

# Research Brief – 102

## Meeting the Needs of Ontario's Youth

45 Charles Street, East, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1S2

Telephone: 416.963.4927  
Toll Free: 1.800.263.2887  
Fax: 416.963.8781  
TTY: 416.963.7905



# Research Brief – 102

## Meeting the Needs of Ontario's Youth

### Background

In early 2006, the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) engaged the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (CEYE) to conduct a study. Its goal was to better understand the current needs of youth in Ontario and identify opportunities to strengthen the impact of OTF granting in this area. CEYE interviewed 24 key informants and grantees. It also conducted an environmental scan, a review of recent publications with an annotated bibliography and an analysis of OTF youth-serving grants. In addition, it consulted with an internal advisory committee of OTF experts.

### What We Learned

#### Defining Youth Engagement

The concept of youth engagement has emerged in recent years as a leading-edge, broad-based approach and best practice to meet the needs of youth, including youth at risk. It is a process that offers:

- Meaningful participation for youth: participation with passion!
- Opportunities for youth to take responsibility and leadership while working in partnership with caring adults who value, respect and share power with them.

At its most successful, the major elements of youth engagement include meaningful participation, sustained involvement, structured activities, connections with caring and supportive adults, and a feeling of ownership and efficacy.

#### The Youth Engagement Spectrum

Youth programming that provides youth engagement is not a fixed approach. It is a spectrum of approaches that are reciprocal, dynamic and interactive. These approaches run the gamut from traditional programs that target young people to programs by youth and for youth. The spectrum includes:

- **Youth-serving** – The program targets youth as consumers of service;
- **Youth input focused** – Youth evaluate or provide feedback on the program;
- **Youth-engaged** – Youth are involved in program development and/or delivery; and
- **Youth-led** – The program concept and/or organization comes from youth.

In addition, some youth engagement programs work to advocate for the adoption of youth engagement practices in other organizations and institutions.

The value of a particular program or group depends upon the degree to which:

- Youth are engaged in the program through meaningful participation;
- The organization supports youth involvement in a meaningful way.

## What We Learned About OTF Granting

**One third of OTF grants benefit youth in Ontario.** The interviews confirmed the wide-ranging extent and effectiveness of OTF granting to youth.

Key informants identified three key strengths of OTF granting to youth:

- OTF's flexibility in programming and grant-making;
- The "start-up funding" provided by OTF grants; and
- OTF's spirit of partnership and existing support to youth engagement initiatives.

## Opportunities for OTF

The study identified the following opportunities related to programming for youth:

- A larger presence and more partnerships with OTF, especially in rural and remote areas;
- Longer term grants;
- Simplified application and reporting processes;
- Including youth in grantmaking decisions;
- More programs and services for youth;
- Greater visibility of, and easier access to, existing programs and services – including travel costs;
- Safe places for young people to gather;
- Engaging activities; and
- Initiatives that address language and cultural barriers.

Youth engagement can play a role in all four sectors that OTF supports and inform OTF granting priorities. The study offers three areas of potential focus for the Foundation:

- A youth engagement approach;
- More arts and culture-based programming; and
- Greater access to mental health services, especially in Northern Ontario and rural areas.

## What OTF Is Doing

**We have adopted Youth Engagement as a best practice.** OTF is developing a Youth Engagement Framework relevant to its granting priorities:

- Across all sectors and priorities;
- Within its own operations; and
- Within volunteer opportunities and recruiting.

This Framework is focusing on how OTF can:

- Support youth engagement in its grantmaking;
- Encourage applications that include a youth engagement approach;
- Increase the number of youth engagement grants, particularly in the North and in rural areas;
- Increase granting to high impact, short-term, higher risk initiatives;
- Work with OTF staff and volunteers to advance youth engagement;

- Look for appropriate ways to increase support for youth travel in grants, especially in Northern and rural areas;
- Influence other funders to adopt youth engagement as a best practice;
- Develop tools to help assess the level of youth engagement; and
- Develop a tool on the OTF website that enables applicants to self-assess their level of youth engagement.

**We are sharing our findings about youth's needs.** OTF has shared the findings of the youth report with OTF staff, volunteers and the public. In addition, OTF has developed an internal tool to share information on youth engagement within the organization on an ongoing basis.

**We are finding meaningful roles for youth at the Foundation.** OTF is exploring options to help more youth participate in all aspects of the Foundation.