



OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

# Building Transformative Youth Leadership:

Data on the Impacts of Youth  
Organizing

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- Support youth organizing groups to develop stable and sustainable organizations; and
- Increase the awareness and understanding of youth organizing among funders and community organizations.

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#### About the Author:

Seema Shah is a research and evaluation consultant based in New York City. Her areas of expertise include youth and community organizing, diversity, urban education, and immigrant and refugee youth. Seema has published and presented widely on these topics over the past decade and is the co-author of the book *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools: Strategies and Successes*, published by Harvard University Press. Currently, she is the Director of Research for Special Projects at the Foundation Center and has previously held research positions at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, the Consultation Center at Yale University, and the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University. She holds a Ph.D. in Clinical-Community Psychology from DePaul University.

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**Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing**

20 Jay Street, Suite 210B  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
(212) 725-3386

[info@fcyo.org](mailto:info@fcyo.org)

# Building Transformative Youth Leadership:

Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing

BY SEEMA SHAH

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## SERIES PREFACE

For years, youth organizing groups have attested to the power of youth organizing in influencing policy, improving institutions, and changing the systems that low-income youth of color need to navigate. Just as important, youth organizers have attested to the impact that youth organizing has had on them, as individuals. Many activists, organizers, and advocates can remember their first direct action, the first campaign they worked on, and the lifelong friends they made, with whom they connected deeply through a shared set of values and commitment to social justice. Organizers often can pinpoint the critical moment when they were sparked and saw themselves as capable leaders who were part of something bigger than them, bigger than the organization they represented, and bigger than the campaign issue they were working on. They were able to identify as being part of a broader social justice movement, which in itself is a transformative experience.

As much as we've been able to talk about the positive and powerful impacts of youth organizing, the field has largely focused on campaign victories and anecdotal stories to demonstrate its success.

Until now. In FCYO's 11th issue of the Occasional Papers Series, "Building Transformative Youth Leadership," the second in the Leadership Pipeline series, Seema Shah builds upon our 10th issue, in which Shawn Ginwright made the case for developing a Leadership Pipeline to bring low-income youth of color into organizing (entry stage); strengthen their leadership and organizing skills (development stage); and support their transition to higher education, employment and advanced leadership opportunities in social justice organizing (transition stage). Shah focuses on the development stage of the Leadership Pipeline and draws upon years of data for this publication, the most comprehensive study on youth organizing's impacts to date.

This report comes at a critical time. As a result of the economic downturn, reduced budgets in the philanthropic sector have led to more selective grantmaking and a call for measureable outcomes. Funders are asking for evidence: Are programs effective? Are young people experiencing success? And, is youth organizing worth investing in? At the same time, the Obama Administration's plans to improve academic standards that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace, with the goal of making this country more competitive in the global economy, has influenced the public discourse on education. Parents, students, educators, and community members are critically exploring how best to improve the quality of public education, and like the funding community, they are asking for measureable outcomes and accountability systems to monitor and improve education settings.

With this issue, Shah illustrates the transformative power that youth organizing, specifically organizing for education reform, has on young people – from increasing their sense of self-efficacy and strengthening their leadership capacity, to increasing their collective power, academic motivation, and future commitment to civic engagement. This paper illuminates the connections between youth organizing's transformative impact on young people and its potential to affect public education and social change. Future papers in this series will continue to build the case for how and why youth organizing is a key strategy in improving outcomes for young people, their schools, and communities.

Lorraine Marasigan  
Program Officer  
Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing  
May 2011

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Grassroots youth organizing is alive and well, and it is changing communities, as well as the lives of young people who are leading campaigns for social justice. Involvement in organizing helps young people, most of whom are youth of color from low-income neighborhoods, develop deep connections to their community. It inspires them to take an active role in solving social problems, and builds their capacity and skills to lead movements for change now and in the future. “Building Transformative Youth Leadership,” eleventh in the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing’s (FCYO) Occasional Papers Series, shows how participation in organizing shapes young people’s development as civic and political actors in their community.

To date, much of what we know about the field of youth organizing and its impacts has been documented through qualitative research, such as case studies. While qualitative research illuminates the successes and challenges of particular organizations or individuals, there is a need for complementary data that captures the impact of youth organizing on a larger scale. The research presented in this report is the most comprehensive to date on the impacts of youth organizing and uses both qualitative and quantitative data from surveys, interviews, and field observations to understand the myriad ways in which young people are impacted by their involvement in youth organizing.

The youth who participated in this study belong to organizing groups in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and New York City. They are predominantly young people of color who live in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the nation and attend some of the most under-resourced schools in the country. They became involved in youth organizing for a variety of reasons, some as lofty and earnest as the desire to make a change in their community and others as mundane and instrumental as the desire to spend social time with friends. Yet all of the youth were ultimately impacted in fundamental and transformative ways.

## KEY FINDINGS

This research sought to understand and document the experience of youth themselves and also to elicit critical perspectives from school and district administrators and adult staff at youth organizing groups. Based on an analysis of 124 survey responses from

youth, 88 interviews with youth, school and district administrators, and youth organizing staff, and observations of leadership development sessions and other organizing activities, we found that:

**Youth organizing groups represent uniquely supportive organizational settings that provide a necessary and important opportunity structure for youth to become engaged in the civic and political life of their communities.** Counter to popular conceptions of young people of color as politically apathetic, this study shows the ways in which youth organizing groups nurture leadership and organizing skills among young people. Youth organizing groups do so, in part, by attending to the lived cultural and political experiences of young people, while also providing safe and inviting spaces for youth.

**Involvement in organizing helps young people feel a sense of agency in their lives – the belief that they have control over their actions and can make a difference in the world around them.** In a society that all too often marginalizes the experiences and voices of youth of color and renders them powerless, young people's discovery of their own power helps to shift their sense of self, expectations for their futures, and their sense of possible roles they might play in the world. Upwards of 80% of students felt confident that they could research a problem in their community, create a plan to address the problem, and get other people to care about the problem.

**Involvement in organizing helps young people develop a critical social analysis.** Youth organizing groups did more than develop the competencies of young people. Through their involvement in organizing, young people began to understand the systemic nature of problems in their community and schools and the need for correspondingly systemic solutions. They also gained the organizing skills to address community problems through collective action.

**Engagement in civic and political action exceeds that of students in a national sample.** Youth involved in organizing plan to remain committed to activism for the long-term. More than 90% of young people in our survey expressed a desire to stay involved in activism and remain committed to long-term social change efforts.

**Involvement in organizing increases young people's educational motivation and aspirations.** Although there are significant disparities in educational outcomes for young people of color and low-income students, young people involved in youth organizing seemed to counter these trends. Eighty percent of students noted their grades improved and 60% reported that they took more challenging coursework due to their involvement in organizing. Eighty percent of youth reported plans to pursue a college education and close to half of the sample said they expected to obtain a graduate or professional degree beyond college.



## MOVING FORWARD

This paper provides evidence of the strengths of youth organizing to build a cadre of leaders for communities and the social justice movement. The continued success of this work depends on the collective efforts of youth organizing practitioners, funders, school-based educators, researchers, and youth themselves. In the work ahead, it will be important to remain attentive to the challenges and difficulties of creating politically and culturally relevant environments that truly support young people of color. And while much of the power of youth organizing groups lies in groups' strong community roots and local history and conditions, there are now expanding opportunities to build a movement through regional and national networks, not only in taking action, but also in developing new leaders and supporting new organizations. In addition, as the field seeks to help young people sustain their commitment to activism beyond high school, deliberate, rather than ad-hoc, strategies to build an infrastructure for long-term engagement in the social justice movement are needed.

In the past decade, youth organizing groups across the country have made substantial progress in influencing social policies that have benefited the hardest to reach communities, and have often done so with limited resources and funding. In this paper, we examine three youth organizing groups, each located in low-income neighborhoods served by under-resourced public schools, and each operating with small budgets for their youth organizing efforts. As the data in this paper shows, youth organizing not only provides a mechanism for policy change, it also presents a unique and significant developmental space for low-income youth of color that addresses their needs, personal goals, and commitment to social justice. Through greater and more strategic investments, there are opportunities to take the work of these three organizing groups to scale. Thus, this paper serves both to illustrate the positive impact organizing has had on individual youth, and to issue a call to action to resource youth organizing at the level it deserves. In concert with field-building efforts is the need for additional research in the field – to inform thoughtful and strategic program development and to build a knowledge base on the processes and outcomes of youth organizing.

## WHAT IS YOUTH ORGANIZING?

It is a cool Saturday morning in South Los Angeles. A dozen teens are perched comfortably on couches and chairs in the offices of South Central Youth Empowered through Action (SC-YEA), the youth organizing arm of Community Coalition, a local organization dedicated to improving economic and social conditions for South Los Angeles' primarily Latino and African-American residents. Despite the early hour, the students are animated and engaged as they focus on a history lesson on youth social movements. The conversation is being led by two twenty-something staff members of SC-YEA, who themselves had started out with the program as youth members. The morning's session focuses on several powerful examples of youth movements – the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's role in the civil rights movement, the Chicano Blowouts in East Los Angeles, and the Soweto Uprisings in South Africa – and examines the objectives of each organizing effort, the strategy and tactics used, the challenges faced, and the victories achieved. And then the conversation moves to another youth movement – their own.

For several years prior, members of SC-YEA had documented the lack of college preparatory coursework in their neighborhood schools, noting that many of their local schools offered more classes in cosmetology and floor covering than advanced coursework in math and science. With a graduation rate below fifty percent in their schools, that meant that the students who did earn high school diplomas were often graduating without advanced coursework —making them ineligible for admission to California's highly regarded public universities. The students provocatively termed this phenomenon “penitentiary tracking.”

