

# Political Advocacy Toolkit for Teens



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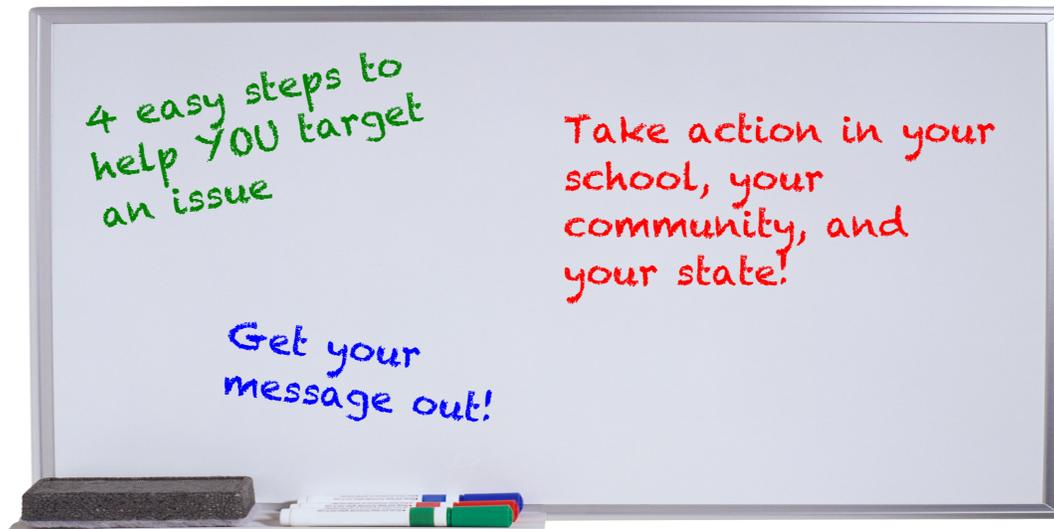
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"The potential of Florida's youth comes from taking the simplistic and beautiful morals of a child and instating them as the practical and admirable qualities of a community."

-Alan Cat, 2012  
Florida Youth  
Commission

## What is Activism?

Activism is taking action in your community to make a positive difference. There is no one way to be an activist; activists vary from location to focus. Activism involves finding a problem or issue that affects your community, state, or even world, and working to fix that problem or address that issue. Activism can involve simply raising awareness by spreading the word and encouraging others to take action, or can involve going to leaders, like mayors, congressmen,

and governors, and asking them to do something to solve a certain problem. Activism can also be working directly to fix a situation in your community; for example, gathering people to tutor students who need help in school. The possibilities for you to get involved are endless.

Activism can be a single effort or a team effort. Although it is (cont.)

## Activism, Cont.

possible to make change alone, there is strength in numbers and your impact grows exponentially when you work with a team. As an activist, it is beneficial to join forces with other activists and community members to promote change. Activism is about more than just a few people doing something; activism is also about connecting the public to make a change for the better, encouraging other people to work together also.

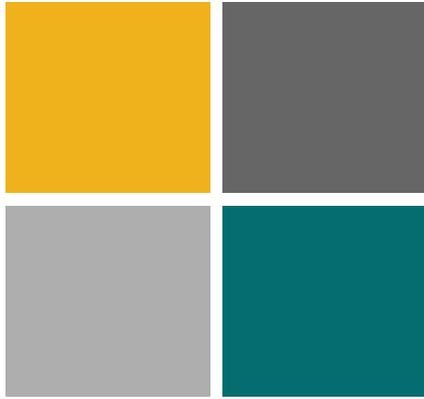


## How can Youth make a difference?

Youth have much power and potential to make a positive impact on other people's lives and their community. Although it can be intimidating to take charge in a world seemingly run by adults, when you take the right steps to making change and show your passion, people will listen. You can make change in your school, community, state, or globe. Change can be made through direct work with people like holding an event at a homeless shelter, or through indirect support by educating the community. Throughout this toolkit, we will provide information on how you can make a change, big or small, and the effective steps to doing so.

**"All youth have enormous potential to improve their communities now, before even reaching adulthood. How you direct your time and talents is up to you, but make sure to find a need or a problem in the community that you are concerned about. Educate yourself and others- the more you know, the more you can do, and you may find that many other people are concerned as well. Working together, all people, and especially youth, can make positive change in the world and for their own lives."**

**-Matthew Morse, 2012 Florida Youth Commission**



## Targeting an Issue

The first step to taking action to improve the lives of others is choosing your cause. Think about what is important to you and where your interests lie. For example, you could be very interested in the environment, so you could start an initiative to promote water bottle usage. Examples that you can take on include youth homelessness, lack of healthcare for children, teen dating violence, infant mortality, poverty, and many more. Educate yourself about issues in your area. Maybe you already know about and have seen a problem in your community you want to fix. Talk with local experts

on issues to find out what problems exist in your community that you might not be aware of.

