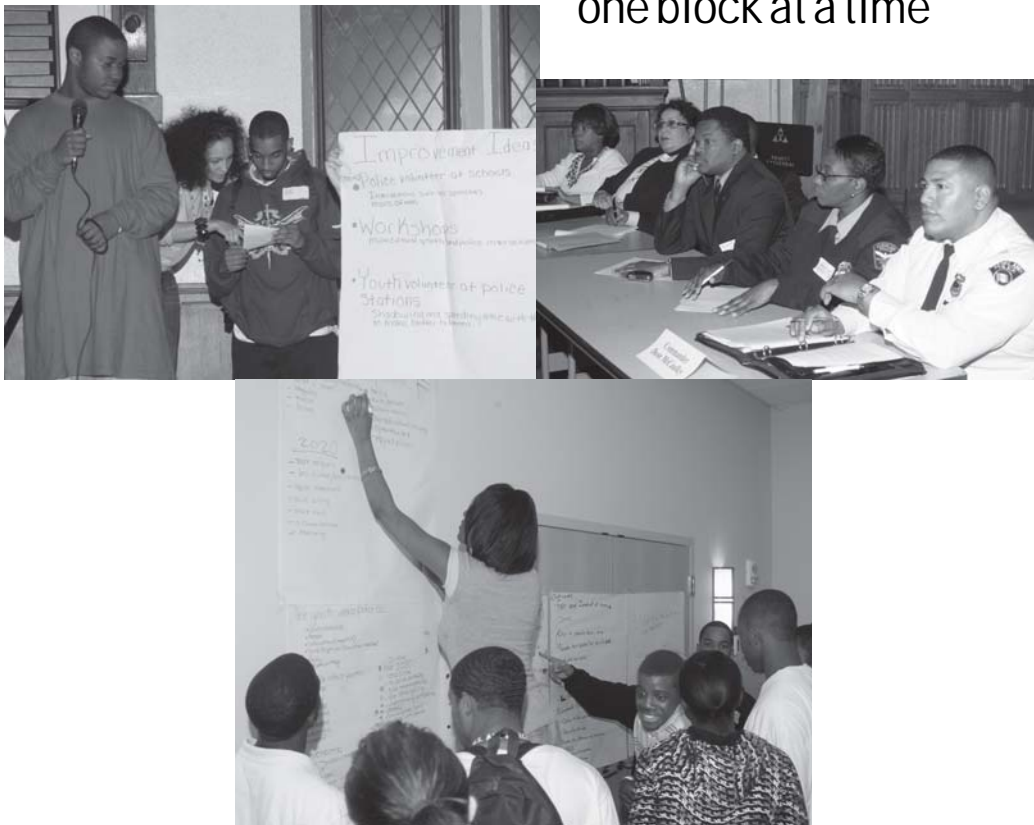


Building bridges between police officers & students...
one block at a time



Planning a youth forum to build positive relations with police

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Introduction

The intersection of youth and justice—and the social change that must take place to align the two—is a major focus of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Throughout our history, we have worked on behalf of future generations to ensure that constitutional protections are extended to all citizens and that those opportunities for education, employment, legal representation and political participation are not denied to anyone.

In particular, the Ohio ACLU has launched a variety of successful programs to educate young people about civil liberties and civic participation, from internships to student rights publications, from classroom speakers to campus clubs.

In our work with young people across the state, we have found that a significant obstacle which limits advocacy for both their community and their civil liberties is the mistrust and lack of communication between themselves and law enforcement officials in their neighborhoods.

Furthermore, statistical evidence shows that inner-city youth, when engaged to provide their own solutions to the obstacles presented by their environment, will seek opportunities for communication between adults and children, with the need for more police involvement highly prioritized.*

To build this kind of engagement, and to provide a forum for dialogue and collaboration between youth and police, the ACLU of Ohio created “My Block,” a program that promotes positive communication between Cleveland youth and police through a day-long conference planned and facilitated by the youths themselves.

