Youth Advocacy & Leadership Curriculum



Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to DC Action's Youth Advocacy and Civic Leadership Curriculum. This resource helps young people understand their communities, investigate issues that affect their lives, build collective power, influence public decisions, communicate with purpose, and prepare for continued leadership.

The curriculum centers Black and brown youth ages 11–24 in Washington, DC. It draws from DC history, youth organizing traditions, public policy, research, communications, campaign strategy, evaluation, and professional development. Youth programs, schools, coalitions, advocacy organizations, government partners, and community-based organizations may use the full sequence or select a clearly defined pathway.

Core commitment. Use this curriculum with young people, not simply for them. Youth should have meaningful opportunities to question, adapt, lead, make choices, and apply the material to issues they identify.

A Personal Note from Kawanza Billy

My commitment to youth voice is personal and professional. Throughout my work in advocacy, organizing, and community and youth engagement, I have seen young people live closest to many community challenges while being kept far from the decisions that shape their lives. I have also seen what changes when adults recognize young people's ideas, invest in their leadership, and make room for them to influence what happens next.

This curriculum reflects a simple belief: young people are the future and their leadership starts now. They bring cultural knowledge, courage, creativity, and a clear view of what their communities need. I hope these lessons help young people understand the systems around them, recognize the power they already hold, build power with others, and practice the skills needed to advocate for the futures they deserve.

The curriculum should continue to grow. Facilitators and youth participants should record what works, what needs clarification, which examples need updating, and how tools should be adapted. Any revision should protect youth power, local relevance, accurate information, ethical practice, accessibility, collective care, and action connected to real opportunities for change.

Yours in service,

Kawanza Billy
Senior Youth Advocacy and Engagement Manager
DC Action

A Note from the DC Action Youth Advisory Team

This message comes from DC Action's Youth Advisory Team Cohort 2, which served during the 2025 and 2026 program years. We are writing to the young people who will continue this work and to the adults and organizations who will learn alongside them.

We learned that youth advocacy involves more than speaking at an event or receiving an invitation to a meeting. It means understanding the issues that affect us, using our experiences to guide what should change, listening to one another, and learning how policy, activism, advocacy, and organizing can move an idea toward action.

Preparation made a real difference during Youth Advocacy Day. Planning our message, roles, and meeting flow helped us speak clearly with DC Councilmembers. We did not need to know everything. We needed to understand the issue, practice, ask questions, and work as a team so one person did not have to carry the whole conversation.

We also learned to listen across disagreement. People can experience the same issue differently. Staying open, asking questions, and forming your own conclusion can reveal what is possible now and what may require more time, organizing, and support.

There are many ways to advocate. You may speak at a town hall, meet with a decision maker, research an issue, write, create, organize peers, help someone prepare, ask questions, or support the team behind the scenes. These skills grow through practice.

To young people: use this curriculum as a guide and make the work your own. To adult allies and partners: listen, explain systems without taking over, be honest about what youth can influence, and follow up after young people share their ideas. Stay connected and let's build together.

With support and solidarity,

DC Action Youth Advisory Team
Cohort 2 | 2025–2026

Curriculum Purpose and Learning Journey

The curriculum follows a developmental learning journey that moves from identity and belonging toward collective action and continued leadership.

Belonging → History → Research → Policy → Advocacy → Collective Power → Campaigns → Communication → Evaluation → Future Leadership

Across 10 modules and 40 lessons, participants move from understanding themselves and their city to designing, communicating, evaluating, and sustaining advocacy efforts. The curriculum is guided by these principles:

- Youth voice and shared power. Youth influence the issues, examples, activities, and decisions that shape their learning.
- Local relevance. DC history, government, neighborhoods, institutions, budgets, and organizing traditions ground the curriculum.
- Learning by doing. Young people practice research, testimony, outreach, mapping, message development, campaign planning, and evaluation.
- Truth and accountability. Participants research claims, verify sources, interpret data responsibly, and use AI with human oversight.
- Care and accessibility. Participation supports dignity, consent, rest, multiple ways to engage, and sustainable involvement.
- Leadership pathways. Young people leave with transferable skills, work products, relationships, and concrete next steps.

What Participants Will Be Able to Do

- Build community agreements and recognize meaningful youth-adult partnership.
- Connect DC history to current systems, inequities, institutions, and civic opportunities.
- Ask research questions, evaluate sources, interpret data, identify misinformation, and use AI ethically.
- Understand public policy, DC government, the city budget, lawmaking, implementation, and oversight.
- Distinguish advocacy from organizing and use inside and outside strategies.

- Build a base, analyze power, select tactics, escalate strategically, and practice collective care.
- Turn community problems into winnable issues and develop campaign plans.
- Create audience-centered messages and organize responsibly in digital spaces.
- Evaluate results, document learning, celebrate contributions, and plan what comes next.
- Translate advocacy experience into leadership stories, portfolios, relationships, and career pathways.