1. **Brainstorm** - Talk with friends about what issues there are in your committee that could be changed for the better. Brainstorm, and keep your eyes open! You might be suddenly struck with inspiration. You can visit sites like [Dosomething.org](http://Dosomething.org) to view and learn about issues that you could address.
2. **Educate Yourself** - Once you have a few ideas, learn more about these issues or problems and how they affect the lives of people in your community. Research online, look at articles in newspapers and articles, and watch news reports. Online, along with finding articles and information about specific groups, you can find videos and online tools to help you.
3. **Talk with Experts** - If you want to find other ways to take action in your community, consider talking with people in your community who would know about other problems or opportunities to make a positive difference. Examples include local politicians, (mayors, city/county commissioners), religious leaders, teachers, principals, directors of local non-profits, and more. These people work constantly in the community and know the issues first hand.
4. **Get out there!** - See firsthand what organizations are already doing in your area to help others and improve the community. Volunteer and tour local charities, shelters, or other agencies. When you volunteer, talk to the people around you. Ask them what they think could be done to improve your community. These are great ways to learn about projects that are already making a difference, and hopefully come up with some ideas of your own.

When you are thinking about targeting an issue, make sure that you do enough research to be able to answer the following questions:

- *Where* is this problem? Is it in my school? My community? My state? The nation?
- *Who* is this problem affecting?
- *Why* is this happening?
- *What* are the impacts of this problem?
- *What* needs to happen to change this?
- *What* is happening to change this already?
- *How* can I work with others to change this issue?
- *What* can I do to change this?

**Most importantly, choose something that greatly interests or concerns you. You are the one who has to spend the time and effort making the change, and you won't go far when you aren't interested. There are many problems that face our communities, our state, and our nation but we can make a difference! Don't be discouraged, and if you need support, you can contact the Florida Youth Commission.**

### **Engage the entire student body**

To involve all of the students at your school, first plan what project you want the students to participate in, and how the students will participate. With this information, talk with a school administrator (such as the principal) about the project. Permission is important, and by talking with a school leader, you can find ways to better reach out to other students and accomplish your goals.

Common projects that can involve all or most of the students at a school include fundraisers for local charities, canned food (or other necessities) drive, a school carnival to support a certain cause, a school assembly to educate the students about a certain issue (like avoiding texting while driving).

## **Taking Action in Your School**

Your school is a great vehicle for change and taking action. With the support from the students, teacher, and staff, schools have a wealth of resources. In addition, already established clubs and organizations can be very helpful in making a difference. Action in your school can address and target issues related to your school, to the rest of your community, or even the entire state. Below are several different ways that you can get involved in your school.

### **Work with pre-existing clubs or other school organizations**

In most schools, there are already many groups that are established, such as Key Club, National Honor Society, Brain Bowl, ROTC, Band, and many more. These already have a structure and officer, making it easier to engage them with projects. Think about the commonalities between the issue that you want to address and the focus of the club. If you think that there is a good match between your project idea and what the club is doing, talk to the club leaders and propose that you collaborate on a project. It is best to work with a club that you are in as it shows you are committed to an issue, but don't be afraid to work with other clubs or join a new club!

### **Form your own club**

If you see that the issue you want to address has no representation in your school and doesn't match with any other existing clubs, you might want to consider forming your own club. Starting a club takes a lot of hard work and effort, but can be very rewarding. Before starting a club, make sure that you are willing to handle the time commitment and the heavy planning involved. If it sounds good to you, go ahead and get other youth involved. You should also approach a teacher to sponsor your club. Create a mission statement and a focus for the club, and brainstorm potential project ideas to get going.

Once you have your project ideas, your sponsor, and your support, it's time to have a meeting! Gain support and interest for your club by hanging up flyers, telling everyone you know, and posting information on the announcements. The more dedicated members you can get, the greater your impact.

