

Youth Participation in Library Board Decision Making – 2014-2015 Pilot and Future Recommendations

Date:	December 14, 2015
To:	Toronto Public Library Board
From:	City Librarian

SUMMARY

In 2013, the Toronto Public Library Board approved appointing two Youth Advisors to work with a designated Board member liaison and provide feedback from youth to the Board. This report reviews the 2014-2015 pilot project and recommends a model for providing future feedback from youth.

Following the experiences with this pilot, where two Youth Advisors learned about and connected with the Library Board, the value of expanding this opportunity is recognized. Direct engagement of a broader range of youth through the strategic planning process suggests that many teens are interested in participating in the Library's decision-making process. It will benefit both the Library and the teens themselves to continue these kinds of conversations.

Rather than engage a limited number of teens and place a burden on a select few to speak on behalf of a diverse many, the recommendation is to more meaningfully engage the Library's network of youth advisory groups, as well as other youth library users and non-users, in conversations of interest and relevance to both them and the Library Board, through focus groups and scheduled attendance at Board meetings to learn about governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The City Librarian recommends that the Toronto Public Library Board:

1. directs staff to work with the appointed Board Liaison to arrange one to two focus group consultations per year with Youth Advisory Group (YAG) members and other teen library users and non-users, on topics that would be of interest to teens, or issues that the Board would like to hear from teens about, and report the findings back to the Board in 2017 after a full year's implementation; and

- invites Youth Advisory Group members to attend Board meetings to learn about Board Governance.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

An annual budget of \$1,000 will be allocated to support the initiative.

The Director Finance & Treasurer has reviewed this financial impact statement and is in agreement with it.

DECISION HISTORY

At its March 27, 2013 meeting, the Toronto Public Library Board requested that staff report back on the feasibility of appointing two youth Board members between 15-17 years old to the TPL Board to attend and participate in Board meetings as non-voting members.

At the September 23, 2013 meeting, the Toronto Public Library Board received the [Youth Participation in Library Board Decision Making](#) report that determined it was not feasible to appoint youth Board members, since the *Public Libraries Act* and the *City Appointments Policy* require that all Board members be at least 18 years of age. The Board approved a pilot project to appoint two Youth Advisors, between 15-17 years old. These advisers were to work with staff and an appointed Board Liaison to provide feedback from youth directly to the Board, and report back to the Board at the end of the pilot. This pilot ended in June 2015.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

A youth perspective at the Board level provides an additional opportunity for youth to influence the strategic directions and policies of the Library by creating a more direct relationship between the TPL Board and Toronto's youth population. As maturing adults with a wide array of interests and needs, these youth are in the early stages of developing their own voice and sense of civic engagement. The Library can play a role in this development by providing opportunities for youth to learn about and be part of decision-making processes, and know that their voice is being heard in a meaningful way.

Pilot Project

Two youth advisors were recruited in the fall of 2013 and began their role in February 2014. The advisors were introduced to the Board at the March 24, 2014 meeting, and made a presentation at the September 8, 2014 meeting. The presentation described what they heard in their consultations with five of the Library's YAGs, and what they saw in the results of an online survey asking Toronto teens how they used, or didn't use, library services. The survey was developed, administered and evaluated with the assistance of library staff. In early 2015, with staff assistance, they wrote two posts to TPL's teen website, reporting back on what they saw in the findings from the spring survey. The main message of their presentation was the need to raise awareness about what the Library offers through more engaging social media and in-branch experiences for teens. In May, they were asked to help with public

consultations for the development of the 2016-2019 strategic plan, by collecting answers to pre-set questions from current teen library users through their personal networks.

Through this pilot, the two youth advisors gained a better understanding of the Library and how its services fit into the City's goals and commitments to citizens. They saw firsthand how volunteer boards function, and had opportunities to meet with other youth to discuss a service that they are passionate about. The TPL Board had an opportunity to hear directly from young teens.

However, the two advisors, while interested in their role, were challenged by time commitments such as school work and other extracurricular interests to effectively take on a broad consultation and survey process. At the same time, we want to expand the understanding that our current YAG members have about the library system and its role in civic life, and create more opportunities for all youth to learn about, and engage with the Library and the Board.

Youth Advisory Groups

There are currently 47 Youth Advisory Groups with 1,186 (2014) members across the library system. YAGs are branch-based volunteer groups open to youth ages 13-19 that engage youth in local branch activities, and give them opportunities to provide feedback on program and service planning for teens. YAG members are also consulted on initiatives such as capital projects and the strategic plan.

COMMENTS

After the pilot ended, Archana Shah, the new Board Liaison was appointed. Staff met with the Board Liaison to review the pilot. At the same time, the strategic planning process was underway and the opportunity to meet with YAGs presented itself.

The Youth Strategic Plan consultation focus group was held on October 17, 2015. Each YAG was invited to send one representative. To help capture the views of non-users, the YAG members were asked to bring along a friend who is not a regular library user. Forty-seven teens took part with lively discussions at eight tables. The Board Liaison was introduced to the teens and observed the discussions. When the attendees were polled at the end of the afternoon, many indicated that they would be interested in coming to another event like this. They enjoyed the opportunity to meet other teens from around the city and present their views and know that they will be taken seriously as part of the strategic planning process. Many good ideas were generated.

The Library's YAGs could be better informed about the role of the Board, and invited to attend Board meetings. The Board could consult these groups on issues that would be of interest to teens, or issues that the Board would like to hear from teens about. In this way, more youth would have opportunities to learn about, and engage with the Library and the Board. As well, offering an orientation to Board governance at YAG meetings, inviting YAG members to attend Board meetings and getting their feedback after Board meetings would provide further engagement opportunities.

A second meeting of staff and the Board Liaison was held after the youth strategic plan consultation to discuss options. Two options were identified.

Option 1 – Maintain Status Quo

The first option is to maintain the status quo and appoint only two Youth Advisors. However, this option limits the opportunity, and is a lot of work for two young teens whose ability to participate at that level is limited by time constraints. As well, this approach does not leverage the network of YAGs.

Option 2 – Focus Groups for Youth

The second option is to work with the Library's YAGs, other teen library users and non-users, to hold annual focus groups and discuss identified topics. One or two themes could be set for the discussions based on current issues facing the Board, such as the library budget or circulation policy, and topics generated by teens, such as the issues raised by the two youth advisors during the pilot project: raising awareness about library resources and services, and making better use of the Library's social media channels. This also complements the Library's plans to engage teens where they are, online, and encourage them to shape their own digital community, making and sharing content. Opportunities for YAG members to address the Board from time-to-time would be provided as there is interest.

Consideration was also given to having a formal YAG executive group, but at this point in time, it was felt the best option was to build on the strategic planning experience. In addition, an orientation to Board governance would be offered at YAG meetings and YAG members would be invited to attend Board meetings and provide feedback after Board meetings.

CONCLUSION

The second option is recommended for implementation in 2016, with a report back on this process in 2017. Offering focus group events open to all youth, and introducing more youth to the Board and its role through contact with the Board Liaison gives a variety of youth the opportunity for direct and meaningful engagement with the Library.

Organizing focus groups attended by the Board Liaison and staff, where teens can come together with other teens from around the city to discuss issues of importance to them, and bringing their voice to the Board's attention, provides an opportunity for meaningful engagement. Orientating YAG members to Board governance and inviting them to attend Board meetings provides opportunities for YAG members to see how the Board functions, to learn about public governance and how issues and ideas get considered and acted upon.

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SIGNATURE

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