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OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

An Emerging Model for Working with Youth

Community Organizing + Youth
Development = Youth Organizing

ABOUT THE FUNDERS' COLLABORATIVE ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) is a collective of national, regional, and local foundations, and youth organizing practitioners whose mission is to: substantially increase the philanthropic investment in; and strengthen the organizational capacities of groups engaging young people in community organizing across the country.

The main goals of the FCYO are to:

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

For more information about the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, visit the FCYO web site at: <http://www.fcyo.org>.

ABOUT THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

The Occasional Papers Series was conceived and developed by a Committee of funders, intermediaries, and youth organizing practitioners, in conjunction with the FCYO. The Series is edited and published by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing. Series Committee members included:

- Californians for Justice
- Forum for Youth Investment
- Edward W. Hazen Foundation
- Movement Strategy Center
- Philadelphia Students Union
- Surdna Foundation
- Tides Foundation
- Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice

Thanks to the Edward W. Hazen, Surdna, and Tides Foundations for their generous support of the publication of this Series.

An Emerging Model for Working with Youth

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This paper has been adapted with permission from a paper commissioned by the Surdna Foundation. The original paper was submitted in 2000.

BY LISTEN, INC.

no. 01

OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

SERIES PREFACE

In 1997, several foundations set out to explore the nascent field of youth organizing, an innovative and effective strategy combining the best practices of youth development with the tactics and strategies of community organizing. In 2000, these foundations and a handful of others launched the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, a formal effort to increase understanding of youth organizing, catalyze support, and strengthen the capacities of youth organizing groups.

This Occasional Papers Series is an important piece of our work. Because the field is relatively young—and because its practitioners may often operate beneath the radar of youth and community development stakeholders—potential allies and supporters have many unanswered questions. What is youth organizing and how does it work? Who leads youth organizing efforts? Can youth organizing really deliver youth development outcomes? Can it create sustainable social change?

These are all fair questions, and we try to tackle them throughout this series. The diversity of youth organizing is one of its chief strengths, and the series overall tries to embody that strength. Rather than trying to argue one approach to understanding youth organizing, the series puts forth multiple perspectives, which as a whole embrace the complexity, diversity, and nuance intrinsic to the field. Capturing this richness, we hope, is the series' principal contribution.

This first installment of the series includes three articles and an annotated bibliography. In "An Emerging Model for Working with Youth: Community Organizing + Youth Development = Youth Organizing," LISTEN, Inc., a training and support organization, tackles the basics of youth organizing—origins, concepts, models, principles, and practices.

In "Youth and Community Organizing Today," journalist Daniel HoSang traces the historical involvement of youth in social change efforts throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and examines how the current phenomenon of youth organizing shapes community issues and community organizing.

In "Youth Organizing: Expanding Possibilities for Youth Development," scholar-activist Shawn Ginwright looks at the nexus of youth development and youth organizing, tracing how youth organizing yields positive youth development and social change.

Although the papers reflect the different approaches, models, and variety of issues within youth organizing, they also reflect the common belief shared by all youth organizing efforts: that all young people have the inherent capacity to be active, contributing partners in their own individual development as well as in the development of their communities.

There are 60 million young people between the ages of 10 and 24 in the United States today. And as we think about the development and role of youth in our society, it is worth remembering that young people grow up in communities, not just community and youth development programs. From this perspective, perhaps the most salient question is this: What would our communities and our society look like if the collective vision, leadership, energy and talents of even a small percentage of all young people were directed toward community transformation?

We hope this series begins to answer that question.

Vera Miao, Project Director
Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing
February 2003

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INTRODUCTION

Inside juvenile detention centers, inner-city youth centers, and suburban bedroom communities, adolescent and teenage youth are coming of age disillusioned and disengaged from mainstream civil society. The fact that large numbers of American youth are growing up on the margins of society has created a dangerous combination of anger, alienation, pain, and disengagement. The results of this alienation are evident among young people affluent and poor, urban and suburban alike. In *Cold New World: Growing Up in a Harder Country*, a 1998 ethnography of teenagers, youth culture, and contemporary social conditions, social journalist William Finnegan highlights how rising juvenile crime, disillusionment with the political process, and suburban nihilism reflect the level of disconnection and desperation felt by racially and socially diverse groups of American youth. “We jail the poor in their multitudes, abandon the dream of equality, cede more and more of public life to private interests, let lobbyists run the government,” Finnegan writes. “Those who can afford to do so lock themselves inside gated communities and send their children to private schools. And then we wonder why the world at large has become harsher and more cynical, why our kids are strange to us. What young people show us is simply the world we have made for them.”