Six months of planning and collaboration between the ACLU and the Cleveland Branch NAACP, El Barrio (which promotes self-sufficiency in the Hispanic community), and Catalyst Cleveland (a public schools watchdog group) gave rise to the first My Block. It was a truly revolutionary idea — the first time that students from various backgrounds and different schools were encouraged to join in a dialogue with each other about how to build bridges and improve relationships with law enforcement. The conference was ground-breaking on other fronts also — it represented a unique opportunity for city officials and police officers to dissolve misconceptions and work directly with students to build mutual understanding, solve problems and begin to develop the tools to effect lasting systemic change.

This manual will help you organize a “My Block” conference in your own community, providing all the tools you need to open a dialogue and forge relationships between young people and law enforcement — and ultimately empowering all parties to play an active role in building safe, just, and nurturing communities.

*“Enhancing Their Likelihood for a Positive Future: The Perspective of Inner-City Youth,” Kenneth R. Ginsburg, Penny M. Alexander, Jean Hunt, Maisha Sullivan, Huaqing Zhao and Avital Cnaan, *Pediatrics* 2002;109:1136-1142].



To provide a forum for dialogue and collaboration between youth and police, the ACLU of Ohio created “My Block,” a program that promotes positive communication between Cleveland youth and police through a day-long conference planned and facilitated by young people themselves.

Build the foundation

How the conference works

My Block begins with a keynote speaker who is selected to help frame the factors involved in police/youth relations, followed by a response panel consisting of police officers.

Next, two breakout training sessions are held to help students understand their rights when approached by law enforcement officers and to learn communication strategies to strengthen their voices with elected officials.

After lunch, students break into groups to create an action plan to build police and youth relations. The conference culminates with students presenting their action plan to a listening panel of city and police officials.

Budget

Planning a student conference of this caliber is not cheap, but there are ways you can secure financial support and donated resources. Look for foundations and local companies who might be willing to fund this project. Things you will need to consider: room fee, lunch, student goodie bag items, honorariums, photographer and student transportation.

Choose a date

Before the first committee meeting, secure a date and location for My Block, then work backward to create a timeline. At least six months is required for planning up to the day of the conference. Keep in mind that schools need considerable lead time to get permission from administrators and to select students to participate. It is also a good idea to review the school calendar to ensure there are no scheduling conflicts with testing and district-wide school events.



Find a location

Space and price are significant considerations in scouting locations. In addition, the location should be a neutral space to all parties.

The ACLU of Ohio used a downtown church for My Block. They had enough space to accommodate break-out sessions and the entire group together. Most importantly, the location was neutral for all schools — no one school could claim it as “their territory.” Not surprisingly, some students criticized the location in their evalua-



tions, suggesting alternative sites in their own neighborhoods.

What support do you need to host My Block?

Collaboration is vital to this conference's success. Seek allies in your community who are devoted to bridging the gap between youth and police. Allies can be individual people, the city or non-profit organizations. The ACLU of Ohio recruited a dedicated group of community members willing to give their time and energy to the project. The committee included:

- Two teachers
- A retired police commander
- The NAACP Cleveland Branch executive director
- A representative from El Barrio (an organization assisting Hispanics to achieve self-sufficiency)
- A representative from Catalyst Cleveland (a nonprofit magazine created to document, support and analyze school improvement efforts)
- The commander of Cleveland's Bureau of Community Policing
- Two ACLU staff members

This mix of community members was especially valuable in planning and publicizing the program. Teachers offer ideas about how to connect with schools and promote student involvement. Police department representatives help to gain city-wide support. Nonprofit organizations assist in identifying trainers and speakers, securing giveaways, and will sometimes bring pressure to bear on city officials and others to participate.

Committees function best when goals and roles are defined — for both committee members and the staff supporting them. The group should determine how many students will participate in My Block, for instance, and what outcomes are expected for students and public officials. After goals are set, the committee can focus on building support within the schools and city, as well as offer advice and contacts. The staff can focus on the details that go into a well-run conference.

Getting the city and police involved

Recruit a person from the police department to serve on the My Block planning committee; this person can be invaluable in

getting other city officials to participate. An ACLU staff person reached out to Cleveland's community policing office to launch the collaboration.

