

3.7 Youth on Board

Boston, MA

BOSTON SCHOOL ADVISORY COUNCIL WORKING GROUP

“BSAC’s ultimate strength lies in its ability to balance young people’s civic engagement with their personal development.” —RACHEL GUNTHER



Since 1994, Youth on Board (YOB) has been a leader in the field of youth organizing in the Boston area and beyond. YOB was established as a program in the education department of YouthBuild USA to promote youth voice, train student leaders, and create programming that empowers young people to develop the knowledge, skills, empathy, and agency to succeed inside and outside of school. For many years, YOB trained adults and youth at participating organizations to improve how they involved young people in decision making and positive youth development practices. Though they still continue this work nationwide, the program evolved after a partnership emerged with the Boston Public Schools, and YOB was asked to revitalize the BSAC. BSAC is a project that brings together high school leaders from across the city to make youth-directed change. Their work with BSAC uses community organizing to give young people the tools to develop into civically engaged leaders, realize their self-worth and community value, and actualize their potential. The unique social change approach balances young people’s civic engagement with their personal development and builds meaningful relationships to create cohesive support systems among peers and adults.

The organizational arrangement between YOB and BSAC is beneficial to all three organizations. As a part of YouthBuild, YOB has the supports of a large organization, despite having only three full-time staff members of their own. The inside-outside partnership they have with Boston Public Schools means that BSAC is less impacted by the district’s budgetary decisions, since YOB fundraises for over half of the program’s staffing. BSAC is staffed by both YOB and Boston Public Schools; two employees of BSAC are funded by YOB, and another staff member is funded by and housed within Boston Public Schools. Jenny Sazama, Co-Founder and Director of YOB, explained:

We get to play an outside organizing role because we’re not funded by Boston Public Schools. But, since we’re also inside, I have to be careful. But I do get to push in some of the ways that an outside organizer gets to. We get access. We meet with the superintendent twice a year. We meet with the city council, the mayor, and the school committee regularly. And we meet with them annually just as a group. So when we ask the city council for an individual meeting they say yes because they know who we are.

Part of this privilege is because of the credible reputation YOB and BSAC teens have built over time. City officials expect that YOB and BSAC teens will be prepared, professional, and well rounded, and the YOB staff believe this is due to the extensive work on social and emotional skill building that the teens engage in.





ORGANIZATION

Total number of full-time staff	3 FT, 9 PT
Number of volunteers	n/a
Annual operating budget	\$ 374,000

FOCUS OFFERING

Total contact hours	134
Duration of the program period	Year-round

FOCUS OFFERING YOUTH (FROM YOUTH SURVEYS)

Number of youth	11
Age	14-18
Gender	78% M
Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% African American • 30% Asian/ Pac Is • 10% White • 10% Other
Percent currently attending school on a regular basis	100%

FOCUS OFFERING STAFF (FROM STAFF SURVEY)

Number of staff	5
Level of education	• 100% College degree
Years of experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8.8 in youth development • 6.5 in this program
Staff program content expertise self-rating (1=Novice, 2=Experienced, 3=Expert)	2.2
Staff SEL expertise self-rating (1=Novice, 2=Experienced, 3=Expert)	2.2

YOUTH AND STAFF CHARACTERISTICS

Youth

BSAC contains two groups of youth: a Steering Committee that is open to any youth attending a Boston public high school who wishes to participate, and a Working Group (a subset of the Steering Committee) that has an annual application process to select youth who will run campaigns, make decisions, and facilitate meetings of the Steering Committee. Rachel Gunther, associate director at YOB, explained how the ideal makeup of the BSAC differs from what actually emerges:

There are supposed to be two representatives from every high school in Boston that should come to BSAC. We have never had two people from every high school. It's just sort of impossible logistically and relationship-wise.

Rachel explained the challenge of maintaining relationships with administrators or teachers in every school amidst staff turnover and competing priorities that school leaders face. Still, YOB does outreach to schools from which they do not have youth representation. During the current program year, the school district agreed to help significantly improve the representation across the city.

So how do youth hear about BSAC and get involved? Rachel said:

Sometimes, a lot of the times, young people bring their friends from their school or from their friend's school and come to a meeting.

She talked about the type of young people who join BSAC:

BSAC members are not the straight-A students or the football players or the track stars or the most popular kids. That's not who is drawn in to BSAC. It's typically students who see or have had problems or issues, and they want to make the change.

