

# Best Practices for Youth Engagement: A Review of Academic Articles and Real-World Precedents

Lucas Jensen & Whitney Mayfield  
Arizona State University  
School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning

City of Tempe



City of Memphis



City of Cincinnati



City of Charlotte



## **Table of Contents**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Methods</b>	<b>4</b>
Academic Article Content Analysis	5
Real World Precedent & Interviews	5
<b>Academic Article Content Analysis</b>	<b>6</b>
Demographics	6
Methods	6
Best Practices	7
Challenges	8
<b>Real World Precedent and Interviews</b>	<b>9</b>
Preparation	9
Methods	10
Best Practices	11
Post-Engagement	12
Challenges	12
Other Advice	13
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>15</b>

## **Executive Summary**

Including youth in urban planning engagement can improve outcomes, foster long-term engagement, and as Hart (1992) argues, establish their right to “participate in programs which directly affect their lives” (p. 6). The research consists of a content analysis of academic articles about youth engagement and primary interviews with city representatives from Charlotte, Cincinnati, Memphis, and Tempe to gain a deeper understanding of youth engagement in urban planning. In addition, this research analyzes and discusses best practices and significant challenges for youth engagement; to provide recommendations for Arizona State University's Master of Urban and Environmental Planning Spring Workshop and the City of Phoenix for their upcoming general plan update.

Academic articles and interviews identified interactive methods centered around the youth experience as the most effective for youth participation. Additionally, both analysis methods identified clear goals and explanations of planning concepts as best practices. Interviews with city representatives stressed the importance of simple messaging and clearly defined objectives prior to engagement. They highlighted time constraints as a significant barrier to youth engagement. Charlotte, Cincinnati, Memphis, and Tempe suggested including structure to fit within time constraints. Academic articles highlighted the importance of avoiding placation when working with youth to ensure their voices are heard and incorporated into the planning process.

Ideal engagement practices should incorporate interactive methods with place-specific references and simplify planning concepts to be easily understood by youth participants. In addition, the goals of the engagement process should be clearly defined before crafting the engagement methods to benefit youth participants and facilitate the collection of data after the engagement process. These general guidelines for youth engagement will lead to positive outcomes and reduce the risk of placating youth while providing the city with valuable input for their comprehensive plan update.

## Introduction

The AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct asserts that “our primary obligation as planners and active participants in the planning process is to serve the public interest” (American Planning Association, 2016, p. 1). However, there is no explicit reference to the engagement of youth populations as crucial to representing and serving the public’s interests within the AICP’s document. Instead, guarantees of youth empowerment have largely come from academic research, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and community groups in conjunction with local planning departments. Sherry Arnstein’s *A Ladder of Citizen Participation* detailed the various levels of participation in the planning process ranging from non-participation to tokenism and finally to citizen power (Arnstein, 2019, p. 28). The main argument of her research is that there is a “critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process” (Arnstein, 2019, p. 24). Following Arnstein and viewing the ladder of participation through the lens of youth participation, Hart (1992) identified five rungs of the ladder that exhibit genuine participation, which are as follows (lowest degree of participation to highest):

- Assigned but Informed
- Consulted and Informed
- Adult Initiated, Shared Decisions with Children
- Child Initiated and Directed
- Child Initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults

Hart (1992) continues to argue that participation of youth, and particularly disadvantaged youth, is a “fundamental democratic right” (p. 6). In 1989, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Right of the Child, a declaration now ratified by 196 countries across the world—with the notable exception of the U.S. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states, “Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (United Nations, 1989, p. 4).

According to 2020 U.S. Census data, children under eighteen account for over 22% of the entire nation’s population. In the City of Phoenix, that number stands at almost 25% of the population, signaling the need for youth-specific engagement practice in urban planning. This research will seek to provide the reader with best practices for engaging with youth on urban planning and, more specifically, general plan updates. We will first examine the existing literature surrounding youth engagement, then look to various municipalities and case studies that have incorporated youth participation into the planning process, and finally, we will conduct interviews with key figures to enhance our understanding of youth engagement practices and activities. Through this process, we will identify a list of best practices, methods, and challenges of engaging youth in urban planning and provide valuable resources for future urban planners.

## Methods

We analyzed secondary sources from academic journals and real-world precedents (comprehensive plans). The analysis also includes primary sources from interviews with planners from the City of Memphis, Cincinnati, Charlotte, and Tempe to obtain context behind their youth engagement strategies. The research aimed to find best practices for youth engagement regarding comprehensive and general plan updates. Therefore, looking at academic research and real-world precedents was critical to find effective strategies and analyzing theoretical models.

### *Academic Article Content Analysis*

We included the search terms "youth engagement," "youth engagement urban planning," "youth in planning," "community participation," and "participatory urban planning" in the ASU Library One Search database. It was essential to select studies conducted mainly in the United States, as planning practices and social programs in other countries may differ that may impact the community's needs. However, two studies from Canada and one from Istanbul, Turkey, were included based on the studies' relevance to the topic.