Our listening panel was tasked with listening to the students' recommendations and concerns prior to responding. The panel consisted of representatives from the prosecutor's office, city council, Ohio State Highway Patrol, City of Cleveland Community Relations Board, Black Shield Police Association, Hispanic American Police Command Officers Association, Children's Defense Fund, City of Cleveland police chief, a judge and a U.S. representative.

Committee members made personal phone calls to those they knew, and we followed up by mailing a formal letter and then making phone calls.

Pitching My Block to schools

We targeted all 10 Cleveland municipal high schools and limited students to juniors because the follow up would be easier if the students would be in school for another year. Due to budget and space constraints, and the fact that this was a pilot program, we limited the number of students to 100, which meant 10 from each Cleveland high school.

We met with guidance counselors at each high school, who then either took on the project themselves or recommended a teacher with whom we could talk. After presenting the project to their administrators, they obtained permission from their principal to participate. Then, we worked with them to choose students; we asked only that those students be chosen based on their interest in police/community relations, and that their grade point average not be taken into consideration. This helped to ensure that the students present at My Block were a true reflection of Cleveland and that the voices of all Cleveland students were heard.

Teachers or counselors then appointed one student from their school as a block ambassador, who would serve as a student group facilitator the day of the conference.

Block Ambassadors

There is one Block Ambassador representing each Cleveland municipal high school. That individual serves as the group leader and is responsible for keeping the discussion focused and development of the action plan attainable and concrete. Block Ambassadors are trained one day prior to the conference. During the training, Ambassadors learn their role and duties for the conference.

Ambassador training agenda

- Welcome and introductions
- Review of My Block schedule
- Responsibility and role of Block Ambassador and counselor/teacher
- Facilitated discussion, management training

You should:

- Encourage everyone to give ideas, no matter how trivial
- Realize that people have strong feelings toward this topic and try to stay positive, looking toward the future

More specifically, you will:

- Stay on task and on the time schedule given
- Follow the plan given in the facilitator training

Block Ambassador conference questions

One aspect of the MyBlock conference is the breakout sessions. During this time, the Block Ambassadors asked the students questions related to their perceptions of the issue. Students then discussed and recorded their answers to be shared later in the day.

- What issues challenge the relationship between the police and youth?
- If you were police chief or mayor, what efforts would you undertake to improve police relations with youth?
- What role should community leaders play to improve relations between police and youth?
- What are the major perceptions young people have of police? What do you think are the major perceptions police have of young people? What can be done to change each other's perceptions?

Reaching out

A basic letter was used to solicit participation and support from the mayor, police chief, and other law enforcement and community leaders, as well as teachers and counselors. The staff person overseeing all details of My Block should sign the letter. In addition, a fact sheet was included with each letter to provide a quick overview of the conference. It was expected that recipients of the letter might need a brief summary to share with supervisors, administrators, and school principals.



Participation letter

Dear XXX,

On behalf of the Cleveland Chapter NAACP, El Barrio, Cleveland Catalyst, and the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio, we invite the City of Cleveland to take part in a groundbreaking student conference called My Block: Building bridges between police officers and students, one block at a time. My Block will take place on Thursday, April 26, 2007 at Trinity Commons from 10 am-4 pm.

My Block will provide students from various backgrounds, academic development, and perspectives an opportunity to give their recommendations to build relations with police and encourage civic participation. With this conference, we hope to start a dialogue where students not only voice their concerns related to policing in their communities, but also give students the tools to create change via active involvement in civic life. Students who attend this conference will receive training, connect with other Cleveland public schools students, city leaders, police officers, lawyers, judges, and most importantly, provide concrete suggestions for community building for both young people and police officers.

We need a representative from the City of Cleveland to participate in the listening panel portion of the program where students will unveil their action plan for building youth-police relations.

The City of Cleveland representative who attends My Block will have an opportunity to engage with youth in a non-confrontational setting and will gain insight from the students' perspectives on creative way to build youth-police relations.

