A YOUTH RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO ACCOUNTABILITY IN YOUTH PROGRAMS

By Rebecca Edmunds

INTRODUCTION

To whom are youth workers accountable? Throughout my year participating in the NorthStar Youth Worker Fellowship, this question has persisted. I have considered not only to whom I am accountable in my role as program coordinator at ACES (Athletes Committed to Educating Students), but also to whom we, as the field of youth work, are accountable. The fellowship provided a framework to consider this question through the examination of a rights-based approach to youth work. By focusing my perspective on the rights of youth, I have concluded that as individuals and as a field, we are accountable to the youth we serve. I am accountable to the young people participating in the ACES program. Thus, I am responsible for evaluating the structure, content, and activities of our program and implementing necessary changes to ensure ACES is honoring the rights of our youth.

To acknowledge this responsibility is to make a commitment to young people. Implementing a rights-based approach to youth development adds a critical layer of accountability to program administration and the board of directors. It challenges accountability to funders and grantors. It reshapes the meaning of accountability to a professional set of standards. A commitment to rights-based youth work means that what I do and how I work must include accountability first and foremost to the 8- to 14-year-old students who participate in my program. My role and the role of ACES must commit to creating a program that is structured to gather, respond to, and implement youth feedback while also developing the skills of youth to knowledgeably and confidently provide input. The process of youth input becomes a primary influence on program goals. All other outcomes would filter through that process. For this is their right and my duty, as stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

> *Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, Article 12)*

As a youth worker, I become accountable to facilitate youth participation in defining successful ACES program outcomes, to ensure that we meet those standards of success, and to build the skills of my students to hold me accountable to the standards they help to define.

As a field of youth work, we must fulfill this commitment for both the benefit to the individual youth served and to the community. A rights-based approach recognizes that while all humans, and more specifically, all children have certain inalienable rights, they do not always have the skills or the empowerment to claim those rights and hold systems accountable. As the name suggests, the primary role of youth work is to provide supports and opportunities for young people to develop positive skills and attitudes. The greatest service we can provide is to support youth to become informed, empowered, and responsible rights-holders. Citizens who are knowledgeable about their rights and engaged in advocating for change are vital for a successful democracy. In claiming their rights, youth will also be developing skills that will benefit them and

the community throughout their lives. A rights-based approach to accountability can provide a process by which youth programs can meet this commitment.

A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO YOUTH WORK

My position is grounded in a rights-based approach to youth work, and the assumptions of this approach must first be considered. Under the direction of the United Nations, our global society has recognized that all humans have certain inalienable rights. These rights are fundamental to who we are as individuals and how we function collectively. By nature of being human rights, we do not have to qualify, request, or in any other way seek out these rights. They are inherent and universal. Every human earns these rights equally and freely by simply existing. No one can deny these rights. In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly, recognized and codified these rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Through the Declaration, we have collectively defined our expectations for the baseline treatment of each person on earth. Honoring human rights provides "the foundation for freedom, justice and peace in the world" (United Nations Population Fund). This is the standard to which we must hold ourselves.

We have also recognized that certain segments of society require additional protections of their rights, due to their marginalization or collective powerlessness. In these cases, particular care needs to be afforded to rights above and beyond standard human rights. The rights of the child are one example and are codified in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The Convention provides the field of youth work with a rights-based standard. In choosing to center our work on the rights of children, rather than on other definitions of outcomes or quality, we establish a rights-based philosophy and approach to our work. In so doing, the youth work field can follow the example set by the United Nations and international development programs in framing their work within a human rights focus.

Grounding youth work in youth rights is a paradigm shift that has been advocated before. Dr. Gisela Konopka identified human rights that are important for adolescent development in 1973. Since then, groups both within the United States and internationally have advocated for a youth rights framework (Lansdown, 2010; Anfinson, Oehrlein, O'Brien, Buskovick and Swayze, 2010; European Youth Forum, 2014). This advocacy has resulted in a variety of approaches to youth work including changes from needs-based to assets-based to positive youth development. However, these approaches lack the fundamental paradigm shift required of a rights-based approach.

