
Mitigating Barriers to Civic Engagement for Low-Income, Minority Youth Ages 13-18: Best Practices from Environmental Youth Conferences

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Abstract: Several studies indicate that there is a civic engagement gap for low-income, minority youth even though they reside in communities grappling with deteriorating social, environmental and economic conditions. Using the annual Environmental Youth Conference (EYC) in Los Angeles as a case study, this article offers best practices for identifying: 1) factors that foster civic engagement among low-income, minority youth ages 13-18, and 2) strategies to mobilize the targeted youth populations on environmental issues. Los Angeles is a useful case study because it is a large and demographically diverse city facing extreme environmental challenges due to its significant agricultural and industrial sectors.

Introduction

On September 30, 2006, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa launched the Million Trees LA Initiative (MTLA) to plant one million trees and foster environmental stewardship in the city. To help achieve those goals, MTLA created educational programs that engaged the community, environmental organizations, and corporate sponsors. One of the primary educational programs implemented from 2007-2009 was the Environmental Youth Conference (EYC) in Los Angeles. Youth became an important constituency to engage on stewardship, particularly in communities facing environmental problems, because they are the ones who will likely suffer the long-term consequences of environmental pollution and degradation.

Unfortunately, several studies indicate that there is a "civic achievement gap between poor, minority and immigrant youth (and) middle-class, white and native born youth" (Levinson, 2007). The lack or under-engagement of marginalized youth is troubling because they often reside in communities with deteriorating environmental, social and economic conditions. In California, many low-income, minority youth and their families live or work in proximity to

agricultural or industrial work sites with high concentrations of pollution exposure and contamination. Understanding the reasons why and how the affected youth are disengaged from civic life, particularly on environmental issues, is vital to promoting healthy, sustainable communities and a vibrant civil society.

Using the EYC in Los Angeles as a case study, this article offers policy recommendations for identifying factors that foster environmental awareness among youth from impacted communities, and strategies for mobilizing affected youth on environmental issues. The EYC is a useful case study because Los Angeles is a large, diverse city facing extreme environmental challenges due to its significant agricultural and industrial sectors. The major conclusion of this study is that effective policies and programs can be designed and implemented to overcome barriers that prevent or discourage low-income, minority youth from promoting environmental health and sustainability in their communities.

Fostering environmental stewardship among youth is important because “how young people think about their neighborhoods, schools and communities is critical to supporting their capacity to help build, shape and challenge the institutions in those settings” (Kirshner, et al., 2003). The engagement of marginalized youth populations on environmental issues is particularly vital for two reasons. First, low-income, minority youth constitute significant and increasing percentages of the national and California populations. Moreover, 37% of Latino children in the United States are living in poverty which is more than any other racial/ethnic group (U.S. Census 2010). In California, 51% of residents under the age of 18 are Latino and the city of Los Angeles has the largest percentage of Latinos at 48.5% (U.S. Census, 2010).

Second, this project addresses a public and social justice need to identify practices and programs that effectively mobilize communities that are often underserved by public policy but disproportionately impacted by environmental problems. Ever since the low-income, minority residents of Kettleman City, California mobilized against a waste incinerator in 1991, there has been mounting public pressure from “a more environmentally aware and concerned minority population” to ameliorate risk and exposure to pollution and other environmental problems (Whitaker, et al., 2005). Numerous studies indicate that marginalized populations such as the target population in this study - minority youth from low-income areas - are especially vulnerable to environmental problems (Bullard, et al., 2008). The EYC offers insights into how programs can: 1) identify communities with high environmental needs; 2) target youth in affected communities; and 3) overcome or mitigate barriers to youth civic engagement and environmentalism.

Methodology and Data

The data for this case study analysis consists of: 1) EYC surveys of youth between the ages of 13 and 18; 2) demographic data from the 2000 U.S. Census; and 3) a tree canopy analysis of Los Angeles conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service. The surveys were collected from youth attending the annual EYC in Los Angeles from 2007 to 2009. Each year, youth participants at the conference were asked to offer feedback on event programming and share their attitudes about environmental issues and activism. The surveys provide insight into the types of activities and information that are appealing to youth, and help to identify the institutional settings, policies and programs that foster youth environmental activism.