In response, students began organizing to raise awareness about the issue among their peers through a variety of creative outlets, including staging a fashion show that showcased the career options available to students with college preparatory coursework (professional jobs) compared to career options without college preparatory coursework (low-wage service sector jobs). Students and SC-YEA staff also met with school and district administrators to push for improved guidance counseling and

increased course offerings in core subjects so that more students would have access to advanced coursework.

Ultimately, Community Coalition co-convened a citywide coalition to demand a change to district policy, advocating for a school board resolution to make college preparatory curriculum mandatory for all of the district's students. Indeed, the students seated around the table that Saturday morning were not just learning about activism from a historical perspective, they themselves were in the throes of the city's college access campaign, busy collecting student signatures for a petition and planning a mass mobilization at an upcoming school board meeting to demonstrate their support for the resolution.

Their work, along with efforts of allied organizations across the city, led to the passage of the school board resolution for increased access to college preparatory coursework a few months later. The victory was touted in the *Los Angeles Times* by then-school board president, Jose Huizar, as "one of the most significant reforms" ever undertaken by the district.

The resolution for mandatory college preparatory curriculum marked a major victory for the field of youth organizing and the ripple effects of the strategies used to lead to its passage have been felt like waves among organizing groups in other low-income communities of color across the country. Today, SC-YEA's campaign focuses on the successful implementation of the policy as full implementation of the reform has lagged. African-American and Latino youth in South Los Angeles continue to fight for educational equity, underscoring the fact that young people at SC-YEA are very much engaged in the long and difficult work of their own youth movement.

While the work of SC-YEA is remarkable on many levels, the story of young people of color coming together to organize and to fight for a better future is not a unique one. Across communities in the United States, young people are organizing to advocate for better schools, a cleaner environment, and safer communities.

Since 2000, the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), as part of the strategy to leverage resources for the field, has documented trends in youth organizing. In 2010, FCYO conducted a field scan to assess the scope and nature of youth organizing nationally, identifying 160 groups across the country whose work centered on a wide range of issues important to young people – immigration, environmental justice, criminal justice, and education, to name a few. Not surprisingly, given the salience of schooling in the lives of young people, as well as the glaringly deep divide that exists in educational access and equity for young people of color, the largest number of groups focused their work on educational justice. And because education cannot easily be separated from other issues affecting young people, much of youth organizing is intersectional. Education reform demands are embedded in other

campaigns for social justice, such as calls for pathways to citizenship for undocumented students and bringing an end to the school-to-prison pipeline.

As demonstrated by SC-YEA, youth activism occurs in concert with youth leadership development and exposure to political education. In the first paper of the three-part series published in 2010, scholar Shawn Ginwright outlines the leadership development process for youth as they become active participants in community change efforts. He describes a process that occurs in three phases – the entry phase in middle school and pre-adolescence, the development phase in high school and adolescence, and the transition phase in early adulthood.

This paper delves more deeply into what Ginwright describes as the development phase – the phase in which young people who participate in youth organizing or other similar initiatives (such as participatory action research) acquire organizing skills, develop an emerging political consciousness, build their knowledge of community issues, and take collective action. For many young people, these are often the experiences that either lead to – or deepen – a commitment to social justice. This paper brings quantitative and qualitative data to bear on the ways in which this phase of leadership development can be transformational for young people and can lay the groundwork for longer-term engagement in social justice activities.

Before turning to the data on youth organizing, it is helpful to define youth organizing and articulate the ways it aligns with and enhances youth development. Traditional youth development programs work to meet the personal, emotional, physical, and academic needs of young people by helping them gain the skills needed to thrive and transition successfully into adulthood. Principles of youth development include: safety and structure, belonging and membership, opportunities for independence and control, identity development, and self-awareness. Organizations utilizing a youth development model focus on building the individual skills and competencies of young people. As the youth development field emerged out of calls for prevention and harm reduction, it typically has focused on providing youth with the skills and competencies to avoid risky behaviors.

Youth organizing builds upon the strengths of more traditional youth development models by empowering youth to build relationships with peers, adults, and community members, and envision positive changes for their community. Yet youth organizing initiatives differ from youth development programs in several ways. Youth organizing trains young people in community organizing and advocacy and helps them analyze community and system-level issues, alter power relations, and create meaningful community change. Youth organizing relies on the power and leadership of young people: they define issues in their communities that are most relevant to them, develop an analysis of the

problem, and identify and implement solutions to address structural problems. As such, youth organizing focuses on individual and collective leadership.

Like programs premised on principles of positive youth development, youth organizing builds on the assets of young people and supports their development holistically. In fact, FCYO found that every single one of the 160 youth organizing groups identified in their field scan provided youth development supports, including formal academic supports such as tutoring and guidance counseling, and more informally, emotional and mental health supports. Youth development programs and youth organizing efforts share much common ground. Indeed, Alberto Retana, who spearheaded SC-YEA's youth organizing efforts in South Los Angeles and who is currently the Director of Community Outreach for the US Department of Education, notes that social change and individual transformation are symbiotic, and for youth of color growing up in rough neighborhoods, there is power in both: "If you really believe that you can change the world and you commit yourself to changing the world, in some way, shape, or form, changing yourself becomes that much easier. With regards to youth development, that's key."

Thus, while youth organizing groups possess many elements of youth development and support the growth of young people in ways similar to youth development programs, youth organizing enhances youth development in its approach by working with young people to help them gain the knowledge and skills to understand social and structural inequities and engage in action that results in social change. In this respect, youth organizing not only builds individual capacity, but it also generates sociopolitical and community capacity.

## YOUTH ORGANIZING GROUPS: A CLOSER LOOK

The three organizations involved in this study – South Central Youth Empowered through Action, Sistas and Brothas United, and Youth United for Change – use political education and leadership development to support young people in identifying community problems, developing solutions, and organizing fellow students and community members to catalyze change. These groups are predominantly comprised of youth and staff of color and create organizational settings that are deeply imbedded within the cultural and political experience of their community.

### **South Central Youth Empowered through Action**

Founded: 1993, as the youth organizing arm of the Community Coalition

Location: South Los Angeles, CA

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#### **Background**

In 1990, several activists, including Karen Bass (currently a member of the US House of Representatives), started Community Coalition to “transform the social and economic conditions that foster addiction, crime, violence, and poverty by involving thousands of people in creating, influencing, and changing public policy.” Early in the development of the Community Coalition, Bass saw a need for youth programs that would develop teens into the next generation of leaders. South Central Youth Empowered Through Action (SC-YEA) began in 1993 as a youth services program of Community Coalition and a year later began an initial campaign against the three strikes law, which mandated long periods of imprisonment for people convicted of even a minor felony on three separate occasions. In 1996, SC-YEA began focusing on school reform, creating campus-based organizing committees at different Los Angeles high schools.

#### **Successful Campaign: Equal Access to College Prep Classes**

To document the lack of college preparatory coursework in South LA high schools, SC-YEA leaders conducted an investigation of their schools’ course offerings. Students found that some of their schools had an excess of “dead-end classes,” or classes such as cosmetology and floor covering that prepared students for a career in low-wage labor as opposed to preparing them for college. SC-YEA members met with the superintendent and four other district administrators who promised to provide every student with an academic transcript, refocus counselors’ priorities to increase college preparation, meet regularly with SC-YEA, and to hold school assemblies about making college preparatory courses mandatory.

To promote awareness, SC-YEA leaders set up a cultural extravaganza where they used art as a way to share information and agitate their fellow students about the issue. They also collected signatures from fellow students for a petition demanding more rigorous coursework. After several years of local organizing at their schools, SC-YEA and the Community Coalition partnered with community organizations to build a district-wide campaign for a school board resolution that would mandate a college preparatory curriculum in the entire district. Though prospects for passage initially looked bleak, the campaign was ultimately successful. In 2008, the college preparatory curriculum became the mandatory default curriculum for all students in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Following the victory, a new generation of SC-YEA members continues to monitor implementation and fight for college access.

### **Sistas and Brothas United**

Founded: 1999, Affiliated with North West Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition

Location: Northwest Bronx, NY

#### **Background**

Sistas and Brothas United (SBU) is affiliated with the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC), a multi-issue, multi-racial membership organization that unites neighborhood organizations and congregations in a predominantly low and moderate income section of the Bronx. NWBCC formed an education committee in 1995 in response to district-wide school overcrowding. Initial campaigns combined school- and district-level organizing to win facilities improvements and the construction of six new school buildings. Fernando Carlo, who began as a youth leader with NWBCCC campaigns to end school overcrowding, caught the attention of area youth with his outspoken criticism of district policies and practices. Working with organizer Laura Vazquez, he and other youth began campaigns to improve facilities and overcrowding in local high schools. As the young people attending local actions and meetings began to grow, SBU developed into its own separate youth action group within the NWBCCC.

#### **Successful Campaign: The Leadership Institute**

After several years of organizing in neighborhood schools, SBU youth examined the possibility of developing their own school. In 2005, SBU opened The Leadership Institute, a small high school conceived by youth and created through collaboration between youth and adult educators and organizers. Based on the themes of leadership, community action, and social justice, the school's mission is to empower students through a comprehensive curriculum focused on grassroots organizing. The youth were involved in every aspect of the school, from theme conception and facility selection to the hiring of faculty and administrators and student recruitment and enrollment. Each week, organizers and veteran leaders from SBU conduct trainings on political education and organizing skills for the students and teachers. The relationship with the school provides SBU with an ongoing opportunity for recruitment and leadership development.

## Youth United for Change

Founded: 1991

Location: Philadelphia, PA

### Background

In 1991, Rebecca Rathje, a drug prevention specialist working in the Philadelphia public high schools, joined 15 youth living in the Kensington/Fishtown areas of Philadelphia to form Youth United for Change (YUC). Initially conceived as a youth media/arts program, the program helped youth create documentaries and write a quarterly newspaper on key problems in the Philadelphia Public School System. Rathje coordinated efforts with the Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project, a local community organizing group, and as a result of this coordination, YUC began to take a more direct action approach to organizing around school reform. The organization launched campaigns targeting district officials in order to elicit specific reforms. Such actions helped YUC gain recognition and trust among district administrators, faculty, and students. Capitalizing on this success, Rathje started a high school chapter in Kensington High School. YUC now organizes membership through six school-based and citywide chapters.