There have been several youth who have joined the program as part of a last chance before dropping out or failing out of school, or who are struggling to graduate. Rachel commented:

We have never had anyone who has come to BSAC actually drop out that I'm aware of, but we know from surveys that many of them thought about it.

Many youth who attend a Steering Committee meeting as a freshman continue coming to BSAC until they graduate from high school. The youth who attend BSAC reflect the general population of Boston Public Schools, and according to Jenny Sazama, most "middle class families have left Boston Public Schools." The vast majority of BSAC students experience a variety of structural barriers, such as poverty, racism, homelessness, community and interpersonal violence—factors that often contribute to students being labeled high risk for dropping out of school and entering the criminal justice system. They are also much less likely to encounter social and emotional learning practices in their daily lives.

Youth who are interested in doing deep work can apply to participate on the Working Group, which involves a formal application process, an interview, and a commitment to attend a two-hour, bimonthly meeting to plan and drive the campaign work. The Working Group members are paid for their time in the meetings. Jenny shared:

The people who stay and become part of the core are really just young people who are excited about student voice, being a part of that.

Staff

With their unique organizational structure, YOB has a staffing model that spans three organizations. Director Jenny Sazama co-leads BSAC with the organizational support of YouthBuild. Her counterpart, Maria Ortiz, co-leads BSAC from the Boston Public Schools Office of Engagement. Rachel Gunther, YOB's Associate Director, sits primarily at YouthBuild USA. Caitlin Donnelly spends 60 percent of her time working directly with BSAC and 40 percent working with YOB's programming administration, development, and organizational support.

Key competencies for staff and volunteers include an in-depth knowledge of the issues students face both inside and outside of school, training and facilitation skills, and high levels of energy and empathy. It is important that staff demonstrate an appreciation for a collaborative work style and a comprehensive understanding of community organizing and advocacy processes as well as the ability to engage, motivate, and have fun with a dynamic group of young people. Jenny Sazama explained:

You have to understand that your role is to get behind student voice. It's not for you. You're in charge of the structure that allows youth voice to come out, but it's not your voice -you're not the prominent factor in the room. The prominent factor in the room has to be the voice of the young people, and it has to be listening to them formulate their opinions. Your job is to be able to be skillful enough to keep the conversation going and point things out without inhibiting youth voice.

In order to keep an active community of young people engaged in the work, YOB also hires recent alumni of the program to be organizers, specialists, and program associates. The value of hiring alumni is clear for Jenny:

They understand the youth voice. They understand what we're trying to do, and they can move in.

Hiring alumni contributes to campaign and program continuity, but it also has its challenges. There is "training and talking and thinking" involved in helping the alumni "switch from being the youth voice to the adult mentoring voice." Jenny meets with the alumni staff weekly in one-on-one supervision meetings.



One YOB success story is Teena-Marie Johnson, who started with BSAC when she was a sophomore in high school at a time when she was skipping classes, running from school police, receiving regular school suspensions, and on the verge of expulsion. In order to avoid expulsion, she reluctantly attended a BSAC meeting. Learning to trust and be able to communicate her own feelings improved her relationships with teachers, peers, and her mother, and she realized that knowing how to break down communication barriers was the key to success in all aspects of her life. In one year, Teena-Marie went from near expulsion to being on the honor roll for the rest of her high school career. She became a leader within BSAC and beyond, and is now employed full-time as the project coordinator for the program.

OFFERING CURRICULUM

Offering Content

Rachel Gunther said:

Before we used the term SEL, we always talked about BSAC having two core components: support and action. The action pieces are the parts that people see in the world, ways to prepare them to be youth organizers. Then there are the behind-the-scenes pieces that provide them a place to learn and grow and support one another through both their own development and their organizing work. The end result is that they leave BSAC with a better understanding of their own emotions and relationships with one another, as well as their own efficacy as a citizen in this world and society. They have these two elements of skills that are connected to one another: both the social/emotional piece as well as feeling that they can be agents of change.

There are three types of meeting opportunities: Steering Committee, Working Group, and Bi-weekly Support Group:

The Steering Committee is the largest group of youth, open to students from all of the district's high schools. Bimonthly meetings are mostly focused on direct campaign work, such as hearing about issues, concerns, possible actions, etc. Students use these meetings to brainstorm ideas and sometimes hear talks from guest speakers.