Meals are provided for the conference. Enclosed you will find an agenda and informational sheet. We do hope that you take advantage of this momentous opportunity. XXX will be contacting you on January 29, 2007 to follow up. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact XXX.

Sincerely,

XX



Fact sheet

- What** Hosting a student conference to provide Cleveland-area youth with a forum to develop and share their recommendations to build relations with police and to encourage civic participation.
- When** Thursday, April 26, 2007 from 8:30 am–3:30 pm
Trinity Cathedral, 2230 Euclid Ave., Cleveland
- Goal** To give 100 juniors from the Cleveland Municipal School District an opportunity to be part of the process in building relations with local police
- Details** My Block will begin with a keynote speaker address, followed by a response panel including students and current police officers. Two breakout sessions conducted by judges and attorneys will help students understand their rights when approached by law enforcement officers and to learn communication strategies to strengthen their voice with elected officials. After lunch (provided), students will break into two groups to create an action plan, based on what they learned in the trainings, to build police and youth relations. The students will end the conference by presenting these ideas to a listening panel, consisting of public officials from the Cleveland Police Department and City of Cleveland. Transportation will be provided.
- Need**
- Recommend 10 students to represent high school
 - Recommend one teacher (preferably from the social studies department) or guidance counselor to represent the high school and accompany students
 - One student of the 10 selected students and the selected teacher will need to attend a training session on Wednesday, April 25, 2007 at 12:00 p.m. at the ACLU of Ohio office, 4506 Chester Ave.
- Benefit** Students and teachers who participate in My Block will actively assist in monitoring and implementation of the recommendations, and they can take the knowledge gained back to the entire student body.



Pre-conference checklist

Once you've picked your date and location, it is time to move on to the specifics. Many small details go into planning a conference. While some duties require more time than others do, they are all of equal importance for the coordination of the program.

Schools

- Meet with guidance counselors to confirm their school can send students
- Confirm which students are attending, along with who is designated a block ambassador, create name tags and coordinate with catering
- Confirm the teacher and block ambassador can attend the facilitator training
- Ask the counselor to have students complete photo release forms
- Make reminder phone calls to tell them when the bus will pick them up
- Assemble student goodie bags

Listening panel

- Get committee to decide who should be on the panel
- Confirm the time listening panel members should arrive at the conference and create nametags
- Get thank you gift and letter together to hand them at the conference

Media/Photography

- Hire photographer for entire conference
- Confirm how to publicize the student conference

Speakers

- Confirm speakers – topics, how long they should talk, interact with students
- Confirm student emcee and coordinate script with bios
- Make sure any honoraria and thank you's are ready
- Create nametags

Food

- Coordinate catering: We used boxed lunches and made sure to offer a vegetarian option

Transportation

- Research bus prices and work with schools to decide pick up and drop off times

Gift bags

Student and teacher goodie bags included:

- "What to do if you're stopped by the police" cards
- ACLU overview sheet
- ACLU button, pen and note pad
- United Way yellow pages (a resource booklet for youth)
- Breakfast bar and water bottle
- NAACP and police material
- Speaker handouts
- Schedule
- ACLU of Ohio teen health and student rights booklets, ACLU speaker's bureau postcards, and ACLU internship information



Plan -- one block at a time

Brainstorm a conference agenda

From ice breakers to role playing, from small group activities to panel discussions, there are a multitude of ways to help individuals relate to each other with the goal of identifying and solving problems. Choose a format that best suits your participants. We chose a fairly traditional format, both for time efficiency and for the comfort level of participants. We began with keynote addresses by a retired police officer and a teacher, each of who discussed the need to move beyond perceptions and stereotypes young people and police officers hold of each other. Next, a panel of two police officers addressed the students. Students then participated in two breakout sessions: "Know your rights: What to do if you're stopped by the police," led by a local juvenile court judge and "Communication strategies: Communicating with elected officials," facilitated by an ACLU staff attorney.

