

This guide highlights each organization's efforts to center youth voice into their work, with quotes from the leaders of the organizations intertwined throughout. Questions are generally the same throughout the guide, but there is some variation between each organization.

We also encourage you to read the [Generosity article](#) about how these organizations are centering youth voice.

Reach out to Abby Rolland (arolland@presserfoundation.org) with any questions.

ArtSmart: Lucas DeJesus, Director of National Program Operations and John Viscardi, Co-Founder and Managing Director

Introduction to Organization

ArtSmart seeks to transform the lives of youth in under-resourced communities across the U.S. through tuition-free music lessons and mentorship by paid, professional artists.

Through weekly one-on-one sessions over a full school year, ArtSmart students receive world class instruction and training from professional musicians. Using an evidenced-based curriculum, mentors work with their students to set goals, learn music, develop a healthy self-esteem and ultimately, chart a course for the rest of their lives.

Youth Leadership Structure: Alumni Advisory Board (AAB)

How and why was the AAB established?

The alumni advisory board was established for ArtSmart alumni to gain access to experiences, while giving the organization the opportunity to “go deep” on incorporating youth voice. Alumni have first-hand knowledge of the effectiveness of ArtSmart’s program; thus, they’re able to contribute feedback and insights on the direction of the organization.

“We want to help young alumni learn and develop leadership and management skills, while also incorporating their voices in the process of creating and refining the programs that ArtSmart delivers. ArtSmart exists for them, and we believe it's crucial that their voice is heard.”

How is the AAB organized?

Formally established 2 years ago; to design it, ArtSmart staff initially went to its mentors (who have strong relationships with their mentee students) to recommend individuals who might be interested in participating. Currently, eight alumni serve on the board. They represent all but one area of the country that ArtSmart works in.

The AAB meets once a month, and is led by an elected Board President, who sets the agenda and leads the meetings, and a Board Secretary, who drafts notes and create follow-ups. Otherwise, the structure is kept flat. The board operates with two committees (Marketing and Programs), and projects are decided on collaboratively with ArtSmart staff, with board members determining the overall direction of the board.

Current Advisory Board members are designing the application and selection process for new participants to join. At this time, alumni participants have had to participate in an ArtSmart program for two years and graduate in good standing. ArtSmart mentors send the board description to graduated students who may be interested in joining.

A mentor in New York was hired as a consultant on this project; she administers the Advisory Board at a high level by supporting the Board President and Secretary in setting the agenda and helping them troubleshoot if members aren't attending meetings.

As a perk of AAB service, members can continue to receive lessons from their mentor.

What have AAB members' experiences been like thus far?

So far, their experiences have been positive.

“Serving on the board is empowering and gives them a sense of meaning. They're able to participate in communications/engagement about ArtSmart, while also learning how to feel some (appropriate) discomfort in charting a path, structure, and purpose of the board.

“Overall, it's a great community of like-minded people who love being leaders and helping current students.”

How has the alumni advisory board informed/influenced/changed/developed the curriculum/programming of ArtSmart?

In the first AAB meeting, ArtSmart staff explained that they envision the alumni advisory board as a nonprofit board, where alumni get board experience and are in charge of the board's direction, agendas, and projects it takes on.

“They were nervous at first, but this structure has really empowered them to make their own decisions.”

Throughout the year, board members provide advice and feedback on curriculum and program effectiveness.

For example, they review the mentor and student handbooks before those are published – “we received amazing, integrated feedback about that handbook from them.” They also created a promotional video for students applying to the program, and serve as ambassadors for ArtSmart.

What do you hope are the long-term outcomes and/or impact of integrating alumni into your work in this way?

Not only does this work build student perspective into ArtSmart, thus helping it meet the best interests of the people that it serves, it also helps cultivate future leaders of the organization, whether they be on staff or serve as mentors for future program participants.

“For us, it was existential to have this integrated into our work.”

What advice would you have for other (music) organizations considering implementing a student/alumni advisory group/council into their efforts? How would they benefit from it?

ArtSmart staff advise youth-focused organizations to make this type of work a priority.

