

About Southern Growth Policies Board:

Formed by the region's governors in 1971, Southern Growth Policies Board is a non-partisan public policy think tank based in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina.

Southern Growth's research focus encompasses the major drivers for economic development in the South—innovation and technology, globalization, the changing nature of the workforce and the vital role of the community. Southern Growth provides its members, and the region, with authoritative research, discussion forums and pilot projects that define the critical issues shaping the South. Southern Growth develops new regional strategies for economic development and identifies best practices to facilitate action. To learn more about Southern Growth Policies Board, visit <http://www.southern.org>.

For Further Reading:

Founded by General Colin Powell, the *America's Promise Alliance* describes itself as “the nation's largest multi-sector collaborative dedicated to the well-being of children and youth.” Go to www.americaspromise.org for information on Alliance initiatives, research, profiles of youth-friendly communities and information on how both youth and adults can get involved.

The *Forum for Youth Investment* is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping make sure all young people are ready for college, work and life by age 21. In addition to practical advice on youth engagement, their website (www.forumfyi.org) also has recommendations on youth policy for local, state and federal leaders.

Interested in involving youth in formal decision making roles? Check out the websites of *At the Table* (www.atthetable.org) and *Youth on Board* (www.youthonboard.org) for examples and publications.

Youth community service and action are the focus of *Do Something* (www.dosomething.org), *Youth Service America* (<http://www.ysa.org>) and *TakingITGlobal* (www.takingitglobal.org).

Youth and technology can be a powerful combination for community change. Resources include the *Youth as E-Citizens Project* (www.centerforsocialmedia.org/ecitizens/), the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* (www.pewinternet.org/PPF/c/6/topics.asp), and United Nations reports on youth and technology as agents for change worldwide (www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wpayinformation.htm).

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's online *Kids Count* database (www.kidscount.org) is a good source of data on youth well being.

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Youth: The Real Future of the South

In Jonesboro, Georgia, Illai Kenney made her first public speech at the age of nine, founded Georgia Kids Against Pollution when she was 12, and was internationally recognized for her environmental and social activism long before she turned 18.



In Mabelvale, Arkansas, 16-year-old Chauncey Holloman started her own greeting card company when she had trouble finding the right birthday card for a friend. Within three years she had landed contracts with national chains—and launched a clothing line.

In St. Joseph, Missouri, Lindsey Williams, first inspired by a discussion of world hunger in her sixth grade class, invented a new plant irrigation system while in high school—more than doubling crop growth while reducing water use. Her family and other farmers were able to donate over 45,000 pounds of surplus crops to local food banks as a result.

Clearly, youth have a lot to offer.

On the other hand, there are troubling signs.

- Compared with other states, Southern states have a high percentage of young adults that are not enrolled in school, are not working, and have no more than a high school diploma.
- Despite significant progress, high school dropouts and teen pregnancies are still too high, exceeding the national average in most Southern states.
- Many communities, especially those in rural areas, are losing their “best and brightest.” Between 1995 and 2000, nine of 13 Southern states lost more single, college-educated young people than they attracted.
- As a whole, Southern youth are not as engaged in community and civic life as youth in other regions of the country. Nine of 13 Southern states fall below the national average in youth volunteer rates and young adult voting rates.

“As we look for ways to ensure future prosperity, we need to think of youth development efforts as economic development,” emphasizes the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth. “The future well-being of the country depends on raising a generation of skilled, competent, and responsible adults,” explains the National Academy of Sciences. Much is being done in the area of education to respond to these concerns, but what else can communities do to strengthen and capture the vision, talents and passion of youth, the real future of the South? Southern Growth has designed this discussion booklet to encourage conversation about the best way to approach this issue in your community.

Approach 1

Focus on Youth Development

As the Pew Partnership for Civic Change has emphasized, “Young people don’t grow into active, productive citizens by themselves.” We need to focus on creating opportunities that help youth discover their talents and passions and develop the skills and confidence they need to realize their full potential.

What Can Be Done?

- Support youth leadership and skill building efforts both inside and outside of school, including opportunities for youth to mentor other youth.
- Incorporate community service-based learning into the school curriculum.
- Promote entrepreneurship education.
- Provide more opportunities for positive one-on-one youth-adult relationships.

In Support

- More than one in three children in the South are growing up in single-parent families and may need extra support.
- Research has shown a number of benefits from youth involvement in community service, including increased academic achievement and reduced drop-out rates.
- Adult role models are crucial, yet, according to America’s Promise, one-third of teens lack quality relationships with their parents and less than one in ten young people have a formal mentor.

In Opposition

- Schools already have too much on their plates. Besides, this should be parents’ responsibility.
- Leadership programs only focus on those who are already the best and the brightest and leave behind those who need it most.
- We don’t have enough resources to address “real” problems like drug abuse and teenage pregnancy. Let’s focus on those problems instead of “frills” like entrepreneurship.

Approach 2

Realize the Value of Young People

Young people have a lot to offer. Schools, government, non-profits, religious organizations, businesses, the media — and other organizations throughout the community — can benefit by creating opportunities for meaningful youth involvement and leadership. We need to involve young people in everything we do — not just in youth-serving programs.

What Can Be Done?

- Develop a marketing campaign to promote positive adult attitudes about youth and youth involvement.
- Plan community forums, study circles and summits to involve youth in discussions of community issues.
- Appoint youth to boards, advisory councils and committees in all types of institutions.
- Encourage businesses to offer internships and include youth in advisory roles.

In Support

- Adults’ perceptions and assumptions on behalf of youth are often wrong. Youth have a right to be directly involved in decisions that affect their lives.
- Youth can add new ideas and energy to all types of organizations. In fact, youth are often at the leading edge in areas like using new technologies.
- Youth involvement will help ensure that programs meet the needs and desires of young people. In other words, if youth “build it,” other youth are more likely to come.

In Opposition

- Youth don’t have the experience or understanding to fully participate.
- Formal meetings are boring. Youth would rather get involved in more creative ways, like sharing ideas via blogs.
- Between extra-curricular activities, work and watching younger siblings or other family responsibilities, most youth don’t have time to participate.

Approach 3

Build Youth-Friendly Communities

We are losing too many of our young people to jobs and other opportunities outside of the community. We need to create a quality of life in our communities that is attractive to young people, not only to keep our “homegrown” youth, but also to attract other bright young people.

What Can Be Done?

- Survey youth to find out what they want in the community.
- Focus on creating new businesses — and jobs — for young people.
- Improve community services for youth — from workforce training programs to recreational opportunities.
- Create both physical and virtual gathering places for youth, from coffee houses, technology centers and skateparks to community-oriented websites and blogs.

In Support

- Improving the economy is critical. If there aren’t any jobs, youth aren’t going to stay or return.
- We need to find a way to keep our highly educated young people, since they are the ones most likely to leave.
- We need to keep youth productively occupied. After school hours are the peak time for teens to get in trouble.

In Opposition

- Youth want adventure. They’re likely to leave no matter how much we work to improve the community.
- In the digital age, geographic communities are no longer as important to youth. They can live anywhere and still stay connected to family and friends.
- Some communities are too small and just don’t have the resources to offer much to youth.