



# Teen Engagement in Developing Program Best Practices

*An Instructor Toolkit and Video*

Created by:  
After School Matters Youth Advisory Council  
Summer 2012



Dear Colleagues:

One of the oldest and largest out-of-school time programs serving high school students, After School Matters is focused on inspiring teens to have hope for their future by providing high quality, meaningful, hands-on programs that foster their desire for learning and help them develop critical skills for work, college and beyond. This includes providing them with opportunities to use their voice to contribute to the vibrancy and culture of their families, schools and communities.

Mikva Challenge shares this vision and we were pleased to partner with them to create the After School Matters Youth Advisory Council, a group of 15 youth leaders from public high schools throughout the City of Chicago who worked together to provide us with valuable insights on the best ways to engage teens in after-school activities.

Throughout our Summer 2012 program session, the Youth Advisory Council worked together to conduct interviews, surveys and observations to inform their recommendations on how instructors can best engage teens, make them feel valued, solicit their input and encourage active participation in after-school programming for high school youth. At the end of the 10-week program session, they packaged their findings in an instructor toolkit and accompanying video that are available through the CBASS website. Youth Advisory Council participants presented their recommendations to our staff and instructors during a popular keynote session at After School Matters Annual Professional Development Conference.

After School Matters and Mikva Challenge are pleased to share these resources with our colleagues in the out-of-school time field. We hope they will enhance your organization's ability to engage teens and inspire you to create similar opportunities to provide them with a voice in the development of after-school programming that will help them become engaged, educated and ready-to-work citizens.

In the words of our founder, former first lady of Chicago—the late Maggie Daley,  
***After School Matters – it really does!***

Mary Ellen Caron  
Chief Executive Officer  
After School Matters

# Instructor Toolkit on Program Best Practices

Created by: After School Matters Youth Advisory Council

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Summer 2012

**Tell me and I forget.  
Teach me and I remember  
Involve me and I learn  
- Benjamin Franklin**

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# Youth Advisory Council Members

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Lane Technical High School

**Brielle Hawkins**

Kenwood Academy High School

**Javier High**

Lincoln Park High School

**Patty Macias**

Chicago Virtual High School

**Amanda Marciano**

Roberto Clemente Community Academy

**Jacob McKibben**

Lincoln Park High School

**Samiyah Mubarak**

Robert Lindblom Math & Science Academy

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**Paul Ortiz**

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**Izamar Ramirez**

North-Grand High School

**Lauren Spencer**

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**Shamar Tyler**

Hyde Park Career Academy High School

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North-Grand High School

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Whitney Young Magnet High School

## After School Matters Youth Advisory Council Staff

Jessica Anderson, After School Matters Summer Intern

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Stephanie Troche, After School Matters Youth Advisory Council Director, Mikva Challenge

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## Introduction

We are the After School Matters Youth Advisory Council, a group of fifteen youth leaders from different public high schools around the city of Chicago with various after school program experiences. We have come together this summer to try to answer our framing questions: “How do the best instructors engage their teens, make them feel valued, and get their buy-in on the program’s content and goals? What can other instructors learn from this?”

We have spent our summer researching different best practices from various programs through articles, video clips, site visits, program observations, focus groups, interviews with teens and instructors, and guest speakers who shared their knowledge with us on this topic. Collecting data and gathering the much needed research for our toolkit was not an easy task. We walked around the streets of downtown Chicago to gather information from program participants and instructors, visited various programs in different parts of the city, and were able to include four questions of our own on the ASM teen survey that nearly 3,000 teens completed.

We hope that the tips we have outlined will assist you in creating the best possible after school experience for Chicago youth!

# Complete Set of Top Tips

## Recruitment

- 1) Use teens to help with recruitment, both before a program starts and during the program cycle if participant numbers drop.
- 2) Use a program website or the ASM website to promote your program, and to give precise details of what youth can expect when they join the program. Make sure to include the benefits (besides just the stipends) teens can receive for joining.
- 3) Use social media outlets such as twitter, Facebook, and tumblr to promote your program.
- 4) Have teens who already participate in the program design colorful, eye catching fliers for the program next year.

