

COLORADO YOUTH SUMMIT

The Colorado Youth Summit sponsored by the Center for Education in Law and Democracy (CELD) is much more than a one-day “Denver experience.” The Summit involves students in in-depth examination of current Colorado issues that they have selected. It also provides multiple opportunities for students to interact with students from across the state, both online and in person, challenging students to engage with people who disagree with them. Finally, the Summit requires student to develop policy recommendations and present their ideas to Colorado policymakers.



Why is the Colorado Youth Summit an important strategy for civic engagement?

The goals of the Colorado Youth Summit are to provide Colorado high school students from across the state with the opportunity to (1) build civic literacy and community engagement skills necessary to become successful citizens, particularly the ability to analyze, take positions on, and discuss public policy issues and (2) develop leadership skills. These represent critical skills for citizens in a democracy. Both students and teachers reported that these goals have been met by the Colorado Youth Summit:

I learned that it is important to hear everybody’s opinion. I also learned that youth can make a difference and leadership is important. – Student participant in 2011 Summit

It was amazing to hear that students had educated their parents and now their parents were educating other community members about this bill. –Teacher participant in 2011 Summit

How is youth voice incorporated in the Colorado Youth Summit? From choosing the focus issues to providing leadership in discussions on the project wiki to planning and facilitating sessions at the Summit itself, youth voice is critical to the success of the Summit. CELD creates a curriculum unit on each of the focus issues chosen by students; the goal is to ensure that students’ deliberations in the classroom, on the wiki, and at the Summit will be informed; that is, that students will support their views with evidence and sound reasoning.

CELD staff provide professional development for participating teachers. Teachers then implement the CELD-developed lessons with all their students, who also have the opportunity to take part in lively discussions on the project wiki. CELD staff meet twice during the Summit preparation with a Student Advisory Committee; participants from schools in outlying areas take part electronically and through partnerships with Metro-area schools.

Real people cared about what we had to say. –Student participant in 2011 Summit

I think this was one of the most effective youth summits I have ever participated in. . . because the students felt they weren’t dominated by adults. And there was just enough structure to keep them focused but not stifled. They were able to do things in their own way. – Teacher participant in 2011 Summit



What happens at the Colorado Youth Summit? Four students per teacher attend the Youth Summit, where they work in small groups to learn about the different positions held by students and develop policy proposals with input from experts, many of whom have previously interacted with students on the wiki. Students then make presentations to policymakers, who ask hard questions about the practicality and effectiveness of student proposals and provide feedback to help improve them. The Summit ends with a town meeting and final vote on each student proposal. One policymaker who took part in the Summit in 2011 wrote: “I just wanted to write to let you know how impressive the Colorado Youth Summit was today. The students were informed and engaged in all of the discussions I

observed ... it was a valuable event.”