Once the students understood the context of the conference, and armed with information about their own rights and THE tools to communicate with community leaders, they were prepared to create action plans to improve relations between their neighborhoods and the police and encourage civic participation among youth. We concluded the conference with a presentation of their action plans to police and public officials, which we referred to as a listening panel.

Each listening panelist introduced themselves to students, and then a student from each breakout group took the stage to give their group's recommendations.

How do students brainstorm action ideas?

This is probably the most complicated part of the student conference. The task of having students create an action plan requires a great deal of organization. Through our committee, we found someone who guided us through this process - a leadership/workshop facilitator from an organizational development firm.

We had two breakout rooms available and 100 students. Each school had one block ambassador. The day before the conference, during lunchtime, we invited the block ambassadors and their teacher or guidance counselor to a training session. Our facilitator taught them how to lead small group discussions that would focus on predetermined questions and the goal of the conference.

When we created student name tags, we gave each student a letter, which corresponded to which breakout room they should enter and in which group they should be. Each block ambassador had students from different schools, to encourage mingling among schools. Then, the block ambassadors led their small group in a discussion. They took notes on a large note pad. Then, each block ambassador presented the ideas to the entire room. The entire room then voted on the top ideas they wanted to present to the listening panel and which person in the room should present.



Conference schedule

Setup, 7:35 am

- Put name tags on table, in order from what school they come from, and goodie bags
- Set up ACLU literature table and help police or NAACP set up their tables
- Put note pads in each breakout room and in the large room – set them up against the wall
- Put table tents on table for response panel and put other table tents in podium for later panel
- Have extra copies of emcee scripts in podium, as well as some water bottles on tables
- Put before lunch papers on each breakout room to indicate where students should go

Registration, 8:30 am

4 tables – 2 for name tags; 2 for goodie bags, and 3 literature tables in hallway

Registration essentials

Four tables were dedicated to student and teacher nametags, with nametags separated by school. Registration staff had extra nametags in case schools had to substitute a student at the last minute. Across the hall, four tables were set up with goodie bags. Once they received their nametags, they left the registration area to retrieve their bag. This cut down the congestion at the registration tables.

Keynote, 9 am

9 am, Emcee introductions

9:10–9:30 am, Keynote speaker

9:30–9:45 am, Response panel

Round tables with chairs for 125 people. Stage set up with table on left, podium middle, table right. There are three microphones: one at the podium, one to pass among panelists, and one for audience Q&A. After students move to breakout sessions, the platform should be changed to the listening panel arrangement, described below. Lunch set up should also take place at this time.

Break, 9:45–9:55 am

Breakout session I, 10:00–10:30 am

Students will break out into one of two workshops:

- The “Bust Card” workshop: Judge Allison Nelson-Floyd, introduced by ACLU intern Jina Gonzalez
- Communication strategies: ACLU Staff Attorney Carrie Davis (introduced by ACLU intern Antoine McKinney)



Room set up ripple effect/radio wave style. Chairs curved on both sides and speaker in the middle to make it conducive to audience participation.

Breakout session II, 10:35-11:05 am

Workshops repeat so that all students have attended each session.

Lunch, 11:05-11:25 am

Review, 11:25-11:35 am

Emcees give a brief review of what has been accomplished thus far and expectations of the students as they develop the action plan to present to the listening panel.

During lunch, the breakout rooms should be set up for the creating the action plan – below. We should post the after lunch papers to the breakout rooms.

Creating the action plan, 11:35 am-12:25 pm

Students follow their Block Ambassador to a breakout room:

- Block Ambassadors lead their small group discussions
- Each group selects one student to record all comments and suggestions from that particular group on the provided note pad.
- All of the groups in the entire room share their ideas aloud. The Block Ambassadors write the ideas on the easel note pads set up in the room.
- All students put a sticker next to the top five ideas they like, and those will be presented to the conference participants.
- The group decides which student will be the presenter

We used both breakout rooms and the large room. Each breakout room had five groups of seven students and the large room had four groups of seven students. The breakout rooms should have five tables with seven chairs around each table.

Break, 12:45-12:55 pm

Listening panel, 12:55-2:00 pm

Block Ambassadors deliver the action plans created in their small groups to the larger student group and the listening panel consisting of city leaders.