When analyzing the secondary sources, we selected themes through inductive coding methods. For example, the significant themes from academic article content analysis included demographics, methods, best practices, and challenges, encompassing all of the significant elements for youth engagement relative to our research project (Table 1). Therefore, identifying specific strategies and activities in the research when coding to identify patterns we observed from research and real-world precedent was essential.

Table 1. Key Themes and Descriptions for Academic Article Content Analysis

Theme	Description
<b>Demographics</b>	Ages and/or grade levels of the participants engaged. Some included other demographics such as income levels or classifications of "at-risk" youth.
<b>Methods</b>	The methodology and activities that were used to engage youth. Examples include concept mapping, community organization involvement, and placemaking approaches.
<b>Best Practices</b>	The main takeaways for engaging youth in the studies and what led to the success of certain methods of engagement. These are generally broad conclusions that are generalizable to engagement practices such as linking the curriculum to the participants experience and knowledge.
<b>Challenges</b>	Describe the major challenges the researchers experienced when working with youth. Similar to best practices, these are generalizable conclusions such as time constraints or avoiding placation.

### *Real-World Precedents & Interviews*

In our initial analysis of real-world precedent, we focused on the methods used because the information on the city websites was not formatted like the case studies reviewed. The most common methods incorporated interactive methods such as art and playing board games for the youth to conceptualize planning concepts. Cities were chosen based on personal knowledge of their engagement strategies and identified through academic articles that mentioned examples of youth engagement in comprehensive planning. While the city websites provided details regarding the inclusion and type(s) of youth engagement incorporated into their general/comprehensive plan update, we felt that primary interviews with planners involved in designing and implementing youth engagement strategies would yield greater insight.

Therefore, we created an interview instrument (Appendix C) to obtain greater detail about their engagement strategies. These questions were divided into sections, beginning with general questions that would build rapport with the city planner and an overview of their youth engagement strategy. Subsequently, we asked questions about preparation for the activities, the methodology, any challenges related to the activities, and post-engagement approaches.

The transcription was uploaded to the cloud from Zoom after the interview and edited for clarity. There are two versions of the interviews, one we edited for clarity, including the full interview, and the other focusing on interview questions and answers. In addition, we conducted primary coding during the content analysis of the scholarly articles and a review of the real-world precedent. After conducting the interviews, we did secondary coding to determine what themes and subthemes were prevalent in each interview. Similar to the academic content analysis, we used an inductive method to identify themes. We extracted themes from the subsections of our interview instrument; preparation, methods, best practices, challenges, post-engagement, and other advice. The codebook describing the major themes and subthemes for real-world precedent and interview analysis is presented in Table 2. Subthemes were based on the interviewee's responses to our questions and considered significant if mentioned multiple times. In the final coding round, we synthesized the remaining themes from all interviews to identify commonalities between the four cities. The final synthesis provided the best practices of all themes to help inform how we will conduct youth engagement strategies to update the comprehensive plan.

