

RAPID CITY AREA SCHOOLS – TEEN UP

BUSH PRIZE FOR COMMUNITY INNOVATION



RAPID CITY, SOUTH DAKOTA

LEADER

Melissa Miller Kincart

BUDGET

\$500,000+

GEOGRAPHY

South Dakota,
Native Nations

YEARS ACTIVE

Founded in 2007

LEADERS OF TODAY

Rapid City Area Schools – Teen Up (Teen Up) is a group of youth from a wide range of backgrounds and achievements who collaborate with each other and community partners to address issues they deem important. Since the creation of this collaboration, youth participation in the community has drastically increased.

**STORY BY KEN STEINKEN AND
MORGAN MERCER**

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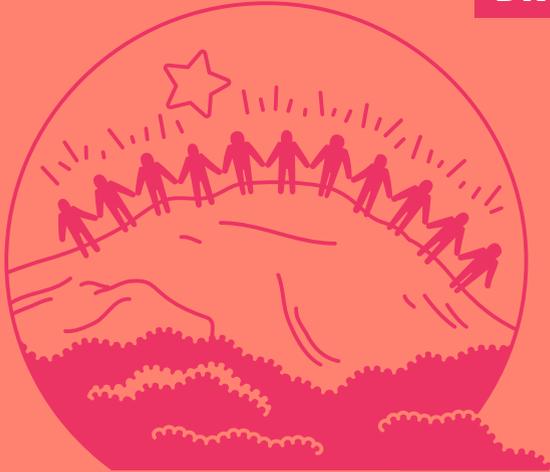
— JESSICA BENSON, Teen Up Stakeholder

INNOVATION

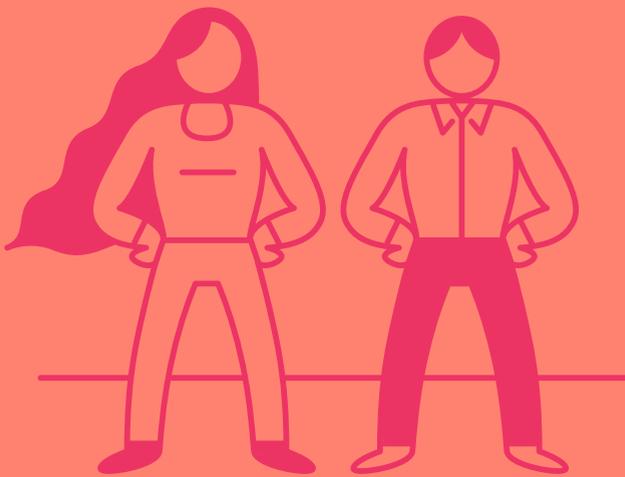
RAPID CITY AREA SCHOOLS - TEEN UP

Teen Up invites young people from a wide range of backgrounds and achievements to collaborate with each other and community partners to make change on issues they deem important.

BREAKTHROUGH

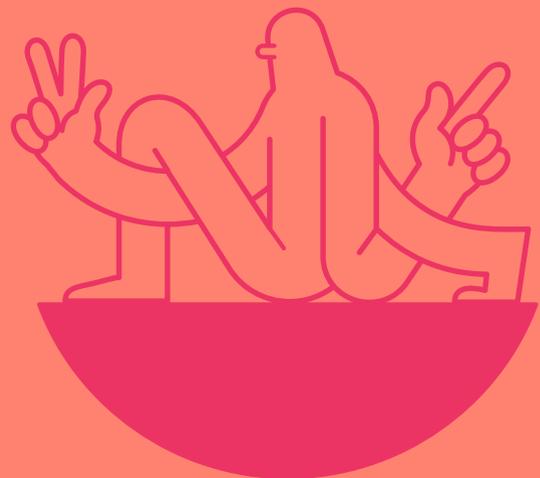


It took a new approach to encourage teens to get active in their communities. Teen Up created a fluid space where students govern the organization, determine the agenda and pick projects of interest. In a single year, the number of student leaders giving back in the area drastically increased.



