Introduction

Creating opportunities for student leadership builds student buy-in and strengthens the program community, while also supporting the development of students' leadership skills and self-confidence as they see their voice matters and they can have an impact. This guide offers ideas for how SEA member programs can implement opportunities for students to develop their leadership skills and make contributions to the success of the program.

Overview

An organization's capacity and philosophy regarding student leadership will determine its approach to student leadership. This guide contains three sections.

- ❏ **Program Philosophy:** A brief section on the mentality programs should have when approaching student leadership.
- ❏ **Student Leadership Group**: A guide to how to build a high-functioning, year-round student leadership group.
- ❏ **Specific Opportunities for Contribution**: Ideas for concrete, time-bound opportunities for students to make contributions to the program and develop their leadership skills.

Program Philosophy

To have strong youth leadership, programs and staff must commit to the following:

- ❏ demonstrate a genuine interest in student voice and leadership
- ❏ empower students to make real and meaningful contributions
- ❏ provide coaching and guidance students to enable their success

Strong youth leadership programs combine opportunities to lead with opportunities to learn about leadership itself and to reflect on oneself as a leader. Simply offering students the opportunity to lead is not enough; adults must play a role in coaching and supporting students. As Ainee Shehzad Salim wrote in an Op-Ed for the Express Tribune, "One of the hardest challenges is to find the balance between too much and too little adult participation. Too much adult involvement will dampen student voice and fail to involve students as true problem-solvers and stakeholders. Too little, and student voice will become diffused, exclusive and ineffective. If students are to be thoughtful stakeholders in improving teaching and learning, they need adult mentors and adult listeners."

Year-round Student Leadership Group

The goal of ongoing student leadership groups are two-fold: (1) to strengthen the program by creating an explicit mechanism for student input and leadership, and by sharing

responsibility with students for keeping the program strong and (2) to strengthen students' leadership skills, peer relationships, and program buy-in.

Programs that want to develop a full-scale leadership group should do the following.

- ❏ **Set goals and objectives**: Create clear goals and objectives for the group, and hold yourself accountable to them.
- ❏ **Determine staffing**: There should be one to two full-time staff members responsible for the leadership group. One of these staff members should be the Program Director or Executive Director, and the other can be a frontline staff member. The purpose of the program leader's involvement is to serve as a strong thought-partner to the frontline staff member, and to hear, coach, and engage with student leaders in your program.
- ❏ **Create a budget**: Set aside a budget for the leadership group. Consider the need for field trips and group bonding activities, guest speakers, funding to support student ideas, snacks at group meetings, and clothing/apparel for the student leaders.
- ❏ **Determine dosage**: Consider when and how often the group will meet. SEA recommends that groups meet about every three weeks to ensure student buy-in and to maintain a strong group connection and culture.
- ❏ **Determine student eligibility**: Have some basic eligibility requirements, such as program attendance and age/grade. Require that students fill out a thoughtful application. When reviewing applications, consider factors that might jeopardize a student's ability to fully commit and effectively contribute, such as an inability to attend meetings or difficulty getting along with other students in the program. Recommended group size is between 10-20 students, depending on the size of the member program and the strength of your candidates. Aim for a mixture of grade levels, with solid representation from the oldest students in the program.
- ❏ **Set group expectations**: Set clear expectations for student involvement. For example, require that students commit to attending meetings and to showing positive leadership in their regular program participation (attendance, participation, etc.).
- ❏ **Plan out calendar year**: Plan out the full calendar year in advance, identifying multiple opportunities for student leadership. Students might plan and host program events, help recruit and welcome new students into the program, lead new family meetings, volunteer regularly in practices, support program fundraisers, and lead donor visits to the program.

Level of Staff Involvement: When initially starting a youth leadership program, the staff will play a greater role in the first year or two than once the program is fully established. For example, when determining what students should be included in the first leadership

group, staff should both create an open application process and encourage specific students to apply; staff should make the first selection decisions to ensure that selections are based on merit and leadership potential, not popularity. Likewise, some core group expectations, such as attendance expectations and leadership opportunities, should be determined by staff in the beginning. After a year or so, when the group culture has been established, students may play increasingly larger roles in reviewing student applications, determining group expectations, and identifying additional leadership opportunities.