Table 2. Codebook for Interview Content Analysis

Theme	Subtheme	Explanation	Example
<b>Preparation</b>	Refine the methodology	Interviewee suggests testing or improving engagement methods before implementation.	I always try to show what I'm going to be doing to someone that's completely outside of the field and hearing their questions. Because if they ask you some questions and right away, you know, like this is something I need to fix right now. So that's something I always try to do whether that's a survey or a presentation. (Tempe)
	Use of visuals	Interviewee suggests the use of visual aids such as maps, photos, or videos in the introductory steps of engagement.	Use maps; teach the kids how to use a map. Perhaps show the current map and ask their input on the current maps. (Memphis)
	Clear and concise explanations	Interviewee states the importance of keeping introductions short and simple to avoid loss of attention.	I would say the keep of your intro short, simple to the point if you are presenting. (Charlotte)
	Identify goals/purpose of engagement	Interviewee suggests clearly identifying the goals of engagement before crafting the engagement method.	Part of it is on us to be very clear about knowing what we want to get out of. It would be more useful to think through for us. (Memphis)
<b>Methods</b>	Interactive methods	Interviewee mentions the importance of incorporating hands-on and interactive methods for youth engagement.	We print out a map based on what community we're going to be in, and that's like roughly the same size as Duplo blocks, and we ask the question, what amenities do you want to see in your neighborhood? They actually can take dry erase markers and write on the Duplo's. (Cincinnati)
<b>Best Practices</b>	Clear and concise explanations	Interviewee mentions the importance of keeping the concepts simple and concise to avoid confusion and increase the quality of engagement overall.	The younger the youth, try and stay as efficient, and to the point as possible. Stay away from planning jargon stay away from acronyms, things of that nature. (Cincinnati)
	Interactive methods	Interviewee suggests using interactive methods of engagement like building or drawing activities to keep youth engaged.	There's a base map, and they're drawing on top of it. And like just obliterating it, the more ways you can come up with, for them to tell their story on a map and scribble it up, the better. You know what, when the mouth is moving, and the hands are moving, like I've found in my previous teaching, and everything, "and through now, that's a pretty good way to use an hour. (Memphis)
	Work in small groups	Interviewee mentions breaking the students into groups to help facilitate engagement and improve the feedback received from participation.	So if you got 15 to go into one class of 30 to 40. Just work really hard on splitting up the game plan, so you're breaking out into subgroups. (Memphis)
	Structure activities	Interviewee mentions providing structure to the flow of activities and concepts.	I think I just want more structure for them, because I want them to be thinking of all the different pieces and making certain decisions. I think because it was really hard to get people, certain kids to talk or to stay focused on what we were trying to get out of the activity. (Cincinnati)
	Placemaking	Interviewee mentions incorporating context specific engagement to relate to the youth participants.	I want the kids to think of or to be thinking about the elements of their neighborhood the most, for me. (Cincinnati)
	Use visuals to illustrate concepts	Interviewee states that the use of visuals is beneficial for the overall engagement of youth.	It's not just the video format it's how we did it, and the style that we did it. It just makes it a little more friendly and a little less intimidating. (Charlotte)
	Meet people where they are	Interviewee states that meeting the youth where they are is more effective than asking them to come to engagement events.	Meeting people where they are is a really good way to kind of tackle that [pandemic related challenges]. Going where they are, and you know from our experience, distributing the coloring sheets to the schools. (Charlotte)
	Incentivize participation	Interviewee mentions providing youth participants with rewards as incentives to participate to help create more engagement.	Incentivizing the kids, whether it's through some sort of a reward or something to get them excited, so that they're not going into a thinking like, uh, I have to do this or I really don't care I just want to get to recess. (Cincinnati)
<b>Post-Engagement</b>	Obtain feedback	Interviewee mentions getting feedback from past activities and notifying youth how their input will be used.	Then find ways to let them know how you collected their feedback and the outcome of their feedback. We always try to share what the outcome is with anyone that gives feedback to us so that way they know that their voices mattered. (Tempe)
	Data analysis	Interviewee mentions methods and suggestions for collecting the data from youth engagement events.	But you've got to come up with some buckets, and count up all the responses and put them in those buckets. And then you can separate them by district. (Memphis)
<b>Challenges</b>	Time constraints	Interviewee references limited time as a potential barrier for youth engagement.	I think we would have spent longer. We could probably have spent the whole hour on that, on building the town. (Cincinnati)
	Lack of engagement	Interviewee mentions the lack of participation or difficulty participating as a potential barrier for youth engagement.	You have to kind of encourage them to be interested in the topic. We had to have a good reason why this is important to them. (Tempe)
	Data Collection	Interviewee mentions the difficulties associated with collecting and analyzing data from engagement.	don't be frustrated if you don't get the feedback that you need. It's okay. Because sometimes you're not going to hear what you need, and that's okay. And you just have to be okay with that. You know, don't try to force it. (Memphis)
	Institutional capacity/limitations	Interviewee mentions limitations and issues created by long times between comprehensive plan updates and limited staff.	We didn't really have a good roadmap of how to do it, because it had been thirty years from 2009 to 1980. (Cincinnati)
	Explaining complex topics	Interviewee mentions the difficulty of simplifying complex planning topics to relate to youth.	How do you make some very complicated material, simple enough for all ages to understand, but still maintaining the important details that have to be there. Finding that balance. (Charlotte)
<b>Other Advice</b>	N/A	Interviewee references the ways that youth participants will surprise you with their knowledge of planning subjects.	How ridiculous would it be if I held back from asking you about household income and race in your own community. So dive into those. (Memphis)

## Academic Article Content Analysis

We selected nine academic articles to examine for key themes described in the methodology section above. An overview of the findings from each article of the key themes we identified is in Appendix A.

### *Demographics*

High school students were the most common demographic target for youth engagement research. As a result, the cities implemented youth engagement strategies as long-term engagement processes, varying from 15 weeks to two years, incorporated into the school curriculum (Heffez & Bornstein, 2016; McKoy et al., 2015; McKoy & Vincent, 2007; Ramasubramanian & Gonzalez, 2007; Santo et al., 2010). Additionally, much of the research focused on disadvantaged communities or at-risk youth, acknowledging these groups' historical underrepresentation in planning decision-making (Heffez & Bornstein, 2016; McKoy et al., 2015; McKoy & Vincent, 2007; Minh et al., 2015; Ramasubramanian & Gonzalez, 2007; Santo et al., 2010; Senbel, 2007; Severcan, 2015).

### *Methods*

When engaging youth in urban planning, the research emphasizes hands-on participatory methods. **Mental mapping** is a tool that allows the participant's stream of consciousness to be written down and organized or mapped spatially to gain a detailed understanding of individual and group perceptions and ideas. Heffez & Bornstein (2016), McKoy et al. (2015), and Minh et al. (2015) all used mental mapping techniques in their research process while engaging youth. Additionally, McKoy & Vincent (2007) used this method in the form of asset mapping to identify local and community assets from the youth perspective. Another standard hands-on method used in this report's research articles is **photographic documentation and analysis**. Heffez & Bornstein (2016) utilized photographic documentation where students had the opportunity to "learn directly from observing the environment with their various senses and from listening to their peers' observations" by submitting photographs. Santo et al. (2010) instructed students to show outsiders what it was like to grow up in their neighborhood through photographs, then incorporated this into a spatially organized map.