There will be a 6' table on the left, podium center, and a 6' table on the right. The students will get behind the podium and present their ideas to the panelists sitting at the tables.

Closing, 2:00-2:15 pm



Conference checklist

Things to pack for My Block

- Honorariums and thank you cards
- Copies of the schedule
- Nametags for students, speakers, teachers, staff, listening panel
- Table tents for speakers and listening panel
- Letter table tents for tables and breakout rooms
- Goodie bags
- Literature for your organization's literature table
- 2 copies of bios and emcee notes (just in case)
- Notepads for creating the action plan
- Water bottles for speakers
- Vendor Contact information
- Thank you cards for listening panel (including letter, Block Ambassador Contact information, and gift)

Day-of duties

- Set up literature table
- Ensure Table tents for first set of speakers are on the table
- Registration tables (nametags, goodie bags, ushers)
- Greet speakers and such throughout the day
- Usher people into the breakout rooms to stay on schedule
- Ensure catering is prepared for lunch
- After lunch, set up table tents and thank you gifts on the stage for the listening panel
- Write down the students' evaluations at the end of the program

Acknowledgments

We thank the My Block committee who dedicated their time, energy and talent to make this student conference a success:

- Deon McCaulley, Commander of Community Policing
- James Copeland, Shaw High School Teacher and retired East Cleveland Police Department Commander
- Meryl Johnson, Vice President of the Cleveland Teacher's Union
- Daniel Gray-Kontar, Editor of Cleveland Catalyst
- Stanley Miller, Executive Director, Cleveland Chapter NAACP
- Isis Quinones, Program Director, El Barrio

The ACLU of Ohio My Block project team includes: Christine Link, executive director, Shakyra Diaz, education director, and Adrienne Gavula and Melinda Silva, program associates. My Block publications were edited and designed by Ann Rowlett, deputy director.

The ACLU of Ohio staff would be happy to consult with you as you plan your own My Block conference. Please call 216/472-2220 or email contact@acluohio.org.

Special thanks to the national ACLU Racial Justice project for their support of this program.





Appendix A: Breakout Session 1

Know your rights: What to do if you're stopped by police

The purpose of this workshop is to provide broad guidelines on rights when interacting with the police and to empower students regarding their rights and appropriate actions. The exercises are based on the ACLU Bust Card "What to do if you're stopped by police," available at www.acluohio.org. The ACLU of Ohio can send copies for your students and/or offer a speaker on this topic.

Exercise: Option One

Hand out five scenarios to five different students. Each student will read that scenario aloud and the entire classroom or students in the breakout session will discuss.

Scenario 1

The police pulled me over. I don't think I was speeding. I have friends in the car with me. When the officer approaches, what do I do?

- Show them your driver's license, registration and proof of insurance.
- You are always required to provide your name, address or date of birth to an officer.
- If you're given a ticket, sign it. Otherwise you can be arrested.
- Think carefully about your body movements. If you're getting out your wallet and it drops on the ground as the cop is approaching your car. DO NOT PICK IT UP! Keep hands where they can see them.
- Don't get into an argument and don't make statements.
 - Anything you say or do will be used against you and don't give the officer a reason to ask you to step out of the car.
 - Don't tell the officer he/she is wrong or tell them you're going to file a complaint.
 - Don't "bad mouth" the police. It just makes them mad!
 - General Rule: Don't argue your civil liberties with someone holding a gun!
- Remember the officer's badge and patrol car.
- Write down the details of what happened right after the incident (time of day, weather conditions, etc). It is wise to

- keep paper and a pen in your glove box.
- Take photos if you're injured and seek medical attention soon.
- Try to find witnesses and their contact information.

Scenario 2

The police pulled me over and they asked me to take a breathalyzer. Do I have to?

- In Ohio, if you're suspected of drunk driving and refuse to take a blood, urine or breath test, your driver's license is automatically suspended for 6 months.
- If you refuse to take a breathalyzer, an officer can ask you to do a roadside sobriety test and sometimes can take you into the station for a urine or blood test.