### Successful Campaign : Kensington Small School Re-Design

A highlight of YUC's success was their role in the re-design of Kensington High School. In 2002, students from the Kensington chapter of YUC developed plans proposing to break Kensington up into four separate autonomous schools in order to improve the climate and instructional rigor on campus. YUC students conducted "listening campaigns" to collect input from the student body about what the new schools should look like. They presented this input to Philadelphia School District CEO Paul Vallas. The plan included sites for the schools, identified themes for each new school. Through further advocacy with the school board and community organizations, YUC built a consensus for the break up of Kensington High School. Several years later, the chief academic officer of Philadelphia Public Schools publicly committed, in front of 250 students, residents, parents, and Kensington administrators, to the re-design of Kensington High School.

#### SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

- 124 youth involved in organizing at 3 groups across the country
- 40% from Youth United for Change in Philadelphia, 38% from Sistas and Brothas United in the Bronx, 22% from South Central Youth Empowered through Action in Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>
- Ranging in age from 13-23, with an average age of 16.5 years
- 53% 10th or 11th graders
- 49% had been involved in the organization for one year or less<sup>2</sup>
- 61% female
- 42% Latino, 37% African American, 15% Biracial/Multiracial

<sup>1</sup>The disparities in sample size across sites, represent, in part, differences in the number of youth who comprise the core leadership of each organization. In each case, however, we were able to survey the vast majority of the group's core leaders.

<sup>2</sup>On average, SC-YEA youth were involved in their organization for a slightly longer period of time than YUC and SBU youth, respectively. However, as the differences between groups were not statistically significant, we consider these three groups to be comparable.



## THEORY

### SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

In the world of research, theories are important because they serve as guideposts, allowing researchers to orient themselves in complex terrain and to identify the most critical variables, as well as the relationships between different variables. We look to theory to help us define key questions of interest. In that spirit, we draw upon the work of Roderick Watts and his colleagues on sociopolitical development to help define our research questions and make sense of our findings (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). This work emerged from the field of psychology and the observation that theories of human development routinely ignore sociopolitical development, despite the fact that understanding one's place in the political and social world is an important dimension of adolescent development. This is especially true for young people whose communities have been historically oppressed.

Sociopolitical development stands at the intersection of both liberation and developmental psychology, representing an “evolving, critical understanding of the political, economic, cultural and other systemic forces that shape society and one's status within it” (Watts & Guessous, 2006). The theory of sociopolitical development stresses the importance of accounting for the social, cultural, and political context in which young people live, and the role of oppression upon the individual, drawing a strong link between critical consciousness and action (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). This reciprocal relationship between social analysis and social action is moderated by an individual's sense of agency (the belief that one's actions have an impact) and the “opportunity structures” available to him or her. Expanding on this model, Watts & Guessous (2006) assert four overarching propositions:

- 1) An analysis of authority and power is central;
- 2) A sense of agency is essential, as people take action when they believe they can make an impact;
- 3) Action requires opportunity; and
- 4) Commitment and action are sociopolitical development outcomes.

What does this look like in practice? Take the example of the SC-YEA students who fought to change their district policy on college preparatory coursework. Students were clearly engaged in an effort to affect change (social action) – an effort that went hand-in-hand with a critique about why existing conditions and policies were unjust (social analysis). In addition, on some level, in order to be effective, the students had to believe that conditions would in fact change because of their actions (sense of agency). And ultimately all of this work was facilitated and supported by the presence of an organization such as SC-YEA that allowed young people to practice and develop their skills as activists through political education, leadership development trainings, and social action (opportunity structure).

Our research uses this theory as a tool to consider and describe the ways in which youth organizing groups provide an “opportunity structure” for social analysis and action.

## ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Just as the theory of sociopolitical development provides a critical lens in our understanding of youth organizing, it is impossible to talk about youth organizing without a more general understanding of adolescence and the unique developmental moment it represents. As research on adolescent development has documented – and as any parent or high school teacher could attest – the teenage years are a time of intense physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes.

One of the central tasks of adolescence, according to Erik Erikson’s classic theory of psychosocial development, is grappling with the question, “Who am I?” and developing one’s own independent sense of identity. This plays out in a variety of ways in adolescence, from figuring out academic and career interests to making choices about who to hang out with and who to date. And importantly, particularly for youth of diverse backgrounds, this is also a time when young people grapple with complicated questions and issues related to their gender, sexual, and racial/ethnic identity. Indeed, the positive development of these multiple and intersecting identities is connected to positive academic and social outcomes more generally (Nakkula and Toshalis, 2006). And because grappling with questions of identity inevitably involves testing boundaries and exploring options, adolescence is often characterized as a time for experimentation and risk-taking. Cognitively, adolescents become more capable of abstract and critical thinking. Socially, peers and social relationships take on increased importance. For these reasons, organizing youth is a qualitatively different endeavor than organizing adults and requires that youth organizing groups attend to the unique developmental and psychological dimensions of adolescence in their work.

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW

To date, much of what we know about the field of youth organizing and its impacts has been documented through qualitative research, such as case studies. While qualitative research illuminates the successes and challenges of particular organizations or individuals, there is a need for complementary data that captures the impact of youth organizing on a larger scale. This research makes use of both qualitative and quantitative methodology, using surveys, interviews, and field observations to document the contributions of organizing to the development of young people.

The data presented in this paper is drawn from a six-year, national, longitudinal study examining the impact of community organizing on urban education reform. The \$2.1 million study, led by Kavitha Mediratta and Seema Shah during their tenure at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, followed the work of eight community organizing groups (three of which included youth organizing efforts or affiliates) and had two objectives:

- 1) To examine the policy outcomes of organizations' school reform campaigns
- 2) To understand how involvement in organizing impacts those who are involved, particularly the ways in which organizing builds grassroots leadership and social capital in low-income communities and communities of color.

The study, which ended in 2008, resulted in a case study series and a book, *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools: Strategies and Successes*, documenting the impact of adult and youth organizing on school reform initiatives. However, until now, there has not been a dedicated analysis of data from the study that examines how the very act of being involved in organizing affects the lives of young people.

This paper draws upon a portion of the data collected for the larger study, specifically survey responses from 124 youth involved in the 3 youth organizing groups; 88 interviews with youth, school and district administrators, and youth organizing staff; and numerous observations of leadership development sessions and other organizing activities.

## IMPACTS ON YOUTH

The theoretical model of sociopolitical development proposed by Watts and Guessous (2006) helped us think about the ways in which involvement in youth organizing impacts young people. The theory guided the development of our survey battery and informed the interview protocol. It also illuminated key constructs, guiding our questions about how involvement in organizing had influenced young people's academic motivation, educational aspirations, and longer-term commitment to activism.

### **Findings from our research demonstrate:**

- 1) Youth organizing groups, as organizational settings, provided a necessary and important opportunity structure for youth engagement in organizing, particularly for youth who lack other such opportunities;
- 2) Young leaders felt a sense of agency about their work, related both to their own leadership capacities as well as to the impact they could make in their communities;
- 3) Involvement in organizing helped young people develop a critical social analysis;
- 4) Young people involved in organizing were engaged in civic and political action at levels higher than students in a national sample, and planned to stay involved in activism for the long-term; and
- 5) Young people in our sample reported that their involvement in organizing increased their educational motivation and aspirations.

### **PROVIDING AN "OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE"**

Watts and Guessous (2006) assert, "action requires opportunity." At some point in our lives, we have all probably had grand ideas about what could be different in this world, how it could be more just and fair. Yet for many of us, there is no clear avenue for translating those bold ideas into reality. The ability to "plug in" to an existing organization or network of people is critical to realizing the possibilities of a seemingly far-fetched vision. Indeed, some of the youth interviewed for this study stated that past experiences or politically engaged role models had already kindled their interest in social justice. As a result, they naturally gravitated toward the opportunities provided by youth organizing

groups. Explained Ricardo<sup>3</sup>, a Latino student in Los Angeles,

“I loved it from the get go because I always had an interest in social justice and what was going on in the world. I heard a lot of it through music and I started to realize, hey, you know, this stuff is really going on. It's not just people complaining, making things up. And I got here, and I heard what the organization was all about, and I was like, this is it. I've been looking for a venue, somewhere to do something with this, and now I found it. So it just kind of fell into place.”

What is perhaps more striking, though, is that the very existence of a venue catalyzed young people's untapped interests in social justice. More often than not, the young people we interviewed had only vague notions of what it meant to be politically active or to organize for social change before they became involved in youth organizing. Some were recruited by youth leaders or organizing staff through outreach efforts, but many stumbled into youth organizing through friends or relatives. In fact, several youth candidly noted that they got involved “by accident.” Yet even these students, who may not have known quite what they were signing up for initially, ultimately kept coming back because they became invested in the work of changing their communities and their schools.

A substantial body of research suggests that political apathy among young people is high, and that students like Ricardo are the exception to the rule (Hart & Atkins, 2002; Levinson, 2007). However, a survey on teen voice conducted by the Search Institute found that African-American and Latino students expressed significantly higher commitments to issues such as helping the poor and improving race relations than white youth, challenging the view of youth of color as apathetic (Scales, Roehlkepartian, & Benson, 2010).

Emerging literature suggests that it is more likely that young people of color do not have a place to channel their interest in community and political engagement. Kahne and Middaugh (2008), for example, have written about the “opportunity gap” for high school students of color. Their research highlighted the lack of school-based civic learning opportunities available in less affluent schools, serving students of color, as well as the limited options for civic and community engagement outside of school.

