



---

# STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & RETENTION TOOLKIT

---

OPERATION  
**SNOWBALL**

cebrin goodman  
*teen institute*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



- Introduction
- The Cycle of Programming
- Selling Your Program
- The Buy-In
- A Voice at the Table
- Celebrating Success
- Alumni Support
- Ebbs and Flows
- Program Fidelity
- Sources and Credits

# INTRODUCTION

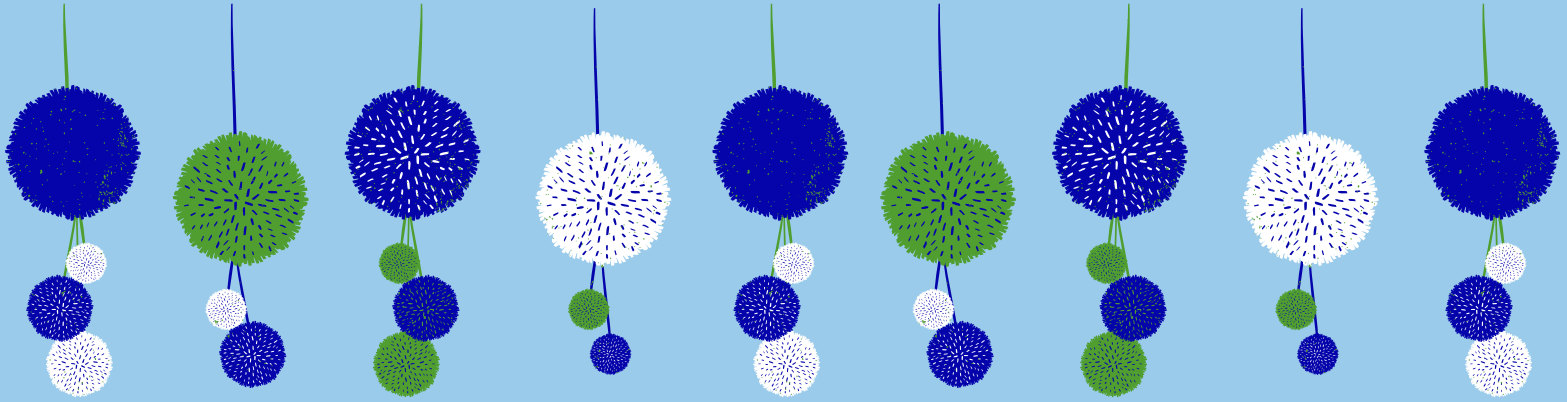
This toolkit focuses on student engagement and retention. Operation Snowball, and the Cebrin Goodman Teen Institute, are student-based programs that use adult partnerships to give them a voice and space to create positive change in their communities!

Simply put, our programming doesn't exist without our student leaders! Therefore, keeping them engaged, inspired and at the forefront of what programming exists is paramount. This toolkit's purpose is to support Action Teams in engaging more youth in joining programming!

What makes a youth leader realize their potential, find a purpose in programming or stick around to make even bigger changes? That's what this is all about. Meeting youth where they are, finding out what they want to do, and helping them create opportunities, accomplish goals and encourage others to do the same.



