

YMCA of the USA

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YOUTH AND GOVERNMENT PROGRAM

» **TOOLKIT
2025**

For a better us.®

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The background image shows three young people, two women and one man, standing at a podium in a formal setting, possibly a government building. They are wearing red lanyards and appear to be participating in a conference or event. A large, stylized purple graphic with a white curved line is overlaid on the right side of the image. The word "INTRODUCTION" is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the bottom of the image, partially overlapping the purple graphic.

INTRODUCTION

YMCA YOUTH AND GOVERNMENT PROGRAM

Welcome to the Youth and Government (YAG) Toolkit! Whether you're starting fresh or expanding an existing program, this guide is designed to help you build a strong foundation. Start small, stay flexible, and focus on what works best for your community.

This resource is designed to help you start or strengthen a Youth and Government program at your YMCA or in partnership with local schools. Whether you're new to civic engagement or looking to expand, this guide will help you take the first steps towards building a quality Youth and Government Program.

The YMCA's [**Youth and Government@ program**](#) is one of the nation's oldest and largest youth civics education programs. Each year, 55,000 middle and high school students are provided the skills, training, and relationships needed to become life-long engaged citizens and community members. Whether you're new to civic engagement or looking to expand, since the 1930s, it has taught democratic principles and inspired lifelong civic participation.

HISTORY OF THE PROGRAM

Founded in New York in 1936 by YMCA Boys Work Secretary Clement "Pete" Duran, the Youth and Government program has a rich history of ensuring that "democracy must be learned by each generation." The program, active in 35 states and the District of Columbia, offers students across the country opportunities through model government, civic engagement, advocacy, leadership and character development, and service-learning to amplify youth voice and strengthen youth civic health. Please also review the Youth and Government [**Historic Program Moments**](#).

CREATING LEADERS

The Youth and Government program offers students a deeper understanding of civic education, leadership development, and the democratic process. It creates opportunities for youth to take on real-world roles -- from legislators to justices to media professionals -- building confidence, public speaking, and critical thinking skills. Through hands-on experiences and mentorship, students emerge as informed, empathetic leaders prepared to make a positive impact in their communities.

YOUTH VOICE IN COMMUNITIES

Youth and Government empowers young people from all backgrounds to raise their voices and advocate for the issues that matter most to their communities. It's more than a program—it's a platform for civic discovery, leadership development, and effective dialogue. By placing youth leadership at the center and intentionally creating pathways for all youth to participate, Youth and Government ensures that all perspectives are not only heard but valued.

Through hands-on experiences in debate, legislation, and media, students gain the tools to speak up with confidence, listen with empathy, and engage across differences. They learn how government works—not just in theory, but in practice—by drafting bills, debating policy, and reporting on civic affairs. These experiences cultivate critical thinking, collaboration, and a deep sense of responsibility to their communities.

The program actively includes students from cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, with a strong commitment to accessibility and inclusivity for all. Materials and activities are designed to reflect the lived experiences of all participants, fostering a sense of belonging and respect. Ultimately, Youth and Government helps shape a generation of informed, engaged, and compassionate leaders—young people who are not only prepared to participate in democracy, but to transform it for the better.

THE YMCA’S UNIQUE ROLE

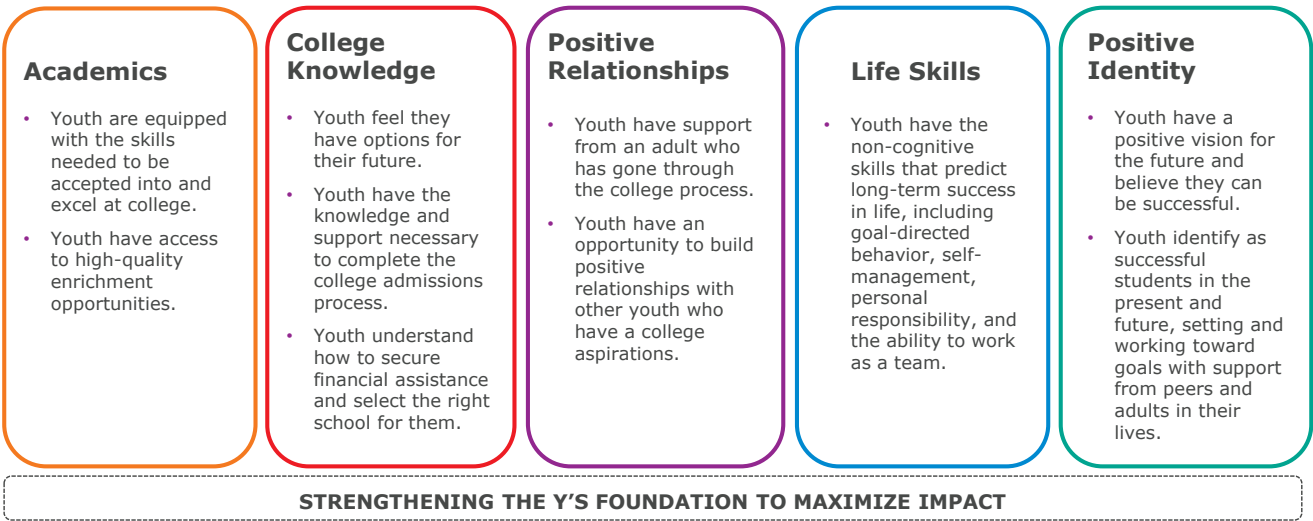
The YMCA is especially well-positioned to facilitate Youth and Government programs:

- Our mission prioritizes youth leadership and civic involvement.
- We are committed to engage young people with QR codes that link to templates, resources, and examples. These are designed to help you take action and connect with others.
- We have the infrastructure and advocacy reach to align with legislative efforts at all levels.
- Our governance model supports authentic youth voice and participation.
- We serve as catalysts for long-term community transformation.