In a rights-based approach, youth are "key actors in their own development, rather than passive recipients" (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.). Even as the language of youth work has moved beyond the needs-based approach, the underlying assumption remains that programs address a deficit for youth whether academic tutoring, a safe space, or mentoring from caring adults. Because they are defined by achieving an outcome for youth, these approaches restrict the interactions between youth and adults. However, in a rights-based approach the process of youth input becomes the goal. Youth work becomes grounded in the specific language of: "the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). This means that quality indicators such as youth voice, planning, and choice are actually functions of youth exercising their rights. Supporting youth rights becomes essential for youth work both in developing the skills youth will need for their future role as a democratic electorate and recognition of their humanity. A rights-based approach honors the idea that youth do not earn the right to make an impact by turning eighteen. As minors, their rights are present, but unclaimed. The youth-serving organization transitions from a provider of programming to a vehicle through which youth can realize their rights.

Additionally, in this framework, youth-serving organizations are held to a higher standard as the duty-bearer "to respect, protect and guarantee"(United Nations Population Fund) (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.) the rights of the youth. Youth have recourse if an organization provides poor quality programming because they have the ability and opportunity to provide input and demand accountability. In a rights-based approach, the actions of the organization, as the duty-bearer, can be viewed as a violation of a youth rights. A similar distinction was articulated when the United Nations Development Group (2003) established a common policy for using a human-rights approach:

> *A set of programme activities that only incidentally contributes to the realization of human rights does not necessarily constitute a human rights-based approach to programming. In a human rights-based approach to programming and development cooperation, the aim of all activities is to contribute directly to the realization of one or several human rights.*

By adopting a rights-based approach to youth work, we declare that our ultimate goal is the realization of youth claiming their rights. The recognition and support of youth rights has to be first and foremost in our work. Thus, establishing means for youth to impact program decisions needs to be well integrated within the structure and practices of organizations.

To fulfill their role as the rights holders, youth also have to be supported in developing the skills to keep organizations accountable. Youth must be informed about their rights, educated in how to claim their rights, and empowered to hold the duty-bearers accountable for honoring their rights. By prioritizing the development of youth as actors, this approach provides a framework for youth-serving organizations to improve their own capacity to meet their obligations to youth (United Nations Development Group, 2003). In creating structures for youth to provide input, we will be structuring our capacity to respond to that input.

Adopting a rights-based philosophy fundamentally shapes our youth programs, the youth worker's role and the importance of youth input. While it does not trump all other organizational responsibilities, youth input is a major feature of our accountability as an organization. In using the context of youth rights, I have defined accountability as the "responsibility of youth workers and youth work programs to be answerable to the youth served in the organization by prioritizing a youth's right to provide input and impact program decisions." This definition requires a shift from viewing organizational accountability as a hierarchical responsibility, where youth workers are accountable to the organization, organizations are accountable to funders, and both are accountable to the ethics of the profession. Instead, by using a youth rights-based approach, we can define accountability of the entire field to the youth. Within ACES, this means that all stakeholders including our board of directors, staff, funders, partners, and the families and youth that we serve understand and support restructuring to integrate youth input in the development and implementation of our program.

Accountability is a greater challenge in the field of youth work as compared to many other fields because young people may not have the skill set or the empowerment to demand recourse from the youth-serving organizations in which they enroll. Often, the greatest power that youth have is in their feet. If a program is not meeting the needs or incorporating the interests of the youth, we know because youth will not participate. When not given an avenue to provide input, youth impact programs by disengaging. As one youth worker said, "It could be the greatest thing that you think you've come up with, [but] if the kids don't like it, there's really no reason for you to even start" (K. Moua, personal communication, 2015). A system in which disengagement is the primary tool of accountability is a system in need of a power shift. Youth must

be engaged and feel empowered by the programs in which they participate. That is not only developmentally beneficial, it is their right! As youth workers, we need to ensure the power dynamic of our system of out-of-school-time programming is one which empowers participation.

