

# Youth Service Journal

*A periodic publication of Youth Service America*

## *Making Youth Voice A Community Principle*



by Andrea Felix  
10/2003

**YOUTH SERVICE AMERICA (YSA)** is a resource center which partners with thousands of organizations committed to increasing the quantity and quality of volunteer opportunities for young people in America, ages 5-25, to serve locally, nationally, and globally. Founded in 1986, YSA's mission is to strengthen the effectiveness, sustainability, and scale of the youth service and service-learning fields. A strong youth service movement will create healthy communities, and foster citizenship, knowledge, and the personal development of young people. YSA envisions a powerful network of organizations committed to making service and service-learning the common expectation and common experience of all young people in America.

**WORKING GROUP ON NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE** provides a cohesive voice for the youth service and service-learning field. The Working Group brings together leaders of youth service and service-learning organizations, schools, and faith-based programs to raise awareness among policymakers and the federal government around service issues, and to support the growth of a diverse network of state, local, and national programs involving young people in service to their communities. Each Working Group results in an issue paper published in the *Youth Service Journal* that is widely distributed throughout the field and to policymakers.

**YOUTH VOICE INITIATIVE** is a national campaign to increase the quantity and quality of opportunities for young people to serve as decision-makers in organizations and communities, establishing a culture where youth involvement is a universal community principle. We mobilize and motivate youth volunteers to further their goals and impact by connecting their involvement in community service with the public-policy making process and other forms of civic engagement. The centerpiece of this program is our National Youth Advisory Council of young people ages 14-22.

The **NATIONAL YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL** is comprised of a diverse group of young people from across the country ages 13-22 elected to two-year terms with Youth Service America. The Council—whose members are involved in different levels of service within their communities—serves as the youth voice for YSA in its programs, evaluation, and direction.



**1101 15TH STREET, NW, SUITE 200  
WASHINGTON, DC 20005-5002**

T: 202-296-2992 ♦ F: 202-296-4030

info@ysa.org ♦ www.ysa.org ♦ www.SERVEnet.org

## OVERVIEW

The concept of giving young people a voice is not new. My parents, aunts, uncles, and a few colleagues have painted rather vivid images of 18-25 year olds during the 1960s initiating a struggle to establish voting rights and equal rights among all people living in America. It was the first time in Baby Boomer history—and possibly that of their parents—that the power of a collective young voice was realized. The motives of this cohort were clear: they sought the same equality and respect afforded to adults. No longer were they satisfied with being told what to do without opportunities to offer their input. To be alive during that time must have been an empowering journey that I can only imagine echoes some of the feelings, attitudes, and frustrations held by the current youth generation.

Young people (ages 12-25) today in many communities across the country are dealing with more adult burdens and responsibilities than those from just a generation ago. Many live in single parent homes, pass through metal detectors to enter school, and have never known a world without HIV and AIDS. Forty years later, youth are still struggling to be heard by adults. This generation, however, seeks to have their opinions, concerns, and input respected at levels of decision-making that not only affects them as individuals, but also affect the schools they attend, organizations they patronize, and communities they grow up in.

Is it possible that America—a country that prides itself on working to end racism, sexism, and other “-isms”—could be guilty of committing countless acts of *adultism*, “the systematic mistreatment of young people simply because of

their age”? (Bell 1995)

Young people have been taught for generations that they are not as “valuable” as adults, with restrictions and prohibitions on how late they can stay out at night to what age they can exercise their right to vote. It is easy to see how the voice and concerns of our most valuable resource became lost.

This document will explore how youth voice can be rekindled and is the result of a series of Working Groups that took place over a six-month period from November 2002 to April 2003 in Seattle, Boston, Los Angeles, Kansas City, and Washington, DC with an average of 25 participants at each event. In an effort to invite people from all sectors of the

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communities we visited, we relied upon local organizations and their connections with other organizations, institutions, and businesses to get the word out about the event. Each gathering was held in a location that was accessible and at a time of day that allowed for both youth and adult attendance.

Our intention in holding this series of Working Groups on “Scaling Up the Youth Voice Movement” was to facilitate a discussion among young people and their adult allies in

communities across the nation about barriers they face and solutions they have used to be heard by adults in all facets of society.