“At times, initiatives that aren't critical for immediate or short-term work can be put on the backburner. We'd encourage organizations to not let the urgent crowd out the important. This work helps youth-focused organizations contribute to the alignment of your mission with your programs.

“We're proud of the alumni advisory board, and believe that it is true to ArtSmart's vision.”

Beyond the Bars: Matthew Kerr, Co-Executive Director and Founder

Introduction to Organization

Beyond the Bars focuses on providing positive and safe spaces where youth who have been impacted by violence or the incarceration system can express themselves. They work to create pathways into music throughout the city with our community partners. They run music programs with a number of anti-violence and trauma informed programs throughout the city where students have an opportunity to learn the basics of songwriting and recording.

Youth Leadership Structure: Student Steering Committee (SSC)

How and why was the SSC established?

While formally established two years ago, the SSC has been informally around since Beyond the Bars was established. It serves as a skills development opportunity for the youth involved.

The student steering committee is the guiding force for Beyond the Bars.

How is the SSC organized?

Anyone can choose to be a part of the committee, while officers are elected. Eight to 12 students currently serve on the board during the school year and meet monthly, and 25 serve during the summer and meet more regularly. The core group has stayed consistent through the creation of the committee.

The Co-Directors of the organization purposefully have sought to make the committee work for the students by empowering them to decide what work they want to do and helping the students operate with a “growth mindset.”

“We work to accommodate their ideas and help guide them through a decision-making process - we walk them through the presentation of the idea, the logic behind it, and the budget that we have to see if the idea can be made into a reality.”

For incentives, student teachers who serve on the committee bill meetings as hours. Other participants receive “on the clock” pay during the summer.

What have their experiences been like thus far?

Through participation in the committee, students are able to provide feedback about Beyond the Bars’ programming and advocate for themselves. They’re proud of themselves for their work thus far.

“We need more spaces for young people to develop as leaders, teach other students, and design and manage events for the community.”

One individual who participated in the steering committee enjoyed his experience so much that he first became a student teacher and then became a part-time teacher who helps run the program now.

How has SSC informed/influenced/changed/developed the curriculum/programming of Beyond the Bars?

Students on the committee have planned out events, instituted directives, and provided feedback on curriculum and events, including the student safety plan.

For example, committee members planned their lab build outs, pushed the student teacher initiative, planned community events and resource giveaways with partners, advocated for their communities at conferences, and helped secure funding for neighborhoods at competitions.

Are there any other organizations that served as a model for this steering committee?

- [Juvenile Justice Center of Philadelphia](#)
- [Neighborhood Bike Works](#)

What do you hope are the long-term outcomes and/or impact of integrating students into your work in this way?

Beyond the Bars plans on growing the committee as they grow the organization. “We want them to grow in the opportunity to become a leader in their organization and their community.” Eventually, they hope that former students will run the organization.

In addition to influencing the work of Beyond the Bars, student leaders spark change in their communities and their city. “We believe that with the opportunity, these students are agents of good and spark avenues for change.”

What advice would you have for other (music) organizations considering implementing a student/alumni advisory group/council into their efforts? How would they benefit from it?

“Don’t over plan in the worry that things may not work out. If your organization is youth-focused, build your organization with them to be the best that it can. When you plan with students, your organization becomes even stronger.

“Our organization exists for young people, so by involving students in your work and valuing their voices, it’s a perfect win.”

Project 440: Rebecca Bolden, Executive Director

Introduction to Organization

Project 440 engages student musicians in educational programs that teach them to use music as a tool to create opportunities for themselves and to give back to their communities.

Youth Leadership Structure: Youth Advocacy Council (YAC)

How and why was the YAC established?

Project 440 started its Youth Advocacy Council for students during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide input on Project 440 programs and receive leadership, project management, governance, and advocacy training.

Through their participation, students are able to advocate for themselves and for Project 440. They're "front and center" in the organization's work.

"Getting feedback from students is extremely important to us."

Students also lead conversations and advocate for issues that are important to them through the Youth Advocacy Council's Music in Color program. When the program initially began, it featured diverse voices in classical music and has grown to include voices from many genres.