**Initial focus statements** and **student-generated ideas** were other critical methods used in the academic articles. For example, Minh et al. (2015) crafted the focal statement, "In the [neighborhood name] and surrounding areas, a problem facing youth that can be addressed with local services and programs is . . ." and prompted the youth to complete the sentence to guide the engagement process (p. 35). Likewise, Ramasubramanian & Gonzalez (2007) engaged in a collaborative discussion with youth to decide the project's direction. Taking this a step further, Santo et al. (2010) allowed the youth to define the projects and the methods and tools to address the issue.

Finally, the focus on **place-based approaches** was critical to the success of youth engagement across the majority of research studies. According to Heffez & Bornstein (2016), “place-based education centers on the learners’ relationships with the spaces they occupy, know best and see as relevant to their daily lives” (p. 112). Additionally, Severcan (2010) found that after placemaking engagement activities, the youth’s attachment to a place correlated with their knowledge of that place increased. Most of the research articles in this report detail methodology that centers on the youth’s experience and geographical setting.

For a complete list of engagement activities, their descriptions, and examples, see Appendix B.

### *Best Practices*

The best practices drawn from youth engagement research are critical to informing future youth engagement practices. **The most important practice drawn from the research to predict successful youth engagement was clearly defined roles, levels of engagement, and goals.** Botcheway et al. (2019) concluded that “the planner’s role in supporting youth is being deliberate in determining which forms of participation are more appropriate than others for youth given different planning contexts, but that various ways of participating must be made available to youth who want to be involved” (p. 268). McKoy et al. (2015) and McKoy & Vincent (2007) found that an authentic project was vital to the success of youth engagement. Doing so ensures that the youth can participate in a real-world project that has tangible effects on their community. It was also critical that the engagement the students are involved in leads to the completion of a project to avoid placating youth during the engagement process, echoing Arnstein’s guidelines for participation. Senbel (2007) similarly found that “having clear goals and being able to follow through on those goals, was more important even at the outset than promising larger roles for the youth” (p. 457).

**Place-based approaches are mentioned in the methods section of this content analysis. Additionally, numerous articles mention them as a best practice for engaging youth.**

Severcan (2015) uses participatory action research, a place-based method using photographs and mapping, to emphasize the importance of place and design. Heffez & Bornstein (2016) utilize place-based approaches through mental mapping of the youth’s neighborhood and commute to school. These approaches help highlight their expertise and local knowledge and lead to the identification of important places as well as potential dangers within the community. The Placeworx method by Ramasubramanian & Gonzalez (2007) centered on the youth creating signs regarding neighborhood change and strategically placing them at local businesses throughout the community. The research articles presented in this report utilized place-based methods to relate planning material to youth due to their constrained geographical boundaries and are one of the most crucial practices for engaging youth.

**Another best practice for youth engagement is to ensure collaboration and partnerships in the process, including graduate students, community partners, and city departments.**

For example, Chawla & Driskell (2006), as cited in Heffez & Bornstein (2016), noted that “the most effective model for youth participation involves young people working together with adult

allies to ensure that youth voices are heard and included in decision-making that affects their lives” (p.112). Additionally, Ramasubramanain & Gonzalez (2007) highlighted the importance of having content delivered by community-based educators and not just university educators.

Lastly, **creating a welcoming environment and building rapport with student participants is a critical step in the engagement process.** Senbel (2007) notes that we must avoid "privileg[ing] a subset of youth the way we privilege a subset of adults” and that less articulate students must feel comfortable in the process (p. 459). In addition to providing a welcoming environment for youth participants, Senbel (2007) and Ramasubramanain & Gonzalez (2007) also highlight the importance of building trust and rapport with the youth.

### *Challenges*

In addition to presenting academic articles' methodology and best practices, examining their constraints and challenges is crucial. **One of the most commonly mentioned challenges was time constraints for engagement.** Heffez & Bornstein (2016) chose a method that fit their time constraints to avoid this issue. Researchers mentioned time constraints as limiting the scope and overall success of the engagement (McKoy & Vincent, 2007; Minh et al., 2015; Senbel, 2007; and Severcan, 2015).

**The other significant barrier to youth engagement success lies in youth participants' limited and highly variable knowledge.** Minh et al. (2015) observed a high degree of variability in youth participants' knowledge of political processes and the provision of services and programs. Severcan (2015) concluded that the “geographic focus of placemaking activities plays an important role in cultivating individuals' attachment to specific settings” (p. 287). This highlights the importance of place-specific engagement and an awareness that students in one classroom may not bring the same experiences or even reside in the same neighborhoods. In the case of Santo et al. (2010), student educational deficiencies made it more difficult for some students to draw connections between their participation and their communities' real-world issues. To combat the variability of participant knowledge, Minh et al. (2015) suggest that participants support others to enhance their knowledge, or other stakeholders can incorporate it into the process (p. 41). The methodology must be tailored to their level of understanding to address educational deficiencies among youth. Santo et al. (2010) experienced difficulty “transferring that [planning] knowledge to a teen audience, especially a teen audience dealing with difficult social circumstances and potential learning disabilities” (p. 61).