This series of Working Group discussions and summary paper not only address the issue of youth inequality and exclusion, but give an overview of ways in which youth voice is or could be integrated into programming, organizational structure, and community.

## KNOWN CHALLENGES

Some of the issues that emerged throughout the Working Groups have roots in youth voice studies

dating back to the 1970s. For example, Francis Ianni's study The Search for Structure: A Report on American Youth Today published in 1989 contained interviews held with inner-city, urban, suburban, and rural youth, their parents, teachers, and community organizations. Based on these interviews, Ianni identified successful approaches, programs and community activities for young people. These topics continue to arise and are of concern for youth roughly twenty years later.

A young participant from Seattle, for example, stated that an organization she patronizes holds their meetings during school hours making it virtually impossible for youth to attend. Additionally, an adult from Kansas City stated: "meetings don't happen when children or youth are available." By not involving young people in organizational board meetings, regardless of one's intentions behind scheduling the meetings, shows young people—especially if they serve as board members—that their input and attendance at such meetings is unnecessary.

Furthermore, actions like this speak volumes to young people—saying "your thoughts, opinions, and input on issues may be important to you, but are not needed. As adults, we know better and have made the following decisions..." Such actions are exclusionary and create a further separation of youth/adult relations.

As an institution that is not only asked to teach, protect, and nurture the future adults of our society, schools were noted by youth participants in most cities as places where young people have no voice. Statements such as "my voice was heard at YWCA [Malden, MA], but not at school" from a female participant in Boston to "Youth should be heard in schools" from an adult participant in Los Angeles continually arose throughout the discussions. This situation is perplexing given that schools exist in part to teach citizenship and responsibility to young people. In most cases young people going to school

have few opportunities to make decisions. Adults dictate most everything, from the homeroom teacher they have to classes they take, to what will be learned.

For the past two decades researchers, organizations, and youth have stressed the same issue: To engage youth as contributing, active citizens of their communities, they need to be involved in decisions that will affect them now, and as adults. While this perspective seems to be common knowledge within the youth development field, discrepancies still exist.

## NEW/ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

Building on the known challenges, participants addressed other topics ranging from the transient nature of young people growing into adults to misconceptions adults hold about young people. Additionally, there were other topics brought up by participants in all cities that included:

- Communication between and awareness of programs
- Turf Issues among organizations competing for youth participants
- Youth fears of speaking out and up and still not being heard
- Lack of Diversity
- Need for a National Spokesperson
- Political Adulthood

## COMMUNICATION/AWARENESS

Participants in Boston, Los Angeles, and Kansas City addressed communication as an area that needs improvement to scale up youth voice. A youth participant in Boston said that the nature of the youth voice movement is changing, but what seems to lag behind the change are programs and trainings that help young people hone their skills to effectively communicate with adults.

Some of the national-based organizations that work with both young people and adults to bridge the gap of effective communication with each other include Youth on Board, Community Partnerships

with Youth, Inc., and Youth Activism Project. Youth on Board helps young people and adults think differently about each other so that they can work together to change their communities. CPY, Inc. is a national training and resource development organization and has over ten years of experience in promoting increased youth voice in organizations and communities. One of the goals of the Youth Activism Project is to train adults on how to collaborate successfully with young people.

Another deficiency in the area of communication was mentioned by Larry Price from The Foundation for Self-Esteem in the Los Angeles area who stated that “there are thousands of pockets of programs everywhere that don’t know about each other. Networking is critical.” On a similar note, a participant in Kansas City stated that there needs to be a better means of communication between local and national programs working for the betterment of youth involved in communities. This decline in communication was cited as a potential roadblock to scaling up youth voice.

At The Table and The Freechild Project are examples of organizations that share information about programs and services offered from different organizations across the country. These two organizations also hold chat forums where individuals have the ability to discuss certain topics and share with others the challenges they face and solutions they have found to involving young people in decision-making.

A youth participant from Seattle said: “It doesn’t matter how many organizations exist if you don’t know about them” when the group was asked about the number of organizations with youth voice opportunities in their community.

