

Training Tomorrow's Leaders

Youth Leadership program helps students speak up, build skills.

BY CHRISTINE CLAPP, DTM

Andrew Peter Bennett, DTM, is District 71's adviser on Youth Leadership. In that role, he advocates strongly for the Toastmasters Youth Leadership program (YLP), saying he has seen young participants benefit in many ways from it.

"I have come to the conclusion that it is one of Toastmasters' hidden treasures," says Bennett, a member of two clubs in London, England.

Indeed, the eight-session program is popular with parents and educators to help students under age 18 develop "communication and leadership skills so that they may become tomorrow's leaders in business, industry and the community."

The YLP sessions are typically held once a week or every other week, and they last one to two hours. They resemble a typical Toastmasters meeting, with a format that includes impromptu speeches, prepared speeches and evaluations. The final session is a showcase event for participants to demonstrate their newly acquired skills for family members, friends, teachers, mentors and community members.

Success stories abound. Take Angelina Zhou, for example, who recently completed a YLP program at the American Chinese School in Herndon, Virginia. Angelina has always struggled with

shyness, says her mother, Rebecca Huang. The Toastmasters program helped with that.

"She used to have 'does not participate' as one of her weaknesses from [the time of her] pre-school teacher's review all the way to her sixth-grade teacher's review," Huang says. "This weakness is gone from her grade 7 review."

YLP graduate Rachel Dunn, now 21, participated when she was a high school student at Gilroy Catholic College near Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. After her experience in the program, and with encouragement from her program coordinator, Rachel presented as part of a youth showcase at a Toastmasters conference and also at a youth leadership contest. The early development of her speaking skills was a sign of things to come: Rachel went on to earn a bachelor's degree in communications from the University of Western Sydney and is pursuing a career in the performing arts.

For Toastmasters who conduct the Youth Leadership program, the experience is highly rewarding. "It's a wonderful feeling to see





Home-schooled students ages 9 to 17 honed their listening, thinking and speaking skills in a Toastmasters Youth Leadership program held near Great Falls, Montana.

a child improving in eight weeks,” says Allena Wesley, DTM, of Landover, Maryland. She coordinated the District 36 Speechcraft and Youth Leadership programs in the early 1990s. “You know you have been able to give them some encouragement and see that they were able to absorb what you were trying to teach them.”

Sarah Rollins, CTM, program coordinator of a Youth Leadership program in Great Falls, Montana, says, “It was inspirational to watch the students grow their confidence and leadership skills that will help them throughout their life!”

Getting Started

A local club can sponsor a YLP if it can find up to 25 interested participants, usually middle or high school students. Many clubs pair with area youth organizations (such as Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts, Key Club, 4-H, etc.), local schools, homeschooling associations, community centers, after-school programs and religious youth groups to recruit participants. Other clubs

extend enrollment to youth in the community at large and publicize the YLP widely to attract participants.

The club provides the members needed to present the program, including the coordinator. The *Youth Leadership Program*

“It’s a wonderful feeling to see a child improving in eight weeks.”

— Allena Wesley, DTM

Coordinator’s Guide (Item 802), which is available in the Toastmasters Online Store, offers information on how to organize and present the program. Other YLP materials like workbooks and certificates for participants are also available on the online store.

The program is tailored to the many young people who can benefit from improved communication skills. Participants learn to apply the principles of better listening, thinking and speaking.

Tips for YLP Coordinators

Are you ready to coordinate your first Youth Leadership program? Do you want to make your next one better? Here are tips on coordinating a successful program.

1 Limit the number of participants. Some coordinators say 10 is ideal, others recommending having 12–15 participants. Almost all agree that 25 (the maximum allowed by Toastmasters) is too many. Whatever your number, make sure you have enough time to listen to speeches and provide thorough feedback. If you have a large group, consider breaking it into two smaller ones that go through the program concurrently.

2 Have fun. Remember, kids have a short attention span. So don't make your meetings too serious. Incorporate fun, exciting activities and speech topics that motivate your participants. The *Youth Leadership Program Coordinator's Guide* provides session guidelines that you can implement creatively.

3 Be flexible. Avoid setting unrealistic expectations for YLP participants. Seasoned coordinator Jimmy Thai, DTM, warns, "Be ready to work with overachieving kids with a lot of homework, sports practices, school clubs, part-time jobs, and distractions." Don't get upset if a participant misses one meeting. Help him or her get caught up and encourage attendance at the next session. "You are there to plant a seed," says Thai.

4 Get creative with your showcase. While creativity is a hallmark of successful YLP coordinators in general, it is particularly important when it comes to session eight, the final meeting, when graduates showcase their newfound communication and leadership skills to family members, friends and community members.

For example, Thai has turned the showcase into a competition where speakers tout a charity of their choice. Thai and his YLP assistant each provide \$50 of their own money to the two showcase winners, who then donate the money to the charitable organization about which they spoke.