## Other Information & Advice

- Talk with your school guidance department to ask about other issues or problems that might affect students in your school or community, and what you and other students can do about. Guidance is a valuable resource. Maintaining communication and good relations with your school's guidance staff can be very useful.
- Carefully consider the abilities and needs of schools and students in your area. How big is your school? What resources can you use to accomplish projects? What problems may face students in your school (is there a particularly high rate of homelessness among youth)? What can you do, with your school's resources, to solve these problems?
- If you have any questions or if you want advice for a certain project in your school or community, you can contact the Florida Youth Commission. We are happy to help.

## Specific Examples/Ideas

- ***School Food Pantry and Backpack Program:*** Many families struggle to pay the bills and put enough food on the table, often because of unemployment, low wages, or other problems. So some students go hungry, especially on weekends when they do not have access to school breakfast and lunch. One solution is to start a school Food Pantry, where students whose families need help with food can take home a backpack filled with canned food each Friday (and return the backpack Monday, to be refilled and returned to the student the next Friday). Teachers and other students donate food for this program, which would be stored in a secure place, and each week student volunteers would fill up special backpacks or other bags with food, for each student. The backpacks help keep the program anonymous. Work with guidance counselors, teachers, and students to identify students who might need food assistance.
- ***Tutoring Programs:*** This project can work in two ways, at your school and in your community.
  - ❖ Gather a group of students who are willing and able to help other students who struggle with certain subjects. Find a time and place in your school where you can meet each week to tutor other students. Advertise for this tutoring in the school, with posters, signs, and word of mouth. Talk with teachers about the program, and ask them to encourage students who need tutoring to come.
  - ❖ Also, you can gather students at your school who can work as a group to tutor other children in your city or community. There are likely many other schools that need help tutoring students. Also, look for organizations in your community that work with children that need tutors. For example, in Tallahassee the Big Bend Homeless Coalition and Grace Mission work with homeless and low income children. Organizations like these would be grateful for extra volunteers to tutor children.

When tutoring, try to bring any necessary supplies (including textbooks).

## More Examples & Ideas

- **Food/Clothing Drive:** With other students, organize a drive to collect items for people or organizations that need them. You can collect food for a local food pantry, clothing for a local charity, or other items for a reliable organization in need.
  - By collecting items like this, you can help your neighbors who may struggle with poverty, hunger, or other issues.
  - You can organize a collection to help after a disaster; if a series of storms or other natural disasters hit an area nearby, then find a reliable organization that will help, and collect relief items for those affected by the disaster.
  - When you organize these collections, try to make it a school-wide effort, so as many students and teachers can donate as possible. One way to do this is to put large boxes or bags in several teachers' classrooms for the collection, and ask teachers to encourage students to contribute. It is easiest to put these boxes in all classrooms of one type, like all of the English or Math classrooms.
- **Organize a Party:** Do some research to find a local charity or organization that works with children or teens, such as a shelter for homeless youth or a program that helps children with disabilities. Contact them to learn if you can throw a party for the youth, for holidays or other occasions, like the end of the school year. Work with friends or a school organization to host the party; there will be much planning involved. What food will be served, and how? What activities will there be? Who will have what responsibilities? There are many more details to consider, and be sure to share all of your plans with the organization you are working with.
- **Host a Fair/Carnival:** This can serve several purposes. A benefit of working in schools is access to space, restrooms, and other resources. A community fair or carnival involves organizing an event, inviting the public to attend, in order to raise money for a cause, educate people about a certain issue, or provide services.
  - To raise money, find a local charity or project you want to fundraise for. Be sure to advertise that the proceeds will benefit a good cause. Money can be raised through an entry fee to the carnival, selling tickets for various games or events, with silent auctions, etc.
  - To host a fair to educate the public, choose an issue that concerns you and your community, such as driving while drunk, infant mortality rates, how to start a home vegetable garden, or other issues that can be solved simply by a workshop for a few hours.
  - One of the most important uses of a school fair/carnival to have an event that provides services for others, like free medical care. Choose a need the members of your community have (for example, if there is a low income area nearby where some children do not receive adequate dental care), and find out how to help at your school. This project will involve partnering with local organizations and businesses, such as health clinics and dentists' offices.

These Carnivals/fairs generally will take place after school hours, such as Friday afternoon or Saturday. Remember to advertise widely in your area for the event. Note: These types of school carnival/fair projects are a massive undertaking, best accomplished with a large club or school organization. Much planning, work, time, and possibly money will be required. Be sure to approve everything with the school administration.