TEEN LEADERSHIP

Teen Up's organizational structure is designed to shift at a moment's notice to best fit the students participating in the group. That flexibility allows more students to share their opinions, network and brainstorm new ideas. Adult mentors have learned to let youth take the lead, even when it feels uncomfortable.



FLEXIBILITY IN DECISION-MAKING

Teen Up coaches community partners on how to engage teenagers in the mission of their organizations. This often requires a shift in perspective to reassure adults to let go of control and see youth for the true co-creators and leaders they strive to be.



LISTENS ACTIVELY



COMMITTS TO COMMUNITY



SHARES OWNERSHIP

IN JUST FOUR WEEKS, the Rapid City High School football team was set to face its big rival. A group of Teen Up students serving on the Homeless Youth Task Force hoped to use the game to raise awareness for homeless teens. To do that, they planned to convince players from both teams to sport green shoe laces during the matchup. With only a few weeks to plan, the adults on the task force thought the idea sounded impossible. Despite that, the teens got to work. Within a few weeks, every player agreed to the plan.

“That’s how young people work. It isn’t a matter of six months of planning, it’s a couple of weeks to make something happen,” says Kristin Kiner, Teen Up’s youth engagement coordinator. “After the initial shock and startle wore off, I believe the adults felt empowered to take on the world, too.”

Last year through Teen Up, hundreds of students in the Rapid City area gave back thousands of hours to their community through various service and leadership roles.

Since 2013, students have orchestrated glow walks to raise awareness for youth homelessness, provided free class photos to more than 50 low-income high school seniors and even served on nonprofit boards like Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills.

Katelyn Wachendorf got involved in the original iteration of Teen Up when she was in eighth grade. She was one of a handful of young people still involved when the original initiative transitioned to Teen Up during her sophomore year. Where its predecessor floundered, Teen Up flourished.

“It works because it’s so flexible,” says Katelyn. “It’s not only a network of information, but of possibilities for anyone who has his or her own idea. It’s for the kids who want to get involved in a project here and there, or just want to commit to one project. It works because it’s for anyone.”

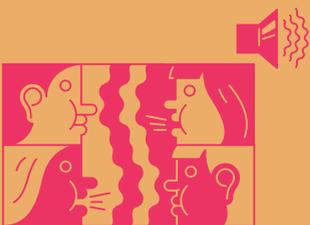
Teen Up thrives because its adult coordinator, Kristin, takes her cues directly from the teens. More often than not, she completely relinquishes the reins of the organization to its student members to set yearly goals, lead monthly meetings and troubleshoot what isn’t working. She provides a space

where teens feel supported and empowered, and then steps back to let the youth fill in the rest.

“Each and every person is a leader,” says Kristin. “Maybe they haven’t identified within themselves how they can be that leader, but it’s our role to help them discover that and to connect them to the adults and places where they can excel in sharing their talent, energy, ideas and student voice.”

