

VOICES OF CHANGE: The Summit County Youth Coalition Story



Imagine the possibilities if students, not just adults, led the way for improvements in school climate, culture, outcomes and experiences. How might things change if we treat students as active partners in their education and not just passive recipients? The Summit County Youth Coalition (SCYC) is showing us what's possible when students have opportunities to lead.

RESEARCH BRIEF

Laying the groundwork for SCYC

SCYC's origins began in fall 2023 when SEI and Akron Public Schools (APS) co-facilitated a focus group with more than 80 APS students to learn and to listen about what mattered to them. Using the StriveTogether Community Engagement Framework, facilitators ensured that students weren't just heard, but that their voices informed decisions, shaped systems and drove change.

During this session, students shared that they:

- Crave more connection.
- Desire more meaningful opportunities to lead.
- Want to know their voices matter.

Narrowing scope through ImpactXperience

In November 2023, nearly 40 APS high school students participated in a second phase of work - ImpactXperience. This full-day leadership, skill building and peer networking workshop engaged students in public speaking sessions, leadership games, a problem-solving challenge and other sessions to define the mission and goals of the coalition.

More themes emerged from ImpactXperience, which now serve as SCYC's foundational initiatives:

- **Student well-being and engagement:** Prioritizing mental health, school safety and student pride
- **Educational empowerment:** Promoting academic excellence, career pathways and cultural awareness in teaching
- **Advocacy and communication:** Expanding student representation and transparency
- **Community and social impact:** Inclusivity, service and guidance for marginalized students
- **Systems awareness and understanding:** Emphasizing student-led programs and addressing systemic barriers

This early coalition work focused on students as co-designers and changemakers and laid the groundwork for what officially became SCYC, a student-led initiative rooted in authentic collaboration, youth empowerment and systems change.



City of Akron:

- Population: 188,692
- 15-to-19-year-olds: 12,915
- 79,000+ households
- Median household income: \$48,544
- 86.4% of households with broadband access

Akron Public Schools:

- Total students: 19,982
- 48 schools



Akron Public Schools



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SCYC expansion

SCYC expanded in fall 2024 to include more APS students. Participating high schools could nominate up to 10 students to apply, emphasizing diverse representation by race, grade level and lived experience. Recruitment was supported by school administrators with flyers and posters, in-school announcements and direct invitations to students who had previously expressed interest.

Nominated students completed a brief application focusing on their interests, leadership goals and commitment to educational equity. The facilitation team reviewed all submissions and selected students based on demonstrated interest, school diversity and alignment with SCYC's mission.

Why APS first?

APS was chosen because of its size, diverse group of students representing many of the challenges and opportunities young people face in Summit County and its strong, existing relationship with SEI. Working with APS gave the coalition a strong base to build on and clear examples of student leadership that could be replicated in other districts.

The role of students in the SCYC

The coalition includes students from several high schools who meet regularly to build community, dig into data and advocate for change. SCYC exemplifies the power of students to lead and generate bold, clear, and compassionate solutions to the challenges their schools face. Its vision, one of well-being, equity and uplifting youth voice, is a blueprint for change that isn't just a dream, it's a reality.

The student-led SCYC is grounded in the belief that young people should be active participants in shaping education systems. The role of the coalition is to:

- Amplify Student Voice
- Facilitate Student Voice Events
- Participate in Action Research
- Advocate for Policy Change

Our role in supporting students

Student-led efforts must be supported by adults. There are many ways to do it.

- Start by listening. Ask what matters.
- Create space, then share power. Invite students to shape the cadence and rhythm of meetings and priorities.
- Build genuine relationships. Encourage partnerships between students and adults that are built on a foundation of respect.
- Invest. Provide opportunities for students to practice leadership and expand their skills.
- Respect the youth's time. Show your appreciation through stipends, food and more.
- Act! Implement ideas and maintain transparent follow-up.

A collaborative ecosystem of support

SCYC's success isn't an accident. It is the result of a strong, cross-sector ecosystem working around a shared vision: amplifying student voice to shift power. This effort was supported by a backbone organization (SEI), APS, funders, partners in education, public policy, nonprofits and policy organizations like Groundwork Ohio, giving our students the right conditions to lead and allowing a shift from engagement to shared power and co-ownership.

And these efforts were supported through significant investments from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and GAR Foundation, which helped establish the coalition's structure and long-term vision.

SCYC is a replicable model for other schools, communities and backbones who are seeking to create an ecosystem for change with students at its core. And what began as a grassroots effort between SEI and APS, is ready to expand to other districts in Summit County.

-MADE POSSIBLE WITH SUPPORT FROM-



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