

How youth engagement helps prepare the next generation of SDG leaders

New York City on giving voice to young change-makers

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THE PROBLEM: Meaningfully involving the youth into the SDG strategy of cities requires intentional openness and structured programs.

WHY IT MATTERS: The long-term nature of the SDGs means their success will depend upon young changemakers.

THE SOLUTION: The City of New York has developed partnerships with schools and community educators to incorporate the SDGs in the education and activities of the city's youth.

Since its founding in 2015, more than 3,500 students and educators have participated in the New York City Junior Ambassadors program (NYCJA), which was created to enable youth to understand their role as global citizens and advocate for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their own communities.

NYC believes deeply in the power of the SDGs to build bridges beyond borders. As a leading global city, we are committed to activating the next generation of changemakers in their community. Given our unique context, we have been harnessing the power of partnership with global diplomats using the SDGs as our guide.

The NYCJA program uses the SDGs as a common language as we bring together global diplomats with students to activate the next generation of leaders.

Each academic year, we select a cohort of 12- and 13-year-olds and their educators to participate in the program, which culminates in a year-end capstone project that incorporates the SDG that the class has been studying. The program also includes curated tours of United Nations (U.N.) headquarters, briefings on the SDGs by U.N. experts, visits with diplomats and city agency leaders, and opportunities to participate in U.N. events.

As host city to the largest diplomatic corps in the world, the NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs is able to harness youth power to elevate the important relationship between the U.N. and the City of New York.

Building a program from the ground up with partners

Since day one, our goal has been to provide a high-impact program for students and partner organizations. We could not do that without foundational partnerships. Now, in year seven, we are honored to have strong support from the U.N., U.N. Foundation, NYC agencies, and UN member states.

Within city government, we work with the Department of Youth & Community Development and the Department of Education to identify schools and after-school programs for participation in NYCJA. We partner with the NYC Community Affairs Unit to identify communities in the city where students might not have easy access to the U.N.. We send information packets to local schools and attend local community board meetings to talk about the program and encourage local leaders to spread the word.

Cohorts are chosen through a highly selective process. It is the educators that apply and must demonstrate the ways they will integrate the SDGs into their lesson plans. For example, one year, a science teacher who wanted to incorporate climate into his curriculum, planned for his students to build solar panel kits which were then shipped to countries in sub-Saharan Africa. With an eye toward such innovation, we put the onus on educators to apply so we can determine their level of commitment to the students—and the program.

Engaging partners in meaningful ways

To tackle the herculean task of choosing the next cohort, we created a selection committee that includes representatives of our partner organizations, NYC, and the U.N. Our partners include the NYC Department of Education, which provides transportation for educators and students to and from U.N. headquarters; the UN Foundation, which provides professional development trainings for educators; and U.N. Department of Global Communications (U.N. DGC), which provides tours of U.N. headquarters that highlight its history and impact.

Over the years, this has proven to be a meaningful exercise for our partners who not only contribute to building out the program, but get an in-depth look at those who will benefit from it.

While educators have a set curriculum that they must follow each year with NYCJA, they have an opportunity to get creative and learn along with their students. To help them along, we host a series of meetings to shepherd educators through the program.

The first meeting focuses on an overview of the U.N. and we talk about how best to engage youth in programming. We also bring alumni educators to speak about their experiences in previous years.

During our second meeting, educators get an opportunity to brainstorm ideas with each other about what does and doesn't work. They also start to think about their 'year-end projects,' which are designed to have students connect local issues with global ones. The goal is to help students recognize that they can play a part in achieving the goals of clean energy and zero hunger.

In the third and last meeting, we reflect on successes and discuss how to keep the excitement going among students. For instance, we work with educators to develop a plan on how to continue integrating the SDGs into their lesson plans. We also give them an opportunity to reflect and write messages for the next cohort of educators. It has truly been a transformative experience for our educators, some of whom apply year after year or come back as alumni to mentor newer educators.

For our U.N. partners, the program has been an opportunity to connect with hundreds of young New Yorkers in a new way. We know that students then take their knowledge back home and spread the word about the mission and impact of the United Nations and our City agencies.

Transitioning online during the pandemic

A great deal of the NYC Junior Ambassadors program is in-person—from the U.N. headquarters tours to the in-class diplomatic visits to the year-end celebration at the Queens Museum (the first home of the U.N.). And so, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit midway through the fifth year of the program, we had to move quickly to transition online.

We first acknowledged the mental toll the pandemic had taken on all of us. We worked with educators to create time outside of NYC

Junior Ambassadors to talk, share and vent our frustrations.

We then worked with U.N. DGC to create an online U.N. tour, which served as a trial model for virtual tours for the general public. Our team also identified virtual symposiums and panels for students to attend and participate in. For their year-end projects, students showed their extraordinary creativity and presented their works online.

- At Ichan Charter School 4 in the Bronx, students took on mental health issues (SDG 3) during the height of the pandemic by creating a [virtual time capsule](#)
- Intermediate School 78 (IS78) in Queens created an [awareness website](#) to address the relationship between climate (SDG 13) and oceans (SDG 14)
- And at Liberty Avenue Middle School in Brooklyn, students used SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and SDG 5 (Gender equality) to [explore the local and global dimensions](#) of human trafficking.

Our sixth cohort proved to be an overwhelming success. As our society continues to grapple with COVID-19, this year, the NYCJA program is completely virtual. While we can't wait to return in-person, we have proven that an online model can be engaging, challenging, and rewarding. As a city, we fundamentally believe that for the SDGs to be successful we need every aspect of society participating. And we believe our youth should be at the forefront.