**The last major challenge is avoiding the rung of placation identified by Arnstein (1969) and redefined terms of youth engagement by Hart (1992).** Placation of youth often consists of the participants giving information without the consent of how they will use it. Three prominent youth engagement models (GUB, YEAH!, Y-PLAN) mentioned by Botcheway et al. (2019) found that all of the models featured some aspects of placation. In particular importance to our research, McKoy & Vincent (2007) concluded that “university participants must use caution when balancing their agenda and that of the community to avoid relegating community participation to a token role” (p. 401). The first step in avoiding placation is “adults making a

case for their feedback to be incorporated and taken seriously” (Botcheway et al., 2019, p. 264). One example of avoiding placation of youth comes from the Growing Up Boulder (GUB) program, where “youth are under the impression that their feedback is valuable and incorporated into future planning processes for Boulder (CO)” (Botcheway et al., 2019 p. 266). In short, ensuring youth participation results is an actionable change to avoid placation.

## **Real World Precedent and Interview Analysis**

We met with representatives from the cities of Cincinnati, Ohio; Charlotte, North Carolina; Memphis, Tennessee; and Tempe, Arizona, to discuss their involvement with youth engagement during the comprehensive planning process. We identified preparation, methods, best practices, post-engagement, challenges, and other advice as significant themes with the subthemes discussed in further detail below. Table 2 contains the complete codebook with descriptions of the subthemes.

### *Preparation*

Preparation is integral to engaging with the general public, especially the youth, as many are unfamiliar with urban planning. Therefore, most cities emphasized the importance of providing clear and concise explanations of planning concepts to the children. For example, the City of Cincinnati advised, “[trying] to keep it as big picture as possible and keep it as simple. No acronyms, no planning jargon, just as simple of a concept as possible.” Later in the interview, the planners did clarify not to underestimate the comprehension of the youth but to give a high-level explanation. In discussing how concise introductions should be, the cities recommended introductions no longer than five minutes as we may lose the children's attention.

It is equally essential to be adaptable in refining the methodology. First, the city must identify its goals and what data they are looking to obtain to inform the engagement strategy. Tempe and Cincinnati suggested doing a testing methodology with others outside the planning field to gain outside perspective. Immediate questions from an outside perspective could indicate the need to refine the methodology and will prove efficient engagement in the long term.

Lastly, advice for preparation given by Charlotte and Memphis advised incorporating visuals to explain topics. Memphis used maps to familiarize the youth with places in the city and help tie in concepts to the data they collected. The City of Charlotte used videos to explain the comprehensive update process for adults and children. The video explained the purpose of a comprehensive plan, the process of updating it, and the next steps. More specifically, for children, it could be helpful to incorporate a cartoon-like video to draw interest to the children. Charlotte used a program called “Doodly” to create multiple animated videos explaining the process. They found this an effective strategy from a comprehension standpoint and an accessible tool, as community members could revisit the video and share it with others.

### *Methods*

Interactive or hands-on activities incorporating games, art, and dot voting took precedence over other strategies. The City of Charlotte played a board and card game with the youth that helped them understand how to build a city, and believed that the youth took interest simply because they were playing a game. By nature of demographic, games attracted children's interest and proved to be an effective way to teach urban planning concepts. The city of Tempe obtained what the youth felt were the most important elements to be highlighted in their character area plan through the dotocracy method. Tempe provided ten digital dots to the students that represented each element in the character area plan and allowed them to select what they felt was more important.

Additionally, incorporating art therapy was a method used by the City of Cincinnati. Per the comprehensive plan, "each participating student was given a flowerpot and asked to paint their fears and concerns for Cincinnati on the inside of the pot. Visions and dreams for the future of Cincinnati were painted on the outside of the pot" (City of Cincinnati, 2010, p.59). Later the children planted seeds, symbolizing future growth. Cincinnati also mentioned the use of Duplo blocks to replicate a city. The commonality of all the interactive methods is that they were child-friendly activities that incorporated education and proved effective by keeping the students engaged.

### *Best Practices*

We observed several best practices through conducting interviews; six proved to be recurring subthemes throughout the municipalities. For example, cities felt it was best to use visuals to illustrate concepts, provide clear and concise explanations, choose interactive activities, work in small groups, ensure that activities are structured and that placemaking helped students conceptualize their community.

As mentioned in the preparation section, videos effectively explained to the youth what a comprehensive plan was, how they were involved, and how it affected their future. Charlotte suggested that animating the video and having a child's voice narrate will likely keep the children's attention and help build a connection to the task. Cincinnati used photos to illustrate a business district while creating a land use map with the children. Additionally, the planners in Cincinnati advised that "it really helped the kids orient. I think it was helpful to see, like 'Oh, this is my neighborhood.'" Using photos to orient students was similar to another significant subtheme of placemaking. In Arizona, it is common for schools to allow open enrollment outside of the district. As a result, planners cannot assume the children are familiar with the neighborhood and can use photo mapping to orient students to the study area or unfamiliar concepts.