## Safe Environment

- 1) Put teens in pairs and small groups using a “Buddy System” to help them build relationships with each other and build skills.
- 2) Provide bus cards or alternative modes of transportation so youth can get home safely and easily.
- 3) Place reliable security personnel in the program facility.

## Supportive Environment

- 1) Show interest in the progress of your teens by walking around the room and checking in with them regularly regarding their given task.
- 2) Make sure there is enough equipment for all the teens to participate in all the activities.
- 3) Have check-in moments with youth throughout the day to be aware of where they are on their work.

## Interaction

- 1) Find ways to relate to youth (making them feel comfortable in their environment) by discussing personal experiences so youth can get to know instructors.
- 2) Use decorations in your program space to express yourself to your teens.
- 3) Smile and use positive energy to keep youth excited about projects.
- 4) Allow teens to lead by letting them plan the agenda and/or lead activities.

- 5) Youth should be able to contact instructors outside program hours for program related questions or concerns.
- 6) Switch up the formation of groups. Take time to interact with youth in groups, pairs and one on ones.
- 7) Have one-on-ones with teens to set goals and get to know them personally.
- 8) Let youth evaluate instructors and give suggestions for improvements.

## Engagement

- 1) Throw an end-of-program party as a way to release stress and celebrate program accomplishments.
- 2) Provide fun activities (like cards or other games) to entertain youth who arrive early.
- 3) Have one theme for each session and define clear goals at the beginning of session.
- 4) Give teens snacks to get their brains working and for better focus.
- 5) Let teens have control over their own projects.
- 6) Have teens work together on a big project to build a sense of team.
- 7) Use games like energizers and brainteasers between activities to break up the day.
- 8) Have a Super Hero day or a Spirit Week to bring out your teens' creativity and personality.
- 9) Give youth a course calendar for program events and meetings.
- 10) Tie current events to program topic (sports, science, cooking, news articles).
- 11) Incorporate activities into your agenda that let youth share their opinions/perspectives.
- 12) Use skits and videos to teach program content.

## Recruitment

- 1) Use teens to help with recruitment, both before a program starts and during the program cycle if participant numbers drop.

*Case Study: "My journalism program was low on teens, and the instructor asked us to help get more youth involved by bringing friends who might be interested to join the program." When the ASM Advisory Council interviewed program participants at Gallery 37, over half of them reported that friends had told them about the program.*

- 2) Use a program website or the ASM website to promote your program, and to give precise details of what youth can expect when they join the program. Make sure to include the benefits (besides just the stipends) teens can receive for joining.



**Case Study:** ASM has a website with descriptions of each program. Some programs had very specific descriptions (hours, days the program will meet, what students will be doing every day, etc...). *“It was effective for me personally, because although the name of the program grabbed my interest, it was the description that made me decide whether or not to apply for a program. Camp DeeJay has its own website that the instructors created that gives information about the program. It also included some of the mixes the youth had produced the year before, as well as a link back to the ASM website so teens knew how to apply.”*

- 3) Use social media outlets such as twitter, Facebook, and tumblr to promote your program.

**Case Study:** *“Teens from YouMedia use Facebook to promote their program. Also, young people use Facebook to promote songs or movies that they like, events they have at their school, and to connect with their friends (48% of Illinois residents use Facebook, and the average user has 130 friends). Programs should all have a Facebook page, and teens can join and post what is going on in the program and invite their friends to events.”*

## Recruitment (cont.)

- 4) Have teens who already participate in your program design colorful, eye catching fliers for the program next year.

**Case Study:** *“The Hip-Hop Dance program at North-Grand hands out colorful, fun fliers during lunch and hangs them around the school. The fliers are interesting and vibrant and they include all of the important program information.”*

Instructors could have current teens design the fliers for the next year as a leadership activity and a way to make them feel a sense of ownership and belonging to the program.

## Safe Environment

- 1) Put teens in pairs and small groups using a “Buddy System” to help them build relationships with each other and build skills.

*Case Study: “At the Culinary Program at Northwestern, teens were in pairs, and the instructor switched it up regularly so that the teens had a chance to bond with each other. The instructor matched teens based on the skills that youth needed to develop. Our partners were people who already were strong in the skill you needed to develop. We got to each bond with each other and share skills to better ourselves. This was effective because we gained new skills and got new friendships.”*

- 2) Provide bus cards or alternative modes of transportation so youth can get home safely and easily.