YMCA assistance and involvement in every major facet of Youth and Government programs allows for the incorporation of YMCA core values:

Caring	Honesty	Respect	Responsibility
Demonstrate a sincere concern for others, for their needs and well-being.	Tell the truth, to demonstrate reliability and trustworthiness, through actions in keeping with my stated positions and beliefs.	Treat others as I would want them to treat me; to value the worth of every person, including myself.	Do what is right—what I ought to do; to be accountable for my choices of behavior and actions and my promises.

Our Youth and Government programs also align with the goals of the **Five Pillars of Teen Programs.**



Throughout the toolkit, you’ll find pop-out bubbles and QR codes that link to templates, resources, and examples. These are designed to help you take action and connect with others.

WHY NOW?

The 2021 Harvard Youth Poll—one of the most comprehensive surveys of young Americans—reveals that, even in the face of challenges, young people are paying close attention and are ready to shape the future. Their passion and persistence offer hope that real, lasting change is not only possible—it's already underway.

Political Polarization – Rates of polarization in the U.S. are both higher than that of other prominent democracies and have risen faster over time. In a 2022 poll, 70% of Americans agree with the statement that, “America has become so polarized that it can no longer solve the major issues facing the country”—a 45% increase from 2010.

Institutional Distrust – Only 19% trust the federal government to do the right thing most or all the time. Confidence in U.S. institutions, such as the presidency, Supreme Court, and Congress, is not only down but at record lows across all institutions. Most young Americans (51%) believe the country is off on the wrong track, while nearly a third (31%) are unsure -- underscoring a generation defined by political pessimism and uncertainty (2025).

Civic Illiteracy – A 2018 national survey from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation conducted found only one in three Americans would pass a citizenship test. In its 2022 survey, the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that less than half of U.S. adults (47 percent) could name all three branches of government.

Community – Fewer than half feel a sense of community, with only 17% reporting deep social connection (2025).

Americans' participation in civic life is essential. It is especially necessary to involve our young people. Turnout among young voters also increased over the last two elections, with participation in the 2022 elections being the second highest for a midterm in the past 30 years.

BENEFITS OF STARTING A CLUB

Adult Club Advisors

Adult advisors (also known as sponsors) make a lasting impact by giving back to their communities through mentorship, leadership, and service. Their role goes far beyond logistics—they help shape the next generation of civic leaders:

- Advisors create a supportive environment that fosters curiosity, confidence, and civic awareness. They build lasting relationships, often serving as mentors and role models beyond the program. Advisors guide students in choosing their area of participation—legislative, judicial, media, or other sections—helping them discover their passions and strengths.
- They also ensure access and help students navigate payment and application deadlines, support fundraising efforts, and advocate for resources so all students can participate. Their commitment helps students from all backgrounds feel welcomed and empowered.
- Advisors invest in their own growth too, attending required trainings to stay informed and prepared. At State and National Conferences, they serve as volunteers, advisors, and chaperones—ensuring students are safe, supported, and engaged. They help select students for program allocations and uphold YMCA policies, modeling integrity and accountability.

In every aspect of their role, advisors give back by nurturing civic engagement, leadership, and community service. Their dedication helps create a ripple effect—empowering young people to become thoughtful, civically engaged citizens who strengthen their communities.

Student Participants

Students benefit from participating in Youth and Government in many ways:

- Gain understanding of formal and informal government structures
- Participate actively in the legislative, judicial, lobbyist and/or press process
- Become aware of societal issues and their resolutions
- Develop confidence in and dedication to the democratic process
- Learn participative leadership skills
- Enhance communication skills
- Listen to and learn to respect varying viewpoints
- Learn accountability and respect for others' rights
- Work alongside and learn from older, experienced students
- Apply moral and ethical valuing processes to public policy making
- Gain exposure to potential career opportunities
- Gain hands-on experience with parliamentary procedure, bill research, bill writing, judicial brief writing, public speaking training, position paper writing and debate training



HOW YOUTH AND GOVERNMENT WORKS

STRUCTURE

Youth and Government is a **locally rooted, student-led** civic engagement program where middle and high school students actively participate in model, state, and national governments. Your state office is a key resource. They may offer training, conferences, and guidance. If your state has a Youth and Government program that supports Youth and Government Conferences, reach out early. State offices typically oversee conferences and provide training. Local Ys recruit students, run meetings, and prepare delegates. Not all states have a steering committee—check with your state alliance for guidance..

Each state program is uniquely modeled after its own government, making every Youth and Government experience distinct. State organizers lead these programs, ensuring they reflect both the local context and the various needs of their communities. This federated structure allows for flexibility, innovation, and expansion -- empowering local teams to create programming that meets their communities where they are.

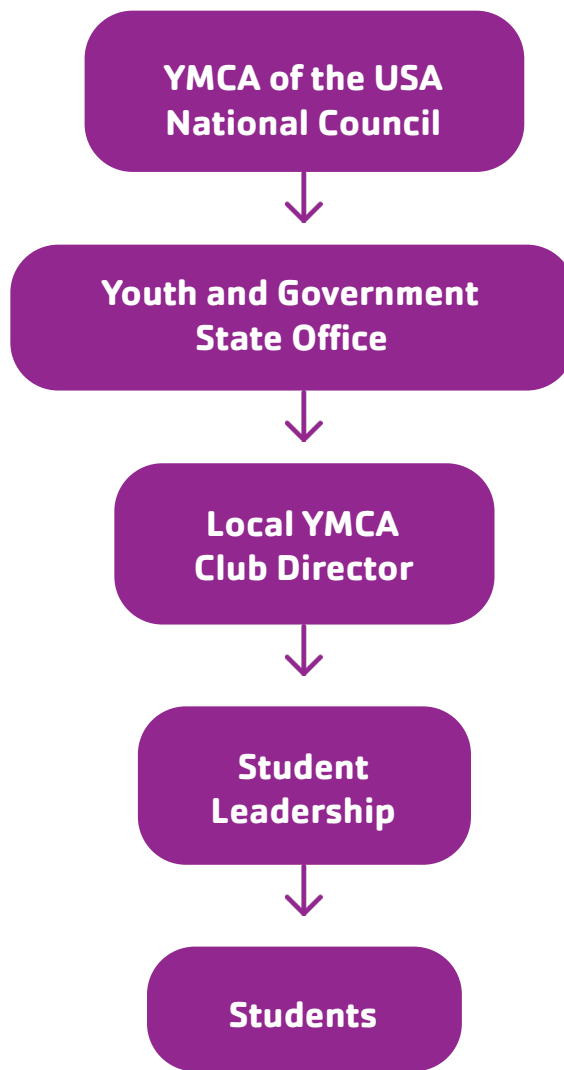
Throughout the year, students gain hands-on experience in civic processes through club meetings, structured debates, legislative writing, speech workshops, public speaking, and voter engagement. They also connect with local officials and participate in advocacy and community service projects. These experiences build critical thinking, leadership, and communication skills, preparing youth to be active, informed citizens.