Who This Curriculum Is For

The curriculum is designed for young people ages 11–24 in Washington, DC. Each lesson includes adaptations for ages 11–14, 15–17, and 18–24. Facilitators should also respond to each group's reading preferences, prior knowledge, language access, disabilities, cultural context, and program setting. Age bands are guides, not labels of ability.

- Youth participants may use the lessons to build civic knowledge, practice advocacy skills, create campaign tools, and plan future leadership steps.
- Youth and adult co-facilitators may divide roles and lead sections together.
- Adult allies may use the guidance to support youth decision-making without taking over.
- Organizations, schools, coalitions, agencies, and community programs may use the full sequence or a defined pathway that fits their goals.

Choose the Right Delivery Model

Delivery Model	How to Use It
Full sequence	Use all 10 modules in order for a comprehensive youth civic leadership program.
Semester or school-year pathway	Select modules that fit the program calendar while preserving prerequisite concepts and product connections.
Campaign-based pathway	Use Modules 3-9 alongside a real youth-led issue only after completing the Practice-to-Action Check.
Standalone workshop	Choose one lesson when participants already have the necessary foundation. Review the module bridge and prerequisites first.
Train-the-trainer pathway	Prepare youth and adult facilitators to co-lead, adapt scenarios, and document improvements.

Using the 60-Minute Lesson Format

Every agenda is designed as a complete 60-minute session. The timing within an agenda is suggested so facilitators can respond to the group, but each session should retain its protected opening, core practice, participant product, reflection, and closing.

- A lesson labeled Part A and Part B requires two separate 60-minute sessions. Do not compress both parts into one hour.
- Begin Part B with a brief reconnection and review so participants can re-enter the work safely and confidently.
- If an interruption shortens a session, protect consent, reflection, and closing. Schedule unfinished practice or production for a later meeting.
- Keep direct instruction brief. Young people should spend most of the session talking, moving, deciding, creating, practicing, or reflecting.
- When additional time is available, add local examples, small-group practice, youth facilitation roles, deeper debriefs, or application to a real issue after readiness is confirmed.

Navigation Legend

Use the following text labels throughout the website. The labels help facilitators identify what to protect and what to adapt. Pair any visual icon with the written label, and do not rely on color alone.

Label	Meaning	How to Use It
CORE	Protected Core	Keep this element in every session. Protected core elements include the welcome or reconnection, youth choice, core learning or practice, participant product, reflection, and closing.
ADAPT	Age Adaptation	Choose or combine options that fit ages 11–14, 15–17, and 18–24, as well as the group's access needs and experience.
ACTION	Practice-to-Action Check	Complete the readiness check before live testimony, campaigns, public communications, data collection, or portfolio sharing.
CHECK	Facilitator Check	Use the evidence and reflection prompts to confirm learning, note support needs, and improve the next session.

Standard Lesson Structure

Lesson Section	What You Will Find	How to Use It
Purpose	Why the lesson matters.	Use it to frame the session and protect the lesson's central intent.
Outcomes / Youth Learning Goals	Youth-friendly learning goals.	Share or paraphrase the goals so participants know what they are building.
Age Adaptations	Options for ages 11–14, 15–17, and 18–24.	Adapt language, examples, reading load, movement, support, and expected analysis.
Process	A brief description of the learning experience.	Read it before facilitating so the lesson arc is clear.
Suggested Run Time	The 60-minute session expectation.	Use the agenda's suggested durations while protecting every core element.
Materials and Preparation	Supplies, setup, technology, and advance work.	Complete the checklist before participants arrive.
Agenda and Activity Guide	Activities, timing, purposes, materials, and facilitator instructions.	Use it as the primary guide during the session.
Facilitator Check	Evidence of learning and reflection questions.	Use it during and after the session to assess understanding and improve delivery.
Module Appendix	Sources, worksheets, examples, visuals, and facilitator tools.	Open, print, download, or adapt only what the lesson requires.

Facilitator preparation standard. A new facilitator should be able to understand the lesson purpose, prepare the materials, follow the agenda, support participation, and identify follow-up without inventing missing instructions.

Recommended Preparation

- Read the complete lesson, including age adaptations, materials, appendix tools, examples, sources, and Facilitator Check.
- Confirm the purpose, outcomes, process, and 60-minute agenda before adapting activities.
- Choose current, local examples and verify facts, dates, data, laws, budgets, officeholders, and procedures.
- Prepare materials, technology alternatives, accessibility supports, food, transportation, stipends, interpretation, and follow-up plans as applicable.
- Decide where youth will hold, share, or influence decision-making power, and communicate the boundaries honestly.
- Identify sensitive topics, required reporting responsibilities, privacy concerns, and support resources before asking youth to share experiences.
- Plan how participant products will be saved, credited, protected, and used later.

Facilitator Preparation Checklist

- I understand the lesson's purpose, outcomes, and place in the learning journey.
- I reviewed and verified the sources and local examples.
- I prepared the appendix tools, supplies, links, and accessibility options.
- I know which elements are protected core and which may be adapted.
- I can explain youth decision-making power and program boundaries.
- I have a plan for sensitive disclosures, privacy, digital safety, and required reporting.
- I know how participant work will be saved, credited, and used later.
- I have a follow-up plan for unanswered questions and commitments.