Three of the four cities emphasized how important it was to provide clear and concise explanations of concepts to the children. High-level explanations and choosing simple concepts will allow for answers that will not lose the children's attention span. While planners should not underestimate the youth's intelligence, long explanations of new concepts may lose interest. Should there be a vital concept, it may be helpful to tie concepts with real-life scenarios

repeated throughout time. For example, Memphis mentioned, “I keep on bouncing back to a concept that grows throughout the whole time you're at the school, so if health and transportation is firing in your brain that day; you're going to just pop back and forth with them and bring it all back. ‘Oh, yes, that relates to transportation again”.

Structured activities and working in small groups are two subthemes that work in tandem. Tempe and Memphis recommended working in small groups to maintain structure and ensure supervision and direct engagement. Memphis mentioned breaking the students into subgroups, often hinting that larger groups may be more difficult to maintain structure. This was evident when the Memphis planner advised, “But in terms of engagement, say, if you have five of you guys going in, you know, 20 is alright for a classroom...” and later, “so on the front end, be real adamant, like, hey, we want 20 kids this afternoon. And doing it that way is way more fruitful and way more enjoyable than everyone at once.” In establishing structure, both Cincinnati and Charlotte recommended short explanations for the activities and explaining the bounds of the activities, especially if there is a time limitation because “activities are always going to take longer than you think.” More specifically, “having a short intro with clear instructions will always be helpful. So if you have an hour, I would say, spend ten minutes on your intro, five minutes on the explanation of the activity, and then go for the activity.” (Charlotte) If researchers execute the structured activity well, this may leave time for the youth to provide feedback on the activity to increase efficiency for future engagements.

### *Post-Engagement*

Gathering data and data analysis are critical to avoid placating youth participants in the engagement process. Charlotte and Memphis both emphasized the importance of having data that can be collected and analyzed after the engagement event, leading to the subtheme data collection. Maria Flor from the City of Charlotte suggested assigning a questionnaire or homework that could be collected afterward. Roger Ekstrom, from the City of Memphis, echoed similar sentiments but suggested allowing the youth participants to “write on the map itself, or put a post-it note” and to collect these afterward. When asked how the data was analyzed, Roger stated that sorting responses into “buckets” or categories was helpful and could be further separated by the district to organize feedback spatially.

Obtaining feedback from youth participants as well as facilitators after the process of engagement was mentioned to improve the success of youth engagement. Representatives from the City of Memphis and the City of Cincinnati stressed that recapping the activities of the day can be a helpful way for the youth participants to synthesize and digest what they learned. Roger Ekstrom from the City of Memphis suggested feedback can be obtained by asking the youth participants to present or explain their work to the class or a facilitator of the engagement. Brenda Clark (City of Tempe) stated, “we always try to share what the outcome is with anyone that gives feedback to us so that way they know that their voices mattered.” Using the input from the youth helps avoid placation. Additionally, the City of Tempe recommended debriefing meetings with facilitators to help improve future sessions.

## *Challenges*

The City of Charlotte and the City of Memphis mentioned simplifying complex planning topics as a challenge for youth engagement. Maddi Pleasant (City of Charlotte) offered general advice for simplifying concepts, suggesting, “make some very complicated material, simple enough for all ages to understand, but still maintaining the important details that have to be there. Finding that balance”. Finding ways to explain planning concepts to youth will be a central focus of the Spring Youth Engagement Workshop.

A significant challenge mentioned by all four cities interviewed was time constraints for the engagement activities. Interviewees from Memphis and Charlotte mentioned that activities often take longer than anticipated and emphasized planning for unexpected changes in engagement schedules. Roger Ekstrom from the City of Memphis highlighted these unexpected changes when he said, “something comes up with the teacher, or they start lining up eight minutes before the bell. Sometimes your last 10 minutes can implode or disappear”. To manage this issue, planning for the unexpected and testing engagement activities before involving youth participants is essential. Maria Dienger (City of Cincinnati) also mentioned time constraints as a challenge for engagement, stating, “We would have spent longer. We could have spent the whole hour building the town”. This echoes similar responses from other interviews who stressed that activities often take longer than expected.

Overcoming a need for more engagement from youth participants was a significant challenge for the cities. Three cities mentioned a lack of engagement as a potential barrier to youth participation. Alex Peppers (City of Cincinnati) noted, “There were handfuls of kids that were just disinterested altogether. Furthermore, some kids were just like drawing smiley faces, or they did not have the ability like some kids did not really have the artistic ability to take what is in their brain and draw it”. Roger Ekstrom (City of Memphis) offered some general advice for this dilemma by encouraging youth to be interested in the topic and providing a good reason why their engagement is essential.