The program culminates in a multi-day, youth-led model State Conference held at or near the state capitol. **There, students take on real-world roles across the legislative, judicial, media, and executive sections (see pages 12–14), for example:**

- **State Senator or Representative:** Debating and voting on peer-authored bills
- **Bill Sponsor:** Researching, writing, and presenting original legislation
- **Attorney in Mock Trial or Appellate Court:** Arguing cases before student judges
- **Cabinet Member or Agency Head:** Leading policy work in executive roles
- **Youth Governors** and their cabinets also play a role

Youth and Government fosters service learning, civic responsibility, and personal growth. It transforms how teens engage with their communities, boosting confidence, expanding awareness of public issues, and encouraging meaningful participation in democracy. By intentionally engaging students from all backgrounds, the program reflects the varied perspectives within each state and ensures that every voice is heard.

Together, Youth and Government participants form a powerful network of young change makers prepared to lead in their communities and beyond.



YMCA of the USA National Council

- Each YMCA is affiliated with a national council.
- The national council provides support to local programs.
- They hold national events like the Youth Conference on National Affairs (CONA).
- They also host the YMCA Change Makers Summit, the YMCA Youth Advocate Program, the Youth Governors Conference in Washington, D.C., and the National Judicial Competition (NJC)

Local YMCA

- Each YMCA is a local affiliate.
- They run the Youth and Government programs locally.
- They are guided by staff, volunteers, or teachers.
- Other participants may include attorneys, legislators, and other community members.

SECTIONS

Program Areas offer many entry points for students. Whether they're interested in law, media, or leadership, there's a place for everyone. Start with 1–2 areas that align with your students' interests.

For your club, select at least one section for your students to participate in; these are also referred to as “areas of participation” in some states. Base your decision on student interest, group size, or your own familiarity with a section. For the first year, it's best to focus on just one or two sections to keep things manageable. Students can explore the section descriptions below to find the best fit.

Depending on your State's Program, students can run for office such as: Governor/Lt. Governor (and related Lobbying and Cabinet roles), Secretary of State, Attorney General, Chief Justice, Speaker of the House, and others.

LEGISLATIVE



The Legislative section involves participants researching issues for legislation, writing and presenting bills, learning Parliamentary Procedure, debating, and participating in a legislative body. Participants prepare legislation (bills, or sometimes joint resolutions) in their clubs for consideration, debate, and action at the conferences. At the State Conference, all bills are heard first in a committee, and some bills then advance to be heard again by a larger audience in the House and/or Senate chambers. Bills that pass both chambers are sent to the Youth Governor for their consideration.

The goal for Legislative participants is to acquire valuable experience in writing, researching, and debating model legislation in a process that closely mirrors the process of the state legislature. This experience increases awareness of how the state government works and pertinent current events. **This section is a good choice if your students would like to work individually and enjoy writing, researching, and debating.**



SECTIONS cont.

JUDICIAL



TRIAL COURT

Trial Court teams include five to eight students: two to three serve as attorneys, the rest as witnesses and bailiffs. Students may also participate individually as judges. Each year, teams tackle high-profile cases -- from double murders to civil disputes -- arguing both prosecution and defense. They write opening and closing statements, witness examination questions, briefs, and court arguments. Judges oversee the courtroom and decide which team makes the stronger case. *This section is perfect for students who enjoy drama, teamwork, and persuasive speaking.*



MEDIA

The Media section offers students real-world journalism experience as they cover the Youth and Government program through newspapers, social media, and broadcasts. Entirely student-run, the Media team handles everything from story development and interviewing to production and distribution. Participants gain valuable skills in writing, reporting, design, and editing, while learning how media and government intersect. Students apply to participate in print, broadcast, photojournalism, or social media, working with other students to report on conference events. *This section is ideal for students who are curious about journalism and thrive in a fast-paced, creative environment.*



SECTIONS cont.

EXECUTIVE



The Governor's Cabinet works directly with its elected Youth Governor on advocacy and special interest topics. The Youth Governor sets a legislative agenda, and then works with the Cabinet to lobby in the legislative chambers for their agenda, which is comprised of specific bills or issues they would like to see debated and acted upon.

The Governor's Cabinet plays a critical role in ensuring the effective execution of the Youth Governor's legislative priorities. Cabinet members advise and support the governor's agenda, participate in committees, calendar committee appointments, and engage delegates.



LOBBYIST

If your State Program offers a Lobbyist Section, this section would be a great choice for students who enjoy leadership, strategic thinking, and political advocacy, or who are interested in public administration and policy influence behind the scenes.



Lobbyists play a vital role in the legislative process during the State Conference by advocating for or opposing bills and representing their own or other delegates' interests. Lobbyists engage with legislators to influence their views on bills, either supporting or opposing them, advocate for their own agenda when the Governor has no position on a bill, Participating in Legislative Debates, and engage delegates out of chambers if the delegates consent.

SCHOOLS & YMCA BRANCHES

PATHWAYS FOR NEW CLUBS

Adults who volunteer as club advisors play a vital role in shaping Youth and Government programs—and they have the flexibility to run their clubs in ways that best fit their community's needs.