The target population was identified using the census and canopy data. Census data tracks high-density concentrations of minorities in low-income communities in Los Angeles. Using

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology, the canopy study identified areas in Los Angeles that have high environmental need because they lack trees and/or green space. Combining the two data sets provides an understanding of the geographic areas where low-income, minority youth populations may be particularly affected by environmental issues.

Engaging Disadvantaged Youth: The Environmental Youth Conference as a Case Study

The 2007 conference was attended by 3,000 youth, followed by 5,000 in 2008, and 7,000 in 2009. The Environmental Youth Conference included panels led by youth environmentalists and offered volunteer opportunities with community-based environmental groups through an exhibit fair. The logistical planning, outreach and program development for the EYC focused on three components:

- 1) identifying communities with environmental needs;
- 2) targeting affected youth populations; and
- 3) overcoming or mitigating barriers to civic engagement.

Identifying Communities in Los Angeles with High Environmental Need

The city of Los Angeles consists of fifteen (15) council districts, and is often identified by seven (7) geographic areas (Downtown/Central City, Northeast LA, Harbor Area, San Fernando/East Valley, Crescent/West Valley, South LA, and West LA). Outreach efforts for the EYC focused on youth residing in areas of Los Angeles facing environmental problems. Impacted communities were identified using a tree canopy assessment conducted by the Forest Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2008), and measured Los Angeles' existing tree canopy cover, the feasibility of planting one million trees, and the potential benefits of tree plantings.

The Forest Service found that there is an inequitable distribution of tree canopy coverage (TCC) among the 15 council districts in Los Angeles. Council districts representing Downtown/Central City, San Fernando Valley, Harbor, Northeast and South Los Angeles had much lower TCC levels than the overall city average (see Table 1). Communities in West Los Angeles and the Crescent Valley had TCC levels as high as 53% compared to the city average of 20.8% (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2008). The study also estimated that tree plantings in low TCC areas would yield significant environmental benefits in air quality, increased property values, and reductions of carbon dioxide, storm water runoff and energy use.

Table 1

Los Angeles Council districts with low rates of tree canopy coverage (TCC)

<i>Council District</i>	<i>Geographic areas represented in District</i>	<i>Tree Canopy Coverage Percentage</i>
Council District 1	Downtown/Central City, Northeast East	15.9
Council District 6	San Fernando Valley	15.0
Council District 7	San Fernando Valley	16.3
Council District 8	South Los Angeles	10.7
Council District 9	South Los Angeles, Downtown/Central City	7.5
Council District 10	Downtown/Central City, South Los Angeles	11.9
Council District 13	San Fernando Valley	13.7
Council District 15	Harbor Area	8.9
City of Los Angeles	Citywide	20.8

Source: US Forest Service Final Report 2007. Note: The City of Los Angeles is described by the following geographic areas: San Fernando Valley, Crescent Valley, Westside, Downtown/Central City, Northeast, Beach/Airport, South and Harbor.

The results of the canopy analysis were cross-tabulated with census data on poverty rates, median home values, and racial/ethnic composition for Los Angeles communities in low TCC areas (see Table 2). Communities with some of the lowest rates of tree canopy coverage had higher poverty rates and lower median home values compared to the rest of the city. Combining the canopy analysis and census data revealed that areas in Los Angeles that had the greatest environmental need were: Downtown (Pico Union, Chinatown, Central City), Northeast San Fernando Valley (Arleta), East Los Angeles (Lincoln Heights) and South Los Angeles (Crenshaw, Koreatown, Watts, Wilshire Center). Not surprisingly, the communities with low-income indicators and low TCC rates also had significant population concentrations of Latinos and/or African Americans. Combining the analyses of the tree canopy study and census data revealed a need emerged to target communities with low TCC percentages, low-income residents, and significant Latino and/or African American populations.

