes and/or impacts underlying the dropout crisis in order to deepen their understanding of the issue by framing it in the personal experiences of current and former students.

Listen Strategy #1: The Youth Keynote

Description: The purpose of a student keynote speaker is to ground the summit in the lived experiences of current students and/or recent dropouts. The presence and story of even one student will serve as a reminder that students are at the core of this issue and will help ground the day with a real sense of purpose. The student selected to present the keynote should work with the summit planning team to ensure a deep understanding of the purpose of the day and to work together to ensure the student message is on point with the events of the day. For example, the student keynote should be aware of the content of other presenters so that he/she is not merely repeating their thoughts from a student perspective. The student keynote needs to be supported by clear expectations and communication from the planning team.

Pre-Summit Work

1. Identify a student through schools or community partners whose life and/or experiences would be relevant to the dropout crisis and one who would be willing to share his/her story/perspective on the issue.
2. Planning team representative(s) works with the student to establish expectations and brainstorm ideas for the development of the keynote address. Adults should help the student frame the message to the purpose of the day while also honoring the student's personal experiences and perspectives.
3. A member of the planning team, or another adult from a school or community group, supports the public speaking preparation and practice as needed for the student keynote.
4. Ensure plans for student transportation and excusing from school for the day of the summit.

Summit Event

1. Student keynote address delivered and framed as core to the day's conversations.

Summit Follow-up

1. See Learn strategies.

Listen Strategy #2: The Youth Panel

Description: The student panel should be made up of a diverse selection of current students and/or recent dropouts. The panel could be facilitated by an adult and/or another student. Regardless, the facilitator and panelists should allow time for 1-2 meetings prior to the day of the event to unpack their thoughts around the dropout issue and to become familiar with the format of the panel. Without this level of prep work, the panel could easily become disjointed and only cover initial responses to the questions rather than presenting attendees with a developed analysis. Further, there must be a degree of familiarity between the moderator and the panelists as well as some clear foreknowledge of the nature of the questions and the conversation. The panel should be allowed a minimum of 60 minutes including some time at the end for moderated questions and answers. The Q&A session should be carefully moderated with adult support to ensure that it is not combative and maintains respect for the student opinions even if members of the audience disagree. The panel should be wrapped up and the importance of student voice reinforced to the audience.

Pre-Summit Work

1. Identify a group of four to six students through schools or community partners whose life and/or experiences would be relevant to the dropout crisis and who would be willing to share their stories/perspectives on the issue.
2. Identify a youth and/or adult moderator.
3. Planning team representative and/or the panel moderator works with the students to establish expectations, brainstorm ideas, develop a deeper understanding of their experiences, and support their public speaking preparation. Adults should help the students frame their messages to the purpose of the day and the audience while also honoring the student's personal experiences and perspectives.
4. Ensure plans for student transportation and excusing from school for the day of the summit.

Summit Event

1. Student panel shared and framed as core to the day's conversations.

Summit Follow-up

1. See Learn strategies.
2. Additionally, the student panel could serve as the nexus for a Youth Advisory Board described in the Lead strategies section.

Listen Strategy #3: Youth Presence at the Summit

Description: Although having a significant student delegate presence at the summit will require quite a bit of communication and coordination, their presence will serve as a visible reminder that youth need to be kept at the center of the discussion. The planning team should work to recruit diverse student delegates and should be clear about the expectations of the day as one with students working together with adults. That being said, the planning team should seek not only students with such experience, but should also be prepared to support students who may have never had an opportunity to work as equals with adults. As part of this, the planning team should set the tone of the day as one where adult attendees support the student delegates and welcome their input. Communication and respect must work both ways for the day to be successful and safe for all to offer their insights. This strategy requires some significant understanding among students and adults related to the Tips for Shared Learning attachment. All student and adult participants should receive this handout prior to the event, or at a minimum, it should be acknowledged in the opening session for collective perusal.

Pre-Summit Work

1. Identify a group of students through schools or community partners whose life and/or experiences would be relevant to the dropout crisis and who would be willing to share their stories/perspectives on the issue in a setting of students and adults working together.
2. Planning team communicates to all summit attendees that students will be taking part in the summit because the committee deems their input critical to the success of the day and to the solutions to the dropout crisis.
3. Identify an adult chaperone from each school or community-based organization that is bringing students as the point person for the pre-planning and the day of the summit.
4. Develop a plan for reporting any instances of students or adults who are not communicating respectfully or who are making the space unsafe for sharing differing perspectives and ideas.
5. Ensure plans for student transportation and excusing from school for the day of the summit.

Summit Event

1. Set the tone in the opening session for the inclusion of the students and the collective respect of opinions and perspectives that will be offered during the day. This could be done by establishing the Norms of the day.
2. Note and provide an overview of the Tips for Shared Learning for all of the participants.
3. Ensure that at least two students, never just one, are at each discussion table, breakout conversation or other format used for discussion during the summit. In this way, every adult participant will have the opportunity to hear from students and each student will have the safety and support of being paired with another student in the process.

4. Planning team connects at the beginning of the day with the students and chaperones to ensure communications and to revisit the mechanism for reporting and dealing with any students or adults who are not respecting the perspectives of the other.
5. Acknowledge the students in the closing session for being there and offering their input as part of the solution to the dropout crisis.