We need to help youth impact programs and advocate for change when they are dissatisfied. We need to empower youth because "the realisation of children's participation rights involves the transition of children from the status of passive recipients to respect as active agents. It necessitates a transfer of greater power for children to have influence in their lives" (Lansdown, 2010, p. 13). In so doing, youth not only improve the individual programs, but more importantly, develop an essential skill. Understanding how to provide effective feedback and make a positive impact through engagement, rather than disengagement, is a skill that impacts interactions youth will have in their communities. As youth-serving organizations, a rights-based approach to accountability necessitates a structure designed for intentional youth impact, a safe space for youth to feel comfortable providing that input, and the development of youth skills to promote effective feedback.

ACES CURRENT STRUCTURE EXAMINED

My role as program coordinator at ACES and the structure, content, and implementation of our program provides the perspective from which I examine a rights-based approach to accountability. My position has been impacted by ongoing conversations with colleagues at ACES and peers in the youth development field. I also used a critical review of the ACES curriculum, ACES data from youth surveys, and the responses from an internal staff survey. I joined the ACES team in August 2013 and my reflections on the program are based on the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years and the 2014 summer program. My recommendations reflect the conclusions that I drew from those results and do not represent the official policy or position of the ACES organization. My goal is to directly impact the design and implementation of our program and fundamentally change how my colleagues and I approach our work. I also hope that other youth workers and youth-serving organizations would utilize this template to incorporate a rights-based approach to accountability in their own programs.

My examination of the program is timely because ACES is going through a period of transition. During the 2014-2015 school year, our Executive Director, Christina E. Saunders opened up a dialogue as to how ACES could improve and provide a higher-quality program. ACES has served students in Minneapolis and Saint Paul for twenty years as an out-of-school-time tutor/mentor program aimed at closing the achievement gap. During that time, the organization has adapted the structure and approach of the program in an attempt to better meet the needs of the youth. Currently, we partner closely with the Saint Paul and Minneapolis Public Schools and Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities to work with students in the fourth through eighth grades. ACES direct-service staff led classrooms of 10 to 15 students through a twice-weekly program of teambuilding, a project-based curriculum, and academic support or homework help.

INTENTIONAL WELCOMING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Creating a safe and supportive environment for youth is inherent in the ACES mission. Development and skill building, especially for youth, requires risk taking and those risks are best explored when youth are secure in the knowledge that they will receive support from their peers and adult mentors. Creating this welcoming atmosphere is a strength of the ACES program. ACES uses a model of small classes, intentional team-building and caring adult staff and volunteers. The strong relationship-building model is reflected in the comfort of students at the program. For example, multiple responses from ACES students to the youth version of the Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (SAYO-Y) in fall 2014 show students identifying ACES as a place where they feel welcome (see Appendix A for ACES Fall 2014 SAYO-Y results). ACES

students responded positively to questions such as "Are kids here friendly with each other?", "Do you like coming here?" and "Do you have fun when you're here?" The ACES internal 2013-2014 surveys also demonstrate a slight increase in positive responses from the pre- to post-program survey for the question "I have support from adults other than my parents." (see Appendix B for ACES 2013-14 pre/post survey results). These student responses reveal that youth are comfortable in the ACES program. From a qualitative standpoint, I also judge the comfort of youth in the ACES program from the relationships that I see in our classrooms. Youth demonstrate a sense of community in their ACES classrooms, with their self-identification as ACES students, their desire to wear ACES t-shirts (earned through attendance goals and field trips), and in their interactions with classmates and staff.

In ACES, we intentionally develop a welcoming environment by emphasizing the use of student names and friendly greetings. Ice breakers and team-building activities are designed in the program schedule to encourage the sense of community, inclusiveness and belonging. Reflection and group projects provide a sense of group achievement. Attendance and participation incentives encourage self-identification with ACES. Staff are also hired and trained for a positive approach to youth work with respect, encouragement, and a belief in the ability of all students to succeed as being of the utmost importance.