Michele Noel-Peake, ACB, ALB, and Tammeca Riley, CC, allow their YLP participants to set the theme of the showcase. A recent group planned a "Hollywood Superstars" banquet, complete with red carpet and "celebrity interview" interludes between speeches.

5 Consider making it a tradition. Many clubs have made a tradition of sponsoring a YLP once or twice a year. Take, for example, the alliance between the Hills District club in Arana Hills, Queensland, Australia, and a nearby high school, Gilroy Santa Maria College. Since 1982, when Barry Haywood, ATM, coordinated the first YLP at Gilroy College, the club has sponsored a program there every year.

More than 30 years later, Haywood still returns to the YLP showcase, although Hills District members John Colebatch, ATMG, CL, and Alan White, ACS, as well as others, have taken over the coordinating responsibilities in recent years. The program is such a strong tradition at Gilroy College that teacher Alex Wilson, who serves as the school's YLP representative, participated in the program when she was a student there



Kendra Lundby, right, a ninth-grade student in Montana, receives an award from Sarah Rollins, CTM, program coordinator of the Youth Leadership program.

Michele Noel-Peake, ACB, ALB, a YLP coordinator from Crofton, Maryland, says that parents who know about the program seek it out for their children as "an enhancement" to coursework at school. Specifically, the mother of two teenagers notes parents have a desire for their children to "formulate their ideas and put their thoughts together" effectively in both oral and written communication.

"That is the most rewarding thing—parents who can say years later that you did something great for their child and that [the child] really looked up to you." — Jimmy Thai, DTM

Leif Gregersen, a resident of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, agrees that Youth Leadership is a great supplement to a school curriculum. He graduated from YLP almost 30 years ago, when he was a high school student. He says the program taught him a great deal, especially since his only exposure to public speaking in school was through two classes. "It wasn't enough," he says. "Those two experiences didn't give any depth, they didn't help you think on your feet, and they weren't taught by experienced speakers."

Today, Gregersen uses his Toastmasters skills as an advocate for people living with mental illness and bipolar disorder.

The program also introduces students to leadership skills. "Every session, I have students run the meeting beginning to



Chatelech Secondary School students in Sechelt, British Columbia, Canada, celebrate their completion of a Youth Leadership program, which has been part of the school's curriculum for the past three years.

end,” says Jimmy Thai, DTM, an engineer and YLP coordinator in San Diego, California. Young participants also hone leadership skills by listening to the speeches of fellow participants and providing constructive feedback, as well as planning meeting agendas and the end-of-program showcase.

Serving as Role Models

The value of the program goes far beyond supplementing school education. Thai got involved in the YLP to serve as a mentor and “keep kids on the right path.” He wants to mitigate the pressure many youths face. YLP coordinators “can be a positive voice and can complement [participants’] parents as a role model,” he says.

Thai recalls hearing from one participant’s mother about how much her child talked about the YLP leaders. “That is the most rewarding thing—parents who can say years later that you did something great for their child and that [the child] really looked up to you,” he says.

Some Toastmasters have conducted the program for youths whose lives have veered off course. Peggy Johnson, ATMB, from Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, coordinated a YLP for juveniles incarcerated at the Duval County (Florida) Pre-Trial Detention Facility.

“For kids in front of a judge, having a Toastmasters diploma can make a difference,” Johnson says. “They won’t get off [for their crimes], but it shows they are making an effort at self-improvement.”

For this population, Johnson hopes that YLP and later participation in a Toastmasters club can help troubled youth get back on track and reintegrated into society.

The YLP not only helps the participants; the coordinators grow as well. Noel-Peake, the mother from Maryland, acknowledges that the program has, above all, taught her patience. “It teaches you patience *whenever* you work with children,” she quips. It takes a healthy dose of creativity to plan exercises and select speech topics that resonate with participants, she adds.

In addition, organizing a YLP counts toward the Advanced Communicator Gold (ACG) award.

Other Benefits

Beyond program leaders and participants, the YLP is a boon to Toastmasters as an organization. After all, it strengthens sponsoring clubs by providing rich opportunities for members to take on leadership roles, to teach communication

and leadership skills to others, and to reach educational goals.

The program also is a powerful marketing tool. Oftentimes adults become interested in joining Toastmasters after attending a YLP showcase and witnessing firsthand the growth of participants and the professionalism of the event.

While the goal of the program is not to recruit new members or form new clubs per se, Thai says, “The more we can introduce the YLP to high school students, the more likely we can get them into the organization when they are in college or are young professionals.” Starting early can foster a lifelong association with Toastmasters that will help participants thrive academically, professionally and personally.

The program truly is a hidden treasure that enriches the lives of those involved, and it is high time that more clubs and youths discover its riches. ■

CHRISTINE CLAPP, DTM, is a regular contributor to the Toastmaster. She is the co-author of a new book, *Presenting at Work: A Guide to Public Speaking in Professional Contexts*, which is available online at spokenwithauthority.com.