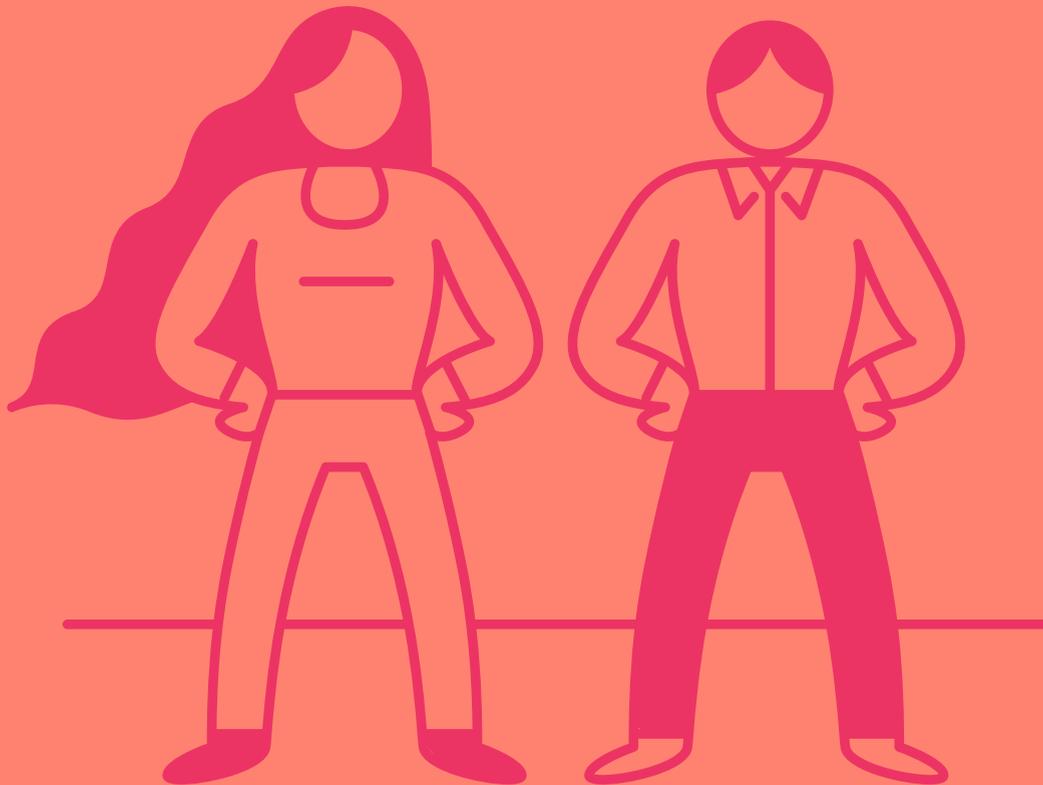
Three years after joining Teen Up as a seventh grader, Jessica Benson has the mayor on speed dial. In 2016, the teen partnered with the city’s county emergency management team to organize a 9/11 commemoration. First, she bought the high school football team knee-high patriotic socks to wear during its game. Then she invited Rapid City’s mayor, fire chief and superintendent to kick off the event by donning the same crazy socks for a photo. The day of the commemoration she sold the socks to Rapid City residents and now plans to use money she raised to throw a Spirit of Heroism Banquet.

“I never would have thought I could lead a project and make change,” she says. “Teen Up showed me that I could.”



LISTENS ACTIVELY: Going to school is like a full-time job for students. On top of that, many young people play a sport, participate in a school activity and even hold down a paying, part-time job. One mistake Kristin often sees community partners make is expecting youth to meet with adults when it’s convenient for them. “How many adults would you ask who have a full-time job and two part-time jobs to come and meet with you at your convenience?” says Kristin. “You’d be a whole lot more lenient, understanding and flexible. It’s important that we take a look at what works for young people and adapt our schedules.”

Teen Leadership



When Teen Up first started, Kristin spent sleepless nights worried her teen ambassadors would forget to follow through on tasks they needed to finish for each project. Every night she wrote out a new to-do list for the students to calm her nerves.

“I feared I had to protect them from failing,” she says. “I had to let go and allow them to take that control.”

These days, Teen Up is truly student-led, and it’s a defining characteristic that sets the organization apart from other youth

programs. Each year, teen ambassadors meet at a summer retreat to identify three areas of focus for the coming school year. Kristin doesn’t participate in the sessions other than to count votes. “Basically I’m just there as support,” she says.

That secondary role wasn’t easy to step into, but once Kristin handed over leadership to the youth, something remarkable happened: Teen Up evolved from a traditionally structured organization teens felt little ownership over, into a nimble group of students that could easily adapt to best engage its

members. Teen Up's youth ambassadors built a new framework for the group: they refused to appoint members to traditional leadership roles, switched weekly meetings from after school to Sundays at 4 p.m. and opened up membership to private school and homeschooled students.