Another challenge for youth engagement came from the cities’ institutional capacity and limitations. For example, Roger Ekstrom noted that they did not always have adequate staffing for a kid's table at engagement events due to the city’s focus on adult participants. Ensuring that the city prioritizes youth engagement is one strategy to overcome this potential barrier. Furthermore, representatives from Cincinnati and Memphis both mentioned that the length of time between comprehensive plan updates created issues. Alex Peppers (City of Cincinnati) noted, “We [City of Cincinnati] did not really have a good roadmap of how to do it, because it had been thirty years from 2009 to 1980”. In addition to logistical challenges associated with the length of time between comprehensive plan updates, Roger Ekstrom (City of Memphis) expressed that it also led to “mistrust because the community had not been engaged for so long.” Regular updates to comprehensive plans and regular engagement with communities can help to lessen the shock and challenges associated with lengthy comprehensive plan updates.

### *Other Advice*

Interviewees offered other advice that needed to fit more neatly into the major themes but is critical for successful youth engagement. For example, the City of Charlotte and the City of Memphis both stressed that children would understand complex topics more than you would assume. Roger Ekstrom (City of Memphis) advised delving into more profound concepts like race and income in their city to address equity issues. In his experiences, the youth could understand these concepts due to their deep connection to their communities.

### **Conclusion**

Effective engagement is a crucial principle of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation. The research was highly influential in obtaining best practices when engaging youth in the comprehensive plan update. Our goal was to compare and contrast methods and best practices in academic articles and real-world precedents to inform engagements for future research. Performing a thorough content analysis allows readers to see if theoretical youth engagement is effective in urban planning practice. Our research confirmed that some theoretical concepts are consistent with engagement methods, such as consulting the youth through interactive methods instead of the customary and often prescriptive presentations. Through interviews with urban planners in the public sector, we confirmed that long explanations and presentations of talking to community members often triggered disinterest. City planners found tremendous success obtaining youth input through tailored, interactive methods. With effective engagement methods, the city plan could obtain the data needed to inform its comprehensive plan of urban needs.

Planners should begin by identifying what data they want to collect and the best practices for the audience they serve to inform the most effective engagement methods. Furthermore, city planners should engage with an adaptive mindset inviting the community to act alongside as experts. Doing so helps build rapport between both entities and fosters inclusive communities.

## References

- American Planning Association. (2016). *AICP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct*.  
<https://www.planning.org/ethics/ethicscode/>
- Arnstein, S. R. (2019). A Ladder of Citizen Participation, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 85:1, 24–34, DOI: 10.1080/01944363.2018.1559388
- Botchwey, N. D., Johnson, N., O'Connell, L. K., & Kim, A. J. (2019). Including Youth in the Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 85(3), 255–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2019.1616319>
- City of Cincinnati. (2012). *Plan Cincinnati: A Comprehensive Plan for the Future*.  
<https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/sites/planning/assets/2012%20-%20Plan%20Cincinnati.pdf>
- Hart, R. (1992). Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship. *Innocenti Essays* 4.  
<https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/100-childrens-participation-from-tokenism-to-citizenship.html>
- Hefez, A. & Bornstein, L. (2016). Youth Fusion's Urban Environment Project: Increasing Youth Participation in Urban Planning through Place-Based Environmental Education. *Children, Youth, and Environments*, 26(2), 110–127.  
<https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.26.2.0110>
- McKoy, D., Stewart, J. & Buss, S. (2015). Engaging Students in Transforming Their Built Environment via Y-PLAN: Lessons from Richmond, California. *Children, Youth, and Environments* 25(2): 229–244.  
<http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=chilyoutenvi>.
- McKoy, D. L., & Vincent, J. M. (2007). Engaging Schools in Urban Revitalization. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 26(4), 389–403.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456x06298817>
- Minh, A., Patel, S., Bruce-Barrett, C. & O'Campo, P. (2015). Letting Youths Choose for Themselves. *Family & Community Health*, 38 (1), 33–43. doi: 10.1097/FCH.0000000000000060.
- Ramasubramanian, L. & Gonzalez, A (2007). Placeworx: A Model to Foster Youth Engagement and Empowerment. *Children, Youth, and Environments*, 17(2), 461–471.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.17.2.0461>
- Santo, C. A., Ferguson, N., & Trippel, A. (2010). Engaging Urban Youth through Technology: The Youth Neighborhood Mapping Initiative. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 30(1), 52–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456x10366427>
- Senbel, M. (2007). Engaging Youth to Engage Community in Sustainable Grassroots Planning. *Children, Youth, and Environments* 17(2): 454–460.
- Severcan, Y. C. (2015). The Effects of Children's Participation in Planning and Design Activities on Their Place Attachment. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 32(4), 271–293. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44113116>
- U.S. Census Data. (2020). *Age and Sex, American Community Survey 5-year estimates*.  
<https://data.census.gov/table?q=age&g=0100000US&y=2020>
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.  
<https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>

