

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



## Helping students know their rights and responsibilities

Civic engagement starts with our nation’s young people. The afterschool field is an essential partner in ensuring that all children have the ability to participate in relevant, experiential civic engagement opportunities. Involvement in civic engagement has been linked to both short and long-term positive outcomes, including improvements in academics, behavior, and connection to the community and a lower likelihood of arrest. As 3 in 4 superintendents agree that preparing students for engaged citizenship is a challenge for their district, afterschool and summer learning programs are critical partners in strengthening student civic engagement and helping them become informed, involved, and conscientious individuals.

### Overview

Equity Alliance MN aspires to broaden opportunity and create the conditions that foster an equitable learning environment for students and staff in the East Metro area. For Equity Alliance MN, an integral part of extending high-quality education to all is providing programs and support services that promote systemic educational equity and integration. One such afterschool program offered by the organization is the Youth Executive Board (YEB), a multi-district group of high school students who meet to discuss social and political issues and learn how to use their voices to make positive change.

### A typical day for students

High school students meet for three and a half hours every Wednesday after school throughout the school year. Students reflect on and discuss topics such as implicit bias, privilege, and the history of the civil rights movement. Through teambuilding and experiential educational activities, students learn how to develop session content and facilitate lessons with the support of adult advisors. Students’ goals and interests influence the curriculum of the program, making each meeting culturally relevant and responsive.

### Outcomes

Equity Alliance MN administers pre- and post-test assessments to measure YEB students’ growth in areas including cultural competency, personal agency, and knowledge relating to influencing systems and structures. Internal evaluations have documented increases in participants’ cultural understanding, recognition and ability to adapt to difference, and commitment to system change.

## Equity Alliance MN Youth Executive Board

Woodbury, Minn.

48

Average number of students served during the school year

36%

Percentage of students qualifying for the Federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program in districts served by Equity Alliance MN

### Main funding sources:

- ▶ Achievement & Integration for Minnesota
- ▶ Minnesota Humanities Center Mini-Grant through Minnesota State Legacy Amendment Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund

## Program characteristics

Equity Alliance MN's YEB program engages youth in diverse and inclusive multicultural conversations about social justice issues. Through instructional scaffolding, adult advisors lay the foundation for socially conscious activism. Students—aware of their right to hold and express opinions—are empowered to co-create and facilitate lessons that critically analyze topical issues. This involves understanding the ways particular issues relate to their civil, political, and social rights; navigating existing systems of power; engaging stakeholders in initiatives for change; executing thoughtful decision-making; and becoming effective community organizers. They are able to build authentic relationships while gaining a sense of belonging and group solidarity that shapes their attitude toward social responsibility.

Students have led a variety of initiatives to increase racial and cultural competency in the curriculum and foster inclusive learning environments at their schools. They have advocated at the State Capitol for more teachers of color in the classroom, met with the school dean to propose changes to school disciplinary policy, published children's books featuring characters with diverse and underrepresented backgrounds, and presented at nationwide and statewide conferences, on topics such as "Absent Narratives of the Civil Rights Movement."

## Program history

Equity Alliance MN, formally known as the East Metro Integration District, has been providing culturally relevant professional learning and student programming for member district schools since 1995. Acknowledging the need for an innovative and engaging program to serve low-income students and students of color, Equity Alliance MN founded the Youth Executive Board in 2007, in collaboration with five youth who made up YEB's first class of participants. YEB has since grown to include high school students from all member school districts.

### Recommendations

*for helping students know their rights and responsibilities:*

- ▶ For any civic engagement initiative, it is vital to prioritize the voices of those being directly impacted by the issue, both to inform the narrative and be a part of the decision making process.
- ▶ Be thoughtful and strategic about building bridges between those being impacted and those in positions of power; this involves understanding multiple perspectives and the ability to align different passions and values to find common ground.
- ▶ Program staff need strong self-awareness of their own backgrounds, biases, and beliefs when creating and running programs, particularly if they identify with the dominant culture.



## Challenges

The U.S. faces a civic engagement predicament, particularly with the nation's young people.

***A disengaged public.*** Between 1980 and 2016, the percentage of voters aged 18-29 years old fell well below voting rates of older age cohorts and volunteerism among 16-to-24-year-olds remains consistently below the national average.

***Civics in schools is largely a second-tier subject.*** The No Child Left Behind Act ushered in a greater emphasis on reading and math, leaving less time for subjects like civics and social studies, despite poor student performance in these areas. A 2018 scan of civics education found that components of high-quality civics education, such as interactive and participatory opportunities for learning, were largely missing.

***Civic engagement as an equity issue.***

Disparities in voting turnout, volunteerism, and circumstances hindering civic participation across income levels and race and ethnicity have been observed. For instance, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) found that students in classes with a high average socioeconomic status level were more likely to report learning how laws are made, participating in service activities, and taking part in debates or panel discussions.

Read [Promoting Civic Engagement Through Afterschool Programs](#) to learn more.



**Afterschool Alliance**

[afterschoolalliance.org](http://afterschoolalliance.org)