Table 2

Income indicators and racial/ethnic composition of selected LA Communities in low TCC areas

Community	Median Home Value*	Poverty rate	Latino population	African American population	Geographic area
Arleta	\$153,617	19.02%	77.53%	1.52%	Valley
Boyle Heights	\$144,665	32.59%	92.46%	1.16%	Northeast
Chinatown	\$140,000	61.19%	25.67%	3.45%	Downtown
El Sereno	\$154,667	21.55%	83.73%	1.64%	Northeast
Highland Park	\$159,523	19.52%	71.69%	2.13%	Northeast
Hyde Park	\$152, 525	22.50%	35.23%	60.77%	South
Jefferson	\$150,500	27.42%	60.23%	32.40%	South
Koreatown	\$100,764	35.89%	62.90%	3.90%	Downtown
Lincoln Heights	\$151,450	34.09%	68.71%	2.06%	Northeast
Mission Hills	\$142,420	8.51%	71.52%	3.19%	Valley
Montecito Heights	\$159,850	24.67%	71.52%	3.07%	Northeast
Pacoima	\$140,908	21.41%	90.85%	4.60%	Valley
Panorama City	\$142,067	25.70%	73.87%	3.15%	Valley
Pico Union	\$152,542	44.24%	82.30%	1.17%	Downtown
South LA	\$152,716	35.75%	59.66%	37.46%	South
Southeast LA	\$144,858	38.82%	80.56%	18.13%	South
Watts	\$106,325	47.66%	69.85%	28.61%	South
West Adams	\$158,700	21.71%	63.58%	30.76%	South
Westlake	\$130,658	35.30%	70.95%	4.73%	Downtown
Wilmington	\$160,900	27.05%	90.11%	2.69%	Harbor
Wilshire Center	\$171,720	30.78%	51.25%	4.44%	Downtown

Source: LA Almanac and 2000 US Census.

Note: Median home value in City of LA is \$221,600.

Engaging the Targeted Youth Populations

EYC planners focused their outreach efforts on youth from areas with low tree canopy, low-income residents and concentrated populations of racial/ethnic minorities. The conference organizers worked with local schools and community-based organizations in the target areas to identify youth leaders and participants for the EYC. In 2007, organizers were effective in their outreach efforts to youth in the San Fernando Valley, Northeast LA and Downtown communities. A majority of the youth attending the conference came from areas with high concentrations of Latinos, low-income residents, and low tree canopy coverage. The percentage of youth from South Los Angeles was relatively low in relation to the environmental needs of those communities (see Table 1).

In 2008, MTLA focused significant energy and time to recruit youth in South L.A. and increase their participation and attendance at the second EYC. Additional outreach staff members were assigned to work with local schools and youth or environmental organizations in South L.A. several months before the conference. Its efforts were successful and resulted in a significant increase in the number of South L.A. youth attending the conference, from 11.3% in 2007 to

28% in 2008. One-third of the EYC participants still came from the other areas with high environmental need – San Fernando Valley, Northeast LA and Downtown (see Table 3).

Table 3
Geographic representation of youth participants/attendees at the EYC

Year	Northeast	SF Valley	Downtown	South LA	West LA	Other
2007	12.8%	43.5%	17.8%	11.3%	12.6%	2.0%
2008	13%	14%	6%	28%	25%	15.0%
2009	9%	50%	13%	7%	15%	14%

Source: EYC surveys, 2007-2009.

In 2009, half of the survey respondents were from the San Fernando Valley but youth from the other target communities were lower than in the two previous years. However, the 2009 surveys may not have been a representative sample of the participants at the conference. Nearly 500 surveys were collected at the 2007 conference, and nearly 300 at the 2008 conference. However, only 108 surveys were collected at the 2009 conference due to staffing shortages and logistical problems at the events. Nevertheless, the surveys collected over three years indicate that EYC outreach efforts to youth in the target communities were relatively successful. The youth attendees from the target communities (low-income, minority populations in low TCC areas) constituted at least 70 percent of the survey respondents at each of the three conferences in 2007, 2008 and 2009 (see Table 3).