The Working Group consists of 10 youth who must apply and be selected to participate. The group meets for at least three hours per week. During these meetings, members learn about citywide policies under consideration, work on developing the campaigns, and strategize about how to advocate for their positions. The leadership team takes into consideration the ideas from the Steering Committee meetings and strategizes about what they should focus on. The Working Group engages in ongoing leadership development trainings on public speaking, relationship building, community organizing, and communication skills. BSAC works to provide training and cultivation of five main social and emotional skill sets:

- The art of listening,
- Working effectively with adult allies,
- Developing caring relationships,
- Discussing how "adultism" and other oppressions affect youth's lives, and
- Respecting others while speaking personally.

The Biweekly Support Group is a time for the youth on the Working Group to share and listen to each other's struggles, successes, and personal and YOB-related lives throughout the school year. YOB seeks to develop emotional literacy in its participants during the support groups by providing time to reflect on their lives, where they are, how they feel about the campaign they're working on, why it's important to them, and how it connects back to their experiences at school. Both youth and staff have the opportunity to facilitate portions of the Biweekly Support Group as they discuss issues faced at home, school, or in their personal lives.

Jenny shared the impact of the groups:

We have found that this peer support group provides an opportunity for students to learn peer counseling techniques, work through interpersonal issues, and cope with the institutional barriers they face in and out of school.



Here, one youth shared what it's like to participate in the support group:

We meet once a month with our junior supervisor Jenny, and it's literally the safest space ever. We have snacks with her at her house and just talk about anything that's going on. It's really nice to just say, "These are all the mishaps and terrible, terrible stuff that's going on." It's nice because it keeps you stable being able to let it out and continue on. Even if no one else is listening, you have a group of your peers that's listening.

Offering Sequence

The sequence of meetings above continues throughout the year and extends over the multiple years that BSAC participants are typically in the program. Campaigns often extend beyond the tenure of the youth participants, and the work on certain campaigns ebbs and flows over time as the interests and priorities of the youth demand. Young leaders in BSAC define issues that are most relevant to them, educate their peers about the issues, and develop collective solutions through school-based, local, state, and national campaigns. The campaign is focused on change rooted in the students' backgrounds and interests. For example, some students may choose to work on promoting constructive feedback from students to teachers, providing adequate transportation, or making more support available for English language learners in the public school system. Here is a video about one the campaign to enable students to evaluate their teachers as part of teachers' formal evaluation: www.youtube.com/watch?v=5T1EENg8bXk

YOB's Offering Sequence



The sequence of events each year depends on the demands and opportunities associated with each campaign. However, each year consists of the following recurring elements:

Fall Retreat: In order to reflect and re-evaluate their work, each year the newly hired Working Group and staff come together to strategize for the coming year. Campaigns were selected and agreed upon in the spring when the Working Group was hired. The Fall Retreat also provides critical time for skills and team building, setting expectations and norms, and, of equal importance, having fun and laughing as a group.

Training: Students participate in trainings based on their needs, such as the art of persuasive argument, building positive relationships, the art of appreciations, listening skills, public speaking, communicating with politicians and the media, and campaign development. All trainings and group activities are structured so that there are opportunities for large and small-group discussions where a trained facilitator (either YOB staff or a BSAC alumni or current member) will use supportive strategies to elicit the voices of everyone in the room. These trainings happen throughout the year as needed. Jenny shared some of the details of what the trainings do:

One of the things we really push is getting youth at the adult tables. We do a lot of work about how to handle adults. How do you push for what you want and not hold back? How do you hold your own in a conversation and participate in an adult meeting in a way that's acceptable? How do you decide to move out of that space and to the next level? What's not going to happen at those negotiating tables?

Public Events: Students may attend events such as school board meetings, other meetings with public officials, rallies, events to educate and mobilize their school peers, and other campaign-related events. For these, youth do a significant amount of planning and preparation to get their message and delivery just right.

Listening Projects: BSAC also prides itself in ensuring that they ask other young people for information about their experiences and ideas, such as conducting surveys, focus groups, circles, and interviewing. These events take time and planning, and require youth training on the interview process and data analysis. Often, BSAC attends events of other collaborating organizations. These events build positive intra-organizational relationships and build youth power throughout the city.

Winter Celebration: Staff always make time to celebrate the young people's achievements—whether that be an incremental policy victory, a successful meeting, or a newly developed idea—to encourage them to reflect on and recognize their contributions and successes at every step along the way. Throughout, the program staff make sure they are having fun and laughing. This can be tough work, but ensuring there are light moments and celebrations keeps everyone energized and moving forward.

