

ENGAGING TEENS IN THE CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT

*Mayoral Youth
Commission 2014*



Mikva
Challenge

Introduction

Who is the Youth Commission?

The Mayoral Youth Commission is a diverse group of young adults dedicated to identifying and addressing policy issues facing the city of Chicago. Through Mikva Challenge, we are given the opportunity to work with Mayor Rahm Emanuel and other important city officials to develop solutions to complex problems throughout the city.

Our Summer Work and Framing Question:

This summer, the Mayoral Youth Commission's main goal is to improve the Chicago Park District's programming, collaborations, and marketing, in order to increase teen attendance and participation.

Research Methods:

Throughout our research we have used various approaches to obtain information. They include surveys, site visits, focus groups, meetings and interviews.

- Surveys:
 - We drafted our first survey and did a small pilot by surveying twelve to nineteen year olds at the Taste of Chicago.
 - After finalizing our survey, we surveyed our first group of teenagers at "Mass Action Friday," a gathering of all the Mikva Youth Councils, and obtained a total of 160 surveys.
 - The survey questions, now applying to only fifteen to eighteen year olds, pertained to safety and how they individually obtained information regarding opportunities at the park.
 - Each member of the Youth Commission took home surveys and surveyed as many teens as we could, either by sharing the link, or taking the physical survey, we gathered a total of nearly 500 surveys.
- Site Visits:
 - To gather data, we also attended Humboldt Park's Teen Extreme Day and surveyed teens to obtain approximately eighty surveys.
- Focus Group:
 - Every week at Mikva, a different Youth Council hosts what we call Mass Action Fridays, where we are given the chance to share our goal and progress with others and collaborate in order to reach our goal.
 - When we hosted, we held numerous focus groups. Each focus group consisted of about 10 people (per group) answering questions, and taking a quick two question poll regarding participation in the park, and interactions with the Park District.

- Meetings:
 - We met with the Chicago Park District Regional Officials to discuss current issues within the Park District, and to gain a better understanding of how the Chicago Park District operates.
 - We also met with Vaughn Bryant, the Chief Program Officer of the Chicago Park District, to see what recommendations the Park District was looking for and to narrow the focus of our research.
 - Our meeting with Jim Cheshire, a Professional Community Project Manager, gave us the opportunity to evaluate possible collaborations between the Chicago Park District, Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Police Department, and Chicago Park Libraries.
 - We met with Jeff Epstein, the founder and director of The Chicago Portfolio School, and he was able to guide us in structuring our two marketing campaigns in terms of presentation and social media tools.

Executive Summary of our Research Findings:

Collaborations:

We believe that the Chicago Park District can more closely collaborate with Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Public Libraries, and the Chicago Police Department to provide more support to teens throughout the city.

Marketing:

We understand that the Chicago Park District has a variety of programs, events, and spaces to offer to teens, but teens have had trouble learning about them. For this reason, participation rates among teens are negatively impacted. As a result, we have focused on improving the marketing tactics in order to attract and retain teens to Park District programming.

Programming:

While the Chicago Park District does offer a great variety of programs, we believe that the Park District can add new programs and improve existing programs.

Programming Recommendations

1. The Chicago Park District should make a policy that at least one member of each Park Advisory Council should be a young person between the ages of 13-22. This person should be responsible for creating at least one program in their park geared toward youth. Their role could also include spreading the word about Park District programs and getting their friends involved.

* Supporting Data: In our survey we found that 37% of teens get info about the park from their friends as compared to 14% who get it from the park district website. This suggests that our recommendation of having a teen advisory member spread the word about Chicago Park District Programs would be very effective.

2. The Chicago Park District should have job training/ resume building workshops for unemployed youth. Workshops could cover interview skills, the job application process, and professional writing.

* Supporting Data: 43% of teens surveyed stated that they would like job training opportunities offered at the Park District. This indicates that teens would likely take advantage of any programs at the Park District that explicitly helped prepare them to get a job.

3. The Chicago Park District should partner with other organizations to give its participants access to counselling and mentoring programs. Some areas that teens may need assistance include, but are not limited to, one-on-one counseling, social emotional support, tutoring, and college/career guidance.

