

Youth Climate Ambassadors Program

Year-long program trains high school students to take climate action into their own hands



(Photo courtesy of City of Menlo Park)

The Impact

The Youth Climate Ambassadors program in San Mateo County, Calif., is a hands-on learning and action program for students who want to address climate change. Through education, collaboration and solution-based leadership, students are given the tools to change their community for the better. Empowered by the program's resources and activist spirit, students have hosted sustainable art contests, built gardens at their schools and restored a site with native vegetation, to name a few of their projects.

The program seeks to train the next generation of socially and environmentally conscious leaders. Studies show that civic engagement and joining membership organizations while young play a key role in developing voting habits later in life. By learning how to take action and offer support for sustainability measures, students are able to make a tangible difference in their community that will inspire them in adulthood. In the short term, they learn about environmental action and implement real projects. And in the long term, cities may see improved voter turnout, civic engagement and local action as a result of the program's graduates.

Description

The Youth Climate Ambassadors program is a broad learning experience that brings a diverse group of students together around climate action. At a time when students are anxious about how

climate change will hurt their communities, this program provides opportunities to get engaged and instigate positive change.

Through a collaboration between public and private organizations, students generally begin by learning about climate change directly from seasoned activists and local climate leaders. Aided by peer mentors and community building, they are empowered to explore how they can help fight climate change. The training culminates in a final Community Impact Project where students showcase what they have learned about climate change and implement a program or plan in the community to address it.

Where It's Been Implemented

The San Mateo County Youth Climate Ambassadors program began in 2020 and has been growing ever since. It is sponsored by the county's offices of Sustainability and Education, Peninsula Clean Energy and a local nonprofit called the Citizens Environmental Council, which originally piloted the program in 2018.

As of January 2024, 273 students have completed or are currently enrolled in the program.

A similar pilot program launched in Houston during the summer of 2021. It was a collaboration between the nonprofit ecoRise, the facilitator group Hire Houston Youth and Houston's Office of Sustainability. Houston's Youth Climate Ambassadors are specifically tasked with advancing key goals of the Houston Climate Action Plan, raising awareness about impacts of climate change and better incorporating historically underserved community voices into the plan, primarily through outreach.

Key Drivers

Today's young people are bombarded with information at a rate never seen before because of technology and social media. They are often highly motivated to do something, but it's hard for them to figure out how to influence political issues when they can't even vote. Their response is often to tune out the information and become desensitized to very real issues.

The YCA program teaches young people how to engage with local government and climate action so that they can be the change. With the tools they learn to use, students are motivated and supported to implement real programs that address their climate anxiety.

Key Factors for Success

Strong support from local governments, such as an Office of Sustainability or Office of Education, is essential to encourage partnerships with other organizations and easily access local, federal and state funding incentives. California offers grants specifically for environmental literacy and environmental education.

Support from local organizations, especially climate-focused ones, offers increased opportunities for hands-on learning and more connections to future engagement. These organizations can also help bear some of the administrative burden of creating curriculum and managing students so that no one organization is overwhelmed.

Key Obstacles

San Mateo County's Youth Climate Ambassadors (YCA) program has no funding issues, thanks to generous support from multiple public and private partnerships. Peninsula Clean Energy (PCE), the county's community choice aggregation energy provider, funds all student stipends. As of September 2022, the PCE-YCA contract fully funds 80 student stipends and 20 supplemental travel and food stipends.



Equity and inclusion are the main issues for San Mateo County's YCA. Making sure the program isn't just filled with Advanced Placement Environmental Science (APES) students, presidents of school green clubs and upper-middle class students has been a challenge. Increased socioeconomic diversity increases the diversity of perspectives, and with each new perspective come new solutions to issues. The scope of projects will increase and so will impact on their community. The program's goal is to connect as many of these student perspectives as possible to build a cleaner future.

To broaden diversity, YCAs use local and national equity assessment tools such as the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) toolkit to assess equity, finding very specific regions of San Mateo County that have been overrepresented by YCA participants. YCA has partnered with specialized environmental organizations and local APES/Biology teachers in underrepresented regions to utilize a more direct connection to students. Ultimately, the organization was able to increase applications from these regions. Finally, it set diversity targets of at least 50% BIPOC students to promote and protect diversity. The racial composition of the 2023-24 program closely mirrors the demographic data from the County census, reflecting the program's dedication to embracing diversity and working towards the inclusion of all students in San Mateo County. Moreover, upon completing the program, every student receives a stipend, and those from lower-income families are awarded an extra equity stipend to address their specific needs. In the 2023-24 program, 34% of the students were eligible for this additional financial support.

Return on Investment

The Houston Youth Climate Ambassadors interacted with more than 400 Houston residents by passing out flyers and attending over 10 outreach events. The San Mateo County Youth Climate Ambassadors program has produced hundreds of community impact projects that address a wide range of environmental issues.

References and Resources

- Julie Hilborn, Environmental Literacy and Sustainability Coordinator, San Mateo County Office of Education, jhilborn@smcoe.org
- Jessica Dominick, Education and Outreach Sustainability Specialist, San Mateo County Office of Sustainability, jdominick@smcgov.org
- Yaneth Calderon, Climate Equity Coordinator, Houston, Texas, Yaneth.Calderon@houstontx.gov, 832-393-8930
- Social Science Quarterly, July 23, 2004, "[Participation in Voluntary Youth-Serving Associations and Early Adult Voting Behavior](#)"
- [Government Alliance and Racial Equity \(GARE\) toolkit](#)
- [San Mateo County's Youth Climate Ambassadors program](#)
- [Projects by students in San Mateo County's Youth Climate Ambassadors program](#)
- [Houston's Youth Climate Ambassadors program](#)
- [Presentation on Houston's Youth Climate Ambassadors program](#)
- California Department of Education. [Environmental education and environmental literacy resources and grant opportunities](#)

Document last updated January 2024