For teachers and school staff, Youth and Government can be integrated directly into classroom instruction or aligned with existing extracurricular programs such as Student Government, Debate Team, or World Affairs Council. This approach allows educators to enrich their curriculum with hands-on civic learning while engaging students in real-world leadership experiences.

For other adults in the community, including YMCA staff, nonprofit leaders, and volunteers, clubs can be hosted through local academic agencies or established as stand-alone programs within YMCA branches. These models are especially valuable for reaching students who may not have access through their schools.

In all cases, building strong relationships with schools and teen-serving organizations is key to growing and sustaining successful clubs. Advisors are encouraged to:

- Connect with school administrators and teachers to explore partnership opportunities and align program goals with educational priorities.
- Collaborate with existing teen programs to identify shared objectives and create joint activities that enhance youth engagement.
- Attend school and community events to raise awareness about Youth and Government and recruit interested students.
- Offer informational sessions or workshops to introduce the program to educators, parents, and youth leaders.
- Maintain open communication with school staff and community partners to ensure ongoing support and coordination.

SCHOOLS & YMCA BRANCHES cont.

PARTNERING WITH SCHOOLS

Youth and Government programs can be run in different ways. Some YMCAs run them independently, while others partner with school districts. If you're starting a club at a school, begin by meeting with the principal or another administrator to get approval.

Make sure school leaders know:

- The dates of state conferences
- Which days students and staff may miss school
- That flexibility is important

Be familiar with the school's rules for off-campus activities, including:

- How to add events to the school calendar
- Getting parent permission
- Arranging transportation

Middle school programs

Middle school students usually participate in Junior Youth and Government, a one-day event that introduces them to the program. This helps prepare them for full participation in high school.

Note: Middle school programs do not include the Judicial section (see pages 12–14 for details).

High School Programs

High school Youth and Government programs typically include grades 9–12 and run throughout the school year. These programs may include all sections listed on pages 12–14, such as Legislative, Judicial, Media, and Executive.

STARTING A NEW DELEGATION

Each state's Youth and Government program has its own structure and requirements. To start a new delegation, YMCA branches should first connect with their State Program Director or YMCA State Alliance for guidance. Typically, branches recruit students, secure advisors, attend advisor trainings, and register through the state office. Some states may require a minimum number of delegates or participation in local district meetings. Always follow your state's application, payment, and deadline processes.

TYPES OF CONFERENCES

A general description of conferences at the state, and national levels can be found below. Further detail on the specific types of conferences, and the actions required to prepare for them, can be found on pages 34–35.

PRE CONFERENCE EVENT

Many states organize events prior to the State Conferences, which help students to gain experience and prepare for State and National Conferences several months later. They are typically one-day qualifying regional competitions.

STATE CONFERENCES

Each year, months of hard work and countless hours culminate with the Youth and Government State Conference (also referred to as [State Assemblies](#), or [Youth Assemblies](#)). These Conferences are usually held at the state capitol (or at a large conference center/hotel, or facilities like convention centers, government buildings, theaters, educational institutions, churches, and camps). The conferences allow students to lead and serve in the various Sections and roles. Each is designed to model its respective state government, so clubs/students will choose a Section to participate in, as listed on pages 13–15. Students complete trainings and assignments (researching and writing a bill, preparing an oral argument, identifying policy priorities, etc.) ahead of attending their conference. By coordinating the efforts of volunteers, staff, and students, organizers aim to make each year's better than the last, fostering a unique and healthy program for all.



Conference may take place in the fall or spring so be sure to check with the state program office when planning your YG program. Some states make a pre-conference handbook available. Your state program will provide you with information for planning your travel and logistics. Not all students will want to be a part of the State Conference, but all students will learn about how important it is to be involved in their community by speaking up and offering solutions.

Every conference has different Sections and roles (branches of state government for a [State Conference](#), organs of the UN for a [United Nations Assembly](#), and cabinet positions for the Executive and Governor officials), so learn about the options available in your state. Youth Cabinet meetings may be primarily virtual, with the option for an in-person presentation at the end of the year.

TYPES OF CONFERENCES cont.

NATIONAL CONFERENCES



[National Conferences](#) offer Youth and Government participants the opportunity to represent their state on a larger stage, engaging with peers from across the country in high-level discussions, competitions, and leadership development. These experiences are designed to deepen students' understanding of national governance, sharpen critical skills like communication and collaboration, and empower youth to think beyond their local context while connecting with others who share a commitment to civic engagement and service.

Annually, there are National Conference opportunities that student may be able to attend depending on eligibility and application process which should be verified with their state programs. Some states may offer a state youth advocate program.

At National Conferences, high school students present national and international policy proposals, engaging in intensive debate and networking. National Conferences are held to:

- Gain an awareness of national concerns and issues.
- Increase understanding of Federal Government and its relation to state, national, and international matters
- Have and use a means for communicating concerns about National Affairs to appropriate persons and groups at Federal Government levels.
- Develop an increased understanding of needs, responsibilities, and opportunities.
- Work creatively together with young adults and adults.
- Help youth and adults to better understand and strengthen their values for living through the YMCA character values.



GETTING STARTED

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Starting a Youth and Government club begins with a few key ingredients: a committed advisor, interested students, and a space to meet. You don't need to have everything figured out—just a willingness to learn and grow with your group.

TAKE THE FIRST STEPS

Taking on this responsibility doesn't mean doing it all on your own! Build your team to support the needs of the teens in your community. Roles vary by state and program size. Focus on what's essential for your site. Some positions may not apply to your program—use what fits and scale as needed.

Check for Existing Programs: Contact your local YMCA or check the state directory to see if a Youth and Government program already exists. If it does, connect with the program lead to explore how you can help—like recruiting students, fundraising, or volunteering.

