



Letter to the editor

Youth Advisory Boards During the COVID-19 Pandemic: From Theory to Practice in a Global Health Setting



To the Editors:

We write this letter to supplement the piece, “Youth Advisory Boards: Perspectives and Processes” written by Dr. Megan A. Moreno et al., to provide a practical example of the implementation of a youth advisory board (YAB) in a global context and to emphasize that YABs can serve as an important way for youth-serving organizations to center young people in decision-making [1]. Of note, this letter has been co-authored by youth participants from Adolescent Health Champions (AHC), an NGO which trains youth as gender and health leaders.

Within the context of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, we describe how a YAB has fundamentally changed our organization, AHC, and our approach and vision during the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, our organization invited 20 former Champions (peer educators) from Mumbai, India, to help our team decide on a path forward for the organization and to address youth needs during the pandemic. These initially informal interactions took place virtually over the course of 12 months and evolved into the formal creation of a YAB with bi-monthly meetings. Over time, YAB meetings have been co-chaired by youth leaders who have set meeting agendas and have used a variety of tools, such as design thinking, polls, and discussions to elicit ideas and feedback for the direction of AHC.

YAB members discussed the need for a widespread COVID-19–focused virtual program. This led to adding content to our existing curriculum focused on the physiology, signs, and symptoms of COVID-19, when and how to receive medical care, as well as ways to support one’s mental health during the pandemic. Secondly, youth shared the importance of involving parents/guardians and the need for independent educational sessions around adolescent health for parents/guardians given the close proximity between youth and guardians. Additionally, given school closures, multiple YAB members supported in transitioning our formerly in-person programming to a virtual delivery model and were instrumental in pilot-testing how a virtual peer education program could work in their schools. In other schools with more limited internet connectivity, youth leaders encouraged the AHC team to create adolescent health–related video content which could be streamed by youth on their own time and shared AHC material with students facing connectivity issues. Lastly, youth members helped co-design a mobile application featuring support resources that youth can access during the pandemic to supplement our program

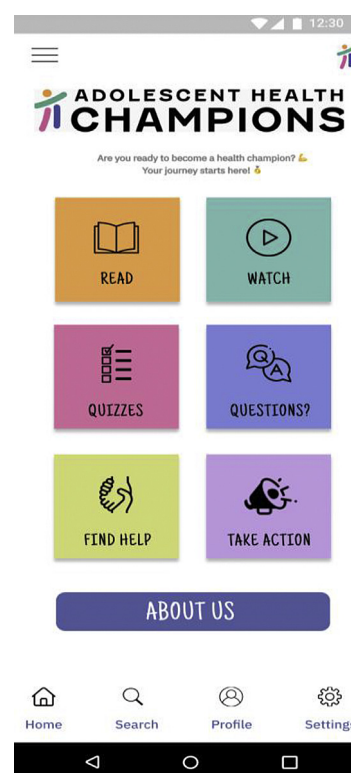


Figure 1. AHC mobile application prototype co-designed with youth.

(Figure 1). With the support of the YAB, AHC’s efforts were able to reach over 2,500 students and hundreds of parents/guardians during the pandemic.

Through the YAB, AHC has additionally transitioned from a youth-focused to a youth-led organization. 10th and 11th standard youth who had spent one year on the YAB recently joined the AHC core team. Many of these youth now lead teams such as the Marketing and Branding, Mobile Application, Innovation Units, Research, among others. One Champion recently published as the first author in the *Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*

describing the importance of youth and community leadership in dismantling traditional hierarchies around expertise in adolescent health [2]. In the future, through a continuous pipeline of young people participating in ongoing YAB efforts and later joining the AHC team, we imagine youth leading every part of our organization and serving as examples of promising youth leadership. We strongly support the article by Dr. Moreno and hope this letter further provides a practical example of the benefits of a YAB in a global context, as well as how youth have creative, context-sensitive perspectives and experiential knowledge that can successfully influence the direction of youth-serving organizations.

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