INTENTIONAL CURRICULUM

Along with creating a safe and supportive environment, ACES staff builds student skills by encouraging student expression, choice, and reflection within the structure of the pre-set curriculum. As an example, in the ACES (2015) curriculum unit "4th Grade Fish Tale," students learn about fish and practice their language arts skills by writing a fish story. In this unit, students may choose the style and content of their story. They are able to creatively express their ideas through writing and illustrating the story and will present their finished projects to their classmates. Throughout this process, staff prompt students to reflect on their work and provide feedback on how they feel about the project. Responding to this feedback is one form of accountability to our youth.

In addition to developing youth choice in the curriculum, ACES staff are encouraged to elicit feedback from youth on the program activities and adapt to the needs and interests of their class. They may extend or limit certain activities based on student feedback. Staff may also occasionally schedule a "free day" or "teambuilding day" to further build the community in their classroom. The relaxed environment and relationship building with ACES adult volunteers and staff encourages student expression (C. Saunders, personal communication, 2015). Additionally, the flexible schedule provides for greater student choice and adaptability to youth input.

When asked to reflect on the 2014-2015 program and on changes that they had made based on youth feedback in an anonymous internal ACES Program Survey (2015), ACES staff provided examples of eliciting youth feedback and adapting their choice of activities (see Appendix C for ACES Program Survey responses). One wrote, "My students requested more physical activity and hands-on learning. They have energy pent up from the school day. I now work this into the curriculum whenever possible." Another staff shared, "Students regularly have two or three activities to choose from at any given time. Also, we frequently take informal polls to see how students would prefer an activity to be structured." One response demonstrated that some staff have supplemented the content of the ACES curriculum based on student feedback, "Andy changed his entire curriculum to address the requests of his students for 'real life' information. They did a customized curriculum of taxes and job applications." These adaptations and the example of the fish tale curriculum unit demonstrate the intentional development of youth expression and choice in the ACES program.

INTENTIONAL YOUTH VOICE

By complementing a welcoming environment with the intentional development of youth voice, ACES can encourage youth feedback and input on programming decisions. However, the overall results on youth input are mixed. On the fall 2014 SAYO-Y, students had mixed responses to the questions "Do you get to choose how you spend your time?", "Can you suggest your own ideas for new activities?" and "Do you get to choose which activities you do?" Students were almost evenly split with only slightly more positive responses to these questions. The questions "Do you get to help plan activities for the program?" and "Do you get to help make decisions or rules for the program?" also had mixed results with slightly more negative responses. These mixed and negative results demonstrate that ACES is not supporting youth input in a consistent way in the program. The staff responses above also indicate that ACES students are not informing the overall structure, content, or goals of the ACES program. Staff and students are limited to adapting within the curriculum and structure.

Even if implemented with fidelity, student voice, choice, and reflection are all quality indicators and beneficial for student development, but are not indicators of full accountability. While youth voice is important, it does not lead to accountability unless the organization is responsive to the feedback provided. Without the intentionality of facilitating youth as active participants, youth can remain in a passive role even while organizations achieve quality indicators. Developing the skills of youth to go beyond providing feedback to expecting and requiring responsiveness from the organizations in which they participate is a challenging but crucial step toward accountability.

In the same ACES survey (Appendix C), staff shared obstacles they observed to youth providing input. These responses demonstrate that ACES will need to make significant changes to achieve accountability. Challenges were identified both for ACES structurally and in a lack of youth skills. Responses on structural challenges included the limited timeframe of program, "sometimes there just isn't enough time"; the lack of intentionality, "they don't have a formal way to give input" and inconsistent attendance. Even when staff attempt to incorporate youth input these obstacles can feel insurmountable: "[W]e may get input from some students but will not see the students at program again when we want to implement their ideas. Basically, unless we implement their ideas the same day, which can be challenging for staff, students will not get to see their input affecting programming." To overcome these obstacles, ACES will need frequent opportunities for immediate youth input through short but intentional feedback and planning activities.