Participants from Seattle to Boston suggested

ideas on how to solve the lack in communication, which included:

1. utilizing current media (both mainstream and topic specific) to get the word out about youth involvement;
2. building strategic alliances with other local, state, and national organizations and institutions;
3. additional regional meetings that would bring together more and more people involved with and concerned about the positive development of young people;
4. workshops at conferences that promote youth voice—but go beyond the field;
5. chances for youth to network with each other across programs and communities; and
6. the development of a youth voice listserv/chat arena where both youth and adults could discuss topics with cohorts and intergenerational participants.

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*- Seattle Youth Participant*

### **TURF ISSUES**

A discussion group in Kansas City talked about the idea that organizations have turf issues. Participants within this group stated that there seems to be competition among organizations who have what

the group referred to as “siloeed activities”. That is, particular organizations seem to be concerned with one aspect of a young person’s development or are so intertwined with their organizations mission and activities to achieve it that they concentrate all efforts on reaching the goal, sometimes “fighting” with other organizations for participants and/or funders.

This discussion group also offered two ways to resolve this problem: offering grants around collaboration of organizations and better collaboration, through communication, around the overall goal of positive youth development.

Within Youth Service America, two of our National Youth Advisory Council Members also serve in advisory positions to another national youth

organization. Specifically during conferences that both organizations attend, we seem to be vying for the attention of these National Youth Advisory Council Members who are pulled in two different, but at the same time almost similar directions. We have worked with the other organization to turn this situation into a positive solution: the “sharing” of Council Members has opened up the lines of communication for both organizations.

### **FEAR OF SPEAKING OUT OR UP**

Participants in all four cities expressed that: “There’s no point in having a voice if no one will listen,” in answers to questions about potential roadblocks to scaling up the movement; taking local efforts nationally; and what organizations, boards, and corporations could profit by the incorporation of youth voice.

As solutions to this concern, suggestions ranged from working in all youth-led groups to building confidence, communication skills, and perseverance to showing youth effective instances where young people were heard by adults and change was enacted.

### **LACK OF DIVERSITY**

Participants in Seattle, Los Angeles, and Kansas City remarked that the populations of youth who volunteer their time with organizations tend to be homogenous in their race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. Shannon Reid, a youth participant from Kansas City, stated that the lack of diversity results in “voices...not being heard nearly as loudly and clearly as the majority’s voice...and, most importantly, these youth are not given the opportunities that they need [since] the main objective of most youth movements is to give better opportunities to people who are not receiving the things that they need.”

To overcome this concern, participants suggested having youth who are involved in youth

voice activities and programming spread the word to their peers to increase diversity. Other suggestions included: examining the community demographics to ensure that participants are representative of the communities they live in, and more directed outreach and effort to bring in those not traditionally asked to participate.

There are some organizations that currently use the above techniques to reach out to young people in their communities such as Seattle Youth Involvement Network (WA), United Way Kids’ Way Youth Advisory Committee (TX), and Cheshire Youth Services (CT).

### **NATIONAL SPOKESPERSON NEEDED**

Discussion groups in Kansas City asked the question: “Who is the champion for youth at a national level?” Others who had asked similar questions asserted that having a good national spokesperson for youth is an effective way to take local efforts to the national level. Additionally, another point of discussion involved the idea that media could be helpful in assisting to locate a young or youthful celebrity that youth look up to and ask that person to serve as a national spokesperson.

Having a national spokesperson would not only attract more youth to become involved in youth voice activities, but would also bring spotlight to an issue that has not been talked about within mainstream media.

### **POLITICAL ADULTISM**

When asked about the government’s involvement regarding youth voice, young people in each city were quick to point out that politicians do not seem to listen to the opinions and concerns of young people because most of them can not or do not vote in elections.

In response to how this issue could be solved a young person in Boston said that “youth can affect voters who affect politicians [for example]

government [officials] can receive youth voice through principals and schools". A discussion group from Los Angeles, in response to how government could be more accessible to young people said "government could sponsor a "Youth Lobby Day" allowing all access [to political procedures and elected representatives] for young people" which would result in better understanding and relations between the two groups. Participants in the same groups also saw the inability to vote as a roadblock to getting heard. Finally, participants in Kansas City said that young people need to "overcome the idea that voting doesn't make a difference".