*Case Study: “The North-Grand High School Improv program youth received bus cards at the end of the day so they could get to and from their job site. This was effective because it made it easier for youth to get to and from the program. I know it was effective because I got bus cards for my program and it made it extremely easy to get to work and not have to worry about walking home or if my bus card had any money.”*

- 3) Place reliable security personnel in the program facility.

*Case Study: “At the Mikva Summer Fellows program there was a security guard present. She asked where we were going and she had to use a key card to let us on the elevator. No one could go past the security point without permission from the program. This was effective because safety is very important to teens in any and every situation.”*

## Supportive Environment

- 1) Show interest in the progress of your teens by walking around the room and checking in with them regularly regarding their given task.

*Case Study: At Junior Research Scientists, the instructors walked around to check in and ask their teens if they needed help and understood the content. “I saw this happen when I was a part of a landscaping program. The instructor would come around to check on our projects and give us encouragement and give us ideas on things we could do to improve our work.”*

This strategy was effective because it made youth feel supported by their instructors and more confident in their work. Some teens were shy to ask questions so when the instructor came around asking them if they needed help it made things easier. It helped everyone get clarity on their assignments and teens were more focused.

- 2) Make sure there is enough equipment for all the teens to participate in all the activities.

Case Study: At Camp DeeJay, everyone had their own turn tables and head sets. There were enough tables and chairs for everyone. This was effective because teens didn't have to share anything which kept the whole process flowing.

- 3) Have check-in moments with youth throughout the day to be aware of where they are with their work.

Case Study: *At Girls Get Digital, the instructor had all the teens discuss the progress they have made on their project. The entire group had check-ins every hour to see how each group was doing. This helped keep teens on task and helped the group merge their ideas for the final project.*

## Interaction

- 1) Find ways to relate to youth (making them feel comfortable in their environment) by discussing personal experiences so youth can get to know instructors.

Case Study: *At the HIVE Youth Ambassadors program, teens played question games and instructors used free time (like lunch) to share their own personal experiences and stories and ask about their teens' experiences. It was effective with teens because it helped them get to know their instructor and each other and to feel comfortable with one another. Youth say this is effective because after they did these activities the teens began to relate and feel comfortable with their instructors.*

- 2) Use decorations in your program space to express yourself to your teens.

Case Study: At many high schools, including Chicago High School for Fine Arts and Hyde Park Career Academy High School, teachers put up posters of their favorite bands and even pictures of their families. Some teachers even paint the walls of their classroom vibrant colors. When there are decorations in the room, the room feels more inviting for youth. If there are no decorations the room

feels dull and youth don't want to be there. Teens in decorated classrooms say that they knew their teachers' interests, which made them feel more comfortable.

- 3) Smile and use positive energy to keep youth excited about projects.

Case Study: At the Art and Fashion Program at North Grand, the instructors were really welcoming and when they talked to teens they really showed their interest by using an enthusiastic tone. If the instructor is enthusiastic, positive and happy, it will make teens feel the same way.

- 4) Allow teens to lead by letting them plan the agenda and/or lead activities.

## Interaction (cont.)

Case Study: At the YMCA Black & Latino Achievers Program, the instructor let the youth lead the meeting. The day flowed smoothly because the youth planned the agenda. Letting teens take the lead will give them valuable skills in the future like knowing how to take charge and lead people.

- 5) Youth should be able to contact instructors outside program hours for program related questions or concerns.

Case Study: In the Young Life program at Lincoln Park High School and at BUILD community organization, the facilitators gave their numbers to the youth so youth can contact them outside of the program. This is effective because youth are able to ask questions relating to the program or say if they are going to be late. This can reduce confusion and give people a heads up if the facilitator knows if a teen is not coming to work. *"Personally it makes me feel at ease that I'm able to contact my facilitator."*

- 6) Switch up the formation of groups. Take time to interact with youth in groups, pairs and one on ones.

Case Study: *At the After School Matters Advisory Council, the instructors talked to us when we were in large groups, in small groups, and when working independently. This was effective because everyone's opinions were heard and shared in a large group.* When teens get spoken to one on one the instructors can learn more about each teen because their focus is on just one teen. Instructors can also help teens work effectively with other teens by having them work in small groups.