Over the last decade, however, community organizers, youth service providers, and youth advocates have worked mightily to heal the schism between young people and civil society. Drawing upon the successes and lessons learned from veteran community organizers and youth development professionals, a new cadre of youth workers is developing a method of engagement based in respect for the intelligence, leadership abilities, and passion of young people. Weaving theories of community organizing with youth development, this new strategy is called youth organizing—a hybrid form of community-based youth work explicitly committed to social and civic engagement and political action.

Although many youth organizers work beneath the radar of traditional youth service organizations, youth organizing is meeting the complex needs of today’s disengaged youth as young people from all walks of life develop new skills and apply

them as they work to transform their communities. Here are just a few snapshots from the nascent field of youth organizing:

In Portland, Ore., Oakland, Calif., and Boston, Mass., student activism has persuaded transit authorities to provide free or discounted bus passes to public school students so they can get to school or participate in after-school activities. In Ohio, young people organized in support of a first-ever state law guaranteeing educational access to homeless children and youth. In Indianola, Miss., pressure from a coalition of student and parent activists won a string of victories: school board officials provided a science lab in an all black school; a farmer was prevented from the spraying of pesticides across the street from a middle school; and a principal and a teacher known for abusing students and parents were removed. In Oakland, a landmark ballot initiative was passed, setting aside an additional \$72 million in funding over 12 years for youth development programs to be administered by a committee of youth and adults. In the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City, youth activists won a pair of reforms: an in-house school at a juvenile detention facility was transferred to the Board of Education, ensuring that detainees could get their high school diplomas; and over \$31 million in appropriations was secured for the clean-up, restoration, and development of park lands along a polluted stretch of the Bronx River.

This paper outlines the essential elements of community organizing and youth engagement that are shaping the field of youth organizing. In our discussion of community organizing, we examine the influence of traditional community organizing models and activist movements led by people of color, while our discussion of youth development is informed by the positive youth development framework articulated by Karen Pittman and the Forum for Youth Investment. We offer a description of the guiding principles and benefits of the youth organizing approach, and we conclude with recommendations for sustaining the field of youth organizing.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

The field of youth organizing is the outgrowth of three important elements: the legacy of traditional organizing models, particularly those informed by Saul Alinsky; the progressive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s; and the rise of positive youth development. These antecedents form the ideological, conceptual, and practical foundation for much of youth organizing's theory and practice.

THE LEGACY OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENTS

University of Chicago-trained sociologist Saul Alinsky developed the earliest, comprehensive community-based approach to political organizing. Identifying the issues facing poor neighborhood youth, Alinsky called on local citizens to develop and exert meaningful control over the social, economic, and political conditions in their neighborhoods. From this neighborhood base, residents could affect local, state, and national policy. At the core of Alinsky's community organizing approach was a strong belief in democracy and resident participation.

Community organizing was a radical departure from traditional social service approaches to poverty. Rather than view poor people as clients, or recipients of social service, Alinsky viewed community residents as customers of public goods and services. Whereas the client was encouraged to be passive and receive services, the organizer mobilized people to act on their own behalf as empowered, educated consumers of service. Alinsky's ideas about community organizing and social change gave shape to many of the nation's most visible and effective community organizing groups: the Industrial Areas Foundation (which Alinsky founded), the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), and the Pacific Institute for Community Organization.

Although community organizing models vary across organizations and geographical areas, they share a handful of common characteristics:

- A practical method of power analysis—the study of the organized financial resources, human authority and knowledge promoting social, political, and economic conditions;
- An identifiable constituency or geographic place;
- An identifiable set of issues, problems, or challenges;
- A clear institutional or individual target with the power to fix, change, or solve community problems;
- Strategies and tactics that include some form of direct citizen participation;
- Members who identify leaders, make decisions, and implement strategy; and
- Opportunities to train leaders, develop relationships, and build sustainable networks and organizations.