To instill this belief, participants suggested having children go with their parents to the voting booths; holding mock elections in school alongside local, state, or national elections; and begin holding elected officials accountable for campaign promises.

Examples of organizations that involve young people and candidates in the political process include Kids Voting USA to the Youth Vote Coalition.

## CONCLUSION

Viewed as the "Last Civil Rights Movement" by the National Youth Rights Association, an organization that is "dedicated to defending the civil and human rights of young people in the

### THINGS THAT WEREN'T DISCUSSED THAT SHOULD BE:

*The following list contains issue areas brought up by participants from across the country, deemed necessary for additional conversation.*

- Adult/Parent Involvement and the role they should play
- Violence: youth on youth; adult on youth; youth on adult
- How to break down the stereotypes about youth
- The resources that are available to support youth voice
- How do we approach people who just don't get it? (People who are NOT open to youth and their ideas.)
- Address how the ageing population and intergenerational issues affects funding for youth programming.
- Examples of successful models of involvement that could be tweaked for youth.
- Feasibility and implementation of a "Youth Strike Out Day"
- How war is wrong and its effects on youth
- Youth need to be paid for their involvement
- Seattle needing a Youth Court
- Central source for youth information
- Adopting new language (overuse of the words "youth" and "young people")
- How to get youth in positions of power

United States", the effort to get the voices of the Millennial Generation heard contains pieces synonymous to the efforts of their parents or grandparents of the 1960s.

This current struggle is woven into the words that Karen Pittman penned in *Balancing the Equation: Communities Supporting Youth, Youth Supporting Communities* regarding the idea of a "community principle" which states that communities need to see youth development as a process that happens throughout a young person's awareness of and interaction with the world around them" (Pittman 2002).

If we are to become the society that the National Youth Rights Association and Karen Pittman talk about, we need to put action into the words.

We hope this document will serve as a catalyst for discussion in organizations and communities across the country about the issues and concerns faced in getting youth voices heard. In addition to holding these discussions, we would like to challenge groups to map their communities for solutions to problems leading to this idea of youth voice as a community principle. Only then will we have established a culture that supports and embraces youth opinions, concerns, and input on an equal plane with adults.

## EXAMPLES USED

**At The Table.org**  
Innovation Center for Community &  
Youth Development  
6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 502  
Takoma Park, MD 20912  
info@atthetable.org  
www.atthetable.org

**Cheshire Youth Services**  
84 South Main Street  
Cheshire, CT 06410  
T: 203-271-6690  
F: 203-271-6664  
<http://www.cheshirect.org/youthservices.htm>

**Community Partnerships with Youth, Inc.**  
550 East Jefferson Street  
Suite 306  
Franklin, IN 46131  
T: 317-736-7947  
F: 317-736-0120  
cpyinc@cpyinc.org  
www.cpyinc.org

**The Freechild Project**  
PO Box 6185  
Olympia, WA 98507-6185  
T: 360-753-2686  
info@freechild.org  
www.freechild.org

**Kids Voting USA**  
398 South Mill Avenue  
Suite 304  
Tempe, Arizona 85281  
T: 480-921-3727  
F: 480-921-4008  
Toll Free: 1-866-500-VOTE  
www.kidsvotingusa.org  
kidsvotingusa@kidsvotingusa.org

**National Youth Rights Association**  
PO Box 5882, NW  
Washington, DC 20016  
NYRA@youthrights.org  
www.youthrights.org

**Seattle Youth Involvement Network**  
2017 East Spruce Street  
Seattle, WA 98122  
T: 206-325-7922  
F: 206-323-8731  
www.seattleyouth.org  
office@seattleyouth.org

**United Way Kids' Way Youth Advisory Committee**  
PO Box 924507  
Houston, TX 77292  
T: 713-685-2846  
F: 713-685-2836  
<http://www.uwtgc.org/kidsway/>

**Youth Activism Project**  
PO Box E  
Kensington, MD 20895  
T: 1-800-KID-POWER  
info@youthactivism.com  
www.youthactivism.com

**Youth on Board**  
58 Day Street  
Somerville, MA 02144  
T: 617-423-9900, x 1242  
F: 617-623-4359  
info@youthonboard.org  
www.youthonboard.org

**Youth Vote Coalition**  
1010 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Suite 715  
Washington, DC 20005  
T: 202-783-4751  
F: 202-783-4750  
info@youthvote.org  
<http://www.youthvote.org>



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Mohamed, Inca A. & Wendy Wheeler. *Broadening the Bounds of Youth Development: Youth as Engaged Citizens*. New York: The Ford Foundation & The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2001 (paper).