In reflecting on the need for youth to develop skills in providing effective input, staff identified a lack of youth confidence as a key challenge because only "the more outspoken students make their opinions known" and "students might not feel that their input is mature enough or their ideas will make them vulnerable to having them not be accepted." Additional challenges arise when youth feedback and adult expectations for that input do not align, such as when "the younger students usually offer quite vague feedback when asked (e.g. more field trips, more candy)." While the ACES curriculum and structure attempt to develop these skills, the curriculum can also be detrimental, "There's a sense that as Team Leaders we must stick to the curriculum at all costs which restricts us from being able to hear out the students' concerns and input." More flexibility will be needed in order for youth to develop into the role of the active participant. Student impact needs to go deeper, for as Gerison Lansdown (2010) asserts "It is not sufficient to listen to children. It is also necessary to give their views serious consideration when making decisions. Their concerns, perspectives, and ideas must inform decisions that affect their lives" (p. 12). A key component missing from the ACES approach to accountability is that ACES, as the duty bearer, must provide intentional structures by which the youth, as the rights holders, can claim their rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN YOUTH INPUT AND ORGANIZATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In order to develop organizational accountability, ACES will need to shift the focus of programming to structure each class, each curriculum unit, and each program day in ways that prioritize the input of youth. The emphasis should be on collaboratively creating the program and on partnerships between youth and staff. As argued in the joint publication from UNICEF and UNESCO, *A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All*, "In good programming, participation is crucial, both as an end and a means. Participation does not mean that 'they' participate in 'our' education programme, but rather that we all participate in meeting the learning needs identified" (p. 14). The traditional model of a pre-set curriculum needs to be transformed into a more flexible curriculum framework through which students become an integral component of determining curriculum activities and outcomes.

To achieve this, ACES should implement the following best practices. Some of these practices are present in the current program model and should be strengthened. Others will need to be developed.

1. **Build strong relationships.** Accountability needs to be grounded in relationships and in mutual trust and respect. Curriculum activities that build teamwork, a sense of shared program identity, a safe and welcoming environment, and mutual respect between students and with staff are important components of a successful program. The intentional use of team-building activities should be strengthened in the ACES program. While there are some curriculum units designed for students to share their experiences with the class, these activities need to be more frequent, and timed for more intentional impact. For example, these activities are especially important at the start of each semester of program or when new students have joined the program. Through both team-building and lessons involving personal sharing, ACES can facilitate a sense of belonging in the program. Currently, ACES staff are encouraged to use team-building and sharing activities, but increased training is needed to expand the repertoire of activities and confidence of staff in intentionally scaffolding activities in order to be more effective.

2. **Intentional planning and feedback time.** Providing a dedicated space and time for students to give feedback is essential. Since ACES is both increasing student input and developing youth skills in providing that input, the process will take time. Students will need to have the process of providing feedback modeled and will need to practice. ACES can use multiple approaches for soliciting youth planning and feedback. Informal surveying techniques should be used to understand youth interest or questions on upcoming curriculum topics and reflect on past activities. Discussion groups in which "children come together each day in a circle to discuss issues of concern to them, identify problems and explore solutions" (UNICEF; UNESCO, 2007, p. 96) are also an effective practice for ACES to implement because they allow for authentic and detailed youth input. The timing of these circles may need to be adjusted to fit the framework of out-of-school time, but the concept is important.

   Facilitated discussion groups not only provide a safe space for youth to provide feedback and input on planning future activities, but also develop youth skills. As Lansdown (2010) argues, "In order to contribute their views, children need access to appropriate information and safe 'spaces' where they are afforded the time, encouragement and support to enable them to develop and articulate their views" (p. 12). While students may initially be hesitant to contribute, the practice of regular circles will develop their confidence and skills. When first implementing this structure, students and staff may need to use guiding questions to facilitate the conversation for detailed planning and feedback. ACES could also use mixed-age groups to apply the skills of the middle school students in modeling the feedback process for younger students. The ultimate goal of this process is for the skills and

confidence of youth to reach a level at which youth will advocate for change, even when their input is not intentionally solicited. Unsolicited youth advocacy will signal successful accountability to youth.