# Taking Action in Your Community

## Organize a Fundraiser

Holding a fundraiser is a common way to support a cause, and the money raised can be very helpful for the recipient organization. There are many different types of fundraisers, so choose the types that best suit your cause, abilities, and setting. Another note: With fundraisers, you and the participants will not be directly interacting with the people the event will help. For this reason, it may be helpful to invite speakers to the fundraiser who know firsthand how the fundraiser will make a difference.

### *Fundraiser Night at a Restaurant*

This project can yield great profits, though requires partnership with a nearby restaurant (locally or nationally owned). An agreement must be made between the restaurant and your organization that during a certain time (e.g. 5:00 – 8:00 pm) a certain percentage of the profits will go to the cause you are fundraising for. Make sure to advertise for this event, at school and around the community.



### *Walkathon/Race*

The key to a successful walkathon is a lot of notice and many participants. You need to find people who are willing to spend an hour or two on the day of the walkathon (or race), and who will find sponsors in the weeks before the event. That is why lots of notice is necessary: the walkers or runners need to find sponsors willing to contribute money for them to participate, which can take a few weeks. Also, it is helpful to choose a cause or recipient organization that will motivate people to participate (like a charity that helps children with disabilities). The day of the event, the participants should turn in their sponsor packets with checks or money, and then the walk/race should begin, and not take too long—not more than an hour.

### *Auction*

Auction fundraisers are usually silent auctions, where people come to a specified place and bid for items, knowing that the proceeds will benefit a certain charitable organization. The items in the auction can be a number of things: artwork, baskets of goodies, baked goods (fresh, of course), household equipment, or other miscellaneous items with some value. To obtain these items, you and others can find businesses who are willing to provide items for the auction.

### *Dinner*

A relatively easy project, this involves a meal being served at a place in your community; the public is invited, and they are asked either to pay for the meal or contribute a donation, with the proceeds going to the chosen cause. Getting the word out is possibly the most important part; you need many people to attend the event. On the days before they dinner, prepare the meal or have a local business donate the food. The dinner guests should be treated as if they were at a nice restaurant, and the surroundings should be appropriate for the occasion.



## Florida Youth Commission

There are many other fundraisers other than the ones listed here. Talk with individuals and organizations in your community for more ideas for successful fundraisers. Keep in mind, the ideas listed above can be combined. For example, a dinner could be hold with a silent auction while entertainment is being played.

### Organize an awareness event

Awareness events are meant to educate the public or specific groups (like students) about an issue somewhere in their school, community, or world. An awareness event should contain certain key points:

1. What the issue/problem is
2. What is being done to solve the problem
3. How the audience can take action

Awareness events should be fun, lively, and interactive, in order to keep your audience's attention. These events should usually not last more than a few hours, and usually awareness events are come-and-go as you please. It is important to consider where (inside, outside, etc.) and how much space you will have. At these types of events, consider including the following:

- Speakers- especially people with firsthand experience with the issue
- Interactive "exhibits"- Such as tables where attendees can learn about the issue, talk to an expert, and/or sign letters, petitions, or in other ways be involved.
- Chairs, benches, and tables for people to sit at
- Restroom access
- Food/Drinks
- Trash cans
- Music
- Pamphlets and other information about the issue for attendees to take with them

representatives, and other elected officials asking them to take action about a certain issue. Be specific in what you ask; for example, ask for the leader to support or oppose a certain bill or law that relates to the issue at hand. Also, you can visit the offices of your elected leaders and talk with them or their staff about the issue. To learn more about getting involved on the statewide political process, see the "Taking Action in the State" section.

### Entertainment or Performance

This can be done with the dinner fundraiser. Choose a location and time where some sort of entertainment will be provided (a play, dance, musical group, or something else). Advertise in the community, telling what the fundraiser is for. It is best to find a group to perform that is either popular locally that will appeal to the audience that attends the event (for example, ask a band of high school students to play at an event with a mostly teenage audience). Try to find entertainment that is free (because it will be for a charity or other good cause, this won't be too hard). Another idea is simply to ask a group of very young children to perform music or a play for their parents (like for a church event) and ask the attendees to donate. Parents love to watch children perform, no matter what the quality.

### Other actions

*Community Volunteer Day:* This is a day when people are encouraged to volunteer for a certain cause or causes. Rather than donate money or material goods, this simply calls for people to spend some time serving others working with specific non-profits. For example, you could have "Action Against Hunger Volunteer Day" when members of the community are encouraged to volunteer at local organizations that help fight hunger, like a food pantry. Advertise well and get written commitments from people to ensure their participation.