Pittman, Karen. *Balancing the Equation: Communities Supporting Youth, Youth Supporting Communities*. Jamaica Plain, MA: CYD Publishing Group, Special Anthology Edition, Spring/Summer, 2002 (pp. 19-24).

Toppe, Christopher, PhD & Golombek, S. *Engaging Youth in Lifelong Service: Findings and Recommendations for Encouraging a Tradition of Voluntary Action Among America's Youth*. Washington, DC: Independent Sector, 2002.

Zeldin, Shepherd, Ph.D., et. al. *Youth In Decision-Making: A Study in the Impact of Youth on Adults and Organizations*. Madison, WI: Innovation Center, University of Wisconsin Extension, 2000.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following organizations involve young people in decision-making, leadership, and civic engagement opportunities.

### **Arsalyn Program**

Ludwick Family Foundation  
PO Box 1796  
Glendora, CA 91740  
T: 626-914-5404  
F: 626-852-0776  
[www.arsalyn.org](http://www.arsalyn.org)

### **The ASPIRA Association**

1444 Eye Street NW, Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20005  
T: 202-835-3600  
F: 202-835-3613  
[info@aspira.org](mailto:info@aspira.org)  
[www.aspira.org](http://www.aspira.org)

### **Center for Youth as Resources**

1000 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Suite 1300  
Washington, DC 20036  
T: 202-261-4131  
[yar@cyar.org](mailto:yar@cyar.org)  
[www.cyar.org](http://www.cyar.org)

### **Council of Michigan Foundations**

P.O. Box 599  
One South Harbor Avenue  
Suite 3  
Grand Haven, MI 49417  
T: 616-842-7080  
F: 616-842-1760

### **National Indian Youth Leadership Project**

PO Box 2140  
Gallup, NM 87301-4711  
T: 505-722-9176  
F: 505-722-9794  
[www.niylp.org](http://www.niylp.org)

### **National Youth Congress**

[www.nationalyouthcongress.org](http://www.nationalyouthcongress.org)