Summit Follow-up

1. Either at the end of the day or as a follow-up, seek student participant reflections on their experience of the day and offer them the opportunity for added input if they felt they did not get the chance to share an idea.
2. See Learn strategies.
3. See Lead strategies.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Tips for Shared Learning
2. Sample Norms
3. Sample Questions for a Youth Panel
4. Strategic Sharing

ATTACHMENTS: LISTEN

Tips for Shared Learning Among Youth and Adults

Adult Do's	Adult Don'ts	Youth Do's	Youth Don'ts
<p>Come willing and ready to listen and learn</p> <p>Help keep the other adults in check</p> <p>Help ensure a safe environment for all to offer their input and ideas</p> <p>Articulate clearly the roles, responsibilities and expectations for all youth and adult participants</p> <p>Articulate from an adult perspective why youth voice is so important</p> <p>Ensure and articulate the importance of youth input and its impact after the event</p> <p>Prepare youth to be facilitators and co-facilitators and work to make sure a youth is the first to speak</p> <p>Lead with a question</p> <p>Have fun!</p>	<p>Assume that you know more or have more valuable knowledge than the youth</p> <p>Team up with or allow other adults to dominate the conversation</p> <p>Allow the outspoken or more experienced youth to dominate or rule the experience for all</p> <p>Assume that everyone understands why they are there and how they need to be together</p> <p>Create an atmosphere of tokenism</p> <p>Set up youth to feel engaged and important only to have them involved in a fruitless event or conversation</p> <p>Facilitate everything or be the first to speak</p> <p>Deliver answers</p> <p>Act like you would rather be or need to be somewhere else</p>	<p>Come willing and ready to contribute ideas, listen and learn</p> <p>Encourage all youth participants to contribute to the process and speak their truth</p> <p>Step Up and respectfully articulate when you feel an adult is dominating a conversation</p> <p>Bring honesty, energy and your unique ideas and experiences to the conversation</p> <p>Respect people with different backgrounds and experiences</p> <p>Follow up by taking your ideas and information back to your own school and community</p> <p>Have fun!</p>	<p>Assume adults won't take you seriously or aren't really interested in hearing the truth from your perspective</p> <p>Team up with people you know or who share ideas in an attempt to "win" a conversation</p> <p>Defer leadership and/or expertise to adults</p> <p>Show up just because someone told you to or because you got out of school</p> <p>Assume that everyone has had your same experiences</p> <p>Leave this as a one-time experience and go back to your school and community without working to change anything</p> <p>Complain about being bored without helping to make things fun</p>

SAMPLE SUMMIT NORMS

The purpose of Norms: We want to establish the basic values of how we want to be together and work with each other as part of the summit. We also want to help each other stay accountable to these values to make sure that the summit experience is safe and supportive for all who are involved. Further, we want to ensure input from all participants, not just those who are most vocal or the most experienced leaders.

What to do with Norms: Norms should be introduced at the beginning of the summit and participants should be asked to agree to these for the purpose of a successful summit. Norms should stay posted all day and should also be posted in any breakout rooms or sessions. We want them to be present and a constant reminder.

Speak Your Truth

This norm is about knowing that your experience, your ideas, your input matters and you need to speak it. Additionally, this norm is to acknowledge that this is YOUR truth and not necessarily THE truth, or even representative of others who may have had very different experiences.

Listen for Understanding

This norm builds on the previous one to emphasize the need for all of us to listen for the purpose of understanding the experiences and perspectives of others, not for the purpose of responding to them, or even creating our own argument against them. We want the day to be about understanding a variety of experiences not just the ones of the loudest or most articulate people.

Respect Each Other

Again, building on the previous, the summit has to be about respecting differences and respecting the perspectives as well as needs of each other.

Be Present

If the summit is going to be a success, every participant must be present in mind, body and spirit. If we are going through the motions or thinking about being somewhere else, we are undermining the purpose of the day.

Step Up/Step Back

We all need to know when it is time to step up and when it is time to step back. This is about self-monitoring. If you have been talking frequently and others have not, it is time to step back. If you have not been talking, then it may be time to step up. Be aware of yourself and your involvement for the greater purpose of the summit.

Take Care of Your Needs

Do what you need to do in terms of your health, emotional or biological needs as necessary for you to maintain the rest of the norms. Restroom breaks, a drink of water, standing and stretching are all a part of taking care of your needs and should be done in a way that supports the rest of the norms rather than disrupts them.

Give Gentle Reminders

We are all working together for this summit. If we see another person who is not living up to the norms, it is our duty to offer them a gentle reminder. This means doing so privately, or quietly and in a respectful tone so as not to embarrass or put someone on the defensive.

SAMPLE YOUTH PANEL 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?

Strategic Sharing

Sharing in a strategic way means making good choices about how we tell our life stories so that our voices can be heard, we are effective, and our wellbeing is protected. At its best, sharing from personal experience can educate, inspire, and make a real difference. Stories are memorable and compelling; they put a human face on issues, needs, and triumphs. Stories motivate and inspire us to action. Disclosing personal information, however, also carries some risks. Sharing personal experiences can make us vulnerable and may make our listeners uncomfortable. At its worst, sharing our life stories can feel manipulative or exploitative and lead to harmful consequences. This worksheet will help you think through your personal story and consider the ways you want to share, what you want to share, and perhaps most importantly, what you are not comfortable sharing.

Three Steps to Strategic Sharing

STEP 1: CHOOSE

Choose what you will share and what you will keep private. Ask yourself:

- What is my purpose in sharing this information?
- Who benefits from this sharing?
- What do I want my audience to learn?

STEP 2: CONNECT

- Learn as much as you can about your audience and prepare a way to connect with them as you share. This shows respect for the audience and will guide you in making choices about what parts of your life story to share.
- Learn as much as you can about the issue you are speaking about so that you can talk about it outside of your personal story. This allows the space to draw the line as to what personal information you are sharing while remaining a contributor to the conversation and connected to the audience. Example: "I'm not comfortable answering that question about my own life, but what I can tell you is that x% of youth face that issue."

STEP 3: CLAIM

Claim your own story and your choices. Be explicit in describing:

- The reasons you have chosen to share.
- The emotions that come up for you as you share.
- The meaning and significance your experience has for you.