Research by Kahne and Middaugh and the Search Institute underscores the importance of creating spaces for civic, political, and community engagement for young people of color. Youth organizing models purport to create this space – one in which leadership development is a central and critical component. Indeed, youth organizing groups typically describe themselves and their work as youth-led. This raises a number of questions: Is this actually the case? What is the nature of young people's involvement in organizing groups? Do young people in organizing groups believe that they are playing leadership roles? To what extent do these groups constitute genuine “opportunity structures” for deep community engagement?

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this section, pseudonyms are used for student interviewees.

Survey results showed that youth organizing groups do in fact provide young people with a wide range of opportunities to become actively engaged in the organization, laying the groundwork for developing their capacity as leaders. Virtually the entire survey sample reported attending organizational meetings and large events regularly and more than 80% of the sample reported involvement in activities such as developing organizing strategy and making demands of public officials. More than 75% of youth surveyed said they played a role in leading the organization and more than half planned and facilitated organizational meetings. To provide a quantitative gauge of overall organizational participation, we created an index by averaging responses for all items related to organizational roles. On a scale of 1 to 3, with higher scores indicating more consistent and active participation, the average rate of participation was 2.3 – indicating high levels of participation across organizational activities.



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The fact that so many young people played leadership roles in the organization (rather than a select few) speaks to the

culture of youth organizing groups – groups promote distributive leadership and begin from the value proposition that all youth have the potential to be leaders. Part of the culture at SBU, for example, is to “step up, step back” – creating an understanding of leadership based on both being vocal and taking on responsibility, and stepping back so that others can do the same. Explained Juan, a youth leader in New York City, “The whole point of SBU is to develop leadership, your full potential...In the work we do, you can’t be selfish.”

Youth organizing is characterized by the youth-led nature of the work. Ashley, an African-American student from Los Angeles, reported that she and her peers were actively engaged in leading SC-YEA and developing strategy. She remarked, “Some of us are 14 or 15, and we’re actually out there on the front lines making this possible. We’re in the public eye, schools, principals, everyone knows about SC-YEA as a whole.” Former SBU director Laura Vazquez described a similar dynamic. “[Youth run] all the meetings. As organizers, we help them develop an agenda...they’ll do it and then we’ll look to see if there’s any points that are missing. Last year we’d gotten to a point where

it was great, [where the youth could] run things. When I was gone for a whole month, the youth were still having meetings with the superintendent, having meetings with educators, Brooklyn College, without me being there, and doing research and running the meetings while I was gone.” On site visits by our research team, it became clear that one of the reasons students feel empowered within organizations is because of the nature and quality of the support they receive from adult staff members and more experienced youth leaders. This guidance and teaching is far from didactic; rather, much of the leadership training occurs via modeling and role plays, making the experience interactive and giving youth the opportunity to learn and practice facilitation, public speaking, and negotiation skills.

The outcomes of this approach were noticed by district administrators negotiating with youth. A district administrator in Philadelphia observed:

“The adults that work with them do a great job in preparing them. They certainly understand the issues and make sure that the students that come to meetings understand the issues. So there is a great amount of preparation before any one of our meetings. And I have to say that all times that we meet with students, they are very polite and very respectful. They make strong points, but they always speak in turn, they speak politely, they come thoroughly prepared and they speak their mind, but do so I think in a very respectful way.”

The leadership opportunities and pedagogy in organizing groups are qualitatively different from what is available to young people within school walls. Outlets for “student voice” in high school typically consist of activities such as student council. At many schools, participation is limited to students with high grade point averages and student government elections often boil down to popularity contests. The purview of the student council may involve helping to plan school events, such as dances or graduations; rarely are they involved in leading reform in schools. In contrast, youth organizing promotes a different type of student engagement – one that aims to create youth activists who are engaged in improving the overall conditions and quality of schools.

Juan of SBU remarked:

“The one thing that I would like to see [in schools]...would be a strong student voice. And I’m not talking about your student council or all these little groups that they have inside schools and that just discuss issues and that’s about it. [Let students work on] whatever it is they want to work on, let them do it. The same thing we do here, let students do that in school. And that way students will start taking ownership of their school, they’ll start fixing the problems themselves and going to meet with people themselves and—I think that would be a lot better. That would change the tone of the high schools in the city a lot.”

## DEVELOPING A SENSE OF AGENCY

### CONFIDENCE IN LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZING SKILLS

As noted in the previous section, our visits to youth organizing groups found wide-ranging opportunities and support for leadership development, particularly through a pedagogy that emphasized participation and experiential learning, with role plays and coaching/mentoring from older members and adult organizers. Prior to negotiation sessions with public officials, for instance, youth prepared by walking through a mock session, in which they practiced conducting meetings with decision-makers and tried to anticipate and problem-solve potential curveballs. After the role play, youth provided one another with constructive feedback on what went well and what could have been improved.

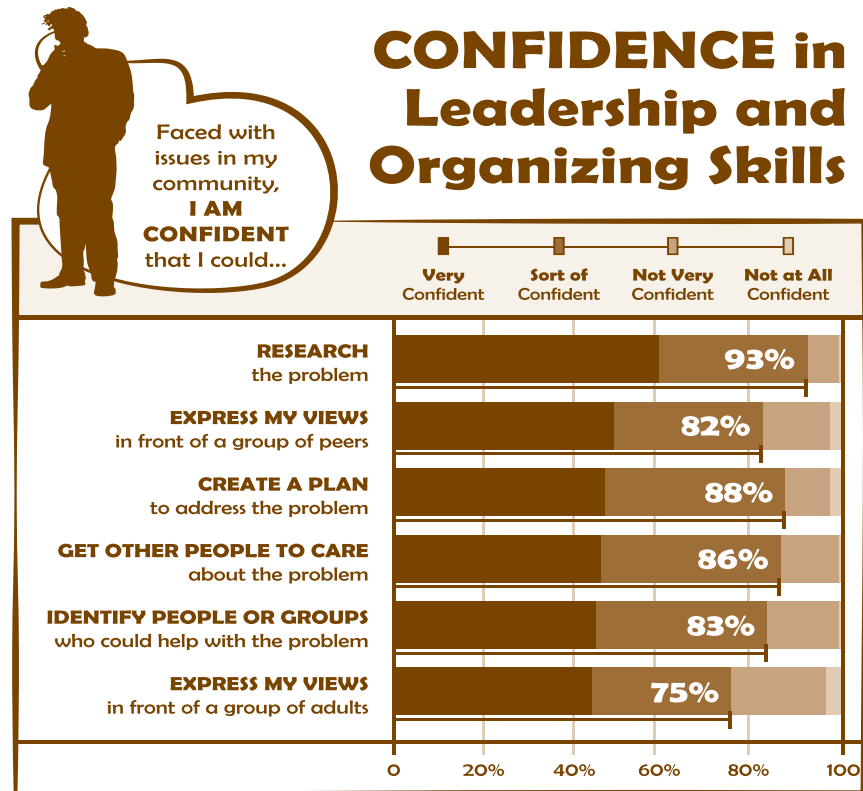
In our survey of youth leaders, young people reported that not only did they have opportunities to acquire leadership and organizing skills, but, by and large, they also felt confident and competent in these skills. Upwards of 80% of students felt confident that they could research a problem in their community, create a plan to address the problem, and get other people to care about the problem. Similarly, when asked to rate their own leadership, nearly 90% of youth indicated that they viewed themselves as leaders and around 80% believed they had the ability to organize people to get things done. The majority of youth in the sample also felt comfortable with their public speaking skills, trying something new, and taking the initiative to solve a problem. Data from multiple survey measures, as well as interview data, suggested a high sense of confidence among students about their leadership skills.

Ava, an African-American student in Los Angeles, shared:

“[I’ve become] a better public speaker...before, I did not say one thing, one word, unless I was talking to my friend...the more I’ve been involved with SC-YEA, the more political I’ve gotten and the more I feel informed...They say we are all leaders and it is true, we are *all* leaders.”



## CONFIDENCE in Leadership and Organizing Skills



Likewise, another student described how he became a more effective communicator through his experience in organizing, a critically important skill in conveying a social justice analysis:

“A lot of times, what happens in the classroom is that students will be learning things that happened hundreds of years ago, maybe 200 years ago, and it doesn’t seem to relate. They don’t see how it connects to the way they’re living their lives, so they don’t want to deal with it. And I think that’s been one of the big things about leadership [development] with high school students — you have to be able to relate it to them...Relate it to them, and then they see that it does directly affect them, and that their hands aren’t tied. There is something they can do about it. But I mean public speaking [is a skill I’ve learned], just being able to gain an analysis on what’s going on so that you can get the message across effectively.”

Observers might note that students’ sense of confidence alone does not mean they have achieved competence. While that may be the case, this sort of confidence (or self-efficacy) is an important indicator. Some research has associated self-efficacy

beliefs with an actual mastery of skills, while other research suggests that, at the very least, high levels of self-efficacy translate into greater levels of motivation to persevere even if a task is challenging or difficult. As another measure of youth leadership competence, we asked district administrators, who negotiated and met with youth leaders, about their perceptions of students' leadership skills. All of the district administrators observed evidence of effective youth leadership, though several administrators critiqued students' dogmatic adherence to protocols or points of view and the need for youth to develop more negotiating flexibility, based on a deeper understanding of the limitations on the system to meet their demands.

Administrators in all sites remarked not only on students' ability to lead meetings and have a high level of conversation about issues of concern, but also the preparation required to make that possible. One senior district official in New York City reflected:

"One of the things that I find that I can measure is just the way that they have conversations with me. I mean, if the kids can sit at a table, have a conversation with me around, this is the research I've done, this is the outcome and this is where we want to go, that didn't come out of the sky...So they organize the kids to be good thinkers and to be able to speak to adults and not be afraid to speak to adults...One of [SBU's] key pieces that make them stand out is that they give students a voice, that they give them leadership."

Another district administrator echoed a similar sentiment, "I've never been to a meeting where the kids didn't run the meeting. They'll have the agendas, they move through the meeting, they're very professional about it. And that part is very effective, so they build a cadre of student leaders."

## COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

So many of the issues organizing groups work on seem intractable. All of the groups in this study focused on issues of educational justice and were engaged in long-term campaigns involving the creation of new small schools, increased rigor in the curriculum, and better funding for schools. Repeatedly, students told us that they did not expect to reap the benefits of their organizing, and were working to improve educational opportunities for future generations. At the same time, research suggests for individuals to feel energized and committed to the work, they must feel they are making an impact. This is especially true for adolescents, for whom the short-term rewards of their actions typically feel far more salient than the longer-term benefits. For this reason, organizers are constantly attentive to the importance of "small wins" to build momentum in their efforts,

connecting these small victories to the larger campaign, so that young people can see the big picture (Weick, 1984). As one organizer put it, “We don’t want to bring our members into a situation where they’re losing hope versus gaining hope.”

The power of small wins can be profound, helping young people see, in a very tangible way, how their actions can make a difference. Young people involved in educational justice campaigns can also make the connection between education and other issues in the broader community. Ricardo, a student in Los Angeles, described a “small win” that helped him see the impact of organizing on his community:

“This Ralph’s supermarket [in our neighborhood] has old meat that they just fill up with more red dye to make it look fresh when it’s really bad meat. That was one of the campaigns that happened and we exposed it. We took cameras in there to show that they’re doing this. And so we got that problem fixed [and now] that’s no longer a problem for the community. That’s really sad that in order to get a profit in their pocket, people are willing to poison other people.”

The sense of potency that emerges from the belief that one’s actions can have an impact is an important component of psychological well-being and sustainability in the social justice movement, especially for adolescents who are just beginning their foray into activism. About 80% of youth in our sample indicated they felt they had control over the decisions they made in their life and more than 70% of youth believed they could influence decisions affecting their community.

One of the recurring themes in interviews with young people was a steadfast belief that through their participation in a collective effort, they could make a difference in their communities, particularly in the company of people who shared their analysis of the causes of social problems. In this vein, our data highlights the power of collective efficacy, or the notion that a group of people can come together to meet their goals. More than 80% of young people in the survey sample felt that by working together, community members could influence decisions that affect the community.

Eduardo, a Latino teen from Los Angeles, spoke for many of the youth we interviewed when he articulated the power of collective, community problem-solving and the role he could play in raising awareness and mobilizing people:

“There is a lot wrong with the world. It’s mind boggling what’s going on and how it’s going on... But if you can identify the problem and network with the people who feel the same way...there’s definitely something to be done about it. I think a lot of times it’s just that everyone is ignorant that something is going on, so you’re misinformed. But if you can get that information out there, you get to work with some people that are ready to move on things...I think it takes time, but change can happen.”

Echoing a similar sentiment, Keasha, an African-American youth leader from Philadelphia, said, “A lot of us don’t realize it, but we all have power and we don’t realize how much we have.” Despite the belief in the potential for community problem-solving, less than half of youth were satisfied with the amount of influence they as individuals had over decisions affecting their community, perhaps highlighting their dissatisfaction with existing power dynamics.

## DEVELOPING A CRITIQUE

The desire to engage in social action operates in tandem with a systemic analysis of inequity. One organizer described the importance of developing a critique: “Everyone needs to go through a critical thinking process. And if you don’t go through a critical thinking process then you’re not going to arrive at the root causes of lots of problems. You’re not going to have the type of analysis that leads us to make the changes that we need to make.” Accordingly, all of the groups in our study invested substantial time and energy in developing and strengthening the political education component of their work, emphasizing the historical context and structural roots of social problems and challenging commonly held beliefs about individual deficits as the cause of social problems. Although political education was integrated into weekly meetings, each group also held intensive training sessions periodically.

As part of their political education, SC-YEA members take a bus tour of their South Central Los Angeles neighborhood, followed by a tour of Beverly Hills. The youth are assigned a simple task – to keep count of the types of stores and services they see. Reggie, an African-American youth leader, reported on what he took away from the experience:

“The tour [brought] to light the disparity between South L.A. and more affluent areas like Beverly Hills. Before I started coming here I don’t think I had ever been to Beverly Hills. I really had never been outside of South Central. So all of this just seemed normal to me, but they showed us LA and then we went to Beverly Hills and saw the difference...I realized what’s going on in my neighborhood doesn’t seem to be fair....Like we have a liquor store on every corner and in Beverly Hills, they have grocery stores. We got check cashing places; in Beverly Hills, they have banks. We got a lot of fast food restaurants and they got dine-in restaurants... [And] a lot of high schools they got prison bars around them and then we went to Beverly Hills High School and there weren’t any gates at all. And if there was a gate it was like a little gate that you would put in your front yard or something.”

Another student on the tour said the exercise helped him understand dynamics

such as, “Why the community looks like this. Why certain people are treated this way. Where did this stereotype come from? Why don’t they have access to these opportunities?” The student proceeded to say that the political education he received through SC-YEA, “... gave me a history that I never, throughout all of my school career, saw in a textbook. It was never in there. But it’s stuff that’s really happening.”

This sort of political education lays the groundwork for SC-YEA’s “formula” for developing campaigns, one that is similar to the approaches used by other youth organizing groups in the study: 1) analyze the issue and its impact on communities of color, including its political and historical context; 2) determine the current conditions that exist (i.e., collect data); and 3) examine the opportunities for action. Like the other youth organizing groups in the study, SC-YEA members meet two to three times weekly, both to participate in political education and leadership development trainings as well as to move campaign work forward. This ongoing connection between action and reflection, and theory and praxis, yields a body of leaders able to situate their community’s issues in a larger historical and political context, with a critical analysis of the root causes of community problems.

In the social sciences literature, one common, although imperfect, approach for assessing this type of critical consciousness is through the “Belief in a Just World” scale.<sup>4</sup> The scale measures the extent to which people perceive class and social differences as the product of structural inequities or individual deficits. Among youth leaders in our sample, the average score for a belief in a just world was 2.13 (on a scale of 4). Lower scores are indicative of the view that the world is not a just and fair place, demonstrating that youth in our sample leaned toward a systemic analysis of inequity.

This type of structural analysis was reflected in the comments of Eduardo, a Latino student who pinpointed the root of individuals’ difficulties as a product of resource distribution and economic and social policy, rather than the individuals’ own inadequacies: “People have dreams, but sometimes because of lack of resources or any number of reasons, it just doesn’t happen... [due to] media, social conditions, economic conditions. It’s a huge problem...from the local level all the way to the federal government [with] different policies that unfortunately don’t create comfortable conditions for everybody.”

At the same time, a systemic analysis of inequity and the power differentials that contribute to inequity prompted some youth to reflect on the challenges of seeking and achieving structural change. Rashad, an African-American youth leader from New York City, articulated, “I don’t think people in power right now want to see people like us powerful or having the same decision-making power that they have or anything like that because they think they’re being stripped of their power or they think they’re being degraded or something.”

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<sup>4</sup>For a critique and a more in-depth discussion of measurement issues related to critical consciousness, see: R. Watts Diemer M, Voight A (in press). Critical Consciousness: Current Status & Future Directions. In C. Flanagan & B. Christens (Eds.) *Youth Civic Development: Work at the Cutting Edge*. Jossey Bass.

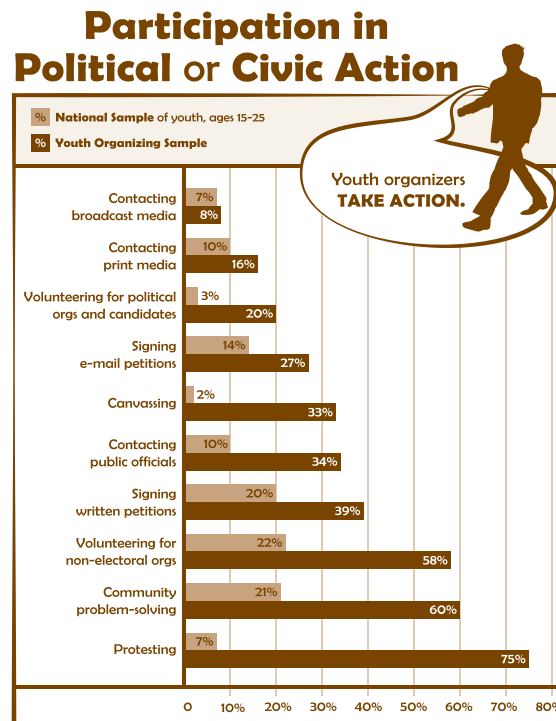
## TAKING ACTION

### POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

To assess young people's political and civic engagement, our survey replicated indicators developed by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)<sup>5</sup>. Thus, it was possible to compare responses in the youth organizing sample to those of CIRCLE's national sample. Higher levels of participation were evident across all indicators, not just ones where one might expect youth organizing leaders to be more engaged. For instance, over 70% of the youth involved in organizing stated they had attended a protest within the past year, while only 11% of the national sample had done so.

The continuum of civic engagement spans a wide range of activities, from more service-oriented activities such as volunteering for a non-electoral organization to more explicit forms of political engagement, such as protesting. As Evans and Prilleltensky

(2005), among others, have observed, while increasing attention has been devoted to youth civic engagement in recent years, such efforts may inadvertently “reinforce models of charity as opposed to models of justice,” by ignoring structural forces such as racism, homophobia, and classism that perpetuate inequality.



<sup>5</sup> CIRCLE data based on a national telephone survey of 3,246 youth, ages 15-25 to assess involvement in civic and political activities within the past year. Youth of color were over-sampled for the survey, meaning that this sample represents a reasonable point of comparison to data in our study.

While our survey did not fully capture students' justice-oriented activities, the existing data suggests that youth organizing skews toward the more explicitly political dimensions of civic engagement. For instance, the largest differences between the youth organizing sample and the national sample are on items such as protesting (a difference of 68 percentage points) and community problem-solving (a difference of 39 percentage points).