Register a New Program: If there's no local program, visit your state's Youth and Government website and reach out to the state lead. They'll guide you through starting a club and registering it. Every club, advisor, and student must register each year—usually online

Find a Club Sponsor/Advisor: Each club needs an adult volunteer—often a teacher or parent—who supports students and helps run the club. Sponsors receive onboarding and serve as the main contact with the state office. Their responsibilities include:

- Communicating with the state office
- Supporting club meetings and conference prep
- Helping with registration and paperwork
- Volunteering at conference
- Sharing info with students and families
- Helping select student delegates
- Enforcing YMCA policies (like curfews and dress code)

Engage Other Volunteers: Invite parents, school staff, alumni, and community members to help. Share clear ways they can support—like mentoring, fundraising, or chaperoning—and make it easy for them to get involved with flexible roles and time commitments.

UNDERSTAND THE COMMITMENT

Students: Students must be willing to commit to regular attendance at club meetings, maintaining the academic and behavioral standards required by their schools for extracurricular participation, and preserving a cooperative relationship with students and advisors. Review your state's code of conduct so that rules and responsibilities are clear to all students.

Advisors/Sponsors: During the fall and early spring, advisors typically lead or support weekly or biweekly club meetings, help guide students through program deadlines, and coordinate logistics for State and National Conferences.

RECRUITING STUDENTS

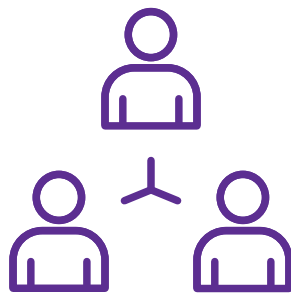
Once a new Youth and Government club is established, you'll need to recruit students to join it. Students must register with the state level program. An annual program fee typically applies; the fee amount varies by state. The program ensures accessible recruitment practices by providing equal access and communicating available accommodations for students with disabilities.

To build your club and student awareness:

- Partner with schools, educators, and local YMCA branch staff to raise awareness and enlist student participation.
- Engage with community groups and civic organizations to extend your reach and build local support. Use marketing campaigns to reach new audiences, especially in communities where in-person outreach is limited.
- Develop scholarship and financial aid opportunities to reduce economic barriers to participation.
- Familiarize yourself with State, and National Conferences so you can clearly share information and set expectations for new students.

Then leverage these recruitment strategies:

- Present information in your own classes and coordinate presentations in social studies classrooms.
- Display flyers wherever clubs and extracurriculars are promoted.
- Host an interest meeting -- offering food can boost attendance and create a welcoming environment.
- Recruit a few strong student leaders early and encourage them to invite their peers.
- Prioritize committed participants over large numbers. Ensure students understand the time, cost, and paperwork requirements.
- Consult with social studies teachers for student recommendations and follow up individually.
- Aim for a broad age range to build sustainability; a club made up entirely of seniors will need to restart the following year.



Youth and Government alumni and experienced advisors can be valuable assets in the recruitment process. Alumni can speak authentically about their experience in the program and help generate excitement among prospective students. They may also return to help lead interest meetings or share testimonials through social media and school visits. Advisors can connect with fellow educators, recommend students who would thrive in the program, and help promote Youth and Government through school networks. Involving both groups can build credibility and momentum as you grow your club.

FUNDRAISING & MARKETING

Marketing should be broad and adaptable. Whether you have a full team or just a flyer, focus on storytelling and student voices. Highlight impact and invite others to join.

FUNDRAISING FOR CONFERENCES

Since fees are due in advance of conferences, fundraising should begin quickly once a club is formed. Fundraising ideas include:

- Sell food after school
- Host a student event that requires ticket purchase (dance/video game competition/movie night/5K, etc.)
- Organize a car wash
- Sell concessions at athletic events
- Partner with a restaurant to receive a portion of proceeds
- Ask local businesses to sponsor your club
- Offer a parents' night out, with students providing babysitting
- Leverage existing state materials; for example, see the Texas State Youth and Government [Pitch Kit](#)

Student participation in fundraisers is crucial; don't fall into the pattern of planning and executing fundraisers on your own. Ensure that students actively participate in choosing, planning, and carrying out each fundraiser. This should/could be student led. Set a goal based on the dollar amount per student that your delegation is hoping to cover through fundraising. For example, if you want to offset costs by \$50 per student and there are 10 students in your club, set a fundraising goal of \$500. Post a graphic in your classroom to track fundraising (e.g. empty bottle that you color in as you approach your goal). Be sure to follow your school's policies regarding fundraising, if applicable.

Students pay a registration fee for each conference attended. Fees can be paid out of pocket, from fundraising proceeds, and/or from financial assistance based on income. Advisors are also responsible for fees to cover hotel and meal costs. Advisor fees can be paid out of pocket, from fundraising proceeds, or from your school.

EXAMPLE: SPONSOR A DAY FUNDRAISER

This allows sponsors to cover the costs of each day of a conference. How to get started?

1. Print a calendar or maintain it online. Share it with neighbors, co-workers, friends, and family.
2. Spread the word to your community that you are doing a sponsor a day fundraiser. Use social media, emails, text, etc.
3. Explain what Youth and Government is and what sponsor a day is. Tell your Y story and why Youth and Government is important to you.
4. Have people choose a calendar day to sponsor. They will donate the amount of money equal to the corresponding number (e.g., September 15th equals donating \$15).
5. Keep going until every day is sponsored (a person could sponsor more than one day if they'd like).
6. Collect the money and write the sponsor's name on the calendar day sponsored. Once every day is filled, gather all the money and turn it in to your Youth and Government club.
7. See the Texas State Youth and Government [Sponsor a Day Fundraiser Guide](#) as an example.

FUNDRAISING & MARKETING cont.

MARKETING YOUR PROGRAM

Newsletters

Use monthly or quarterly newsletters to inform and engage families, schools, and community supporters. What to include:

- Student spotlights (“Meet Our Youth Governor”)
- Event recaps with photos
- Key dates and volunteer/fundraising needs

Example: Subject: “Local Teens Lead Debate on Real Issues!”