# THE CYCLE OF PROGRAMMING

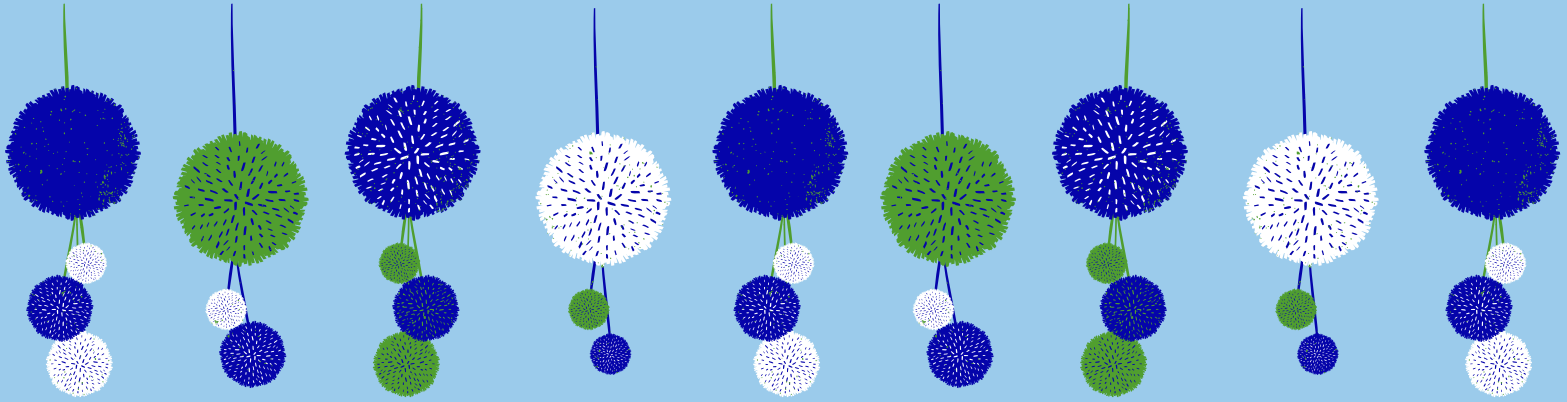


Action Team programming works in a cyclical fashion! Students join as early as possible and are trained through their programs with help from OS or at events like CGTI.

Those students create action plans to make a difference in their community, while also helping to engage other local youth leaders in programming. Then they can help train those students during local events and meetings!

These students then graduate leaving space for the newer youth to take higher roles in your program while also possibly offering a chance to return in a new role as an alumni that can offer outside support.

# THE CYCLE OF PROGRAMMING



# SELL YOUR PROGRAM

So how do you get youth engaged in the first place?

"Selling" your program is a huge part of the process :

- What do you have to offer, how and when?
- How can you give them a summary of what Operation Snowball has to offer in an enticing and fun way?
- How can you get the attention of the leaders in your community that you know could find a home at OS, and maybe later at CGTI too?

Youth are busy - they already may have a schedule set between classes, other extracurriculars and things they're doing at home. What can you do to show them why this fits in or why they should make room for it?

Selling your program is a dance of showing what's in it for them but also doing the work to meet them where they are whether that's someone who is already very involved, someone who may be nervous to join or someone who doesn't know why their place might be here.

# SELL YOUR PROGRAM



How are you reaching your youth?

What incentives can you offer?

Will you hold an info session?

What do your youth care about?

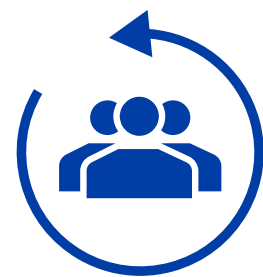
Who can attest to your program?

What do your youth need?

# THINGS TO THINK ABOUT



# THE BUY-IN



The most important part of the engagement you're doing whether that's at a meeting, in a one-on-one conversation or in an email is discussing, highlight and emphasizing your youths' WHY.

WHY should they join? WHY are they staying? WHY do they care?

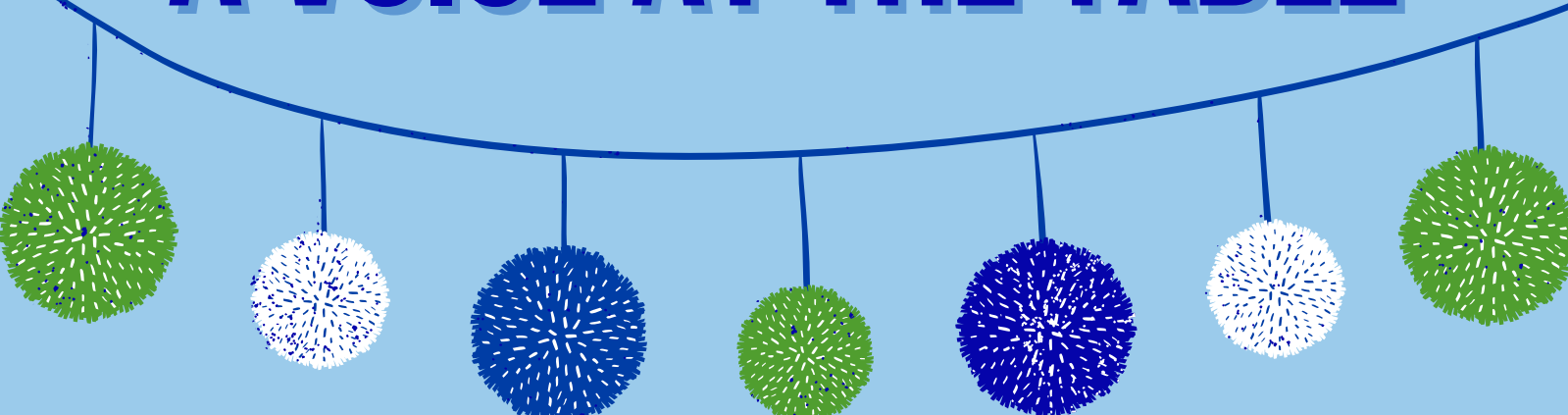
Everyone's why is different. They could have a personal connection to substance use prevention or mental health awareness. They could be looking for a space where they feel they have a chance to be creative or make a difference. They could like spending time with their peers in a positive space.