Communities of color found community organizing to be an especially powerful strategy for challenging racial oppression. Although the Alinsky tradition was historically dominated by white male organizers, many of whom eschewed critical analyses of race, class, and gender, the community organizing model was adapted throughout the 1960s and 1970s in communities of color. As noted by Gary Delgado, co-founder of Center for Third World Organizing, organizers in communities of color brought a new level of analytical sophistication, emphasizing issues of race, class, and gender, and developing indigenous leadership. Members of this new generation of organizers were more likely people of color with roots in the communities they were organizing. These organizers served as leaders and teachers, analysts and activists. However, despite the newfound emphasis on race, class, and gender, young people often faced deep resistance to their leadership in community organizing. Community organizers typically saw young people as a constituency army but rarely as decision-makers in their own right. Youth were the leaders of tomorrow rather than leaders of today.

Nevertheless, the present generation of youth organizers has been profoundly influenced by the legacy of community organizing and the liberation movements led by people of color that grew out of or overlapped with community organizing. While many of the current youth organizers may not have read Alinsky or received formal training from the heirs to his tradition, intermediary organizations like the Center for Third World Organizing and Southern Echo introduced many communities of color to the hard skills of community organizing and the practice of productive critique and adaptation that fuel current youth organizing efforts. For thousands of youth, the study of past organizing efforts—through books, music, film, or relationships with activist elders—has inspired, informed, and sustained emerging youth organizing efforts. The legacy of these movements—the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, farm worker organizing, the Chicano movement, and the free speech and anti-war movements—has been critical to youth organizers as they develop their organizing acumen.

THE RISE OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Youth development refers to the process all young people undergo as they build the individual assets or competencies needed to participate in adolescence and adult life. Ideally, young people receive support from their peers, families, caring adults, schools, and community institutions, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive youth development and improved life outcomes. Even under the most ideal circumstances adolescence is a turbulent time, yet for young people growing up in low-income communities the challenges are often exacerbated by a number of factors: a lack of economic opportunity for their parents, family instability, inadequate schools, the prevalence of drugs, violence, and social isolation, and, in the case of ethnic and racial minorities, racism.

In the mid-1980s, a new field of positive youth development was beginning to take shape. Many youth workers had grown critical of prevailing prevention models, which in their view compartmentalized youth based on pathologies. These critics argued for a more holistic framework, one that focused on educational, artistic, and physical development. Meanwhile, grassroots, community-based youth programs—many of which were founded and run by people of color—argued that youth development should also build cultural, racial, and community identity. Out of this growing cohort, a younger generation of youth workers pushed the critique even further, arguing young people themselves needed to shape youth development programs and policies.

Jason Warwin, who grew up in youth development programs in New York City, and later founded The Brotherhood in Harlem, was one such critic. “If you had a problem in the black community, and you brought together a group of white people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously,” the 17 year-old observed. “There’d probably be a public outcry. It would be the same thing for women’s issues or gay issues. Can you imagine a bunch of men sitting on the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Women? But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us.”

Among grassroots organizations, young youth workers united with young people to demand that young people have a meaningful say in youth development policy. They began to carve out youth-led spaces within youth programs, advocacy organizations, schools, and communities. Many of these groups grew into some of the nation’s earliest youth organizing initiatives. In New York City there was the Coalition for Twenty Million at the Youth Action Program, the Toxic Avengers at El Puente, Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, and Youth Force. In Philadelphia, it was Youth United for Change. And in San Francisco, Youth Making a Change at Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth did seminal youth organizing work.

A CONTINUUM OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

The field of positive youth development yielded several important contributions. First, it pushed the field to develop new strategies and techniques for addressing young people's needs for civic engagement. Second, in seeking to do more than treat young people's individual "problems," youth development created a host of collective empowerment techniques that led to youth leadership development, youth civic engagement, and youth organizing. Third, and perhaps most important, once practitioners and thinkers broke away from the youth-as-problems-to-be-solved mold, a proliferation of new strategies and overlapping approaches emerged in the field of youth development. Conceptually, these approaches fall on a continuum across five broad categories, with traditional youth service models on one side and youth organizing models on the other (*see figure 1, page 10*).

