Bennington Youth Council Gives Students a Voice in Local Government

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Young people are often told they are the future, but some communities lack actions with that statement. In the town of Bennington, youth are already helping shape the present. The Bennington Youth Council gives local students a direct opportunity to participate in local government, share their perspectives, and contribute to decisions that affect their town.

Established in 2025, the Bennington Youth Council is made up of six students between the ages of 13 and 18 who represent the voices of young people throughout the community. The council operates independently from the Bennington Selectboard but maintains a close relationship with the town's government. Members are encouraged to attend monthly selectboard meetings or town community meetings, where they represent local youth, stay informed, and provide perspectives on topics affecting Bennington youth.

The council was created with a selectboard initiative, collaborating with the Alliance for Community Transformation (ACT), a community-based organization dedicated to supporting youth and strengthening community connections. Together, the town and ACT, with help from the Vermont Community Foundation's Opportunity Fund, developed a program that gives students meaningful opportunities for civic engagement while also strengthening local decision-making. Rather than engaging youth simply for the sake of participation, the council was designed to ensure that students have a meaningful voice in decisions that affect their community. Town leaders recognize that students experience Bennington differently than adults do and that hearing students' perspectives before making policies helps the community benefit from more informed and well-rounded decision-making. Rather than waiting until young people are old enough to vote, the Youth Council invites them into the conversation now, recognizing that the decisions being made today will shape the community they will inherit.

"We wanted youth to be viewed as partners," Alyssa Irizarry (ACT Programs Coordinator) explained. "Everyone has their own lived experience, and young people

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have valuable insights that can help make the Bennington community a better place for young people."

Membership is open to students who attend schools in the Southshire District. When joining, students go through a brief application process with questions about how they believe their own experience can help their community. The goal is to involve students who do not necessarily have leadership experience but who do have a passion for learning and changing their own environment. Each council member receives a $300 stipend in recognition of the time and commitment involved, just like selectboard members.

The council meets once each month for approximately two hours. During the first hour members report back on community events, selectboard meetings, or other town committee meetings they attended. All students stay connected by a "homework" assignment where they can either research something that they believe is important to discuss in their own community, or attend town committee meetings.

The second half of the meeting typically features guest speakers, such as legislators, community leaders, and local officials. These conversations expose students to various aspects of government, advocacy, and public service while helping them better understand how local decisions connect to state government.

In Bennington, the students' goals are overall learning how they can help improve their communities on a local level. Students want to make Bennington safer and allow it to be a more youth-friendly area. Many students come in wanting to learn how to participate in their community and all the different pieces to learn how you can participate in your local government. The goals may seem small, but they truly are there to make a difference for the future of Bennington and for this involvement to spread into other towns in Vermont.

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The program also works to address the challenge often described as “adultism”: the tendency for adults to make decisions for young people without including them in the conversation. The success of a youth council depends less on funding than on a community's willingness to genuinely listen to young people. “The people involved in town government are usually much older, so having youth participate in meetings brings a fresh perspective and a jolt of energy. We hope that the students involved in the Youth Council are encouraged to stay active locally. By joining local boards and commissions, attending community events, and volunteering with community organizations, they are not only learning about civic engagement, but they are also becoming our future town leaders. If you feel invested in your community and that you can make a difference, you're more likely to stay.” Assistant Town Manager, Shannon Barsotti expressed.

"If you want to create a community that's thinking about its future, you need to invest in youth's voice," Irizarry said. "Young people have valuable lived experiences. They're assets for town planning and decision-making, and they deserve a place at the table."

As the **Bennington Youth Council** continues to grow, it represents more than just a leadership program. It serves as an example of how communities can build stronger local government by treating young people as partners. By creating space for students to learn, participate, and lead, Bennington is investing not only in its youth but also in the future of the community itself.

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