

## **Sister Circle Students Voice their Opinions on Youth Participation**



**We collected**  
data from 99 youth  
sports administrators  
and 20 female high  
school students.

**Our findings**  
may assist emerging  
nonprofits implement  
young women's initiatives  
within low-income  
communities in a more  
efficient capacity

### **Key Factors for Increasing Student Engagement**

- ✓ Nondisruptive Programming
- ✓ Trust Building
- ✓ Peer Support



## Sister Circle Students Voice their Opinions on Student Participation

Written by Donald Curtis and Yun Simpson

June 17, 2019



On January 26, 2019 we partnered with DC's Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and the Student Athlete Project to facilitate the *Sports for Girls Networking Conference*. Approximately, 99 administrators from 48 girls' and women's focused sports organizations shared their challenges with participant engagement and operational sustainability.

Their data highlighted 10 areas of programmatic concern, the five most reported challenges were Youth Engagement, Human Capital, Fundraising, Data Collection [Programmatic], and Collaboration [with other sports-based organizations]. This report focuses on their concerns with Youth Engagement. Our recommendations emerge from data collected from our Sister Circle program.

Sister Circle was established in 2016 as a study hall for young girls. The program evolved into a safe space for girls to discuss nonacademic concerns, ultimately creating a complementary in-school destination for social and emotional youth development. The young ladies meet once a week during their school lunch hour. We collaborate with other community-based organizations to facilitate workshops and off-campus exploratory observations.

**Scenario:** A presenter from an emerging nonprofit visited Sister Circle to facilitate a workshop for 15 girls. The students love the presenter and the emerging nonprofit's mission. The presenter offered the girls an opportunity to engage in a Saturday activity facilitated by their nonprofit. In the moment, every girl enthusiastically expressed interest in participating in this Saturday activity with that emerging nonprofit. After about three weeks, the students were granted the opportunity to participate in the proposed Saturday activity. A couple days before the activity, every girl lost interest in

participating in this activity. We were interested in learning the cause(s) of such a drastic swing in student interest in the course of 21 days. We assumed the obvious, 3-weeks was too long a wait, that is why the students lost interest. We were wrong!



### Key Findings:

In addition, these findings may assist emerging nonprofits implement young women's initiatives within low-income communities in a more efficient capacity.

Recently Yun Simpson, program manager, Women's Initiatives [at SOUL], conducted exit interviews with approximately 20 high school girls. These girls participated in our Sister Circle program and attend one of the two DC- Ward 7 high schools where Sister

Circle is facilitated. Students were asked questions related to student satisfaction and program delivery. We asked students if we should change Sister Circle programming times (from lunch time to an in-class layout) and increase the number of weekly sessions. In addition, they were asked if they prefer us opening the Sister Circle sessions to more students. Yun discovered our students preferred lunch time programming opposed to out-of-school\* time programming.

- ✓ Non-Disruptive Programming via Lunch Time programs: The Sister Circle students expressed a preference for participating in lunch time programs. One girl shared, *"lunch time programs provides a break from the turbulent school day."* Another student claimed that during the weekend she can find other safe spaces, which meet her specific needs. Students also claimed the programs that interrupt their class schedule add more stress on them. Those interruptive programs negatively impact their academic performance; they academically fall behind.
- ✓ Trust Building: Girls agreed that a nonprofit should have a consistent person, dedicated to creating a safe space for them to engage. This positively influences the likelihood of the girls participating in out-of-school time or weekend programs with a nonprofit. In SOUL's case the girls have verbally express how they would like to engage with Sister Circle during out-of-school time for the 2019-2020 academic year with Yun.

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## Insight Report: Sister Circle Review

- ✓ Peer Support: The girls expressed a reluctance to recruiting new girls into Sister Circle after the program has started. The students are interested in creating genuine relationships with their peers. *"We are on this journey together. We don't want uncommitted girls. Girls who are on, then off, then back on this journey."* There is a thirst for connectivity. An example, we observed the girls encouraging their peers to attend the weekly session. Yun witnessed one girl expressed to the group her desire for the group to deepen their relationships within the peer group.

**Relevance of Our Findings:** We are meeting with many new social entrepreneurs and change agents who want to create youth engagement programs. Most of these individuals have expressed an interest in facilitating out-of-school time programs for low-income youth. Our data suggest it is difficult to engage this target audience without building trust. Youth from low-income communities are constantly approached by youth developers about a new enrichment opportunity. What separates the well-intentioned emerging nonprofit from the next? We believe it is the ease of accessibility and the perceived value each young person places on the people connecting with them. Although the data we collected addresses youth engagement at the surface level, these findings can save a nonprofit thousands of dollars and time spent trying to understand why their targeted youth are not attending the well intentioned out-of-school time program.

### Our Suggestions:

**Emerging Nonprofits:** We suggest emerging nonprofits that are interested in empowering low-income youth, especially organizations focused on serving young women, consider implementing their initiatives as a complementary youth enrichment opportunity within a larger youth service provider structure; i.e., schools, recreation centers, nonprofits, churches, resident councils, child and family services, etc. By integrating the youth initiative within an existing youth service provider's structure, the emerging nonprofit can be more strategic in its program delivery. This includes providing services in a more accessible manner and begin the trust building process with administrators, families, and youth for long-term sustainability.

**Established Nonprofits:** We suggest that established nonprofits whom are experiencing challenges with sustaining student participation consider partnering with smaller youth service providers whom have built strong relationships with the desired community. When integrating a youth initiative within an existing youth service provider structure,

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we suggest that the youth enrichment opportunity enhance (simplify) and not disrupt the existing youth provider's service delivery processes. Over the duration of the collaboration, operational and/or programmatic modifications will inevitably occur; it's called evolution or innovation. It is encouraged that the nonprofit leader approach the potential partnership from a position of curiosity and deep understanding of the social concern. The goal is to build trust with all stakeholders allowing the administrators, students, and families to share their perspectives and intent. Do not alienate the established stakeholder community with theoretical jargon. Allow the stakeholders to help you modify your service offerings to meet the needs of the target community. This will ensure student participation and minimize administrative distrust, which can develop if the collaboration feels one-side.

### Endnotes

\*Out-of School Programs: Out of School Time (OST) is a supervised program that young people regularly attend when school is not in session. This can include before- and after- school programs on a school campus or facilities such as academic programs (e.g., reading or math focused programs), specialty programs (e.g., sports teams, STEM, arts enrichment), and multipurpose programs that provide an array of activities (e.g., 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs). Division of Population Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/ost.htm>

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