3. **Increased flexibility in curriculum.** In addition to the ACES curriculum being intentionally designed to solicit and incorporate youth plans, ACES staff need to feel supported in adapting activities and lessons based on youth input. Staff comments in the internal ACES survey (2015) indicated that this is currently limited by the pre-set nature of the ACES curriculum. While ACES needs to continue to provide curriculum for staff to ensure program goals are met, in terms of academic content, that curriculum must also be designed around the inherent goal of student input.

   Student input can be increased through programmatic flexibility. Rather than a strict program calendar with set curriculum units, ACES could design lesson frameworks which highlight the aspects of programming to be included, such as teambuilding and reflection, and provide a set of curriculum topics and suggested activities. Staff can introduce the topic, draw on suggested activities, co-plan additional projects with students, and implement accordingly. In this framework, emphasis would be placed on a continuous system of youth input and corresponding adaptations to the program. Youth input becomes the process through which all ACES content is explored. By making student input a stated goal of the program design, ACES can empower youth. As ACES youth develop experience and confidence in co-designing and implementing projects, they will learn to expect that their input will be solicited. Once that expectation is set, ACES will have provided the youth with a measure by which to hold the program accountable.

4. **Scaffold youth skills.** The success of youth-driven programming relies on the development of youth skills in effective planning, reflection, and feedback. ACES will need to scaffold the approach to youth input with "the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). More structure and modeling will be provided for younger and less mature students and their initial input may be limited to planning one aspect within a pre-set activity or choosing among limited options. However, as younger students gain experience and with older students who already have the necessary maturity, the scope of input should be expanded. Older youth will be more engaged and gain beneficial experience with greater input in program design and implementation.

   Expanding youth skills begins with student involvement in developing program norms and setting group expectations. As stated in the joint report issued by UNICEF and UNESCO (2007), "All children are entitled to express their views and have them given due weight. This involves listening as well as talking. It requires that children play a part in the creation of constructive spaces that promote mutual respect" (p. 22). Rights have corresponding responsibilities. For youth this means respecting the input of others. Taking ownerships of that responsibility is a skill to be intentionally fostered. Staff need to support students in understanding that not every idea can be implemented and in finding compromises respectfully. These expectations provide a foundation for more intentional planning and feedback throughout the program. By articulating the development of youth skills in advocacy as a fundamental goal of the ACES program, curriculum and activities can be designed to meet both academic outcomes and, in the process, develop the skills of youth in providing effective feedback.

5. **Trust student voice.** As adults, we can easily minimize the power that youth have in making decisions. We can be dismissive about their authority. This is reflected in comments ACES staff

offered regarding the vagueness of the student feedback, their discomfort, lack of maturity, or as one staff member said "Their suggestions are often unrealistic" (ACES Program Survey 2014-2015, 2015). In dismissing youth input, we unintentionally foster disengagement as the means of impacting a program. To foster engagement, we must embrace the power shift.

Opening the ACES program to youth input and intentionally providing flexibility to adapt both the process and outcomes of the program is a risk. Providing frameworks and intentional scaffolding of the youth input process are necessary to support success for the program, staff, and students. However, there remains an often uncomfortable amount of uncertainty inherent in this process. Youth input, especially while developing the skills of providing effective feedback, may not always align with the adult-identified goals. Scaffolding the experience for youth is important. As is trusting that youth have ability to effectively reflect on and identify their needs and plan engaging activities that will meet program objectives. We have to give youth the opportunity to exceed our expectations. ACES will need to remain grounded in the framework that honoring youth input is not only beneficial, it is our responsibility as a bearer of duty. Youth input, even if messy, is a right which we must protect in order to stay accountable to our mission to serve youth.

6. **Stay reflective.** As an organization, ACES will have to hold itself accountable to these goals. With successful implementation, accountability from youth will develop. However, each year youth will graduate out of the program and the process will restart. Thus, program reflectiveness will be required with constant evaluation and reintegration of youth in decision making. Accountability to youth as an organizational goal is never completed. It will always be an ongoing process. Embracing accountability as a state of being, rather than an outcome, will be necessary.

