

# EMPOWERMENT

Youth movements following a youth empowerment model are the reason for many successful efforts within the tobacco control community. Youth are involved in all aspects of their tobacco control programs, from the early planning to actually bringing the programs to life. They have developed effective messages that have motivated thousands of youth across the country to take action in the fight against tobacco. It is their creative input and a peer-to-peer messaging system that has allowed for the anti-tobacco industry message to resonate with so many youth throughout the movement. They are not only designing messages that work, but also spreading them far and wide through advocacy events, activism, viral marketing and word of mouth. They have done whatever it takes to get their message out and recruit new advocates and leaders to sustain the tobacco control movement.

Empowering teens to take the lead in their programs is the key to success. Strong youth and adult partnerships help create an important balance within these programs. Youth are often not used to having so much decision-making power. It is a positive change to have youth involved in the decision-making process and responsible for really making things happen. Adults are also often unaccustomed to handing over responsibility to young people. Strong partnerships between youth and adults establish a balance in which they each understand their role and work together to accomplish their goals.

Comprehensive tobacco prevention programs with a strong youth empowerment component have contributed to amazing reductions in youth smoking. For example, in Ohio, smoking rates dropped forty-five percent in high schools just four years after they launched a comprehensive program with a strong youth-led campaign. In Wisconsin, smoking among high school students went down thirty percent in four years. Smoking among high school students in New York went down by thirty-two percent in four years. West Virginia and Washington State have also achieved dramatic declines in youth smoking rates using similar, youth-driven approaches.

Although statistics can show how effective the youth empowerment model is, the true test is in talking to youth who are in the thick of it. Here is what they have to say:

Youth are crucial to the movement because youth, and only youth, can mesh the passion and voice of one generation to make change, both policy and social norm, that affects all generations.  
– Malavika Srinivasan, Xenia, OH

It is up to us, the youth of this world, to make something out of what we believe.  
– Pete Yakovich, Price, UT

Now, more than ever youth are stepping up to the plate in an adult world. We are creating radio public service announcements, helped pass state laws, writing letters to the editor and more. We are showing adults and other youth that we all can work together in a partnership to fight Big Tobacco. We need to encourage youth empowerment because youth bring a different perspective to the table.  
– Kaitlyn Reilly, Dover, NH

