Cities and villages are starting to take advantage of one of their most abundant resources, previously underutilized: their youth. Today’s youth are as engaged as any generation before it, participating in social and political activism both online and in-person. However, while today’s teenagers are just as, if not more, interested in changing our political landscape, it has been only until recently that municipalities have begun taking advantage of their vast potential. These municipalities have found that youth participation brings a new perspective on what is needed to improve the community.

A potential reason for this dismissiveness of municipalities overlooking their youth constituents may be due in part to an apparent low interest in government by its youth demographics. However, as shown by mass public movements orchestrated by teenagers, this is in fact not a disinterested population. Rather, today’s youth are merely uninformed as to the ways they can involve themselves locally. Investing in civic education for today’s youth is not only a foundation of good governance – but will, in turn, provide municipalities with willing, insightful new perspectives on how to provide for the betterment of the community.

What is Civic Engagement?
Professors Barry Checkoway and Adriana Aldina of the University of Michigan School of Social Work suggest that civic engagement is instrumental to a healthy democratic society – a society that is ever changing and ever growing. They define civic engagement as “a process in which people take collective action to address issues of public concern.”
Under this definition, civic engagement can be looked at broadly, including initiatives to organize, participate, and advocate before city, village, and other community agencies, organizations, and boards.

Youth.gov, a collaborative federal working group specializing in youth programs, suggests that civic engagement also includes “developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make the difference.” According to the group, four constructs are integral to forming civic engagement: civic action, civic commitment (duty), civic skills, and social cohesion. These constructs are interrelated and are all connected as the tenets of civic engagement – working to make a difference in the lives of one’s community. These constructs are the benchmark to establishing and developing the combination of skills and knowledge necessary to make that difference.

Authentic Youth Civic Engagement
National League of Cities (NLC), the oldest and largest national organization of municipal government in the United States, created the Youth, Education and Families (YEF) Institute to help local leaders create meaningful interactions with children and their families within the community. The YEF Institute developed a framework for what they refer to as Authentic Youth Civic Engagement (AYCE). The National League of Cities feels that successful implementations of AYCE by local governments acts as a catalyst for community improvement.

NLC suggests that there are four elements of AYCE: a setting where the civic climate of the community is welcomed and supported; a structure where the organization and system that supports AYCE meet both the youth and community needs; a strategy to develop meaningful opportunities for local participation; and, finally, support from adults, both within and outside of the local government.

These four “S” elements of AYCE are all interrelated and es-
sential steps to creating civic engagement. They reflect the YEF’s central belief that young people are: valuable participants in the work of local government; prepared to take on meaningful roles in addressing relevant issues; and willing to work in partnership with adults who respect and support them.

Benefits of Creating Authentic Youth Civic Engagement
Using this framework for Authentic Youth Civic Engagement, NLC has documented numerous benefits to these municipalities that have invested in improving youth participation.

- **Budget savings and better use of resources.** Including input about youth’s interests can help local departments optimize both staff and financial resources directed towards youth services. By understanding these interests, local leaders can redirect municipal funding away from programs that they find have less interest.

- **Leadership opportunities.** By participating in the planning process, young people become instilled with a new sense of leadership skills and knowledge. These skills are crucial towards crafting leaders of the future.

- **Increased support for municipal initiatives.** By partnering themselves with the local government, youths and their parents become more receptive to government processes. City Councils and Village Boards that have reached out to youth have found them to be an important constituency in promoting change.

NLC also indicates that municipalities engaging in youth-based civic engagement have increased youth exposure to potential careers in government, and become models for other communities looking to create a youth-friendly community.

Implementing AYCE: Think Nationally, Act Locally
An educated and informed electorate is a hallmark of our electoral system. Justice Louis Brandeis once remarked, “The only title in our democracy superior to that of President [is] the title of citizen.” This observation demonstrates the great importance placed upon being a citizen in our country. While we often don’t realize it, we can view every one of us like Atlas, carrying the weight of the country on our shoulders.

However, despite this great importance placed on being a citizen in the national context, the focus of AYCE and other civic engagement techniques is structured at the local level. The core elements of these programs are centered on youth in a community-based setting, to address local issues, to achieve local interests, supported by local leaders. Every aspect tailors to the idea that the most authentic forms of civic engagement must root themselves in local structures. For this reason, municipalities that are interested in promoting civic engagement may want to first focus on what is immediately affecting their community.

From Civic Introduction to Civic Engagement
A quintessential civic engagement program should start young. A strong belief of civic engagement is that good government begins by inspiring young children and fostering those values up through adulthood. These actions are most effective if forged in partnership with schools to provide children access to their local government, ideally providing them with unique opportunities that demonstrate what it means to be a part of the city or village, and what makes working in local government so fulfilling.