AN ACCOUNTABLE FUTURE

There will be challenges inherent in the above recommendations. It will take time and critical conversations to achieve a cultural norm of a rights-based approach with all stakeholders, including students. I have recommended changes to the program structure, activities, and curriculum. This necessitates changes to staff training. Additional resources will be required to implement all of these changes. Although it will not be easy, now is the time for ACES to embrace these recommendations. As stated earlier ACES is in the midst of a transition and program leadership understands the importance of improving quality and youth engagement. A rights-based approach to accountability is the process by which to achieve both of these goals.

We are not starting from nothing. ACES has already established a quality program. Strong, caring relationships exist between youth and adults in the program. The ACES curriculum encourages youth expression and provides some choices. ACES staff informally seek and utilize youth input when the current structure allows them to make adjustments. Going forward, ACES needs to extend these practices. By striving for the process of youth input to become the outcome by which we define success, ACES can implement a youth rights-based approach to accountability. In the 2011 *Journal of Youth Development*, Dale Blyth argued that in order to improve the field of youth work we must welcome input from the youth:

> *As co-creators and participants in youth programs, young people have unique perspectives and valuable insights into what is happening and why. While we cannot simply defer to their wisdom, we can also not afford to ignore it if we are to grow as a field. Youth as colleagues in building our field is one of the greatest untapped resources available. (p. 172)*

Recognizing the ACES youth as co-creators of the program honors their rights, develops their skills as democratic citizens, and answers my question of to whom I am accountable. Our entire field is accountable to honoring the wisdom of our youth and supporting the boundless potential students have for creating amazing programs that will serve their needs. I am excited to shape our future programming at ACES within the framework of rights-based accountable youth work. By centering our work in accountability to youth, we can set a model for other youth-serving organizations on how to honor the fundamental right of our youth to inform the program within which they participate.

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APPENDIX A

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at Wellesley College developed a set of tools to assess the success of OST programs. These tools, referred to as the Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (SAYO) include three versions: the youth survey (SAYO-Y), the staff survey (SAYO-S) and the teacher survey (SAYO-T). Each version can be used to complement the others in an assessment system or to stand alone. The SAYO-Y is developed to assess youth experiences in OST programs and the research-based outcomes related to youth success and a focus on three areas: "youth's experiences in the afterschool program; youth's sense of competence; and youth's future planning and expectations" (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2015). Through our partnership with the 21st Century after-school program at the Saint Paul Public Schools' Flipside, ACES has access to youth responses on the SAYO-Y. Table A1 shows responses to selected questions from the SAYO-Y survey of ACES students in November 2014.

TABLE A1.

	Yes	Mostly Yes	Mostly No	No	No Response
Are kids here friendly with each other?	33	53	13	7	4
Do you like coming here?	69	30	4	3	4
Do you have fun when you are here?	65	36	3	2	4
Do you get to choose how you spend your time?	22	34	26	24	4
Can you suggest your own ideas for new activities?	28	41	15	22	4
Do you get to choose which activities you do?	25	33	28	20	4
Do you get to help plan activities for the program?	19	25	33	29	4
Do you get to help make decisions or rules for the program?	21	17	25	43	4

APPENDIX B

ACES conducts pre- and post-program surveys with the students each fall and spring to assess student attitudes. The data from these surveys is then compiled in an Internal Comparative Assessment of Student Data, Table B1 shows ACES 2014 data from question 9 of the survey, administered to 83 students.

Question 9. I have support from adults other than my parents.

1=Rarely, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Almost always

TABLE B1.

	Average
Pre-program survey	2
Post-program survey	2.695

APPENDIX C

In April 2015, ACES conducted an anonymous staff survey to gather feedback on the ACES program for the 2014-15 program year; included in that survey was a section for my position paper with two items on youth input. Items C1 and C2 list anonymous responses to those two questions.