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Youth Services

Youth services organizations or programs provide treatment and supports needed to address problems young people encounter. The services approach defines young people as clients instead of active participants or members. The work strives to intervene in a young person's life to confront personal problems. Within a youth services framework, the inherent strengths or skills young people possess are overshadowed by the academic, psychological, or economic obstacles they face. Success is measured by an organization's ability to help individual young people overcome personal barriers rather than seeing such barriers as part of a collective struggle for improved life chances. Youth services are usually offered as crisis intervention or prevention.

Youth Development Framework

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development formulated a list of desired competencies for young people that includes academic, cognitive, civic, emotional, physical, social, cultural, and vocational competence. Beyond these expected competencies, an important set of secondary outcomes exists—those that allow young people to be competent, connected, caring, and committed.

All young people—affluent or low-income, above grade or out-of-school—need a mix of services, supports, and opportunities in order to stay engaged. Youth development requires that young people have stable places, services, and instruction. But they also need supports—relationships and networks that provide nurturing, standards, guidance, as well as opportunities for trying new roles, mastering challenges, and contributing to family and community. Without these conditions, positive youth development cannot and does not occur. Any individual, institution, or organization that seeks to work with youth in a sustained manner must be mindful of the youth development framework and integrate these principles into their efforts.

Youth Leadership Development

Youth leadership development helps young people look beyond their personal needs and interests to see their relationship to a collective group, organization, or community. Youth workers who practice youth leadership development create spaces for young people to contribute to the well-being of others. Active study of leadership is incorporated

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In explicitly acknowledging the marginal social and political status of teens and young adults, and by providing young people with the tools necessary for them to challenge systems and institutions on their own, youth organizing pushes the adult-determined boundaries of traditional youth work.

in program activities, and youth are supported to build ethical codes to guide their relationships within the world. Special attention is paid to deepening historical and cultural understanding of their experiences and community conditions. Youth are able to practice leadership through meaningful roles within the organization, serving on boards, as staff members, or as peer trainers. Further, skills training and community projects provide youth with additional outlets for decision-making and problem-solving.

Youth Civic Engagement

Building upon experiences offered in the youth leadership framework, youth civic engagement is defined as young people developing the skills and habits needed to actively shape democratic society in collaboration with others. What makes this approach unique is its emphasis upon engaging young people in a democratic process, both inside the organization and within the broader community. Small groups of young people come together to identify issues that they want to address. Skills training and political education is tied to ongoing policy analysis and advocacy around issues that youth identify. Youth move from an individualistic space of “what can I do by myself” to a collective space of “what can we do together.” This shift is important as groups of young people—via

local youth councils and local advocacy groups—learn how to navigate political systems of community and government.

Youth Organizing

Youth organizing is a youth development and social justice strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change in their communities. Youth organizing relies on the power and leadership of youth acting on issues affecting young people and their communities. Young people themselves define issues, and youth organizing groups support them as they design, implement, and evaluate their own change efforts. Employing activities such as community research, issue development, reflection, political analysis, and direct action, youth organizing increases civic participation and builds the individual and collective leadership capacity of young people.

Therein is the critical divergence in theory and practice between youth organizing and other forms of youth work. Youth organizing, youth leadership, and youth civic engagement all pay attention to culture and identity. They all study political systems and structures, and all value sustained relationships with caring adults and expanded opportunities for youth leadership. But in explicitly acknowledging the marginal social and political status of teens and young adults, and by providing young people with the tools necessary for them to challenge systems and institutions on their own, youth organizing pushes the adult-determined boundaries of traditional youth work. Ultimately, youth organizing seeks to develop within a neighborhood or community a base of young people committed to altering power relationships and creating meaningful institutional change.

For marginalized youth, who are most isolated and frequently discriminated against, youth organizing has particular utility. Within youth organizing, marginalized youth find companionship, structure, and a critical framework for studying and understanding the world around them—connecting their public and private life. By helping young people see how their individual experiences, both positive and negative, are shared by others, young people participate in *group* efforts that lead to building *collective* power. Youth organizing skills include the following:

- Analysis of community governance structures including dissection of decision-makers;
- Analysis of mainstream socialization—corporate commercialism, media imaging, and pop culture;
- Practice of issue analysis, power analysis, and communication skills;
- Importance of building relationships and alliances with peers and adult allies; and
- Recognition of limits of engagement without organization and/or mobilization.