In interviews, the inclination toward political engagement and structural change versus more service-oriented engagement was even more apparent. Youth were particularly taken by their introduction to the political arena and the ways in which political engagement had the power to generate systemic community change. SBU leader Rashad described his newfound place in the political world: "I have the ability to just meet with people in power just out of nowhere. I never thought residents, you know, regular community residents can just go and actually meet with politicians. I thought we were us, they were them and that's the way it was. Until I came here."

Importantly, Pedro, a youth leader from SBU, observed youth organizing goes beyond engaging youth in protesting to helping them undertake substantive and consequential forms of community problem-solving:

"A lot of people don't know that when something's wrong you can do something about it and they don't know the steps, how to go about it...especially with youth, it's very unheard of, youth getting together, identifying an issue, going to somebody with power and getting the issue solved. Usually when people think of power or youth leadership, they just think of rallies and demonstrations which are good, but the difference about this type of work, it's really grassroots and we really get to the issue and make sure it's solved. Like, there are steps to make sure that the issue is taken care of instead of just doing awareness stuff."

A high-level administrator in Philadelphia acknowledged this potent brand of youth political engagement, in which youth organizing groups not only built genuine power in the political landscape but also worked to influence the direction of policy:

"You know, [YUC] has irritated me a couple of times. Like on the school district's discipline policy when they brought a bunch of kids to the Board and they were wearing prison shirts... [But] at the end of the day...there are a lot of constructive ideas emerg-

ing from those groups, if you're willing to take the time to listen and not be threatened by them." This administrator credited YUC for the direction of small schools reform in Philadelphia, observing that: "Youth United for Change has been the direct... reason for that [reform and] an important influence in that process."

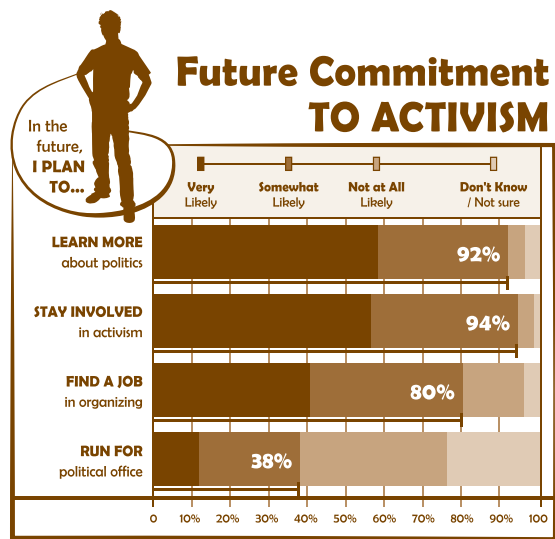
FUTURE COMMITMENT TO ACTIVISM

As Shawn Ginwright documented in Occasional Papers Series No. 10, developing a leadership pipeline for young people to stay involved in activism is urgently needed so that young people have a mechanism for ongoing engagement in the social justice movement beyond high school and college. Our survey data suggests that young people are hungry for those opportunities. More than 90% of young people in our survey expressed a desire to stay involved in activism, and nearly 80% planned to find a job in the field of organizing. Ninety percent of students planned to learn more about politics in the future and nearly 40% thought they might run for political office one day.

Indeed, the vast majority of adult staff at the three youth organizing groups in our study had themselves come up through the ranks of high school youth organizing. Whether or not young people ultimately choose a career in organizing, our interview data suggests that even those with other career interests were already thinking about ways to integrate a social justice analysis into their work.

Consider these examples: Jasmine, an African-American student in Philadelphia, planned to pursue a vocational career but knew from her involvement with YUC that a union job would protect her rights as a worker. Denise, an African-American student from Los Angeles, who planned to attend art school and study film and photography,

said she hoped to use media as a way to share the multiple narratives that make up her community. Another student described the ways in which his work on educational justice led him to initiate an anti-military recruitment campaign at his school, and that in the future he planned to get involved with the anti-war movement more generally. And though runs for





political office might seem far off into the future, SBU leader Rashad did just that, running an impressive campaign for the New York City Council at the age of 19, one of the youngest individuals ever to do so. As he observed, “I can’t say now that I’m always going to keep up this work in this way. But whatever I do in the future, I’m going to change the world. I’m going to affect it. With my history and background, I don’t want to see today’s youth grow up in the way I did. I take everything in this organization personally because of that.”

## ACADEMIC MOTIVATION AND EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

In addition to understanding the contributions of youth organizing to the leadership and political development of young people, we also examined to what extent students’ academic motivation and educational aspirations were affected by their involvement in organizing. Unlike other youth leadership programs or student government opportunities, the youth organizing groups in this study did not “cream” from the top. Demographic data collected in our surveys shows that students represented the full range of the academic spectrum, not just high-achieving students. More than half of the students in the survey sample reported earning B’s and C’s or lower in school. While it was common for students to report not feeling engaged with school, a number of the students we interviewed reported that they were not attending school at all when they joined their youth organizing groups, and that involvement in the group inspired them to re-engage with their own schooling. Laura Vazquez, the former director of SBU, observed:

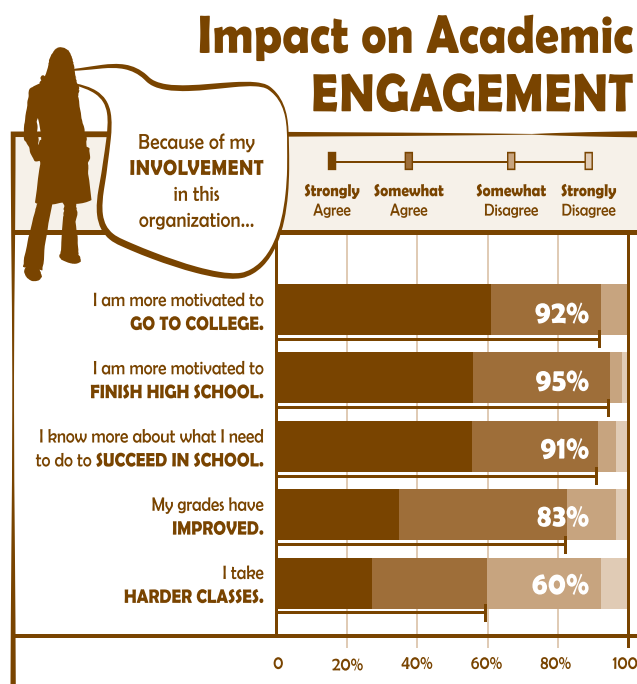
“Those who become better leaders here, I know that...most likely they’re among the kids [who] aren’t in school, but I know that they become interested in going back to school when they actually start taking education and fighting for education seriously. [One of our leaders] failed out of school in his sophomore or junior year, and then following his departure he began organizing more seriously—I mean, that’s one thing he’s always said—he not only complained about the problems that were going on in schools, but he fought to fix them. So after he started organizing, then that’s when he said, ‘Okay, I want to take my education more seriously if I’m going to be fighting for it.’ He went back to school and he’s gotten all A’s and B’s [and] he’s graduating this year.”

Damian, an African-American SC-YEA member, shared a similar story. “[Before SC-YEA], I was part of a gang out here—I grew up around them and kind of idolized them. That is why I was reluctant to join initially, I thought it was not for me...Even though I was a gang member I did not fit the stereotype, I was always interested in school...They knew I should be doing something more productive. [SC-YEA] has helped me in that.” Indeed, 90% of the students in our survey indicated that their

involvement in youth organizing made them more motivated to complete high school. Eighty percent of students noted their grades improved and 60% reported that they took more challenging coursework due to their involvement in organizing.

Importantly, all three youth organizing groups provided students with tutoring help as well as guidance counseling related to post-secondary options. Explained one organizer, “If their grades are not great, we put some attention on them to make sure they get their grades up. If their grades are already good we try to assist them in being stable.” At SC-YEA, college students from the University of California, Los Angeles, contributed tutoring support and an academic coordinator on the SC-YEA staff helped students keep track of whether or not they were meeting college preparatory requirements. In addition, SC-YEA conducts an annual college tour to help students learn more about their post-secondary options. According to the organization’s own data, more than 90% of their members go on to college, a figure far above the college-going rate of other young people in the community.

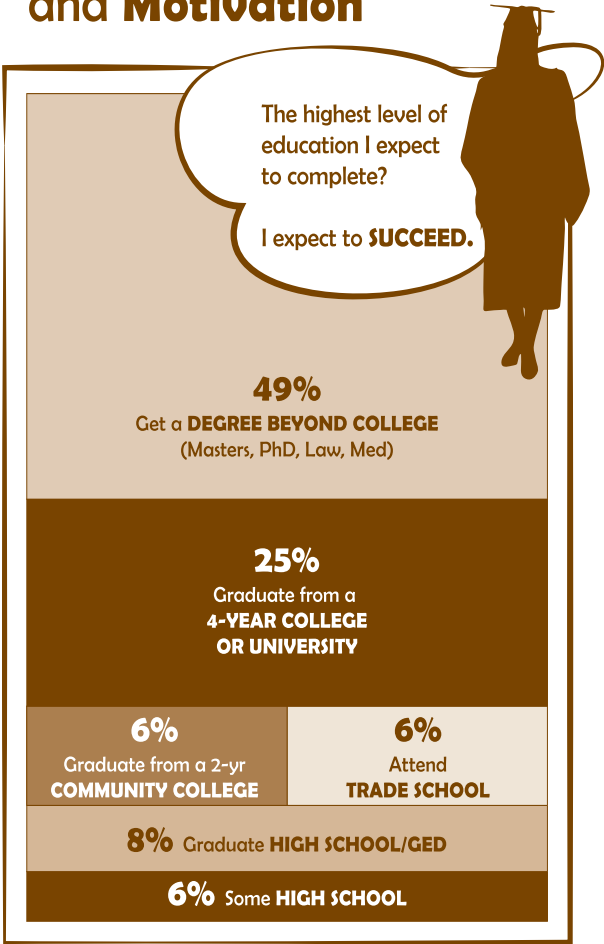
The college-going culture and supports at SC-YEA were in stark contrast to the messages students received at school. Marcella, an African-American youth leader, described the types of expectations she perceived from her school environment: “They expect us to go into low-wage labor and go into the underground economy and expect us to go and clean their cars, fix them, work in McDonald’s or something. They don’t expect us to become anything.”