- 7) Have one-on-ones with teens to set goals and get to know them personally.

Case Study: *In the Mikva Education Council, the instructors would meet with their youth individually to help each teen identify their personal goals and how to*

### **Interaction (cont.)**

*accomplish them. This helped us figure out what we really wanted to do and how we will do it. It helped us focus on what needed to be done. That made teens better because they could identify where they were strong and where they needed to improve.*

- 8) Let youth evaluate instructors and give suggestions for improvements.

Case Study: In the Journalism Program, instructors met one-on-one with youth and talked about ways the instructors could improve their facilitation styles and what types of changes the teens would like to see in the program. The changes that were talked about during the discussion were implemented by the instructor within a week and the instructors continued to ask their teens about other things in the program that needed improvement.

# Engagement

- 1) Throw an end-of-program party as a way to release stress and celebrate program accomplishments.

*Case Study: Both BUILD and Step-Up had end of summer parties or potlucks. The head instructor planned the summer bash and involved staff and youth in the planning. This gave youth a chance to socialize and have fun, and it gave instructors time to talk to their teens about coming back during the school year.*

- 2) Provide fun activities (like cards or other games) to entertain youth who arrive early.

*Case Study: Digital Media had board games, computer games, and team building games that youth played if they arrived early. It got youth in a good mood, and gave them time to hang out with instructors and their peers before the program started. It also encouraged teens to come a little early to program and helped energize them before session.*

- 3) Have one theme for each session and define clear goals at the beginning of session.

*Case Study: Experimental Animation always had “topics of the day” (for example, 2D animation, 3D animation, or doing frames). This lets your teens know how the day will play out and working with one topic helps youth stay focused and stay engaged.*

- 4) Give teens snacks to get their brains working and for better focus.

*Case Study: At the HIVE program, the youth had snacks at the beginning of the program provided by their instructors. The teens were able to start program and be focused. It helped the teens stay calm and collected while working—even a little snack helps us focus on the work rather than how hungry we are.*

## Engagement (cont.)

- 5) Let teens have control over their own projects.

*Case Study: In the programs HIVE and Camp DeeJay, the youth mostly worked independently and incorporated their creativity and ideas in the program. The instructors would guide the teens but yet still let the youth have full control over their project. Youth reported that they were able to be more creative and open in the program, and this made them feel more connected to their work.*

- 6) Have teens work together on a big project to build a sense of team.

*Case Study: In the Experimental Animation program, the teens each animated a small part of the project. The teens used everyone's animation to put together a cartoon at the end of the program. This was effective with youth because they learned how to work together and have fun with each other. "I know this was effective because everyone in the program was strangers at first but then everyone became friends."*

- 7) Use games like energizers and brainteasers between activities to break up the day.

*Case Study: At Radio Arte, the instructor and teens played games to boost up the teens' energy and mood. This was effective because after the energizers, the youth made a huge effort to complete their work. Brain teasers (at Mikva) get youth thinking more creatively and using their brains in a fun way.*

- 8) Have a Super Hero day or a Spirit Week to bring out your teens' creativity and personality.

*Case Study: Many high schools have spirit weeks or days to get youth energized and excited. Programs could modify this by having a spirit week where each day is a different theme and encourages them to bring their creativity and*

### **Engagement (cont.)**

*personalities. Spirit weeks could have pajama days, special colors, or team spirit days, etc... It's a good idea because it gives youth the opportunity to express themselves in a creative way, and it provides a fun, happy mood instead of a serious, "let's go to work" atmosphere.*

- 9) Give youth a course calendar for program events and meetings.

*Case Study: In the Radio Arte program, calendars were given to teens so that they would know what sort of events were going to take place. Also a calendar was in the conference room where the youth met. This helped the youth stay on track and organized in the program because they knew the times and dates that they were expected to be at the program.*

- 10) Tie current events to program topic (sports, science cooking news/articles).