Content: Recap of a recent conference, student quote, and registration reminder.

Blogs

Blogs allow for deeper storytelling and can live on your program’s website or local YMCA page. They’re ideal for showcasing the student experience, explaining program impact, and boosting SEO for local outreach. Blog entries are typically posted on a website, either the official website of the Youth and Government program, the local YMCA branch, or a dedicated program microsite or blog platform. What to feature:

- Student reflections (“My First Year in Appellate Court”)
- Program overviews
- Civic engagement benefits

Example: Title: “Why Youth and Government Matters”

A parent- or student-written post with a call to sign up or donate.

Social Media

Social media is key to reaching students and spreading the word. Best uses:

- Behind-the-scenes content
- Student shoutouts and testimonials
- Deadlines, events, and reminders

Examples:

Instagram Reels: “A day in the life of a student delegate”

Facebook: Event invites and recap albums

X/Twitter: Quick updates with hashtags (#YouthAndGovernment, #NextGenLeaders)

RESOURCES & SUPPORT

Costs and fees to participants will vary by program. Participation fees may be covered by teens and their families, Ys, schools, and sometimes volunteer advisors.

Helpful Skills & Tools for Advisors and Staff

To run a strong program, it helps to build skills in areas like:

- Communication: Learn active listening and clear communication (e.g., Listen First Institute).
- Tracking & Evaluation: Use tools like Hello Insight to measure program impact.
- Trauma-Informed Practices: Support students with empathy and awareness of past experiences.
- Restorative Practices: Build community and resolve conflict in healthy ways.
- Lesson Planning: Create engaging, age-appropriate learning experiences.
- Career Guidance: Help students explore future paths.
- Child & Youth Development: Understand how young people grow and learn.

State Alliances bring YMCAs across a state together to make Youth and Government stronger. They help programs stay consistent, share resources, train advisors, and organize big statewide events like

State Assembly. Alliances also connect YMCAs, build partnerships with leaders, and give students more opportunities to learn and collaborate.



MEETINGS, CONFERENCES & MORE

TEAM BUILDING & CLUB MANAGEMENT

Activities

Team-building activities play a vital role in creating a supportive environment where students feel connected, respected, and empowered. These activities help establish trust, break down social barriers, and develop communication, empathy, and problem-solving skills -- essential for civic engagement and leadership.

Club team building may include the following types of activities:

- **Icebreakers** and introductions to help students feel seen and valued
- **Group challenges** that require collaboration, critical thinking, and shared decision-making
- **Reflection and discussion** to draw connections between the activities and real-world leadership, communication, or democratic processes
- **Character-based exercises** that reinforce the YMCA core values
- **Examples** of specific activities can be found in the Texas Youth and Government [Delegation Handbook](#).

Ensure that you have the materials, time, and space to implement the activity you choose. Most importantly, make sure that every team building activity leaves the group feeling more connected, more positive, and more willing to work together to achieve the club's goals. Pay particular attention to students who seems quiet, shy, or disconnected from the group. They will need the most encouragement to participate in team activities.

Bylaws & Roles

Establishing bylaws and clearly defined student leadership roles helps create structure, consistency, and shared responsibility within a Youth and Government club. Roles vary by state and program size. Use what fits your site and scale as needed. Some roles may not apply to your program—focus on what's essential. The above [Delegation Handbook](#) also contains examples of bylaws and role descriptions.

Bylaws define how the club operates -- covering meeting schedules, officer elections, participation expectations, and decision-making. Clear guidelines help create fairness, consistency, and prevent future conflict. As the program progresses, monitor group dynamics and address any issues early. If redirection is needed, do so privately to maintain respect and avoid escalation.

Student leadership roles -- such as president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer -- give youth the chance to practice real leadership. Officers help organize meetings, track attendance, share announcements, and support fundraising or outreach. Each club can determine the number and type of student officer positions. Hold officer elections early in the program cycle and establish roles and expectations with student officers.

ORGANIZING MEETINGS

PURPOSE OF CLUB MEETINGS

Club meetings are the foundation of a successful Youth and Government experience. These sessions help students build community, gain section-specific skills, and prepare for conferences. Clubs typically meet every other week during the fall, led by an adult advisor and, increasingly, by student officers as the year progresses.

Getting Started

- After your interest meeting, choose a consistent meeting day, time, and location.
- Use tools like Doodle to find the best time for students with other extracurricular commitments.
- Decide on which Youth and Government sections (e.g., Legislative, Media, Judicial) your club will participate in.

First Meeting Checklist

- Introduce the program and confirm section choices.
- Share registration info and brainstorm fundraising ideas.
- Hold team-building activities to build rapport.
- Explain student officer roles and prepare for elections.

Meeting Structure (Sample)

4:30–4:40: Attendance + team-building

4:40–4:45: Announcements (deadlines, fundraising, events) and officer reports

4:45–5:30: Section-specific training and prep

Student Leadership

Hold officer elections early in the program cycle. Typical roles include:

- **President** – Leads meetings, ensures deadlines are met, contacts advisor
- **Vice President** – Assists President and fills in when needed
- **Secretary** – Tracks attendance, sends reminders, supports registration
- **Treasurer** – Leads fundraising efforts and tracks progress

Multi-Section Clubs

If your club includes students from different Youth and Government sections:

- Begin meetings together, then split into smaller groups by section.
- Appoint a student leader for each section to guide peers through the curriculum.
- Meet with student leaders beforehand to prepare them to lead effectively.

TRAINING STUDENTS

The mission of YMCA Youth and Government is to help young people become responsible citizens and future leaders. Club advisors play a key role in achieving this mission by fostering each student's personal growth and leadership development. Training is adapted with accessible formats, assistive technology, and guidance to ensure students with disabilities can fully participate.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

While Youth and Government naturally builds "hard skills" like reading comprehension, research, and writing, it also provides a powerful platform to develop essential "soft skills" -- non-technical qualities such as communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving.