In addition to political development, youth organizers are increasingly assuming responsibility for supporting young people through the stresses of daily life. Youth organizing groups often work with youth who are at risk of incarceration, in danger of dropping out of school, or are disconnected from family. Managing the diverse and sometimes life-threatening needs of these young people can be overwhelming. Oftentimes, youth organizing groups establish partnerships with existing social service agencies in order to refer young people for formal intervention such as health services, literacy, and tutoring. In the absence of such partnerships, many youth organizing groups find the lack of resources and expertise within their organization—or within the community at large—an obstacle to maintaining youth participation.

FIGURE 1. YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM



FUNDAMENTALS OF YOUTH ORGANIZING

But what does youth organizing look like in practice? How do youth organizers structure day-to-day activities? What do youth organizing groups look like, how are they governed, and what do they do? The answers to these questions fall into four categories: process, principles, models, and impacts.

THE PROCESS OF YOUTH ORGANIZING

Adapting the concepts and traditions of both community organizing and youth development, the process of youth organizing occurs in four overlapping cycles.

Development and Skill Training

Core youth leaders and broader group members engage in skill-building activities that are both political and developmental. These might include small- and large-group discussions of personal and global issues—for example, how tying education funding to local tax revenues results in less public education resources in poor communities. Hence the obstacles to academic achievement: a lack of textbooks, counselors, and college prep resources. Political education sessions help young people analyze broader socioeconomic forces and how they impact their lives. Young people develop individual skills by learning to facilitate meetings, speak in public, handle media relations, conduct research, and organize community members.

Outreach and New Member Recruitment

As young people develop their communication skills, they employ them in outreach and new member recruitment. Activities may include outreach on a one-to-one basis; peer-to-peer outreach through social and family networks, schools, and other institutions; arts and cultural events, like hip hop shows and youth festivals; open community forums and events; and community tours and service projects. These strategies are interrelated to ongoing membership development, as each promotes skills and self-confidence of the youth both conducting and participating in the events.

Community Assessment and Issue Identification

Youth conduct research among their peers and community members to assess needs and pressing problems facing youth and their community. Here, young people might analyze pending legislation for its impact on the group's constituency. Community research and data analysis enables groups to crystallize their understanding of community needs and identify key issues for organizing campaigns.

Campaign Development and Implementation

Once an organizing group has identified an important issue to organize around, the next stage involves identifying the goals and desired outcomes of a campaign. This might include identifying those people with the authority and ability to fulfill those demands. Groups might conduct a power analysis to help youth to understand how they might influence a targeted decision-maker, or to help young people identify their own strengths and weaknesses, or locate key supporters on all sides of an issue. Youth organizing groups also identify allies and brainstorm tactics to push the identified decision-maker to meet the campaign's demands. These tactics might include community education, media pressure, public speaking and testifying at public meetings, negotiation, development of counter proposals, and demonstrations. At the completion of a campaign, effective youth organizing groups devote time for reflection. Here, the goals are to ensure deep learning and analysis by young people, and to strengthen future programs and campaigns.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF YOUTH ORGANIZING

The work of youth organizing is grounded in an evolving set of guiding principles heavily influenced by the best practices of youth development and community organizing.

Reinvest in Youth

Reinvestment in the capacity of all youth, including the most alienated, is vital to community progress and to the future of American democracy. Youth organizers target young people from all walks of life, from gang members to honor students, fostering recognition of the important role they must play in community change and social progress. The call to reinvest in youth is predicated on two beliefs. First, that youth are leaders of today not just tomorrow. Second, that healthy young people cannot exist disconnected from their community, and a healthy community cannot exist without meaningful contributions from its youth members. All young people should play a direct role in their own development, ensuring that the policies and institu-

tions that impact young people and their communities are accountable to all members of society.

The entry age for youth organizing constituents can be as young as 11, but most young people get involved around the age of 14. Youth organizers themselves are often young adults between the ages of 18 and 30. Defining age boundaries for participation, leadership, and decision-making is of utmost importance to youth organizing groups. Such boundaries govern the relationships between youth and adults, ensuring that young people have sufficient opportunities to practice true leadership and that adults are cognizant of their role in partnering and supporting that leadership.