Beyond being more motivated to finish high school and go to college, youth in our sample expressed high expectations of their educational future. Eighty percent of youth reported plans to pursue a college education, and close to half of the sample said they expected to obtain a graduate or professional degree beyond college.

Research indicates that there is often a gap between the expectations of youth and what youth are actually able to achieve. Still, it is noteworthy that youth in our sample have educational expectations for themselves that are higher than those reported in

## Educational Aspirations and Motivation



national samples. In the 2004 National Center for Education Statistics survey, for example, 35% of Black youth and 29% of Latino youth indicated that they expected to obtain a graduate or professional degree, compared with 49% of the youth in our sample. Because all the young people surveyed and interviewed for this study were involved in campaigns for educational equity, it is possible they were more attuned to their own educational trajectory than youth involved in organizing on other issues. Longer-term studies of youth organizing alumni are needed to track the trajectory and educational achievements of young people across organizations and across issue areas.

However, these initial findings suggest that young people develop ambitious educational goals for themselves, in part due to the supports and expectations nurtured in their youth organizing groups.

## ORGANIZATIONAL DIMENSIONS

The survey results presented in this paper, combined with interview data and field observations, paint a rich picture of the ways in which young people of color are transformed through their involvement in organizing. A review of the qualitative data suggests several cross-cutting commonalities across the three organizations in our study that catalyzed this transformative experience.

### POWER

Each organization in this study successfully made students feel powerful, both individually and collectively. In a society that all too often marginalizes the experiences and voices of youth of color and renders them powerless, young people's discovery of their own power helped to shift their sense of self, expectations for their futures, and their sense of possible roles they might play in the world. A New York City youth leader, when asked why he stayed involved with SBU put it succinctly: "Power, the power, I'm not gonna lie. It's the power. Because I feel powerful when I'm here." The sentiment reflects the culture of youth organizing groups – one in which an understanding of power, a critique of power, and the building of collective youth power permeated.

Young people not only develop a sense of personal agency and capacity, they also develop an understanding of the distribution of economic and political power in society and the ways in which the institutional power of school, corporate, or government bureaucracies can be challenged through collective community power. Renaldo, an SBU member, reflected on the importance of collective action and developing a power analysis: "What's the best power and obviously to us, the best power is people power. A lot of people think it's money, but the best power is people power."

As young people build collective power, they begin to experience the ways in which they can work to change their communities and demand equity. Renee, an African-American member of SC-YEA, said, "So, we have a lot of power and everyone knows we have a lot of power. We have some youth like me here who actually challenge the administrators, who wouldn't let it just pass us by."

For each of these groups, the notion of collective power goes hand-in-hand with the belief that for young people of color, discovering their own sense of agency is the

most relevant way to develop youth. The very act of engaging in social change fits the day-to-day reality of young people growing up in impoverished neighborhoods and underscores that the problems they see in their schools and communities are not because of their own personal inadequacies, but because of systemic forces. Their lived reality equips them to understand the issues and to become active partners in developing solutions. As one youth leader asserted, “We know how to make ourselves better in our community. That’s what makes us so effective.”

## ATTENTION TO SOCIAL IDENTITY

As noted earlier in this paper, one of the main tasks of adolescence is grappling with the question of “Who am I?” And for youth of color, developing a positive sense of self is all the more important and all the more challenging, given daily experiences with racism and discrimination (Scales, Roehlkepartian, & Benson, 2010). Conversations about identity – what it means to be Black or Latino, what it means to be gay, bisexual, or straight, what it means to be undocumented, what it means to be male or female – were not necessarily explicit or prominent in our observation of groups. Rather, an awareness of race, culture, and class, among other forms of diversity, was deeply embedded in the culture of youth organizing groups. As noted earlier, most of the staff organizers were people of color, many of whom had grown up in the same community as the youth. In addition, the physical spaces of these organizations were infused with art, music, and reading material reflective of positive images of their community and their culture, creating a counter-narrative to mainstream images of youth of color.

Because youth organizing is predicated on developing a critical analysis of social conditions, youth of color not only need to understand their experiences with discrimination and injustice in a historical and political context, but also need to develop the skills to challenge oppressive structures.

In ways subtle and not so subtle, the youth organizing groups in this study created supportive and culturally relevant spaces that nurture positive social identities for young people. These spaces, all too often, stood in contrast to the messages communicated to young people in other settings.

## SAFE SPACE/SOCIAL VENUE

While youth organizing groups are providing young people with the tools to become change agents, the students they work with are in the process of many developmental changes. Involvement in youth organizing may be particularly well-suited to some of the developmental features of adolescence – challenging authority, taking intellectual and personal risks, and developing critical perspectives. At the same time, although the need for experimentation characterizes adolescence, so too does the need for acceptance

and a sense of physical and emotional safety. In this way, youth organizing groups provide a safe space, both physically and emotionally, for young people. All three of the groups in the study were located in low-income urban communities. And while their neighborhoods had many assets, they also were rife with their share of neighborhood violence. In this respect, the sense of physical safety provided by the group could not be underestimated. One young African-American woman living in Los Angeles recounted how her neighborhood was full of “gang bangers.” But at SC-YEA, she said, “you feel all cool and relaxed because you ain’t got to look over your shoulder all the time.”

As important as the sense of physical safety, the three youth organizing groups in this study offered a place of emotional safety as well. Creating this sense of emotional and physical safety is considered one of the critical hallmarks of supportive and positive developmental settings for youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Young people felt respected and valued in the space, often in contrast to what they experienced at their schools. In interviews it was clear that the sense of acceptance and belonging felt by students ran deep. Over and over in interviews, the three youth organizing groups were equated to “families.” Laura Vazquez, the then-director of SBU, explained,

“This is their home. Some of these kids, I have to give them money for food because they don’t have anything at the house – I mean some of these kids come from hard situations...You’re dealing with so many issues. Sometimes you want to have a meeting and if one person’s going through a lot of stuff, you’ve got to stop that meeting and deal with that person...So we spend a lot of time doing the more social service-y piece of the work.”

The organization works hard to create strong bonds of trust between the staff and its youth leaders, which ultimately helps create the familial culture that exists. Laura observed, “We’re all like brothers and sisters.”

Along these lines, many of the youth commented in interviews that youth organizing was simply fun. Working together with their peers on common interests gave them an opportunity to connect socially with other youth, and thus students were able to meld the serious work of critical analysis and social justice with a sense of adventure and friendship. Noted Rashad, a New York City youth leader, “It’s beneficial in so many different ways....I’m around people my age, so socially that’s great. [And] we’re all having fun!”

## ADULT SUPPORT

As Kirshner (2008) and others have noted, youth-led organizing does not mean that adults are invisible. Adult staff members must strike a careful balance – allowing youth to practice their leadership skills, to express their voices, and to make mistakes in doing so, while also commanding their respect, teaching them new skills, and conveying knowledge and information. Young people need to be able to simultaneously relate to organizers and look up to them as role models. Kirshner has likened the relationship between adult staff members and emerging youth leaders as an apprenticeship, or a youth-adult partnership in which young people and adults learn and lead together. Using this frame, adults and youth work jointly on campaigns and help young people develop the skills they need to lead their campaigns effectively. By and large, this was precisely the type of dynamic that existed in the three groups in our study. As one organizer said, “We do not try to be rhetorical in our methods. We try to teach them to do for themselves.”

Importantly, adult staff members in the three youth organizing groups in our study were in their mid-to-late twenties and were themselves people of color. This not only helped young people identify with adult staff members, but it provided them with role models who were, for the most part, college-educated people of color who were continuing their work in the social justice movement.

Finally, the relationship between adults and youth was clearly one of mutual respect. Several organizers talked about how much the youth they worked with inspired them, and felt that it was not just the youth who were benefiting from their participation. Summarized one organizer, “I get just as much out of it as the youth do...I expect to get something out of this process. I expect to learn something about myself and about other people that I did not know before.”

## IMPLICATIONS

One long-time school administrator and former Philadelphia principal openly acknowledged the skepticism related to youth organizing:

“Are you brainwashing kids? Are you feeding kids a message? I think that [youth organizing groups] would argue vehemently against that point. No, we aren’t feeding them a message; we’re actually trying to wake them up and have them role play and have them be the center of it. Certainly you’ve got to teach kids how to do this. This isn’t easy, especially in communities where typically their voices have been muffled or typically where you’re in communities where there are issues of assault, there are issues with law enforcement, there are issues with what the outside perception is of a community. Poor doesn’t mean unintelligent. People struggling doesn’t mean that they don’t have expectations of themselves and desires of wanting to do better. Unfortunately when we take a look at many of our under-sourced communities, it is really easy to draw that conclusion, that kids don’t care and that kids don’t want to be in school. These guys are saying, ‘I do care.’”

Youth organizing is a counter-narrative to prevailing assumptions of youth disengagement from civic and political life. It provides a powerful avenue through which young people of color, who are all too often dismissed in public discourse, can have a voice and build collective power. Not only do these youth voices matter, they are vital and necessary as communities attempt to address our most pressing social problems, whether under-performing schools, unsafe neighborhoods, or poor environmental conditions. Resolving these longstanding problems will require the engagement and commitment of those who have the most at stake.

In this vein, our analysis is an important, initial step towards illustrating the powerful impact of organizing on the lives of young people of color who otherwise have limited leadership opportunities in their schools and communities. Even more striking is that these impacts were seen among youth who had been involved in organizing, on average, for about a year. The data suggests recommendations for youth organizing practitioners, educators, and researchers, while also raising important questions about how the field moves forward.