Encourage students to reflect on the leadership skills they're gaining. Common examples include:

- Public speaking
- Argument formation and debate
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Time management
- Active listening
- Conflict resolution

Consider focusing on one skill per meeting. For example, observe how students collaborate this week, and offer praise or gentle guidance as needed. Next week, focus on time management or communication. Observe individual students during club meetings and provide feedback on what skills they should continue to practice.

- Speaking pace and volume: do students need to speak more loudly, slowly, or naturally?
- Body language: do students hold themselves in a way that conveys confidence?
- Team work: is each student contributing to the team positively and cooperatively?
- Time management: are students focusing on the task at hand? Building soft skills doesn't require extra time -- just consistent awareness. Encouraging leadership through mentorship and intentional feedback helps students thrive in the program and far beyond.

PEER MENTORSHIP

A mix of grade levels within your club offers a valuable opportunity for peer mentorship. Pairing younger students with more experienced peers fosters support, shared learning, and leadership development on both sides.

Tips for peer mentorship:

- Pair students by grade level when possible; if not, pair by experience or interest.
- Schedule regular, informal check-ins -- like a two-minute peer check-in at the start of each meeting.
- Even in your club's first year, establishing this structure sets the foundation for future growth and continuity.

TRAINING STUDENTS cont.

GOVERNMENT EDUCATION

It is important that Adult Sponsors and YMCA leads help students understand how the legislative, executive, and judicial branches function at the state level.

Government Structure

How to teach it if you're new to the topic:

- Use trusted video explainers: Short clips from sources like [iCivics](#), [Crash Course](#), or the official state legislature's website are engaging and accurate.
- Start with your state's structure: Print a simple chart showing how your state's government is organized—House vs. Senate, governor's powers, courts, etc.
- Assign roles for students to research: Have each student briefly report on one branch or official (e.g., What does the Lieutenant Governor do?).
- Play a game: Match each branch with its powers or responsibilities as a group activity.

Legislative Development

How to teach it if you're new to the topic:

- Use your state's Youth and Government curriculum: Start with the bill-writing lesson plan included in your state's advisor toolkit -- this breaks it into simple steps.
- Look at real-life examples: Pull simple bills from your state legislature's website. Read through them together and talk about the structure (title, purpose, action, etc.).
- Break it down like an essay: A bill has a title, background/problem, and a proposed solution. Use that structure to help students get started.
- Run short mock sessions: Practice introducing a bill and asking clarifying questions. Keep it informal and low-pressure.

You don't need to lecture -- just guide. Let students explore, assign peer leaders where possible, and ask clarifying questions. You're there to facilitate, not to be the expert.

PREPARING FOR CONFERENCES

As noted on pages 17 to 18, Youth and Government activities throughout the year culminate in several types of conferences at the state and national levels. Although registration, fundraising, and announcements are important tasks that must be accomplished through club meetings, the heart of Youth and Government participation is preparation for these conferences. How your students prepare will look very different depending on their section, which is why **it's helpful to start a club with students participating in only one section.**

In advance of and in preparation for any conference:

Sponsors should:

- Help students choose roles and register on time
- Lead regular meetings using the provided curriculum
- Help students prepare materials, speeches and resolutions.
- Support training, fundraising, and logistics/travel

Students should:

- Attend meetings. Learn their role and prepare materials (bills, cases, media stories), or research assign country and politic issues
- Practice public speaking and teamwork
- Stay on top of deadlines and bring items needed

Please see additional considerations and action items for each conference type below:

PREPARING FOR CONFERENCES cont.

STATE CONFERENCES

State Conference: Model Legislature & Court

The Model Legislature and Court program gives high school students hands-on experience with state government by simulating the legislative and judicial branches. Led by youth officers such as the Youth Governor, Secretary of State, and Chief Justice -- with guidance from adult volunteers -- students build critical thinking, public speaking, writing, and research skills while learning how government works.

Students usually meet weekly in local clubs to prepare for in-person program events, typically held in November and February. There, they debate legislation, argue court cases, and put their training into practice.

The program runs from fall to spring, with meetings focused on civic engagement, current events, and role-specific preparation. Content is developed by advisors, youth officers, and council members.

PREPARING FOR CONFERENCES cont.

NATIONAL CONFERENCES

Conference on National Affairs (CONA)

The YMCA Youth Conference on National Affairs (CONA), takes place annually at the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly, Black Mountain, NC. CONA gives high school students from across the state the opportunity to convene and discuss issues facing society with peers throughout the country. In preparation, students write original proposals focusing on national and international concerns and refine their oratory and debate skills during a fun-filled pre-conference trip. During the conference, students engage in intensive discussion and debate while taking in a wide array of perspectives. The conference offers an opportunity for students to critically think about the nation, network with peers from different parts of the country, and have fun in the spirit of lively debate.

- ✓ **Develop full proposals on national issues, participate in a day-long draft session -- be prepared with supporting data and public speaking notes.**

National Judicial Competition (NJC)

The YMCA National Judicial Competition (NJC) is an annual competition for high school student participants in the model judicial components of the YMCA Youth and Government program.

Participating Youth and Government state programs select students from their state to compete in either the **Appellate** or **Mock Trial** competitions. Detail on the current year's location, dates, registration, case materials, and procedures can be found here: <https://www.ymcayag.org/njc/>. If you have questions, please contact the Conference Director listed on this webpage.

If you haven't been in touch with your State Director/staff regarding attending NJC, please connect with them first before registering. You can find contact information for state programs here: <https://www.ymcayag.org/states/>.

- ✓ **Coordinate with your State Director for selection, review national case materials, and rehearse courtroom arguments under timed conditions.**

Youth Governors' Conference

Each summer, the Youth Governors-elect from each state convene in Washington, D.C. for their state's annual YMCA Youth Governors Conference.