Cross-tabulating the canopy analysis and census data allowed EYC planners to identify areas with high environmental needs (low tree canopy coverage) and marginalized youth populations (low-income Latinos and African Americans). Furthermore, the two data sets reaffirmed the claim made by environmental justice scholars and advocacy groups that low-income, minority communities are disproportionately impacted by environmental problems compared to wealthier neighborhoods. Furthermore, the correlation between demographic trends (low-income minorities) and environmental need emerged as an important factor to consider in the design, delivery and evaluation of educational programming for the EYC.

Mitigating Barriers to Civic Engagement and Environmentalism

Identifying communities with need was only part of the goal. EYC organizers wanted educational programming at the conference that directly addressed common civic engagement barriers encountered by low-income, minority youth:

- 1) lack of opportunities for civic action,
- 2) lack of relevant information, and
- 3) lack of resources.

One of the challenges faced by marginalized youth is the lack of opportunities for meaningful civic engagement opportunities. At the conference, youth were able to visit an exhibit fair where they could learn about and volunteer for environmental organizations such as TreePeople, Pacoima Beautiful and Los Angeles Conservation Corps. The goal was to offer youth ways that they could pursue and sustain their environmental awareness and activism after the conference. An overwhelming majority of youth indicated on their surveys that they planned to volunteer or get involved with one of the environmental organizations after the EYC (see Table 4).

Table 4

EYC attendees who expressed an intend to volunteer or get involved with an environmental organization

Conference Year	Percentage of youth responses
2007	54%
2008	71%
2009	52%

Source: EYC surveys, 2007-2009.

The educational program for the EYC was also designed to offer relevant information to the target youth populations about the environment and community involvement. The presenters at the conference were youth leaders from the target areas who organized and participated in community-based environmental projects through their schools and/or local organizations. Several of the projects were aimed at community development as well as environmental quality such as recycling programs, the use of alternative energy buses, tree plantings, and community gardens. The hope was that youth attendees would receive specific information on how to get involved and promote environmentalism in their own communities rather than just discussing abstract principles like conservation, preservation and global warming. Survey responses from each year indicated that the EYC programming was effective in providing youth with concrete actions that can be taken to promote environmental health and well-being in their own communities (see Table 5).

Table 5

EYC attendees who expressed that the conference provided specific information and concrete actions to improve the environment in their communities

Conference Year	Percentage of youth responses
2007	91%
2008	98%
2009	89%

Source: EYC surveys, 2007-2009.

Many of the EYC attendees reside in low-income communities that lack resources and logistical support for environmental activism. Transportation, flexibility and time are three often cited civic engagement barriers for low-income and minority individuals (McBride, et al., 2004, 12). Therefore, the EYC events were held on Saturdays from 9am to 1pm so that school and work schedules were less likely to be interrupted, and EYC organizers provided bus transportation for schools and community-based organizations in the target communities. Incorporating basic logistical support into the EYC planning process significantly contributed to the high rates of youth turnout from low-income, low TCC communities with concentrated populations of racial/ethnic minorities.

Concerns about resources also informed the educational content of the EYC programming. Each year, the EYC developed a "green menu" of environmental actions that youth can incorporate into their daily lives without a significant commitment of time or money. Examples of green menu action items included taking shorter showers or baths, buying reusable water bottles, and using alternative energy like compact fluorescent lights. Youth were also told how each green menu item contributes to environmental health and well-being. Each youth was

asked to incorporate one green menu item into his/her daily routine for 30 days. Furthermore, the EYC inspired youth to be environmental stewards in their own communities by encouraging a friend or family member to commit to one green menu action item for 30 days (see Table 6).