## FOR YOUTH ORGANIZING PRACTITIONERS

In line with the work of Watts and his colleagues, youth organizing provides “opportunity structures,” or spaces where young people have the space and support to become engaged in activism. At the same time, almost all community-based organizations struggle with a scarcity of resources, and the quality of training and services organizations undoubtedly varies.

All three youth organizing groups in this study were established groups achieving strong results with limited resources – groups that had fine-tuned their methodology over time. Perhaps this organizational maturity accounts for the overwhelmingly positive results, particularly in their ability to provide opportunity structures in the richest sense that both spoke to the lived experiences of young people of color and infused their activities with a sense of cultural and political relevance. As new groups enter the fold and as established groups continue their work, the attention to providing politically and culturally relevant environments that truly support young people of color remains paramount. And while much of the power of youth organizing groups lies in the groups’ strong community roots and local history and conditions, there are opportunities to consolidate and share resources through regional and national networks at scale. Adult organizing efforts have had longstanding networks, such as People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO) and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), to support affiliated groups. What would it take to develop a similar set of national and regional supports for youth organizing? The recently formed Alliance for Educational Justice seeks to create a national network for youth organizing in the arena of education. To what extent will it be able to support groups in the more foundational task of youth leadership development? And how effective will it be in engaging new groups, particularly from areas of the country where, historically, there has been less youth organizing?

Our data also shows young people’s desire to stay involved in activism beyond high school, underscoring the argument Shawn Ginwright makes in *Occasional Papers Series No. 10* that it is crucial for the field to invest in deliberate, rather than ad-hoc, strategies to build an infrastructure for long-term engagement in the social justice movement. Young people are hungry for clear pathways to continue their involvement in social justice activities as they transition into post-secondary and work settings. Making this happen will require investments from funders, as well as thoughtful strategies that support young people in maintaining and furthering their organizing skills beyond their engagement with a particular youth organizing group during their high school years. In the coming years, as practitioners seek to take their work to the next level, the field must grapple with the question of how it builds on this energy to support the next generation of organizers.

## FOR EDUCATORS

Schools and school systems ultimately share the same objectives as youth organizing groups when it comes to education reform demands, specifically that young people deserve a quality education. There are opportunities for the work of youth organizing groups and educators to align with one another. For example, where opportunities for civic and political engagement are lacking in schools, partnerships between youth organizing groups and schools can help fill the gap. Indeed, groups like YUC and SC-YEA have school-based chapters that engage school staff as sponsors and create the space for both a collaborative and challenging relationship that aims to address substantive schooling concerns.

In addition, the data shows that students feel more invested in educational attainment when they are involved in organizing. Educators can take advantage of this increased motivation to provide students with the supports and encouragement needed to advance their academic trajectories.

## FOR RESEARCHERS

One organizer we interviewed reflected, “There is always an art and a science to the work that we do. It’s important to work on and improve both.” In this spirit, in concert with field-building efforts is the need for additional research in the field – to inform thoughtful and strategic program development and to build a knowledge base on the processes and outcomes of youth organizing. There is also a need for additional research that tracks dynamics within the field – particularly the growing prevalence of intergenerational organizing and its accompanying challenges, as well as the impact of involvement in organizing on young people’s psychosocial development.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FCYO

The field of youth organizing is poised to take new leaps in the coming years, particularly as researchers, funders, and practitioners begin to have more conversations about how to support young people in high school, as well as in college and career choices beyond high school. Like anything else, the success of these efforts will depend on the political will that is generated among key stakeholders, as well as the investment of time and money to support new and continuing field-based efforts to strengthen and expand the field of youth organizing. In 2010, in response to the deepened interest in supporting young people to develop holistically as leaders and the field of youth organizing's growth and self-articulated needs, FCYO launched its Leadership Pipeline Initiative, a multiyear strategy to address sustainability of social change efforts by cultivating the leadership of low-income youth of color, systematically and intentionally, over time. Recognizing the strengths of youth organizing and the impact that efforts have had on young people and their communities, the Leadership Pipeline Initiative was designed to achieve three main goals:

- 1) To engage young people from the most marginalized communities into youth organizing;
- 2) To develop the leadership and organizing skills of young people; and
- 3) To successfully transition young people into higher education, viable employment, and leadership opportunities that facilitate their continued commitment to social change work.

The data presented in this issue of our Occasional Papers Series underscores the urgency of creating such a pipeline – not just to support the development of the individual young people currently involved in youth organizing, but also to bring new energy, creativity, insights and vision into the movement for social justice.

As Shah makes clear, youth organizing groups present a provocative challenge

to a society that does not fully value the voice of young people, and that too often discounts the strengths and wisdom of young people in social change processes. We believe that those who are most affected by social inequities – poverty, lack of access to resources, structural and institutional racism – have deep knowledge of community issues, and when given the tools and resources to organize, can be highly effective in developing solutions. Therefore, it is critically important for communities, organizations and institutions to create opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making processes that impact their lives.

**Our funding recommendations flow from this imperative.** As such, we have identified the following funding priorities for targeted and timely support:

#### #1: FUND THE LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

In order to transform the most marginalized youth and communities and build the Leadership Pipeline, we must create an integrated ecosystem, or a system of coordinated pathways, which introduces young people to organizing, develops them holistically, and transitions them to further opportunities within the social justice field. As the data presents, young people are interested in pursuing higher education and professions that allow them to stay committed to social justice. Funding FCYO's Leadership Pipeline Initiative will help to systematize these linkages between youth organizations, institutions of higher education, and employment opportunities in social justice, effectively serving young people and strengthening the social justice movement.

#### #2: SUPPORT LEARNING SPACES AND CONVENINGS

Building strong and effective organizations requires opportunities for sharing and mutual learning. Through the creation of learning spaces and convenings, funders can promote strategic collaborations and partnerships. Youth organizing groups can connect their work with others across the country, learn from peers working on similar campaign issues, develop collective strategies, and share best practices and tools. As this paper points out, convening spaces provide an avenue to grow and strengthen important networks.

#### #3: PROVIDE RESOURCES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING

The sustainability of youth organizing depends on the organizational capacity of groups themselves. Youth organizations have identified the need for capacity building in staff and board development, research and evaluation, technology, communications, fundraising and financial management. Capacity building grants help organizing groups to maintain and grow their work, effectively engaging young people and community members in advancing their campaigns.

#### #4: INCREASE GENERAL OPERATING SUPPORT FOR YOUTH-LED EFFORTS

The political and economic context within which youth organizing groups operate is constantly changing. As in all social change efforts, the viability of youth organizing groups depends on their ability to respond quickly to emerging issues and to develop innovative strategies, tactics, and actions. General operating support maximizes organizational flexibility, allowing youth organizing groups to make the best use of resources in designing strategic campaigns.

#### #5: PROMOTE FURTHER RESEARCH

The data presented in this paper illustrates the powerful and transformative impacts of youth organizing for a set of young people. Resources are needed to examine the long-term impact of youth organizing by conducting follow-up and longitudinal studies on individual young people. Youth organizing's impact on communities and the policies that young people influence warrant further study. In addition, as this study focused on the core memberships of organizing, follow-up studies might usefully explore the effects of organizing participation on a wider base of young people who are less intensely involved.

#### #6: CONNECT RESEARCH TO APPLIED PRACTICE

As the field of youth organizing has developed, there is a growing need for – and interest in – documenting successful strategies, sharing tools and curricula, and educating the broader field of youth-serving organizations about the benefits of youth leadership and political engagement. Support in this area can strengthen the work of existing organizations and provide much-needed examples that can help others to enter the field.

#### #7: SUPPORT AND PARTICIPATE IN FUNDERS' COLLABORATIVES

FCYO is dedicated to growing, strengthening, and promoting learning in the field of youth organizing – its trends, challenges, and best practices. Supporting collaboratives like FCYO allows funders to leverage their dollars and reach a broader constituency than their funding and capacity may allow. In turn, the investment helps strengthen and further our collective understanding of the contributions of this vibrant and essential field.

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## APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

The data collected for this study was part of a larger six-year study that followed the education organizing campaigns of eight community organizing groups across the country. Three of these groups had youth organizing affiliates. This paper draws upon a portion of the data collected for the larger study, specifically 124 surveys of youth involved in the 3 groups; 88 interviews with youth, school and district administrators, and youth organizing staff; and numerous observations of leadership development sessions and other organizing activities.

### DATA SOURCES

#### Interviews

Interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including youth leaders, school and district administrators, and youth organizing staff. Interviews with youth focused on how they became involved in organizing, the nature of their involvement, the progress of campaign activity, their school experience, and their future aspirations. Interviews with staff focused on campaign activity, organizational structure, organizing strategy and methodology, and leadership development of members. Interviews with school and district administrators focused on their perceptions of the important school reform issues in their community and their perceptions of and experiences with the organizing group.

#### Observations

During multiple site visits to each of the groups, the research team observed committee meetings, trainings, negotiation sessions, and public actions. Team members took field notes to document these observations.

#### Youth Surveys

Site visits were made to each organization to conduct surveys with youth leaders. The paper-and-pencil surveys took about 30 minutes to complete and covered organizational participation, confidence in leadership and organizing skills, social analysis, political and civic engagement, and questions about the extent to which organizing influenced academic aspirations.

### ANALYSIS

A detailed coding scheme was created to facilitate analysis of field notes and interviews. New codes were created as further analyses warranted. All interviews were coded by two researchers and uploaded to NVivo software, which allowed for detailed analysis of categories across sites. Survey data was analyzed in SPSS. The data was cleaned and initial analyses were conducted to establish the reliability of measures and to ensure that there were not significant differences between groups. Descriptive and correlational analyses were conducted, as well as a series of regression analyses.



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20 Jay Street, Suite 210B  
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