*Case Study: In the Mikva Summer Fellows program, the youth had to act as if they were reporters and tell the class about current events in the news. It was effective because having knowledge of current events assisted teens with*

*understanding specific topics areas (e.g. teen health) and how it related to their work. Having to present the information helped teens develop more confidence. The youth were also more aware of what goes on in the world.*

- 11) Incorporate activities into your agenda that let the youth share their opinions and perspectives.

*Case Study: Youth in the After School Matters Advisory Council used the activity “Silhouette” to write and draw in what they think makes up a good youth worker. They started with what they knew and then researched the topic in other ways. A teacher at Lindblom used a “Thought Museum” to get teens’ thoughts and ideas on paper. In a Thought Museum, a facilitator or instructor puts pictures or quotes*

## Engagement (cont.)

*or facts on butcher paper and the teens walk around and write what they think about the topic on the paper.*

- 12) Use skits and videos to teach program content.

*In the Mikva Challenge Election Judge program, small groups of youth were each provided a different problem that might happen in a polling place and have to act out the solution for the rest of the group. This way, the youth had fun while they learned new content.*



## Research

Issacs, Deana. "Does Maggie Daley's After School Matters really matter?" Chicago Reader. September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011

Leopold, Wendy. "After School Matters: Study Finds flagship after-school program for teens helps reduce problem behaviors." Northwestern University News center. June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011

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

Robert M. Goerge, Gretchen Ruth Cusick, Miriam Wasserman, Robert Matthew Gladden. "After-School Programs and Academic Impact: A Study of Chicago's After School Matters." Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. June, 2007

Deschenes, Sarah N., Amy Arbreton, Priscilla M. Little, Carla Herrera, Jean Baldwin Grossman, Heather B. Weiss and Diana Lee. "Engaging Older Youth" Harvard Family Research Project. 2010. Cambridge, Mass.

Akiva, Tom, Gina McGovern & Maureen Okasinski. "Active Learning." David P. Weikart Center. 2012  
Best Practices: positive youth development. Oregon Commission on Children and Families. 2009

## Interviews

60 Interviews with Gallery37 Millennium Park Arts Tent

Brian Brady. Executive Director. Mikva Challenge

Brenan Smith-Evans. Associate Director Mikva Challenge

Tobias Emms. Director of Programs. After School Matters

Tim O'Neill. Program Specialist. After School Matters

Focus Group with 30 teens, YMCA Black & Latino Achievers Program

## Site Visits

Mikva Fellows. Mikva Challenge 332 S. Michigan Ave. Chicago, Ill 60604

Camp Deejay. Livevine works. 501 N. Central Ave. Chicago, IL 60644

Radio Arte. Yollocalli. 1401 W. 18th St. Chicago, IL 60608

Gallery37. After School Matters. 66 E Randolph St. Chicago IL 60601

Hive Youth Ambassadors. Youmedia . 400 S. State Street, Chicago IL 60605

Junior Research Scientists. Columbia College. 600 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago IL 60605





Dear Colleagues:

Mikva Challenge was founded 14 years ago on the simple premise that youth voice matters, and that our civic and political life is richer when youth are sitting at the table with decision-makers. We practice “Action Civics,” a hands-on, real-world approach to democracy that empowers young people by developing the 21st century skills they need to be great leaders and great citizens.

Since 1998, Mikva Challenge has engaged nearly 30,000 teens in the political process through programs in electoral engagement, public policymaking, and community problem solving. Today, we partner with Chicago’s biggest institutions - like the Chicago Public Schools, the Mayor’s office, and the Police Department - to bring youth voice and youth expertise into the decision-making process on issues that directly impact young people.

This shared belief in youth leadership is what makes Mikva Challenge’s partnership with After School Matters so ideal. We both believe in the power of learning-by-doing and in the principles of positive youth development. The success of the Youth Advisory Council - taking up a question posed by adults, conducting intensive research, and presenting a solution for-and-by-youth - is an example of what Mikva Challenge does every day.

Together, Mikva Challenge and After School Matters are building a system in which 21st century skills - collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity - not only prepare youth for college and career success, but also renew our democracy with the next generation of active, thoughtful, and ethical leaders.

Thanks for your interest in the work of the Youth Advisory Council and I hope that you find it useful in your after school programming.

Sincerely,

Brian Brady  
Executive Director  
Mikva Challenge

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