Table 6

EYC attendees who would encourage a friend or family member to be environmentally conscious and/or commit to a green menu action item

Conference Year	Percentage of youth responses
2007	82%
2008	90%
2009	84%

Source: EYC surveys, 2007-2009.

Best Practices and Strategies from the Environmental Youth Conference

An analysis of the EYC offers three useful insights into programs that are designed to foster civic engagement and environmentalism among low-income, minority youth. First, it is important to accurately identify the target populations that are under-served and under-represented in public policy based on empirical data and an ideological commitment to social justice. The canopy analysis by the Forest Service allowed EYC organizers to determine which geographic areas in Los Angeles required environmental attention because they lack trees and green spaces, and the benefits that accompany them. Using the census data, EYC planners determined that communities with high environmental need also had significant youth populations that are often marginalized due to their economic, immigration, and racial/ethnic minority status.

Second, programming and services offered to target communities must be directly relevant to the lives of the affected populations. In this case, the content of the EYC program had to address some of the civic engagement barriers that low-income, minority youth encounter including the lack of resources, opportunities for community involvement, and relevant information. Providing logistical assistance like transportation ensured that youth could attend the conferences each year. Holding the events on Saturday also allowed families to attend the conferences and reduced the likelihood that work and school schedules would be an obstacle. The green menu action items and volunteer opportunities at the exhibit fair gave youth participants specific ideas or ways to channel environmentalism into their daily lives with little or no commitment of money.

Third, peer modeling is a powerful tool for promoting youth activism and leadership. An overwhelming number of youth responded in the surveys that hearing the youth presenters inspired them to take action in their own communities and encourage others to be environmentally conscious. Having youth presenters from the target communities was particularly powerful because hearing about environmental projects in communities like their own enhanced the sense of political efficacy among the youth attending the conferences. Although EYC planners were not able to systematically track the youth participants and their activism after the conferences, the events did meet the objective of inspiring youth to be environmental stewards in their communities through peer role models and opportunities to interact with community organizations that focus on youth and/or environmental issues.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

Effective policy for mobilizing marginalized youth on environmental issues must include opportunities for the development and practice of civic skills. Three strategies can help to achieve this policy. First, schools and other educational institutions can and should be used more effectively by youth and environmental advocates as partners in the development of civic skills for low-income, minority youth. Schools create a setting which can “nurture the kinds of beliefs and commitments that ultimately sustain democracy... (because) young people are more likely to develop a vested interest if they feel affective ties to people and institutions in their communities” (Flanagan, et al., 2007). Environmental and youth groups should institutionalize partnerships with schools to create curricula that foster civic literacy and practice. For instance, EYC planners developed a service learning curriculum that teachers and students attending the conferences could use to fulfill the community service requirement for high school graduation in California. Teachers from science and government courses were particularly receptive to incorporating the EYC service learning curriculum into their lessons plans.

Second, local organizations may be the most effective venue for civic action or practice among low-income, minority youth because they focus on the social problems facing stakeholders in specific communities. Activism among marginalized youth is more effective if the issues being addressed are relevant to their daily lives and are seen as redressing an injustice in their communities such as failing schools, crime, graffiti, and racial profiling (Flanagan & Levine, 2008). Framing environmental problems as community development or social justice issues rather than abstract principles is more relevant and inspiring to low-income, minority youth.

And last, policy makers must develop ways to identify populations that are disproportionately impacted by social problems because they require specialized attention and resources in public policy, programs and services. Promoting environmentalism among youth is important because a significant portion of immigrants and minorities live in communities that are grappling with multiple socioeconomic and environmental problems (Bullard & Johnson, 2000). Due to budget constraints and a change in mayoral leadership in Los Angeles, the EYC is no longer in existence but engaging these youth populations is not only a matter of social justice but one of public need. Neglecting disproportionately impacted populations is bad for public policy and a democratic society, especially when mobilizing the affected youth populations can cultivate the next generation of environmental stewards.

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