*Become Involved in Local Government:* Is there an issue that is affecting your community or county concerns you but you don't know how to take action? Perhaps the answer is to become involved in the political process. Throughout our nation's history, citizens have called on their elected leaders to take action on a certain issue, and this has been an important means of progress. Assemble a group together, and call upon the community, to write letters to your mayor, commissioners, senators,

# Taking Action in the State

## Background on Florida Government

Florida's government is headquartered in Tallahassee, the capital city. The state government, like the national government, is made of three branches: the executive branch, which is responsible to making final decisions and overseeing government; the legislative branch, which is responsible for creating laws; and the judicial branch, which is responsible for interpreting laws.

- **The Executive Branch** of Florida is similar to the national executive branch. Rather than a president, Florida is led by the governor, elected once every four years. The governor shares power with his cabinet, which consists of three elected officials; the Chief Financial Officer, the Attorney General, and the Commissioner of Agriculture. The governor appoints his executive agency heads, like of Commissioner of the Department of Education or the Secretary of the Department of Children and Families, as well as many other important government officials.
- **The Legislative Branch** is responsible for making the laws of the State of Florida. It is composed of two houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives. The state of Florida is divided into 40 Senate Districts and 120 House of Representatives Districts. In each district, an official is elected to represent the district in the State Legislature. Senators are elected to four-year terms, and Representatives are elected to two-year terms.
- **The Judicial Branch** is made of the courts and judges. There are several levels of the courts, including the county courts, the circuit courts, the district courts, and the Supreme Court. Each county has a county court, totaling to 67 courts. There are twenty judicial circuits and five judicial districts which house courts. The Florida Supreme Court is the highest power in the Florida Judicial system. The governor appoints seven judges to the Florida Supreme



### *Changing the law*

You may think that only Senators and Representatives in the Legislature have the power to create new laws, but in actuality, the power is in YOUR hands. Senators and representatives are elected and are expected to represent the wants and needs of their constituents. Anyone can get involved in the Legislative process, and can truly make a difference in doing so!



## The Basics

**Congress** creates bills. Bills can create new laws or amend current laws. A bill is formed when a Senator, Representative, and/or the public address an issue that they believe should be passed into law. A bill must pass through the House and the Senate before it gets to the governor who then has to power to veto or pass the bill into Florida law.

The **Legislature** creates new laws and changes old ones with bills, which are ideas for laws that anybody can submit. A bill can be about changing driving rules, creating laws to protect public areas, or any other matter that is important. For a bill to pass and become a law, it is first given to either the Senate or the House of Representatives. A committee of legislature members looks at the bill; if they approve of the bill, the bill is voted on by that entire group (the Senate or the House). If the bill passes, it moves on to the other part of the legislature. So if the bill is presented first to the Senate, it will next go on to the House of Representatives. Throughout this process, the bill can be “amended”, or changed slightly. If the bill is passed by both the House and Senate, then it goes to the Governor. The Governor can then let sign it and make it law or veto the bill and stop it from passing.



## How can YOU get involved?

**Communication** Email, mail, call, Facebook, Tweet, or fax your local senators and representatives about an issue you believe should be addressed, or about a current issue. Let the people who represent your wants and needs know what exactly your wants and needs are. Below here are websites where you can find your local representative or senator to contact:

<http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/>

[http://www.senate.gov/general/contact\\_information/senators\\_cfm.cfm?State=FL](http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm?State=FL)

**Media** Media can be used to make or break anything, so use it to your advantage. Not only do you have to voice your wants and needs to lawmakers, but you must also let it be known to the public. If there isn't enough support about an issue, chances are that lawmakers will ignore the issue and address an issue where more constituents are fired up about. So if you want to make a difference, then spread your idea. Use Facebook, Twitter, school, pretty much anything that will express your idea or issue to the public and see how people respond. It can be done, the question is, are you willing to do it?

## How can YOU get involved?

Getting your message out there is so very important. Want to know something cool? It is one of the easiest things to do! The only items needed to get the news out there is you! There are many ways in which you can get your message out there.

Here are some ideas for getting your message out:

- Use Facebook, Twitter, and Social Media
- Create a PSA and put it on your school's announcements
- Reach out to local news, newspapers, and other forms of media.
- Talk to different schools about your efforts.
- Post flyers in workplaces.

The more people that talk about your project the better!! By spreading word around about your project, you can create a movement.



# FLORIDA YOUTH COMMISSION



The Political Advocacy Toolkit for Teens  
is brought to you by:

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