Despite these changes, some of Teen Up's oldest youth ambassadors still thought the group wasn't engaging its youngest or newest members as well as it could. So Teen Up pivoted again. Instead of allocating half the time of each meeting to a community speaker, the students replaced it with an open-market discussion where members could bring up new topics of interest and discuss them in small groups.

"This was a complete shift in how we did things in the middle of the school year," says Kristin. "Adults tend to hang on to the roles and models they are familiar with. Their approach to meetings, committees and significant planning isn't necessarily a workable model. True youth engagement

provides an avenue for teens to become more invested in their communities and their world."

Teen Up's flexible approach to meetings allows more students to share their voice, bring up new ideas and network with students from other schools or projects. The absence of rigid rules and processes keeps teens creative and allows them to be flexible and respond to community issues in real time. To create an empowered space like that for young people, Kristin learned to lean into feeling uncomfortable. Instead of trying to control how or what teens do, she guides her students with a lighter hand through group reflections or one-on-one sessions. Those exercises give her time with students to identify what tasks they've completed and what still needs to be done. Instead of blaming teens when a project falls short, she asks questions to help her youth ambassadors recognize any strengths and weaknesses in their work to help them grow as leaders. With that attitude, Kristin reframes failure and uses it as a tool to drive learning, not deter success.



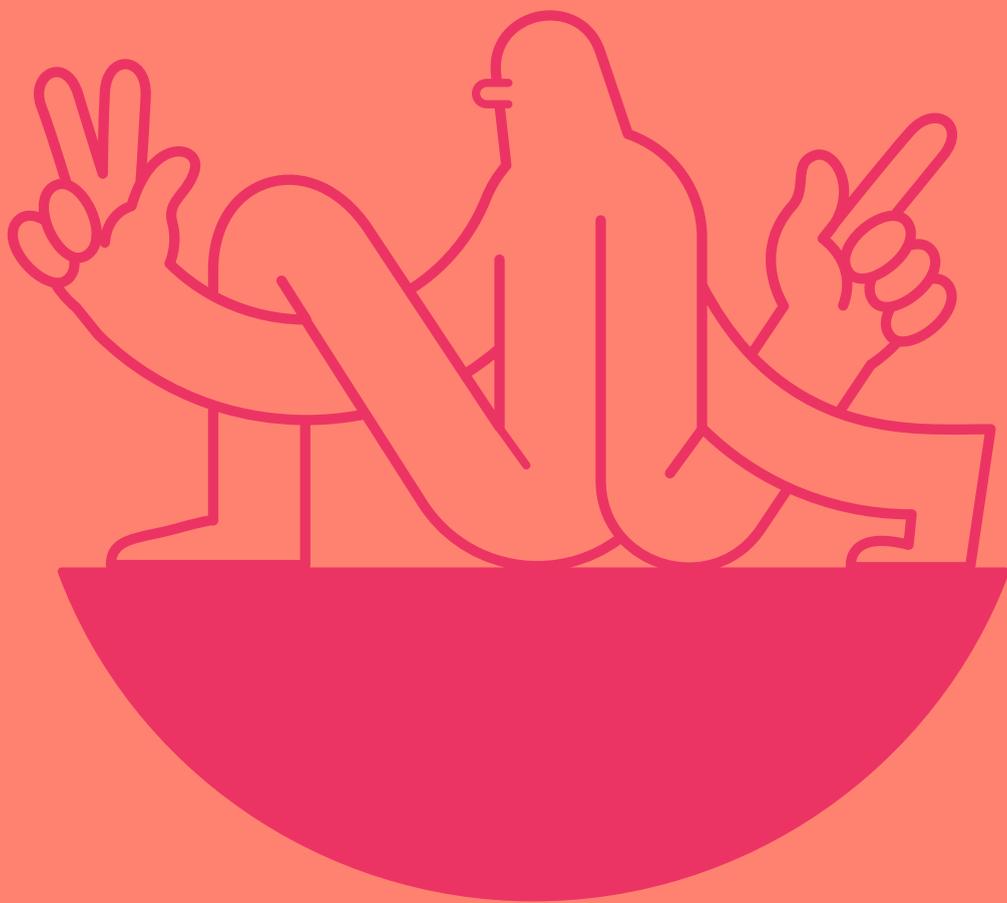
COMMITTS TO COMMUNITY: Long-term sustainability is another challenge Kristin sees community partners face when they work with youth. When teens express interest in doing something, it's important for adults to capitalize on that and make sure students feel valued within two to eight weeks of joining an organization or board. "If young people don't show up to something or miss a few meetings, they're going to think they've disappointed you unless you also make the effort to stay engaged with them," says Kristin. Identify one adult on your team who can consistently follow up with students to keep them involved in the work, even if it's just to send a text saying, "Sorry we missed you at the last meeting. Hope to see you again soon."