Creating Belonging Access and Choice

Young people connect with the material when they know what to expect, can make meaningful choices, and can participate without being pressured to disclose personal experiences. Facilitators are responsible for creating the conditions for dignity, access, and trust.

- Facilitate with youth, not at youth. Invite young people to lead, choose examples, question assumptions, and shape group products.
- Name power and choice. Explain which decisions youth control, share, influence, or are only being informed about.
- Begin with relationships. Learn and use names and pronouns, explain your role, honor agreements, and follow through.
- Offer multiple ways to participate. Include speaking, writing, drawing, movement, partner work, anonymous input, breaks, fidgets, food, water, interpretation, and technology alternatives as needed.
- Use plain language without lowering expectations. Define terms, use local examples, break complex processes into steps, and invite application rather than memorization.
- Do not force disclosure. Participants may pass, use fictional or composite scenarios, speak generally, work with a partner, or contribute in another way.
- Protect story ownership. Ask permission before recording, quoting, photographing, posting, or sharing a young person's story. Explain where information will go and who will see it.
- Explain confidentiality and its limits. Do not promise secrecy that legal or ethical responsibilities prevent you from keeping.
- Use trauma-aware practices. Give advance notice about sensitive topics, offer choices and grounding, permit breaks, and do not treat trauma as proof that an issue matters.
- Treat conflict as part of learning. Use community agreements, address impact, and create opportunities for accountability and repair.
- Teach civic participation without directing youth to support a political party or candidate.
- Verify current information, distinguish evidence from interpretation, cite sources, and correct mistakes openly.

- Use AI with accountability. Do not enter private youth information into AI tools. Verify outputs, check bias, disclose meaningful assistance, and keep a person responsible for final decisions.
- Compensate and credit youth when possible, and explain compensation, use, and ownership before the work begins.
- Close the feedback loop. Tell youth what happened with their ideas, what changed, what could not change, and why.

From Practice to Real-World Action

Practice, fictional, or composite scenarios are the default. Before moving into live testimony, a real campaign, public communications, data collection, or portfolio sharing, confirm each condition below. If any condition is missing, keep the activity in practice mode.

- Youth freely opt in and may pass or change roles without penalty.
- The decision, process, timeline, and public-record consequences have been verified.
- Staffing, transportation, food, accessibility, compensation when appropriate, and adult follow-through are available.
- Consent, privacy, story ownership, digital safety, and required reporting responsibilities are clear.
- The group has a follow-up and debrief plan.

Facilitator Reflection After Each Session

Record what supported participation, what was unclear, where timing shifted, which accessibility needs emerged, how power and participation showed up, and what should change before the next session. Document unanswered questions and every commitment that requires follow-up.

Youth Participant Best Practices

These practices support shared learning. They are not rules for punishing participants. Youth and facilitators should adapt them into community agreements that fit the group.

- Bring your full self and choose your boundaries. Your identity, culture, questions, creativity, and lived experience matter. You decide what personal information to share.
- Speak from your experience. Use I statements and avoid assuming one person represents an entire neighborhood, identity, or generation.
- Step up, step back, and step with. Contribute, make room, and support people who participate differently.
- Ask questions and challenge ideas without attacking people. It is okay not to know.
- Check before sharing. Verify claims, look for original sources, read beyond headlines, and correct misinformation.
- Protect people's stories. Do not repeat, post, record, or quote another person's story without permission.
- Use technology responsibly. Protect personal information and do not upload confidential information to AI tools or public platforms.
- Give credit to the people, organizations, communities, research, art, and ideas that informed your work.
- Practice consent in group work. Ask before taking photos, tagging people, assigning public roles, or volunteering someone to share.
- Follow through or communicate early. Complete agreed responsibilities, ask for help, or tell the group when circumstances change.
- Care for yourself and the group. Take breaks, drink water, move, seek support, and notice when others may need space.
- Share feedback and celebrate growth. Name what helped, what was unclear, what felt inaccessible, and what you learned or contributed.

Participant Learning Portfolio

Participants should be encouraged to maintain a physical or digital portfolio. The portfolio helps youth carry work from one module to the next and translate advocacy experience into future opportunities. Depending on the pathway completed, it may include:

- Community commitments and leadership reflections.
- DC history, government, and budget learning products.
- Research questions, source checks, and data analysis.
- Policy notes and implementation analyses.
- Testimony, outreach messages, and inside and outside advocacy plans.
- Organizer style reflections, base-building plans, and power maps.
- Issue trees, campaign plans, frames, messages, and tactic ladders.
- Digital organizing plans and ethical storytelling agreements.
- Evaluation plans, evidence summaries, lessons learned, and celebration records.
- A professional biography, resume language, work samples, relationship maps, and a future plan.

Portfolio safety. Youth decide what to include and who may view or share it. Remove private information before public use, confirm consent for other people's stories or images, and provide a nonpublic option.