### **Youth Leadership Institute**

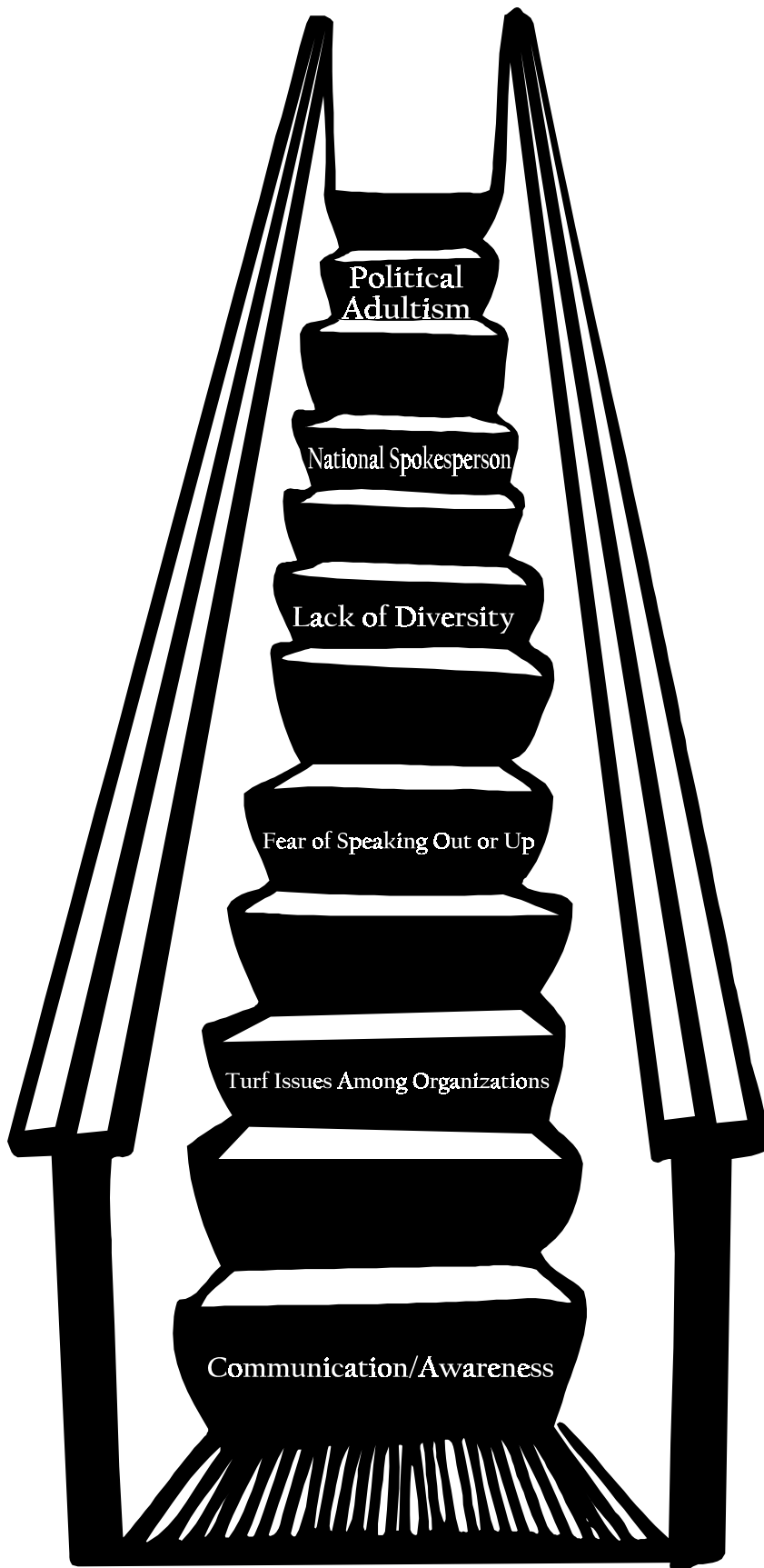
246 First Street, Suite 400  
San Francisco, CA 94105  
T: 415-836-9160  
F: 415-836-0071  
[info@yli.org](mailto:info@yli.org)  
[www.yli.org](http://www.yli.org)

### **Youth Service America**

1101 15th Street, NW, Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20005  
T: 202-296-2992  
F: 202-296-4030  
[info@ysa.org](mailto:info@ysa.org)  
[www.ysa.org](http://www.ysa.org)

# Steps to Making Youth Voice a Community Principle

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## **POLITICAL ADULTISM**

Youth are the last population of society to be heard by politicians. In order for the movement to finally reach the point where it will truly be scaled up, politicians need to recognize youth concerns and needs.

## **NATIONAL SPOKESPERSON**

Social and political movements throughout history have had a figure who - either by default or wish - has served as the leader and become synonymous with efforts. Can the Youth Voice Movement survive and/or become "law" if there is no such person(s)?

## **LACK OF DIVERSITY**

The recruitment and participation of under-represented youth in activities, programs, communities, organizations, etc. will only strengthen the movement's momentum. Without these voices, we lose out on added perspectives, values, thoughts and opinions.

## **FEAR OF SPEAKING OUT OR UP**

By addressing and working to resolve the fears youth have about speaking up and speaking out, the movement will gain its greatest force: the young people we are working with for equality.

## **TURF ISSUES AMONG ORGANIZATIONS**

Building collaborations with each other can only improve the lives of young people who participate in programs and an organization's ability to retain and continually recruit members. Additionally, by working with each other, the effort is bound to gain more fuel through collective energies and focus.

## **COMMUNICATION/AWARENESS**

Consistent, strong, and thorough communication, from local through national programs and organizations, can strengthen and bring to scale youth voice.