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YOUNG PEOPLE ARE OUR LEADERS OF TODAY, NOT OUR LEADERS OF TOMORROW.

—KRISTIN KINER, Teen Up

Flexibility In Decision-Making



By 6:30 a.m., Kristin's cell phone began to buzz with text messages from two of Teen Up's ambassadors who felt nervous about a meeting that morning. The pair helped start the Take Action student theater group in the fall, but after a few months they became progressively more frustrated with

the adult mentor guiding them through the project. After weeks of coaching with Kristin, the two students scheduled a meeting with their community partner to share how they were feeling.

"I never go and fix the problem," says Kristin.

“I work with the students to create a plan. My focus will always be to help young people build confidence and feel comfortable sharing their voice, and making sure that their voice is just as strong and valued as anyone else’s at the table.”

When adults want to take charge and tell students what to do, that’s a problem. For Working Against Violence, Inc. (WAVI), a local organization that partnered with Teen Up students to launch Take Action, letting go of control and seeing youth as co-creators and co-leaders required a shift in perspective and a new level of trust.

That started with the teens more clearly defining the roles they wanted to be responsible for, like managing the development of scene changes or acting as Take Action’s primary point of contact. For months, the theater group’s adult mentor took the lead on those tasks because she worried the young people wouldn’t follow through and get things done. Teens don’t often operate along the same schedules and structures that adults do, Kristin says, and recognizing that is the first step toward letting students take greater accountability where they want.

“The largest changes happen when you feel the most uncomfortable. Don’t look at it as

the place where you have to put up a barrier,” says Kristin. “That’s hard as an adult because once we’re structured, it’s hard to push outside that comfort zone. When you engage teens as decision makers and leaders, you have to totally let go of that control.”

After the meeting, Take Action’s adult mentor stopped delegating tasks to students and instead starting asking how she could support them. While conversations like these can be difficult, the results are often transformative when community partners fully embrace Teen Up’s model of youth leadership.

Today, WAVI is one of the group’s most successful partners. Since 2015, more than 1,700 middle and high school students have watched Take Action members perform original skits about sexting, dating violence and homelessness. Last year the group received so many invites to perform that it had to turn down requests.

“Communities are missing out on true, reliable and sustainable solutions if we don’t have young people at the table when we’re discussing issues we need to overcome,” says Kristin. “Young people are our leaders of today, not our leaders of tomorrow.”



SHARES OWNERSHIP: Instead of just showing up and helping without input or ownership, teens in the Teen Up program wanted to participate. But first the adults needed to let go of the roles and models they were familiar with. They could no longer assume leadership simply because they were the adult in the room. The teens helped the adults shake their usual approach: meetings, committees and endless planning. Now Teen Up embraces fluid movements rather than organized structure, and teens are feeling significantly more engaged.

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— KRISTIN KINER, Teen Up



STAFF, Teen Up

TEEN STAKEHOLDERS

Teen Up



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