Peer Support Retreats: These day-long workshops may focus on particular themes related to campaigns or encourage youth to consider broader topics, such as youth power or climate change. There are a variety of opportunities throughout the year in which Working Group members can participate.

National Peer Learning Exchanges: Members of the BSAC Working Group often travel nationally to learn and share about other models of youth engagement in urban public school districts. In the last year, they have visited cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New Orleans to learn and share experiences around student evaluation of teachers and restorative justice practices.



ONE CAMPAIGN STORY

Several years ago, there was a group of students who started a campaign that would enable students to evaluate their teachers as part of teachers' formal evaluation. When the students first began this campaign, they were very excited. They built their argument and supporting evidence and brought it to the superintendent. At that meeting, they were rather quickly told that this "wasn't going to work right now" and were advised to go back and start again. This moment could have been devastating for the group. But instead, it made the students think about how they could still win this campaign through a different route than originally expected. This experience is a perfect example of how BSAC trains students to adapt to a shifting educational landscape and change course without losing sight of the end goal. Students went back and decided that as a first step, they would bolster teacher, administrator and union support and make the proposal something that would not be a formal part of the teachers' evaluation but instead a mechanism for providing informal constructive feedback. The piece of the project became an important stepping-stone. By re-routing their original ideas and by being patient and creative, students got teachers, administrators and the union to buy-in to the project. BSAC's efforts ultimately led to the Boston School Committee to formally adopt their policy on constructive feedback, and led to widespread media coverage. Students then went to the Massachusetts Board of Education in 2010 to introduce a policy mandating student-teacher feedback in all public schools in the state. The fact that the campaign took a different route than originally envisioned in the end made the win even more impactful and meaningful to the students of BSAC. Additionally, it provided a good example of the importance of perseverance and grit. Students knew that their ideas were valid, and creatively and patiently moved forward until they reached their goal. The roles for advisors and adult allies was to support their vision and help them see that their efforts continue past their time in the BPS. In fact, their efforts could help influence the greater good of all students. BSAC provides adolescents an opportunity to think beyond their own experiences and see how their civic actions affect other people—whether in their own school, their district, their state or across the nation.

TEENA-MARIE'S STORY

Teena-Marie, 24 currently works with Youth on Board full-time through a fellowship program. She started with BSAC when she was a sophomore in high school at a time when she was feeling unheard and disengaged from her education and school. As a result of feeling disconnected and discouraged, she began skipping classes, running from school police, getting suspended, and ended up on the verge of expulsion. Teena felt hopeless and exhausted. At that point, a special teacher suggested that she go to a BSAC meeting as a way to gain some connection to her school and community. Teena reluctantly agreed to go to the first meeting as a way to avoid expulsion—but very soon her life began to change through her connections and relationships she made in BSAC.

The young people she met at BSAC inspired her and made her realize that she needed to be the change in herself and her education. BSAC made her see that school could be better and that she had the power within herself to change her life and her surroundings. She learned how "adultism," racism and other oppressions made her feel ineffectual and powerless. Once she began to trust her own ideas and was able to speak about them freely with others, a power and energy was unleashed within her. Learning to trust and be able to communicate her own feelings improved her relationships with teachers, peers, and her mother, and she realized that knowing how to break down communication barriers was key to success in all aspects of her life. In one year, Teena went from near expulsion to being on the honor roll for the rest of her high school career and became a leader within BSAC and beyond. Teena credits the incredible adult and peer support system, the bi-monthly support meetings, opportunities to travel and meet new people, and the leadership training as keys to her success.

When it came time for high school graduation, BSAC staff helped Teena navigate the complicated world of college applications and financial aid. Being the first in her family to attend college meant she needed emotional and logistical support through this process. Teena attended college and continued to work with BSAC and Youth on Board throughout her schooling and recently graduated in December of 2013. Teena's graduation from college felt like a community and family achievement. Through the travel, speaking, and leadership opportunities available to Teena through YOB/BSAC, the world opened up to her—she learned about other cultures, cities, how to connect with high level policy makers while maintaining positive interpersonal relationships. Teena moved from being a BSAC member to a mentoring role as a BSAC alum and now is a full-time fellow. BSAC hopes Teena continues to work with the program for years to come as her insight and story is a prime example of the love, support, teaching and learning that goes on in program every day.