Scenario 3

The police pulled me over and he asked to search my car. Should I give him permission? Can he search my car?

- Police may NOT search your car unless they have reasonable suspicion. You should always say that you do not consent to the search, even though you may not resist or interfere.

Scenario 4

I'm at home and a police officer knocks on my door saying my neighbor asked that I turn down the music. He asks if he can come in to look around. Does he have the right to search my house?

- You don't have to admit police into your home unless they have a warrant. The only exception is if someone is yelling help inside.
- Ask to see the warrant!
- They can only search where the warrant states they can.

Scenario 5

The police are arresting me. What should I do?

- You have the right to remain silent and talk to an attorney before you talk to police.
- Tell the police nothing except your name and address
- Within a reasonable time, you can make a local phone call, and the police can listen to this call, unless it's to your lawyer

Exercise: Option Two

Another option using the idea of scenarios is to break students into three groups and have them answer questions related to their scenario.

Scenario 1

- Group 1: Give one student a nametag identifying him/her as Jordan.
The remaining students are standing in front of the corner store with Jordan drinking water.
- Group 2: Give one student a nametag identifying him/her as Toni.
"Toni" sells weed and all his friends know it. The remaining students are standing in front of the corner store with Toni drinking water.
- Group 3: Give each student a name tag identifying them all as Trouble Makers.
All the students have engaged in some sort of harassment of others while standing in front of the corner store, while drinking water.

Give each group 2 minutes to answer this question: How are your group's rights different from the other two groups? Answer: They are not. All the groups are entitled to the same rights, whether they are minding their business, at the wrong place at the wrong time, or engaging in some sort of illegal activity.

Scenario 2

- Group 1: Give one teen a nametag identifying him/her as Jordan.
The remaining teens are standing in front of a corner store with Jordan. Jordan and friends are drinking water, when they are approached by a police officer who asks them to answer some questions regarding their whereabouts the night before. What should you do? What are your rights?
- Group 2: Give one teen a nametag identifying him/her as Toni.
The remaining teens are standing in front of the corner store with Toni drinking water. Toni sells weed and all his friends know it. A few minutes later, the teens get into Toni's car to go to McDonalds when the police stop them and ask to search the vehicle. What should Toni and the passengers do? What are Toni's rights and the passengers rights?
- Group 3: Give one student a nametag identifying him/her as Asa
Give the rest of students a nametag identifying them all as Trouble Makers
All the teens have engaged in some sort of harassment of others while standing in front of the corner store, drinking water. A few minutes later the teens walk over to Asa's house to play videogames. The police come to Asa's house and tell him that they need to come in. What should Asa do? What are Asa's rights?



Appendix B: Breakout Session 2

The purpose of this session is to discuss ways that students can share their experiences from the My Block conference and encourage public officials to support their action plan.

Communicating with elected officials

Meeting with public officials, other local leaders, and their staff **in person** is the best way to communicate your message. They are more likely to listen, take you seriously, and remember your message. It also gives you an opportunity to answer any questions they may have. You can set up a meeting at their local office, or at a coffee shop or other community location. The key is to establish a cordial relationship.

If you can't meet in person, the next best way to communicate is **by phone**. Like an in-person visit, you have a live conversation with the person you are trying to influence. You can engage in a dialogue and answer their questions, and most importantly, develop a positive relationship with them.

Most people communicate with their public officials through some form of **written correspondence – by letter, fax, or email**. Many people prefer to write to public officials, rather than meet with them in person, for several reasons. It takes less time to send an email than to arrange, travel to, and attend a meeting. You can write at any time it's convenient for you, such as when you get home from work or school. Writing your message also gives you the opportunity to find the right wording and edit your message. You don't have to answer any questions you may not have planned for, and you avoid the tension of talking to an authority figure.

Writing to your public officials

Many legislators believe that a letter represents not only the position of the writer but also many other constituents who did not take the time to write. These tips will help increase the effectiveness of your letter.

