

# Public Achievement Program

# The Public Achievement Program

## History

In 1990, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs created the Public Achievement organizing model.

It grew out of a series of focus groups involving over 200 young people in a variety of settings in Minnesota. The youth were asked about problems in their schools and communities and about their views on politics and public life. They named many problems, but saw themselves outside of the solutions and outside of politics and public life. Nobody had ever asked them what they could do about the problems that mattered to them.

Public Achievement was first implemented in schools. It gave young people the opportunity to be producers and creators of their communities, not simply customers or clients. They showed that they could do serious work and have an impact on real problems.

Public Achievement has been recognized as one of the best youth citizenship education efforts in the world. In 2007, it was named one of 15 finalists for the prestigious Carl Bertelsmann prize. Awarded annually since 1981, the international award recognizes "innovative approaches and outstanding ideas that help shape and further develop democratic societies."

## Overview

Public Achievement is a youth civic engagement initiative focused on the most basic concepts of citizenship, democracy and public work. Public Achievement draws on the talents and desires of ordinary people to build a better world and to create a different kind of politics.

Our work is anchored by a few core ideas.

Everybody can do citizen work

All people—regardless of age, nationality, sex, religion, income or education—can be powerful public actors.

Citizenship isn't easy

Democracy is messy and sometimes frustrating, but when you work hard with others you can accomplish extraordinary things.

We learn by doing

The most important lessons of democracy come from doing public work and finding ways to cooperate with people who are different and may disagree. We learn from each

other when we solve problems together. This is the kind of politics that everyone can do, not just politicians.

#### Core elements

Participant elements (these can be adapted to participants of all ages)

- Youth choose to participate.
- Youth participate in teams (usually of 6 to 8 people).
- Youth choose issues through a deliberative process.
- Issues are grounded in the passions, values, and interests of the team.
- Team actions are real work – they take place over time (several months or longer), involve many steps, and have identifiable results or products.
- Young people use evaluation to learn from experiences, including successes and failures.
- Teams meet formally at least once a week.

#### Project elements

- Projects must be legal.
- Projects must be non-violent.
- Projects must contribute in some way to the public good.

#### Coach elements

- Coaches are guides and facilitators, not leaders, mentors, or directors; the coach time commitment is typically 3 to 5 hours per week.
- Coaches help teams do their public work, learn from their tasks, and identify key concepts (e.g. democracy, public work, and citizenship). Coaches help their teams link theory to practice.
- Coaches participate in training sessions that involve skill development, organizing methods, understanding theory, and an orientation to the Public Achievement site.
- A coach coordinator supports and supervises the work of coaches; creates an accountability structure, and works in partnership with the site coordinator.

#### Site elements

- Sites see Public Achievement as a way to implement or pursue their core mission and values.
- Site coordinators integrate Public Achievement into the site culture, coordinate logistics, help teams continue their work outside of formal Public Achievement meetings, and help make Public Achievement work visible.
- Sites see themselves as leaders in the movement to strengthen and invigorate democracy.