Planning Overall Content: When thinking about what roles the students will play and what coaching you will provide, use Bridgespan's 70:20:10 model for staff development: approximately 70% of time should be spent doing the work and learning on-the-job, 20% should be spent receiving coaching and mentoring, and 10% should be spent in formal training.
- ❏ **70% doing:** Students need opportunities to practice leadership in order to understand how it works and give feedback on effective changes.
- ❏ **20% mentoring**: Create opportunities and a safe space for group reflection, feedback, inspiration, and learning. Invest in students personally as well, giving individual feedback on their contributions and checking in on how they are doing.
- ❏ **10% formal training**: Organize at least 1-2 formal leadership trainings throughout the year.

Planning Meetings: Have an agenda for monthly meetings. Core aspects of the agenda should include (1) reflection on recent events/activities, (2) planning or brainstorming for future events, (3) conversations about program culture, and (4) inspiration. The "program culture" aspect of the agenda is an opportunity for staff and students to bring up concerns about or enthusiasm for the program culture; for example, the group might discuss recent thefts, student disengagement, or concerns about tensions between staff members and students. When addressing concerns, set the rule that no specific names will be shared and that, if a student brings up an issue, he/she must also come with a proposed solution for discussion.

Kicking off the Year: After students have been selected, schedule at least several hours, or perhaps even a day-long retreat, to establish the group and begin planning for your first event. Topics to cover include: review of and commitment to group expectations, icebreakers, teambuilding activities, review of calendar, and planning for first event.

Specific Opportunities to Contribute
If programs are wary of or unable to dedicate resources to support a year-round student leadership program, there are ways to include student voice and develop student

leadership on a smaller scale. Below are some options to consider, listed in order of increasing levels of involvement.

Teambuilding Activities
Students should have opportunities to engage in teambuilding activities and, following the activity, reflect on challenges, success, and the roles played by team members. They should identify how different people on the team contributed, whether by role-modeling hard work or by helping resolve a conflict or by communicating a vision. Strong leaders know how to motivate others; share power and distribute tasks; work with a team; manage conflicts; and create and communicate a vision. Practice in teambuilding activities will help students build and understand these leadership skills.

Student Surveys
Students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their programs that adults don't necessarily have. Student surveys create a confidential way for students to share this information with staff. Staff might ask for student feedback on a recently completed unit, on how they as a staff member are doing, on the team dynamics, or on the program overall.

Activity Leaders
Staff select students to lead various activities, whether the squash warm-up on court, handing out snacks, or taking attendance. When activities require dividing into smaller groups, the students or staff might select a student from each group to share with the larger group how their group did, or to report out what the group learned or thought.

Team Captains
Programs may create a Team Captain role, either as a rotating role or as a permanent role for a year. Here are some ways that programs have used Team Captains.
- ❏ **Team Captains for matches** - The coaches or team may elect students to lead them as Team Captains for a match, and perhaps in the week leading up to that week's practice. This is an opportunity to recognize students who have shown leadership traits in practice, whether by cheering on other students, working hard in practice, or showing improvement. This opportunity does not involve spending a lot of time developing students as leaders.
- ❏ **Team Captains for the season** - The coaches or team may elect a male and a female player to serve as team captains for an entire season. The challenge with allowing students to elect captains is that they sometimes elect leaders based on popularity rather than leadership potential. The challenge with allowing staff to select captains is that other students may be less likely to embrace them as their leaders. If your program chooses to do captains for a season, be very thoughtful about how to

ensure that the captains, whether selected by students or by staff, have the capacity to be effective leaders and role models. Then, converse with and coach your captains throughout the season, using them as partners in helping identify and address concerns, and motivate and inspire teammates. The captains have to be strong leaders, the staff have to commit to coaching and working with them, and their role has to be meaningful; without these factors in place, the captains program will not be effective, and may be counterproductive to your goals.

Event-Planning Groups
Programs may solicit student leaders to help plan program events such as team trips, team meetings, year-end parties, holiday parties, open mic nights, and mentor celebrations. Have the group meet weekly in preparation for the event. Have two student leaders who are the key drivers and who coordinate with staff in advance of meetings and then lead the meetings, with staff members playing a support role. Within the group, have different students take on different responsibilities. Students can research places to go (for trips), plan activities, create decorations, communicate information to other students in the program, organize supplies, create videos, and more.