* Supporting Data:

- Over 90% of youth who commit suicide have a mental condition, and suicide is the third leading cause of death in people aged 15-24. (Shaffer, D., & Craft, L. "Methods of Adolescent Suicide Prevention." *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 60 (2). 1999: 70-74. National Alliance on Mental Illness)
- Only between 25%-33% of youth with mental conditions receive any type of care or counselling. (Fuentes-Affleck, E. "Is Limited Access to Care the New Morbidity for Latino Young Adults?" *Journal of Adolescent Health* 39(5) 2006: 623-624. National Center For Children in Poverty)

- Students in mentoring programs are more likely to graduate on time and lead healthier, more successful lives. (*Youth Empowerment Program Report 2011*)

4. All police officers that patrol Chicago Parks should participate in a Youth Program Quality Training in their respective police districts. Youth should be incorporated into the training experience to build better relationships between youth and law enforcement officials.

* Supporting Data:

- There has been tension between youth and the police since the 1980s and there have been multiple attempts to rectify the situation since. The issue is that there is a disconnect between both groups. (*Longacre, C.D. "Building Positive Police-Youth Relationships Via After School Programs At the School Site."* June 2007)
- In our survey we found that that 26% of teens feel unsafe and 42% feel kind of safe. This means that 68% of teens are not feeling totally safe in their parks. We think that YPQA training could help build relationships between youth and police in the neighborhood and make teens feel safer in the park.

5. The Chicago Park District should help neighborhood parks create a safe space for teens and young adults through the use of media and music (recording, performing, open computer lab). In this regard, the Park District should offer "Media and Music" hubs that provide teens from around the city to come together to work, learn, and play with media and music together.

* Supporting Data: Programs such as YouMedia and Street Level Media that are already in existence are very popular and give teens a safe place to go and to do what they love artistically. Lots of students travel from all over the city to participate, but a lot of times it is difficult for students who live far from Wicker Park or Downtown.

- 50% of teens go out of their way to go to YouMedia. If teens are willing to go out their way to visit YouMedia, then if there was a space created like that in their communities teens would likely attend that space as well. ("Teens, Digital Media, and the Chicago Public Library-Research Report May 2013" University of Chicago CCSR).
- 89% of teens said at YouMedia it's cool to be excited about your interests. Most of the time teens feel that it's not cool to be excited about positive things around their peers; this is why it is so important to create more spaces like this for teens. ("Teens, Digital Media, and the Chicago Public Library-Research Report May 2013" University of Chicago CCSR).

6. The Chicago Park District should allow all neighborhood restaurants to bring extra/unused food from the end of the day to be passed out to the homeless/needy in the park. Teens could get service learning experience from helping facilitate this program.

* Supporting Data: During the 2013-2014 school year, 22,144 students in the CPS System identified as homeless. Lots of homeless citizens spend time in local parks, and according to our survey, 37% of teens spend time hanging out in local parks.

Collaboration Recommendations

1. In order to get more teens engaged in the park schools should appoint teen ambassadors (one from each grade level) to gather and distribute information about their high school's local park's programs and events. These ambassadors would serve as representatives for the Chicago Park District to help ensure that students at their schools get informed about Park District opportunities.

* Supporting Data: In our survey we found that 37% of teens get info about the park from their friends as compared to 14% who get it from the Park District website. Since it is clear both from our survey and our experience that teens get their information from other teens, it is very important to involve them in the promotion of Park District programs.

2. The manager of local parks should have a meeting at the beginning of the year with a representative from the high schools in their area to find out what sports, extracurricular, and resources they are missing from their school. This would help local parks better serve the gaps in teen programming in the area. We can see this helping in several areas like sex ed, sports, and job training.

* Supporting Data:

- In our focus groups we found that 37% of teens hang out at the park while only 29% use the programs offered. We feel if the parks offered programs their park didn't have, they would be more likely to take advantage of them.
- In 2011, 46% of female high school students and 60% of male high school students in Chicago reported that they have had sexual intercourse. The teen birth rate in Chicago is one and a half times higher than the national average. ("Healthy Chicago" Chicago Department of Public Health Policy Brief June 2013). Research suggests that teens who do not spend time in extracurricular activities after school are 37% more likely to become teen parents than their peers. (Manlove, J. et al.. "Preventing Teenage Pregnancy, Childbearing, and Sexually Transmitted Diseases: What the Research Shows." Child Trends Research Brief. May 2002.)

