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## Editorial

### Youth left out of loop in decision making

By DeWarren Langley  
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Imagine going into a restaurant and being seated for dinner. After you are seated, a dish is already prepared at the table for you with the expectation that you will eat it. Your order was not taken. Your input was not involved. More than likely, you will not eat the dish because you were not involved in the selection of the meal. The dish presented to you would stem from the waiter's observation of you rather than your true needs, because no one took your order. The same holds true of the process contributing to the current state of affairs of young people. Youth are not participating in local programs and services meant for them because their input was not involved in the development process.

Often discussions and policy directed toward the challenges facing our youth do not engage young people in the consultation and development process. While forums are useful means of youth engagement, we need long term and consistent venues for youth participation.

The Durham Youth Council, a body developed to include youth in the policy and programming development process, was proposed. Four years after the proposal, we still lack cross governmental youth engagement geared toward improving working relations between policy makers and youth. Adults cannot have this conversation alone and among one another without youth input.

In late March, County Commissioner Ellen Reckhow spearheaded an event aimed at "Reducing the Risks and Increasing the Odds for Healthier Youth." The event used findings from the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey and Gang Assessment, which both indicate a greater need for coordinating private and public organizations serving youth, to set priorities, identified gaps and develop strategy. Although Durham Public Schools were on spring break during the week of the event, students weren't invited or present.

Why weren't they present at the event? Should they not have been a part of the conversation rather than merely a topic thereof?

Young adults provide new ideas and voices that will stimulate enthusiasm and investment in youth development programs and services. In order to engage them, we must understand the invaluable impact of youth involvement. This includes respecting youth culture, getting them involved on all levels and respecting their invaluable contribution to society. We cannot strictly limit their involvement to task-oriented volunteerism. We must empower youth to become full partners in Durham thereby establishing their vested interest in longer term community participation.

We enlist the participation of youth by showing the link between their contributions in the process and the outcomes of those decisions. Inviting them to share the vision and goals of the community, and then engaging them in creation of action steps and benchmarks, and finally implementation and evaluation of a program, would elicit their involvement at every stage of development.

For example, the city, county and board of education should partner to support the Durham Youth Council and the Student Advisory Council as influential means for youth of our community to actively contribute to policy.

Young people's input into policy development, evaluation and analysis of policy alternative feasibility will transition them from their role of inactive citizens to fully engaged stakeholders. This powerful connection to real community issues will involve them not only in present decisions, but in future outcomes, leading them to investments that will provide potential ties toward future commitments as adults.

As long as our policymakers continue to have conversations about and around youth without inviting them into the process, we, as a community, will persist in the current cycle of programmatic and systemic failure.

DeWarren K. Langley is a resident of Durham. He can be reached at [politicallyactive@gmail.com](mailto:politicallyactive@gmail.com).

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