Community Service and Engagement
Community service projects can be great ways for students to provide leadership both within their program and in the greater community. The strongest community service projects target substantive issues, include education about these issues, and give students the opportunity to directly see their impact. Students often benefit from meeting with local and state leaders to better understand the issues and challenges. Student leaders can help brainstorm, organize, recruit students for, and lead projects.

Peer Mentoring
Programs can organize opportunities for older students to mentor younger students. These opportunities might be one-day events, semester-long projects, or ongoing mentoring relationships. Here are some ways programs have set up peer mentoring initiatives.
- ❏ **Student coaches:** Older students come to practice on their off-days to coach younger players. Some programs offer this as a formal job for students, with an interview process, training, salary, and specific responsibilities and expectations. Others require it as an aspect of their year-round leadership program, and others simply encourage their students to come and volunteer.
- ❏ **One-day events:** Older and younger students might pair up on a given practice day for a specific event. Below are some examples.
  - ❏ Invite 9th and10th graders to talk to 8th graders about the transition to high school

- ❏ Separate practices by gender, and invite older boys and girls to come practice with the younger girls or boys for a day
- ❏ Lead a "Program Olympics" where you divide students up into mixed-age teams and have them compete in a variety of fun games, with the older students knowing in advance that their role is to help get the younger students psyched up and participating
- ❏ **Team-to-team:** Pair older and younger teams (and students within the teams) and organize events for them throughout the year. For example, pair your 12th graders with your youngest team. When students make the team, ask the 12th graders to decorate their lockers or write them welcome notes. When the 12th graders graduate, have the youngest students return the favor. Throughout the year, bring the groups together for pizza parties, bowling, or other fun activities.

High School Staff: Programs might consider hiring high school students to help coach younger students, either in the classroom or on court. If you choose to pursue this option, consider doing the following.

- ❏ **Job description**: Have a clear job description that outlines the responsibilities of the position (i.e. supervising locker rooms, setting up for practice, cleaning up after practice, being a role model, leading activities during practice, joining fitness, etc.), the time commitment, and requirements (program attendance, grades, etc.)
- ❏ **Application process:** Students should submit a resume and cover letter, and have an interview with the staff member who will be directly supervising them. The Program Director or Executive Director might also interview the student.
- ❏ **Training**: After hiring the student, review the job description, your expectations (arriving on time, dressing appropriately, no cell phone use, etc.), and what kind of feedback they should expect from you on their performance. At a minimum, students should be formally trained in (1) appropriate conduct with youth (no swearing, no flirting, no romantic relationships or appearance of them, etc.) and (2) coaching specific to their responsibilities. For example, students working on court might receive training in how to project their voices, how to feed effectively, and how to address students who appear unmotivated. Coaches might do a "Squash 101" training with students to review the squash principles they will be helping teach. Students working in the classroom might receive training in how to redirect distracted students and how help without doing the work for the students. The more time and thought you put into training students, the better they will perform.
- ❏ **Feedback**: Students should receive regular feedback from their supervisors. For the first several weeks, check-in with students after practice. Get their feedback on how

it went and ask them to share highlights and challenges from the day. Reflect with them on the challenges and how to best address them.
- ❏ **Performance reviews:** Half-way through their time and at the end of their time, give them a written performance review. You might consider asking them to fill out a self-review as part of this process.
- ❏ **Opportunities to lead:** In addition to supporting staff in leading sessions, high school staff can plan and lead their own sessions. Staff members should outline clear expectations for what the practice/activity plan should contain and review it with students in advance. Help them work through and anticipate any potential problems. After they lead the activity, reflect with them on how it went. Ask them for their thoughts first, and then share your thoughts with them.

Additional Resources
- ❏ [Taking the Lead: Youth Leadership in Theory and Practice](#) - A guide created by The Youth of Today consortium of youth organizations and funded by the Young Foundation and the Department for Children, Schools and Families and Communities and Local Government in the United Kingdom
- ❏ [Youth Development and Youth Leadership](#) - A paper by the The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth to assist youth service practitioners, administrators, and policy makers in defining, differentiating, and providing youth leadership programs
- ❏ [Fostering Youth Leadership](#) - A summary of ways that programs can offer youth leadership opportunities, by the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development
- ❏ [The Importance of Giving Students a Voice](#) - An Op-Ed by a teacher in the Express Tribune about the importance of giving students a voice and some ideas about how to do so effectively.

SEA Shared Drive Resources
- ❏ [SquashBusters Teen Ambassadors Program Application](#)

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