C1. Responses to the question: *Please share an example of a time when a change in programming was made in response to youth input around ACES activities, content, or structure.*

- My students requested more physical activity and hands-on learning. They have energy pent up from the school day. I now work this into the curriculum whenever possible.
- The kids suggested doing homework time in the beginning, and we tried it. Didn't work out, but it was a good experiment.
- We got rid of a curriculum the kids weren't responding well to. They made it clear that they were not enjoying it.
- On Mondays, a couple students had to miss the first 30 minutes due to a mandatory school program, but the students still wanted to come to ACES so they asked if we could rearrange the structure our program so they wouldn't miss the curriculum. In result, we started with ice breaker then homework so students could join at the end of homework time and start curriculum with us. They liked that best!
- Tweaking curriculum according to class needs/preferences.
- No E-mentoring.
- Youth chose what ice breaker was used for the day.
- Andy changed his entire curriculum to address the requests of his students for "real life" information. They did a customized curriculum of taxes and job application forms.
- More craft-based programming was recommended, more craft-based programming was implemented.
- I have occasionally changed the structure of a day in order to accommodate students' requests to have extra time outside.
- Students regularly have two or three activities to choose from at any given time. Also, we will frequently take informal polls to see how students would prefer an activity to be structured.
- Group work.
- When students would find the material 'boring'/unappealing they would rebel, but when they gave some input to what could be done to make it 'funner' they enjoyed themselves a lot more.
- I feel like we are given a curriculum to teach that is easy to adapt to how students learn best...
- More time using computers.
- Site leader talked to some of the students who were considering leaving the program and asked them what they would like to see more of and less of in the ACES curriculum and we have made an effort to include a number of their suggestions.
- Creation of a PI-day.
- Green made a special field trip for middle schoolers based on what they are interested in.
- It hasn't happened yet, but one of my students offered an idea for our end-of-year celebration and we will hopefully see this go into effect in the next couple of weeks.
- When we learned to use constructive reinforcement and took note.

C2. Responses to the question: *What challenges do you see at ACES that may prevent students from giving input?*

- They don't have a formal way to give input, so the more outspoken students make their opinions known.
- Students might not feel that their input is mature enough or that their ideas will make them vulnerable to having them not be accepted.
- I think that sometimes it can be hard to tailor the curriculum of ACES and the structure of the program to each and every student, so there is a balancing act between what they would like to see and what we can actually do.
- I feel like sometimes the students don't feel like they will always be listened to. Though I feel like they are given the opportunity.
- They don't attend consistently.
- There's a sense that as team leaders we must stick to the curriculum at all costs which restricts us from being able to hear out the students' concerns and input.
- Less free time.
- The younger students usually offer quite vague feedback when asked (eg. more field trips, more candy).
- At the Boys and Girls Club, we don't regularly see the same students, and so we may get input from some students, but will not see the students at program again when we want to implement their ideas. Basically, unless we implement their ideas the same day, which can be challenging for staff, students will not get to see their input affecting programming.
- Inconsistent attendance.
- They don't feel that staff will listen.
- Sometimes there just isn't enough time. Maybe implementation of specific time to offer ideas.
- Their suggestions are often unrealistic and don't involve academics.
- Extremely short amount of time on site to do curriculum/homework, which may make it hard to listen to kids in a less-structured conversational setting.
- Students who feel like we are 'making' them do things.
- I don't believe they have any challenges.
- If students don't feel comfortable enough to speak up.
- I feel that students aren't sure how to articulate why they don't like an activity. They often have time during reflection to critique the curriculum for that day.
- We don't structure much time in our schedule for student input, only the first day of the ACES semester, but after that staff have to evaluate students' behavior and interests to find out how to add in student suggestions in the curriculum.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

REBECCA EDMUNDS started at ACES in 2013 as a volunteer coordinator and quickly transitioned to program coordination. She has worked with youth from ages 5 to 21 in tutoring and mentoring, Model United Nations, and teaching English as a foreign language. Rebecca is a 2010 graduate of Hamline University.