How is the YAC organized?

The council has 10 members, all of whom have completed at least one Project 440 program. They meet two times per month from August to May and at the end of the year, present a final report to the board to share the work they accomplished and what they want to learn in the upcoming year. Each participant receives a \$10 per hour stipend for the work that they do on the council. Students can continue to serve on the council after one year (the curriculum changes from year-to-year).

A member of YAC also serves as a youth board representative on the full board in a leadership role.

What have their experiences been like thus far?

YAC participants have benefited from having their voices heard and shaping Project 440's programs.

The most recent Music in Color program, "Transitioning from High School to College" featured a panel of Project 440 alumni currently enrolled in college. The panelists shared the impact that participating in YAC has had on them and their readiness for college: Common themes that YAC alumni discussed including learning how to be respectful of other's ideas and opinions and event planning.

- "You feel really adult when you are in YAC. It's really cool to see how the skills you learn transfer. Your going to have to learn how to create events if you want to be a musician or any profession really. You learn to be respectful of other's idea."
- "I learned Advocacy practice. Friends as me, how did you do that, how are you so good at that. I had to work on it."
- "I didn't always have the best days at school but entering YAC meetings, it would remind me, things aren't that bad, things do get better."
- "Learning how to talk about difficult subjects with people, is something that I learned and has benefited me in college."

- “Event planning. Being able to join a group of people or a team. I do a lot of group work. Having the experience of going through the process of event planning not just having a task assigned to you but how to assign roles, create a run of show and all of the specific things that have given me a template for creating an event for any team that I work with. My professors and other team members have pointed it out for me. It helped me to learn how to draw the line between work and play.
- “YAC gave me the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. When I am in leadership roles, I’ve had to learn how to respond to things that I don’t agree with.”

How has YAC informed/influenced/changed/developed the curriculum/programming of Project 440?

YAC gives students the opportunity to have their voices heard to shape the programming of Project 440. Through participation in YAC, students develop programming that’s of interest to them. For example, one YAC meeting focused on the representation of BIPOC individuals in music. From those conversations, the students developed Music in Color (mentioned above), which has evolved to encompass various topics.

YAC students also provided input on the development of Project 440’s Doing Good II program, which was developed for Doing Good alumni who want to continue to develop their service-learning projects.

The council also gives students the opportunity to speak with one another about issues that are important to them. They’re able to advocate for themselves, knowing that they have a voice in music and beyond music in the community as well.

What do you hope are the long-term outcomes and/or impact of integrating students into your work in this way?

YAC’s impact is illustrated on three different levels.

- 1) Students involved spread the word about Project 440 and how others can get involved.
- 2) Students direct programming at YAC and influence Project 440 internal operations and programs.
 - a. They answer whether a program is just for YAC or for broader Project 440 programming
 - b. They work with peer institutions in Philadelphia and around the country to understand other programs and how those could potentially fit into Project 440’s work.
- 3) YAC keeps students and alumni engaged. For youth development organizations, a council, committee, or board is a great connecting point. Alumni can return and share their experiences, which keeps them involved in the organization’s work as well.

What advice would you have for other (music) organizations considering implementing a student/alumni advisory group/council into their efforts? How would they benefit from it?

- 1) Having YAC reinforces Project 440’s commitment to students and young people and makes it clear that it’s vital to receive feedback from students.
- 2) Make sure that it becomes a priority, and make the resources available for it.
- 3) Make sure that students feel heard in multiple ways.

Rock to the Future: Jessica Craft, Founder and CEO

Introduction to Organization

Rock to the Future (RTTF) supports positive youth development and economic empowerment through free, student-driven music programs for Philadelphia youth. Annually, they serve hundreds of students in grades 3-12 in-school, after school, and during the summer in schools, community locations, and juvenile justice facilities. They intentionally partner with under-resourced schools and organizations that are located in neighborhoods affected by poverty.

Their innovative, holistic programs combine exciting, student-driven music programming and strengths-based youth development strategies including trauma-informed approaches, restorative practices, mentoring, and conflict-resolution skills.