Finding out the why of each youth you connect with and highlighting those whys in your programming will make OS the special place that it is - something that offers a piece for everyone interested. OS is what our youth make of it - they can decide how many projects they want to take on, what issues they want to tackle and what steps they want to take together. Helping them find a united passion while supporting each individual one is how and why action plans are successful!

You can ask students their whys in your meetings or give them ideas on your own. They may not know that Snowball has so many facets, so many opportunities for growth or learning. Hear them out and then let them know what OS can provide!



# A VOICE AT THE TABLE

A decorative string of seven colorful pom-poms hangs across the top of the page. The pom-poms are in shades of green, white, and blue, and are suspended by thin black lines from a curved black string.

Once you have student engagement, let them tell you and show you what keeps them there! Your meetings, your events and your action plans should be student-led or student-based. How do they want to contribute? What are their interests?

What does this mean? Offer them the chance to lead meetings, to plan fun events for the team outside of programming, to have a say in decisions made. Every student will want a different level of engagement, and that's okay!

Give students the chance to grow their leadership within your organization to higher positions like small group leaders or directors. If students aren't ready for this level of advancement, offer committees or specific group work!

Students should have a voice in both the fun aspects of programming and in the serious. Let them tell you their ideas, work on group cohesion and more. Bringing purpose together with fun is what keeps students active and energized.

# CELEBRATING SUCCESS

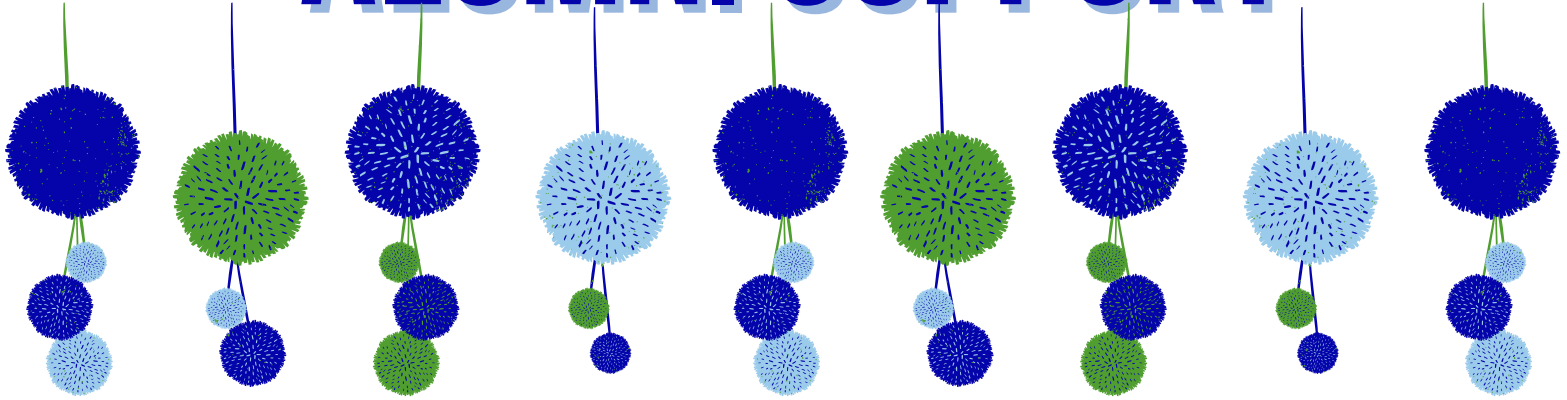
One of the most important things you can do for your youth is acknowledge what they accomplish and what they bring to the table, both big and small. This might mean celebrating hitting small goals like getting three new peers to a meeting, acknowledging a completed action plan, or giving out graduation cords to seniors.