This model would begin with an introduction to civics and gradually build to civic engagement. While perhaps less structured than addressing only one aspect of engagement, municipalities dedicated to an incremental approach of developing youth at a young age through adulthood, will find they have created higher levels of authenticity, and will provide for a greater pool of potential civil servants when called to serve.

A civic introduction approach to educating youth starts with inspiring elementary schoolers’ interest in political topics. In a joint effort with schools, local officials can introduce topics to students covering the basics on: civics, differences between local and state or federal government, and what government exactly does for people. These conversations should be interactive when possible. Children can hold mock elections or play games dedicated to political education online. Mayors and municipal officials interested in joining students in the classroom may reference NYCOM’s “Local Leaders in Local Government” Classroom Kit. For more information visit NYCOM’s website to refer to our “Mayor’s Check List” and print out the “Fun Sheet” to bring for a classroom visit.

Building on this introduction to civics, educators and local officials could then move on to civic encouragement. During civic encouragement, programs should become a little more defined, focusing on particular areas of government. Topics could include taxation, political systems, civil rights, and checks and balances within government, helping the students to begin to fully understand how local government works, and how it differs from federal and state government. Encourage youth to start diagnosing problems they see within the community. Mayors and local officials may also prompt eighth-grade students to write about these problems and how they would solve them in NYCOM’s annual “If I Were Mayor I Would...” contest.

Once the students are high school age, municipalities can pair with educators to move beyond a lecturing on civics. While continuing to teach government, focus can shift more outside of the classroom by instilling an appreciation and desire for youth to involve themselves in local government. Municipalities now have the chance to employ the youth’s potential to grow, and reimagine, the political landscape of their community.
Best Practices
Across the state, municipalities have developed several ways to best foster civic engagement in their youth. These programs are critical for exposing youth to real experiences in local government, building upon the education they had formally received.

One practice used by cities and villages throughout New York State is hosting field trips to their respective city or village halls. Cities like Binghamton9 and Buffalo10 have hosted schools and youth organizations, touting their City Halls as the guiding symbol of local government. While relatively simple, school visits have the potential to instill in youth a greater understanding of a local government’s mission. A good class trip should have students leaving having felt they learned more about the history of their community. A tour of City/Village Hall is a quick step to instantly developing a lasting impact on the interest of youth.

Municipalities can also engage youth outside of school. Some cities offer programs during the summer to engage children while they are off from school. The City of Albany offers a “Summer Youth Employment” LIGHT (Learning, Initiative, and Gaining Headway Together) Program.11 The program is designed to provide teenagers in Albany with work experience, identify youth with career interests and good work habits, and provide a source of income to youth. The job runs five days a week, for five weeks in July and August, and on the fifth day of each week the program provides youth with an “enrichment day.”12 These days are planned with events like financial literacy workshops, career exploration workshops, tours of UAlbany, and a “Know Your Rights” workshop by the Albany Police Department and Center for Law and Justice. Programs like Albany’s LIGHT encourage civic and work skills development in the summer, building on the civic education students receive during the school year.

Another growing trend among municipalities is to create a Youth Council, or Youth Advisory Council. The purpose of Youth Councils is to prepare young people to become civic leaders while using their input to generate effective change now. While often similar, each municipality must decide for themselves how to run their councils, including: who will oversee the youth council; how many members it will have; and how to select or appoint members. Most youth councils meet once or twice a month, and report to the legislative body on improvements they feel are necessary or updates on programs they currently are providing. Youth Councils are becoming increasingly popular among municipalities because they provide a means of collecting relevant input and actively engaging a subset of the population. Conversely, youth may be eager to join the council to express their concerns as well as potentially highlight their participation on their college and scholarship applications. Cities and villages all across New York have begun to develop youth councils, with cities like Ithaca,13 Middletown,14 Syracuse15 as just a few of the already established councils active in New York State.

Conclusion
Today’s youth are one of the greatest possible resources to municipalities, and yet, too few local governments have begun to utilize their youth population to their greatest potential. Using the AYCE framework established by NLC, we encourage our members to consider implementing and expanding civic engagement programs to facilitate opportunities for youth in their communities to become involved. Using this framework, municipalities should address local issues and local solutions to including youth in government. Efforts to partner with local schools will allow greater opportunities to raise civic awareness and interest among children. Once children are introduced to and educated in civics, then municipalities may find it easier to explore possible opportunities in involving youth.

Each municipality is unique, and no one plan is the answer for all. Cities and villages can build off any of the already established practices for civic engagement, or explore new avenues for engaging their youth. In either instance it’s important to keep in mind that by crafting local programs today, you are jumpstarting the path for tomorrow’s leaders.

For more information relating to Civic Engagement and Youth Participation, please reference NYCOM’s “Youth in Government” section at www.nycom.org, or by calling NYCOM at (518) 463-1185.

Endnotes
5. Id.
6. Id.
12. Id.
15. City of Syracuse Youth Advisory Council (n.d.) City of Syracuse http://www.syrgov.net/YAC/.