

VOICES OF CHANGE:

The Summit County Youth Coalition Story



Youth in Motion: The First 2 Years

From 2023-25, youth from across the city of Akron came together to share stories, identify systems that need to change and co-create a better future for their peers. And what started as The Summit County Youth Coalition has grown and is no longer a council, it is a movement. This part of the series traces the journey from initial student discussions to the formalization of the coalition and its plans for the future.

RESEARCH BRIEF

Year 1: Bringing together students from Akron

The coalition initially convened students from across the city of Akron. Some students had never been in rooms where their voices were welcomed, let alone prioritized.

The ImpactXperience became a pivotal moment for them and the other participants. These young people met, shared their stories and discovered shared struggles: barriers to mental health support, school cultures that didn't reflect their identities and a lack of preparation for life after graduation.

But they also uncovered something else: power. In these early sessions, students realized their perspectives could influence decisions. And adults (educators, administrators, nonprofit leaders and school board members) began to listen with new intent. For many students, this was the first time they were asked not just what they needed, but what they envisioned.

"The best part was being able to talk to all the other students. I wish we had more opportunity and time to connect with each other."

- an ImpactXperience participant.

Momentum built quickly. The first student-led sessions revealed common themes across buildings and soon after, coalition members were being asked to sit on panels, present to school boards and co-facilitate community conversations. The coalition had become more than an initiative and grew from there.

Year 2: A shift from ideas to movement

In the second year, youth began moving beyond simply identifying problems toward exploring potential solutions. Students engaged in discussions and planning around issues such as discipline reform, inclusive curriculum, and access to mental health care, building on partnerships with Akron Public Schools and other community organizations. These efforts laid the groundwork for proposals and initiatives that will continue to take shape in the coming months.

The growing diversity of voices is what made year two especially powerful. Students representing different buildings, cultures and lived experience joined the work. They started going beyond speaking and started shaping the process itself. Meetings evolved into collaborative design spaces where youth facilitated conversations and challenged systems to do better.

TIMELINE

- ▶ **Winter 2023:**
 - ImpactXperience launch
- ▶ **Spring 2024:**
 - SCYC launch – five (5) Akron Public Schools high schools with focus on behavior and discipline
 - Regular coalition meetings; policy and advocacy training; survey creation
 - Survey launch
- ▶ **Summer 2024**
 - Summer session with training and opportunity to call Congresswoman Emilia Sykes
- ▶ **Fall 2024**
 - Leadership development and advocacy training
 - Gained representation for all eight (8) Akron Public schools high schools
- ▶ **Spring 2025**
 - Supportive and encouraging experience - Meet and greet with Akron Board of Education
 - Finalization of SEE organization as building-based action teams for county-wide SCYC work
- ▶ **Summer 2025**
 - New school recruitment

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During a SCYC session, students led the way in shaping the identity and foundation of their organization. They drafted their official bylaws, designed a logo that reflected their mission and values and selected a name that represented their vision for youth-led change. The students took ownership of the process through brainstorming and discussion and laid the groundwork for a movement driven by student voice, leadership and purpose.

The coalition's progress is marked by milestones that represent much more than dates on a timeline. They tell a story of persistence, creativity and impact. From the first student gatherings in early 2023, to the fall 2023 launch of the coalition, to the expansion and formalization in 2024, the journey has been fast-moving but deeply rooted in intention. Youth voice has been the thread holding it all together at every step.

Voices from our students

"I plan on applying what I learned from today's session to advocate for myself and others for what is right and what I/we believe needs changing."

"The best part was the feeling that I got while being here. The inclusiveness and the creativity of not only the students but the faculty members. It is something that I would love to do again and even invite my mother so that she can see the activities that I am involved in and why it is important to me."

SCYC is supported by Derrick Hollifield, doctoral candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Derrick brings more than 10 years of experience in education leadership to his role, drawing on his background as a former principal in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Derrick helps SCYC foster inclusive, student-led environments where young people shape the policies and practices that affect their lives. He applies his expertise in cross-sector collaboration, youth empowerment and community-centered leadership to elevate student voice and drive systems change. His work with SCYC reflects a deep commitment to equity, collective impact and cultivating the next generation of changemakers.

Stay tuned for Part 3 of this series: Building What's Next

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