- **Keep it brief.** Letters should never be longer than one page, and should be limited to one issue. Public officials read many letters on many issues in a day, so your letter should be as concise as possible.

- **State who you are and what you want up front.** In the first paragraph, tell your official that you are a constituent and identify the issue about which you are writing.
- **Hit your three most important points.** Choose the three strongest points that will persuade officials to support your position and explain them.
- **Personalize your letter.** Tell your elected official why this issue matters in her community. If you have one, include a personal story that shows how this issue affects you and your family. A constituent's personal stories can be very persuasive as your public official shapes his or her position.
- **Personalize your relationship.** Have you or your family ever voted or volunteered for this elected official? Are you or your family familiar with her through any business or personal relationship? Did you go to the same school or church or community center? If so, tell your elected official or his staff person. The closer your legislator feels to you, the more powerful your argument is likely to be.
- **You are the expert.** Remember that your public official's job is to represent you. You should be courteous and to the point, but do not be afraid to take a firm position. Remember that often your elected official may know no more about a given issue than you do.

Meeting with your public officials

Meeting with your public officials is a lot easier than most people think. Remember, your public officials work for you!

Before the meeting:

- **Request your meeting** by phone or in writing. Be sure to follow up if they do not respond in a few days.
- **Clearly state the issue you wish to discuss.** Make sure they know that you are a constituent.
- **Prepare for your meeting.** Educate yourself about the issue. Decide who will attend the meeting. Bringing more than five people can be hard to manage. Keep it small, but bring people who represent different groups that have an interest in the issue like parents, community leaders, religious leaders, or school board members.
- **Agree on what to discuss.** It's tough to make a strong case for your position when you are disagreeing in the meeting! If a point is causing tension in the group, leave it out.
- **Plan your agenda.** People can get nervous in a meeting, and time is limited. Be sure that you lay out the meeting beforehand, including who will start the conversation.
- **Decide what you want to achieve.** What is it you want your elected official to do? Provide more funding for a local project? Help change police policies? Asking your public official to do something specific will help you know how successful your visit has been.

During the meeting:

- **Show respect.** Your appearance and presentation should be respectful and appropriate. Do not dress or speak casually. Address the person properly, by their title or “Mr. or Ms. So-and-so.” Be sure you pronounce names correctly.
- **Be prompt and patient.** Public officials run on very tight schedules. Show up on time for your appointment, and be patient — it is not uncommon for officials to be late or to have your meeting interrupted by other business.
- **Keep it short and focused.** You most likely will not have a lot of time for your meeting, usually less than an hour. Make the most of that brief time by sticking to your topic. Bring up any personal, professional or political connections to the elected official that you may have. Start the meeting by introducing yourselves and thanking the legislator for any votes he or she has made in support of your issues, and for taking the time to meet with you.
- **Stick to your meeting plan.** Stay on topic, and support your points with no more than five pages of material that you can leave with your elected official.
- **Give personal and local examples of the issue’s impact.** This is the most important thing you can do in a visit.
- **Saying “I don’t know” can be a smart move.** You need not be an expert on the topic you are discussing. If you don’t know the answer to a question, it is fine to tell your public official that you will get that information for him or her. This gives you the chance to state your strongest arguments, and gives you another opportunity to contact them again about the issue. Never make up an answer to a question — giving wrong or inaccurate information can seriously damage your credibility!
- **Set deadlines for a response.** Often, if a public official hasn’t taken a position on an issue, she will not commit to one in the middle of a meeting. If she has to think about it, or if you are meeting with a staff member, ask when you should check back in to find out what will be done about your request. If you need to get information for them, set a clear timeline for when this will happen. That way, you aren’t left hanging indefinitely.

After the meeting:

- **Compare notes** with everyone in your group to understand what the public official committed to do and what follow up information you agreed to send.
- Each person who attended the meeting should promptly **send a personal thank you letter** to the official.
- **Follow up in a timely fashion with any requested materials and information.** If the public official or staff member doesn’t meet the deadline for action you agreed to during the meeting, ask him to set another deadline. Be flexible but persistent.