Some ways you can celebrate success:

- handing out yearly leadership awards or superlatives
- throwing a pizza/celebration party
- bringing special treats to a meeting
- planning a fun group outing
- Getting special merch when you hit a goal
- Letting students pick theme nights for meetings
- Putting congratulations in school or community news (announcements, online, newspapers, etc)

Above all, Operation Snowball is about **youth empowerment!** What support we can provide is what makes our partnership essential. This may be the one space they find this kind of encouragement or celebration of what they can do!

# ALUMNI SUPPORT



Thinking about retention, beyond when you are with your students in person year to year, you also have to think about what comes *after*.

You should decide ahead of programming what role, if any, you want alumni to play:

- will they come back to help with meetings occasionally
- will they participate in and support events in alumni roles
- will they have to wait a certain amount of time (i.e. post-college) to return
- will they just provide general support such as sharing social posts and giving donations when able

Some programs have an excellent community of alumni that work hand in hand with their youth and provide a really excellent viewpoint for how Operation Snowball continues to make a difference in their day to day lives as adults. Other programs want to focus on the youth that they are currently working with only. Both of these options are okay, but setting the parameters ahead of time and sticking to them is what's important for maintaining structure and thinking about future programming as years end and new students both leave and come in.



# EBBS AND FLOWS



Something important to mention in speaking to retention and engagement are the natural ebbs and flows that may come with programming. You may see your program go through natural cycles of interest and disinterest based on outside causes - maybe the next class coming in is really athletics-focused which might mean a lot of students are not ready to make the time commitment to other clubs. The number of students you engage may differ year to year. We know for certain that the pandemic changed many of our teams' abilities to both engage and retain students! Some things you can't predict.

Part of engagement and retention is not just adapting to meet students where they are, but also to meet your school, organizations, and communities where they are too. Having to make changes in your programming in terms of engagement and retention does not mean that your programming isn't working or is failing. It means that we are moving and working with the time and place that we're in!

Operation Snowball and CGTi are always here to assist if you need new and fresh ideas when bringing in new students and keeping former students inspired and energized!

# PROGRAM FIDELITY

Above all, we know that engagement and retention can be difficult! The buy-in process can take incentive, convincing students to take healthy risks and meet new people or try new things. Operation Snowball is meant to offer each youth leader a place to explore passions, create change and find a way to use their voice in the way that suits them best while also trying new things.

That being said, when we talk about meeting students and our communities where they are, we also have to remember that the fidelity of the program should not be compromised in doing so. For instance, if you feel that you are having a hard time engaging students because they think that substance prevention is "lame," that doesn't mean you should remove that aspect of the programming. This is a great chance to return to the drawing board and say, "okay, what do we have that speaks to *their* why."

We should never be compromising the mission or values of Operation Snowball, or CGTI, to engage students and retain them. Some students may not be interested in general, despite every angle and opportunity you provide. No worries! What matters is offering genuine programming to those who are.

# SOURCES AND CREDITS

This toolkit was made based on suggestions from the SPF-trained staff of the Illinois Association for Behavioral Health, Operation Snowball and the Cebrin Goodman Teen Institute. These staff are not responsible for any medical issues or otherwise that occur at any Operation Snowball events hosted based on this toolkit. Teams and individuals hosting events are responsible for what occurs at their specific events.

This Toolkit is meant to be used as a basis for programming and is not suggested as the *only* way to retain to engage students. This Toolkit is meant to serve Snowball Teams and CGTI attendees in action planning within their communities and to support thorough, organized and detail-oriented planning through youth and adult partnerships that are fostered based on the fidelity of the program.

This toolkit should be used by and shared with Operation Snowball chapters and Cebrin Goodman Teen Institute actions teams only and was made with that specific use and implementation in mind.