## Appendices

### Appendix A. Key Findings on Youth Engagement from Academic Research

Source	Ages	Methods	Best Practices	Challenges
Botcheway et al. (2019)	Elementary to high school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Y-PLAN</li> <li>• YEAH!</li> <li>• GUB</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly defined goals and objectives.</li> <li>• Youth specific exercises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding placation</li> </ul>
Hefez & Bornstein (2016)	High school students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental mapping</li> <li>• Photographic documentation &amp; site visits</li> <li>• SWOT analysis</li> <li>• Classroom presentations</li> <li>• Design-build workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth working with adult allies</li> <li>• Creative engagement techniques</li> <li>• Explicit links to learner's daily experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students with special needs</li> <li>• Voluntary participation</li> </ul>
McKoy, Stewart, & Buss (2015)	High school students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental mapping</li> <li>• Student conducted interviews &amp; data analysis</li> <li>• Site visits</li> <li>• Design-build workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authentic project</li> <li>• Place-making</li> <li>• Shared decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• N/A</li> </ul>
McKoy & Vincent (2007)	High school students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth proposals</li> <li>• Youth generated ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared decision-making</li> <li>• Authentic problems and engagement</li> <li>• Projects build individual and institutional success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time constraints</li> <li>• Avoiding placation</li> </ul>
Minh et al. (2015)	Ages 12 - 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concept mapping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcoming environment</li> <li>• Concept mapping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity of participant knowledge</li> <li>• Language and cultural barriers</li> <li>• Time constraints</li> </ul>
Ramasubramanian & Gonzalez (2007)	13-21 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth generated ideas</li> <li>• Definition creation</li> <li>• Youth proposals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative goal setting</li> <li>• Community-based educators</li> <li>• Build rapport/create trust</li> <li>• Flexible and adaptive curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language barriers</li> </ul>
Santo et al. (2010)	High school students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental mapping</li> <li>• Photographic documentation</li> <li>• Youth generated projects</li> <li>• Asset mapping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place-making and local knowledge building</li> <li>• Unstructured learning environments</li> <li>• Flexible and adaptive curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of motivation &amp; self-esteem</li> <li>• Educational deficiencies</li> </ul>
Senbel (2007)	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design-build workshops</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly defined goals and objectives</li> <li>• Welcoming environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time constraints</li> </ul>
Severcan (2015)	Ages 9-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photographic documentation</li> <li>• Asset mapping</li> <li>• Design-build workshops</li> <li>• Youth proposals</li> <li>• Site visits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design-build workshops</li> <li>• Importance of place-making</li> <li>• Knowledge building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time constraints</li> <li>• Limited facilitators</li> <li>• Scale of place-making</li> </ul>

## Appendix B. Engagement Methods and Descriptions (cont.)

Engagement Method	Description	Examples
Youth proposals	Participants create a final product that they can present to the class, city council, their friends and family, or a combination of the three. This provides validation for the work they are doing and celebrate their achievement. Severcan (2015) details how "children engaged in workshops to synthesize and present their ideas about the planning and design of child-friendly neighborhoods."	McKoy & Vincent (2007); Ramasubramanian & Gonzalez (2007); Severcan (2015); City of Cincinnati
Definition creation	Participants were asked to define gentrification after several weeks of discussing the topic. Can be used for other topics to understand their level of understanding.	Minh et al. (2015)
Art programs	The City of Cincinnati had participants paint terracotta pots to express the hopes and dreams for the city as well as fears and concerns on the inside of the pot. The City of Charlotte had a local artist design a coloring sheet for the students for the comprehensive plan that contained information that was useful for the engagement of the participants parents or guardians at home. Art programs provide another form of engagement and communication style that may be more comfortable for youth.	Ramasubramanian & Gonzales (2007)
Concept mapping	Participants responded to the prompt, "In the [neighborhood name] and surrounding areas, a problem facing youth that can be addressed with local services and programs, is . . .". Their responses were then grouped categories based on the methods that could be used to address the issues. The study used Health and Counseling; Life Skills and Personal Development; Arts, Recreation, and Other Specialized Programs; Education and Job Training; and Systemic Issues.	City of Cincinnati; City of Charlotte
Board games	The City of Charlotte created a board game where participants select their overarching planning and policy goals for the city. They are then asked to build their city to meet the goals they've chosen.	City of Charlotte

## **Appendix C. Interview Template**

### **General Questions**

1. What is your role in the planning department and involvement with the Comprehensive Plan update?
2. Can you provide a brief overview of what the experience of working with youth to engage them in urban planning is like?

### **Preparation**

3. Were the students provided any instruction, such as presentations or introductions on urban planning **before** the participation process?
4. What advice would you give us for the initial steps of participation (things to avoid or include)?
5. What was the scope of what the city expected from the youth engagement process?

### **Methodology**

6. How did you explain planning concepts to the youth at an age appropriate level?
7. What methods were most effective at engaging the students, especially those from 5th to 8th grade? (Technology, hands-on activities, real-world examples, etc.)
8. Are you able to provide any engagement curriculums or other resources that were used for the engagement process?

### **Challenges**

9. What were the major challenges you faced when working with youth populations?

### **Post-Engagement**

10. How did these activities directly influence the plan update, where were they incorporated?
11. Do you have any advice for best practices engaging youth in the general plan update process?
12. If you only had time for a one-hour engagement session, how would you design the curriculum?
13. Are there any other cities or organizations that you would recommend contacting?