2. The Chicago Park District should host a one day event at all parks where the youth will be able to read books in the park. The books will be donated by the Chicago Public Libraries, as well as community members. Teens would also be able to earn service learning hours by reading to younger kids from the community.

* *Supporting Data:* From our data we have found that 51% of our teens are willing to participate in an event at the park that may help their community and also give them service learning hours. This is beneficial to us and our teens because we can get credited by our schools and community recognition for being a great community member. As evident by the recent Polar Plunge that Mayor Emanuel took a part in, Chicago's youth like to read. Mayor Rahm Emanuel challenged Chicago youth to read 2 million books - and they did!

3. The Chicago Park District should offer a *Know Your Rights Workshop* where Police from the neighborhood come in and give a class about the laws of the city and how to best interact with the police. These classes would be taught by neighborhood police or attorneys from legal clinics nearby. They would teach the youth the laws and their basic rights. They would be taught how to apply these new skills in times of crisis.

* *Supporting Data:* Based on the data from our survey 37% of our teens feel unsafe within their community because of all the police brutality we hear about. Currently the police department does not offer any classes that teach the youth what their rights are as citizens. This has led to countless false arrests. The time spent on the paperwork of the arrest is not worth the minuscule punishment they receive, which makes it not only a waste of time and resources, but it causes the relationship between the youth and police to become strained. This leads to an increase in the lack of trust in officers and allowing more crimes to go unsolved because the people don't feel comfortable talking to them.

Marketing Recommendations

1. The Chicago Park District should expand the existing Park Points to include youth friendly prizes and direct marketing to teens. They should create a Park Points App that teens can download onto their phones and use to gain park points for attending and participating in teen programs.

* Supporting Data: 37% of teens have smartphones and among them, 58% have downloaded apps to their cellphone or tablet. (www.pewinternet.org/2012teen/factsheet)

2. Park Advisory Councils should create separate social media accounts for youth so they can focus more on what appeals to teens and can target teens more directly.

* Supporting Data: In our survey we found that 64% of teens would like to get their information about Chicago Park District programs on Facebook.

3. There should be a designated Park District liaison that would visit neighborhood schools in their region and share information about Park District employment and program opportunities for teens. This Park District liaison should visit during lunch periods as well as school opportunity fairs to pass out fliers and talk to teens.

* Supporting Data: Data from our survey shows that currently 69% of teens will get this information from a combination of fliers and school events. Our survey shows that the following activities are most wanted by teens and need to be marketed more in order to increase participation: open gym, self-defense classes, skate parks, DJ in the park, swim class, and cooking classes.

4. The parks need to put the commercials they make on YouTube to increase the chances of going viral and causing more people to see them.

* Supporting Data: As of 2014, 74 percent of 14-18 year-olds and 68 percent of 19-24 year-olds in the U.S. use YouTube, which is above Facebook and significantly more than Twitter. YouTube is the top platform overall amongst 14-34 year-old users. (The Intelligence Group, "The Cassandra Report, Fall/Winter 2013")

5. The Chicago Park District should utilize the youth-friendly hashtags we created for Twitter (#Chiparkpoints; #atthepark; #beChicago) so that people can find park information more easily.

**Supporting Data: The data from our surveys show that 32% teens don't get any information about Park District programs. Because around 78% get their information on either Instagram or Twitter, we think this would be a great way for them to get information about the Park District.*

Conclusion

The mission of the Mayoral Youth Commission is to improve the quality of life for youth in Chicago. This summer, we partnered with the Chicago Park District to accomplish our mission. We believe that the quality of life for young Chicagoans revolves around five key areas: Education, Employment, Health, Recreation, and Safety. The recommendations in this report focused on improving these “quality of life” areas because we believe that the Chicago Park District could serve as a potential solution to issues youth in Chicago face in all of these areas.

For more information on the Mayoral Youth Commission's work, please contact Jackie Rosa at Jackie@mikvachallenge.org.

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