Youth Leadership Structure: Youth are integrated into RTTF's programming and operations decisions

How and why was student voice integrated in this way?

Programs at Rock to the Future are student-driven as students create their own music, support program events and strategic planning, and lead decision-making and peer accountability processes.

Part of RTTF's mission statement is "student-driven" – at the foundation of their programs is student voice. They decide what songs they learn and create, what guest speakers come, what colleges and trade schools are visited, what types of workshops they'd like to have, what type of food they'd like, etc.

In 2022, they launched their student ambassador program, where students lead site visits and meet with funders. They are also included in organization processes. For example, in 2018 students participated in RTTF's logo and brand redesign, in 2019 were included in the strategic planning process, and in 2021 helped to select the organization's anti-racism facilitator.

How is student voice in Rock to the Future organized?

It is engrained in RTTF's program design. At the beginning of each term, the groups are asked what they are interested in learning and what artists they like, which the instructor uses to create chord charts and music for instruction. In large groups (like the choral ensemble), the students vote on the songs they will learn and perform. In band practice, students can write whatever they'd like, however they'd like. In MakerLab, instructors teach the technical skills for music production and graphic design and provide coaching, but students' creations are their own and they make original music and create their own band posters and affirmation posters.

Their music is brilliant and not having a required structure provide much more opportunity for creativity, thought process, and self-efficacy. RTTF receives feedback about programming through one-on-one sessions, focus groups, and anonymous surveys.

What have their experiences been like?

Rock to the Future's programs are provided at no cost, and they also provide paid creative skill development opportunities for 50 - 60 youth annually. Students also receive their own instrument to keep – even if they leave the program they can keep it – which provides the chance for them to continue creating and learning.

How has the student-driven work informed/influenced/changed/developed the curriculum/programming of Rock to the Future?:

Leaning into student-driven and student voice has improved student leadership skills, self-efficacy, creativity, social emotional growth, peer communication, ownership of the program, finding and defining their unique identities, and connectedness to each other and RTTF's team. It has improved student retention, team and student relationships, and the vibe is really warm, welcoming, and inclusive. Staff learn a great deal from students. They understand and have opinions about community issues, current events, and have mature conversations about things that are impacting them like racism, environment, violence, gender issues, etc.

From their feedback and opinions, RTTF is working to implement a student action group in 2023 to use their creativity to advocate for causes that are important to them (such as improvements in their schools and education system and anti-violence needs in their communities).

Are there any other organizations that serve as a model for you in this work?

- [Creative Youth Development](#)
- [Equity toolkit](#)
- [Equity Audit User Guide](#)

What do you hope are the long-term outcomes and/or impact of integrating students and Rock to the Future participants into your work in this way?

“We’re continuing to work towards leading with youth voice.”

RTTF placed their first alumni student on their board in 2022 and hope to onboard another alumnus. They’re also looking at having current student ambassadors on our board of directors as non-voting members. Three of their team members are alumni students.

“It can be challenging because adults sometimes don’t believe that youth can or should make their own decision, and working with partners and various stakeholders in the RTTF community may occasionally require convincing of our methods.

“However, when teens have the chance to make their own decisions, and learn the positive and negative consequences of those decisions, it helps them grow and learn their capabilities in ways that wouldn’t be possible if they didn’t have that chance.

“Creative arts programming is the best place to provide this type of youth choice and voice because it’s engaging, builds trust, requires communication and decision making, and has so much room for creativity, experimentation, and evolution.”

What advice would you have for other (music) organizations considering implementing a student/alumni advisory group/council into their efforts? How would they benefit from it?

“It can feel like a daunting task, maybe you don’t know how to tackle it, perhaps not everyone is onboard, or there is fear about giving power to young people and losing your decision-making power. Meet with others that do it well, research and read about models, and pick something to start with and build from there. You may have to convince others through education opportunities. If you’re from a new or small organization, build this in the foundation of your mission and programs before you grow too large and it could be more challenging to make culture shifts.

“Be equitable and inclusive at your core, which includes leading with your constituents (your youth) in decision making.”