- ✓ **Finalize your state's policy platform, refine presentation materials, and confirm travel and accommodation logistics with state staff.**



QUALITY PROGRAMMING

GOALS IN MIND

Before launching a program, consider whether Youth and Government (also called a Club or Delegation) aligns with your community's needs and interests. Civic engagement can be a powerful tool for youth development, but it works best when tailored to local context. Clearly defining your goals, which guide every decision—from recruiting participants and selecting advisors to designing program activities that build skills and encourage meaningful engagement. Establishing goals from the start ensures the program's structure, tasks, and resources align with its intended impact, while also providing direction, making success measurable, and keeping the program meaningful, sustainable, and responsive to both participants and the community.

Common goals of a Youth and Government program may include the following:

INCREASE CIVIC KNOWLEDGE	Students will gain understanding of government structures, civic processes, and their roles as engaged citizens.	Measured through: pre-and post-program surveys, debate performance, legislative work quality, and reflective writing.
DEVELOP LEADERSHIP SKILLS	Participants will strengthen skills in communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and decision-making.	Measured through: advisor evaluations, peer and self-assessments, and active leadership roles during sessions.
ELEVATE YOUTH VOICE	The program will amplify student perspectives and empower them to drive meaningful discussions and change.	Measured through: participation in student-led initiatives, media content, advocacy projects, and post-program feedback on empowerment.
ADVANCE WELCOMING SPACES	Ensure access for youth from all backgrounds, removing barriers and creating welcoming, representative spaces.	Measured through: demographic tracking, scholarship distribution, language and accessibility accommodations, and participant feedback.
STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	Students will connect with civic leaders and community organizations, building partnerships and awareness.	Measured through: guest speaker involvement, community project participation, and surveys from partners and participants.
FOSTER CAREER & ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT	Provide exposure to professional pathways in law, journalism, public service, and more through experiential learning.	Measured through: student feedback, participation in specialized tracks (Media, Legal, Lobbyist), and alumni follow-up on education and career paths.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Quality programming is simple at its core. Focus on creating a safe, welcoming space and building strong relationships. Metrics can help, but not all success is measurable. Start small and grow with intention.

What Makes a Youth and Government Program Successful

For All: Make sure everyone feels welcome. Remove barriers like transportation or cost, and ensure materials and activities reflect the varying perspectives of the communities you serve.

Youth Voice & Leadership: Let students lead. Create spaces where they can speak up, make decisions, and take action on issues they care about.

Community Impact: Connect the program to real-world issues. Encourage students to get involved in service, advocacy, and policy work. Build strong partnerships with local organizations. Education: Teach students about how government works, their rights, and their responsibilities as citizens.

Skill Building: Help students grow in leadership, communication, critical thinking, civic knowledge, and public speaking.

Welcoming Environment: Create a space where all voices are valued and students feel seen, respected, and safe.

Sustainability: Build a strong foundation with reliable funding, community support, and long-term planning to keep the program going.

Evaluation & Growth: Use feedback and data to improve your program over time. Stay flexible and open to change as your students and community evolve.

CONTRIBUTORS TO STRENGTH:

- Data-driven, clear objectives and measurable outcomes
- Adequate resources and trained staff to support delivery
- Program is available for all
- Programs tailored to local needs and youth interests
- Opportunities for real-world civic participation and leadership
- Ongoing data collection and evaluation to measure success and guide improvement

INDICATIONS OF SUCCESS:

- High engagement and enthusiasm among youth participants
- Tangible, positive impact within local communities
- Clear growth in leadership and civic knowledge
- Strong partnerships with schools, local governments, and civic organizations
- Financial and operational stability to support long-term goals

IMPACT METRICS

COLLECTING DATA TO MEASURE SUCCESS

Using surveys and other measurement tools can help sustain longevity of your program and support sustainability for ensuring you are staying relevant and adjusting to the changes of your teen and the communities they live in.. Some of the metrics you may track are listed below:

Program Participation: Track how many students are involved and what they're doing:

- Number of bills submitted and signed
- Attendance at annual conferences
- Students registered to vote
- Total number of participants
- Section participation (Legislative, Judicial, Media, etc.)
- Student demographics (age, grade, race/ethnicity, county)
- Years in the program

Engagement: Measure how connected and active students are:

- Civic Health Survey responses
- Feedback from digital surveys (e.g., Microsoft Forms)
- Communication with schools and teachers

Outcomes: Evaluate the impact of the program:

- Bills passed by Youth Mayor
- Students who voted after registering
- Recommendations of YMCA programs
- Broad representation of participants

Additional Insights: Gather broader data to support program growth:

- Program expenses
- Household demographics (size, income, education)
- Zip code and military status
- Knowledge gained (e.g., legislative process, voter registration)
- Character development survey results



TESTIMONIALS

STUDENT AND STAFF FEEDBACK

STUDENT VOICES

"I used to be quiet and unsure. Now I've made new friends, spoken at a conference, and I'm excited to come back. This program changed how I see myself."

– Freshman Student

"I never thought I'd run for office, but after one year, I'm running for Secretary of State. If you believe in something, go for it."

– Junior Student

LEADERSHIP & CONFIDENCE

"Before Youth and Government, I'd never led a group or debated publicly. Now, I'm a Committee Chair and a Youth Advocate for my state."

– Senior Student

"I was nervous about joining. Now I'm running for office and finally feel confident in who I am."

– Sophomore Student

ADVISOR & VOLUNTEER PERSPECTIVES

"As a chaperone, I learned more in four days from these students than I ever did in civics class. It gave me hope for our democracy."

– Program Volunteer

"This program shows students how laws are made, how to lead with empathy, and how to debate with respect. It's a model for what democracy should be."

– Educator

"Youth and Government has given me many wonderful opportunities to strengthen and showcase my writing, editing, and public speaking skills. I was able to win a local speech contest about the Constitution, which I would never have been brave enough to enter before Youth and Government. It also introduced me to some of the coolest, most hardworking, and passionate teens and adults across the country, many of whom are my closest friends."

– Junior Student, 2025 Social Media Press Editor

