



BRIEF 4.2. TOMORROW'S LEADERS: FOSTERING GLOBALLY ENGAGED CITIZENS THROUGH YOUTH EXCHANGES

City, state, and other local governments must play a key role in broadening youth access to international opportunities. Collaboration with schools, universities, and civic organizations to expand youth exchanges provides benefits in the long run by building the next generation of engaged leaders, creating mutual understanding across countries, and nurturing lasting international connections.

1. The value of investing in globally fluent leaders.

International youth engagement yields many benefits, including:

- **Policy innovation:** Embedding young people's perspectives and ideas in discussions with local governments representatives strengthens policymaking and ensures that solutions to urban challenges consider youth needs and vision. For instance, local governments have increasingly established youth climate councils to create dialogue with youth climate leaders, ensuring environmental strategies reflect diverse community priorities, including those of younger generations.
- **Leadership development:** Youth programs develop future leaders with global fluency, experience, and networks. These programs can also create long-term ambassadors for communities that often go on to champion international partnerships. Future decision makers build cross-cultural understanding through direct experiences (see the example from Nancy, France below).

2. Considerations for international youth programming.

Integrating youth exchanges into existing partnerships deepens international ties. Local governments report that youth exchanges strengthen and help activate international partnerships. Nancy's Summer Internship Program demonstrates how to maximize existing partnerships. The city takes advantage of close links with its twin cities Karlsruhe, Newcastle, Padua, Lublin, and Kanazawa to operate an annual month-long program exchanging students. Interns gain exposure to municipal governance while improving language and professional skills (see case study below).

The cultural and academic initiatives underpinned by international youth programs benefit long-term economic and workforce development. These programs can build human capital and support international career development for participants by including language immersion, skills training, and hands-on experience in corporate or government spaces (see case study below).

Successful programs leverage institutional partnerships to limit the need for additional government staff and resources. As youth programs are often unfunded, local governments should seek to co-deliver programs with school and universities, which provide student recruitment support and academic credit mechanisms, or NGOs which can provide program management expertise and international network access. In France, programs receive support from the Franco-German Youth Office as well as the European Union. In New York City, the NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs launched in 2015 the NYC Junior Ambassadors program (NYCJA) which leverages the United Nations (U.N.) as a resource for seventh graders so that they understand their role as global citizens and can engage with the U.N. and its mission. This program benefits from the support of the U.N., the U.N. Foundation, NYC agencies, and U.N. member states. This approach requires building relationships with national, international, and regional funding organizations.

Insights From the Field



How Nancy deepens sister cities partnerships through youth exchange programs.¹

Nancy takes advantage of its close links with its twin cities in order to set up an annual month-long **Summer Internship Program**, exchanging students aged 18-25 with its twin cities including Karlsruhe (Germany), Newcastle (United Kingdom), Padua (Italy), Lublin (Poland) and Kanazawa (Japan). Interns get the opportunity to work in municipal services to enable them to improve their knowledge of the French language, to discover another way of life and another culture, as well as to understand the functioning of French local authorities and institutions. Interns are assigned specific tasks and participate fully in the life of the department they work in.

What makes Nancy's Summer Internship Program a success?

Each edition has a specific theme so that students learn to defend their values and get an insight into other cultures and ways of thinking. Participants provide a report at the end of their internship, and, back home, act as ambassadors of Nancy upon returning home, thus encouraging future engaged citizens. Evaluation documents such as a list of selection criteria, end-of-course survey, course certificates, various feedback from trainees, films, and internship agreements can help to secure a serious evaluation of the impact of this measure, highly appreciated by young people who capitalize on this initiative throughout their lives.

Who manages the program?

This is an originally Franco-German program led by Nancy and Karlsruhe that has been expanded to other twin cities of our cities. The respective international relations services select the students they send to the twin city and build the host program in their own city. This includes finding services likely to host an intern, organizing the leisure program, visits, thematic meetings, preparation of an end-of-stay show, and assistance with writing a logbook that brings together all the beautiful experiences lived in Nancy, leaving a beautiful record each year.

How is the program financed?

The City of Nancy provides a budget for costs related to hosting students. Transportation costs are borne by the students themselves. For German and French students, the Franco-German Youth Office supports this exchange financially. For other countries, no such structure exists.



Dortmund's youth engagement²

Dortmund's long-standing partnership with Buffalo, New York exemplifies its commitment to youth exchanges. The Buffalo-Dortmund Youth Ambassador Program has been running for decades, allowing students from Dortmund to spend several months in Buffalo, participate in local schools, and engage in cultural and recreational activities. The program is reciprocal and is supported by both municipalities as part of the official city partnership.

Youth engagement is also considered when organizing or attending international events and planning delegation visits. At the 2025 Eurocities Annual Conference in Braga, a youth representative of Dortmund took part in the "Young City Shapers" program that is offered in addition to the official conference program. It allows the inclusion of young people's perspectives and ideas in discussions with the city representatives and local politicians. The aim is to ensure that solutions to urban challenges consider the needs and visions of young people.

¹ Contribution from Nancy (France)

² Contribution from Dortmund (Germany)

Another example is DORTBUNT, a yearly city festival, that among other aspects provides the opportunity to showcase good practices from Dortmund such as the sustainable transformation from

its industrial past to innovation. Partner cities are always invited to such milestone events. It is beneficial to consider various groups of interest including political actors, technical experts, but also youth representatives. This year an additional side program for young delegates from the partner cities has been organized by the "Respect Office" of the Department for Youth Welfare, providing a platform for a multilateral and multinational exchange under the theme "Echoes of Freedom". The City of Dortmund also provides limited funding for various projects and initiatives, including youth exchanges that are linked to strengthening city partnerships.



Youth professional skills training and leadership at the core of the cooperation strategy of French region La Réunion in the Indian Ocean and Southern Africa³

Youth professional skills training and leadership are key drivers of the cooperation strategy of the French island of La Réunion in the Indian Ocean and the region of Southern Africa. To strengthen co-development and integration in its surrounding area, the regional government of La Réunion supports youth volunteer programs run by France Volontaires, a French government organization that sends volunteers to countries around the world. These programs allow young people from La Réunion to gain international professional experience in areas such as culture, sustainable development, and economic cooperation. Recent graduates get the opportunity to apply and develop skills while serving communities in the Indian Ocean and Southern Africa, such as Madagascar, Mauritius, and Tanzania. The program also trains and prepares a future generation of regional cooperation leaders and practitioners. La Réunion Region has established a partnership agreement with France Volontaires, which has set up a local office in La Réunion to develop this exemplary program.

Since 2004, 341 young people from La Réunion have benefited from this experience, including 245 with co-financing from La Réunion Region. This initiative, integrated into French and European international development policies, is co-funded by the European Union, the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, and La Réunion Region through the EU Interreg Indian Ocean funding program.

³ Contribution from La Réunion (France)

About this Toolkit: Strategic guidance based on experiences from the field.

State and local leaders receive visiting foreign delegations, opportunities for international partnerships, and pressure to engage globally—but no clear guidance on how to do it right. This Toolkit provides that strategic guidance, building upon the insights and best practices from a group of innovative city, state, and regional government leaders from nine countries: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States

The result is a practical guide organized around the core challenges local leaders face most often. It provides strategic guidance to:

- Build an international strategy that serves community's priorities while avoiding common pitfalls (Briefs 1.1, 1.2, 1.3)
- Manage relationships that create economic opportunities and jobs (Briefs 2.1, 2.2, 2.3)
- Navigate security threats and potential risks (Briefs 3.1, 3.2)
- Turn international connections into influence and resilience (Briefs 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)

Each brief includes specific steps and real examples from local leaders, experts, and practitioners. If you're using this Toolkit to apply an innovation locally or have questions or suggestions, [please fill out this short survey](#)