Constituency Building and Collective Action

Youth organizers engage young people in constituency building and collective action. Youth organizers often work to build a large body of constituents—a membership base—that can be mobilized to carry out campaign strategies and tactics. The membership, comprised primarily of youth in youth-led projects and youth and adults in intergenerational groups, has a range of decision-making authority that may include defining the campaign platform and action plan, setting budget priorities, electing leadership, and reviewing performance of peers. Groups often focus on the development of a smaller, core group of youth leaders who facilitate and provide overall leadership.

Youth organizers assume a more facilitative role with core leaders and the wider membership, fostering dialogue, relationship building, collective visioning, and decision-making. Effective youth organizing groups work constantly to bring in new members, supporting development of new youth leaders to continue campaign and organizational development.

Because youth leadership and constituent control is a fundamental principle in youth organizing, leadership transition has become a pivotal issue for many groups. As leaders “age out,” they are developing strategies to develop internal leadership and facilitate the passage of knowledge and experience from seasoned youth leaders and organizers to subsequent generations. Strategies include developing and integrating new member orientation and training, setting aside time for leadership workshops, and formal youth-youth and youth-adult mentoring.

Respect for Youth Culture

Youth organizers meet young people where they are by respecting youth culture, life experiences, and community relationships. One such example of respect for youth culture can be seen in the strong influence of hip hop in youth organizing outreach strategies,

Relationships with young people extend beyond weekly meetings, trainings, or rallies and into neighborhoods where organizers can develop a strong knowledge of the community—the values, traditions, and daily struggles that shape young people’s lives.

conferences, and community forums. For many youth, the cultural phenomenon of hip hop has become the rhythm that inspires, energizes, and moves, and hip hop is the language spoken during workshops, on web sites, in annual reports, and at public hearings or school assemblies. The influences of hip hop—music, art, poetry and dance—are tools youth organizers use to connect with youth, bringing forth young people’s energy and voice, and amplifying their activism.

Youth organizers also demonstrate their respect for young people by creating an open and safe environment for young people to share personal frustrations and life experiences. Organizers often spend their days walking the halls of local high schools and detention centers, meeting with guidance counselors, teachers, or probation officers. Organizers get to know young people’s parents, aunts, and uncles. Relationships with young people extend beyond weekly meetings, trainings, or rallies and into neighborhoods where organizers can develop a strong knowledge of the community—the values, traditions, and daily struggles that shape young people’s lives.

Rather than ignoring or trying to escape the unjust conditions they face personally, youth are encouraged to work productively and collectively to rebuild their schools and neighborhoods. The intersection of personal and community transformation is common among youth organizing groups.

Politics Inspires Young People

Political education and movement history are powerful tools for mobilizing, educating, and inspiring young people. Unlike traditional community organizing, youth organizing groups depend upon the study and discussion of race, class, gender, and sexual identity as a way to connect with young people. In an effort to better understand the conditions young people face, organizers encourage them to discuss their experiences and recognize the individual and collective impact of systemic discrimination—racism, sexism, homophobia, nationalism (anti-immigrant sentiments), etc. What keeps diverse groups of young people together is the realization that they have common experiences caused by the failure of certain social and political ideals—justice, equality, democracy—to be fully realized.

Youth-Adult Partnership

Youth organizers work with young people, not for them. Respecting youth leadership is a precursor to providing young people with the skills to navigate their

lives and engage in collective action. In youth organizing groups, staff organizers support young people in the development and exercise of their own leadership. Adults provide support, access to resources, and mechanisms for accountability. With staff guidance, young people assume control of and responsibility for their own campaign and organizational decisions, both good and bad. In all instances, youth are able to express ideas, receive feedback, reflect and refine with peers and supportive adults.

Some of the strategies youth organizing groups are testing for genuine youth leadership include ongoing rotation of committee chairs and meeting facilitators, the use of consensus decision-making, and, as an introduction to organizational management, the appointment of young people on boards of directors and governance committees. For many, the primary leadership goal is to create pathways for youth members to become staff, organizers, and ultimately life-long community activists.

YOUTH ORGANIZING MODELS

While youth organizing offers diverse approaches to youth-adult partnerships, there are three main organizational models. Each approach reflects the emergence of young people as participants, decision-makers, and leaders in grassroots community change.

Participation in Adult-Led Organizing Groups

Within adult-led organizing groups, adult leaders are increasingly seeking out young people as core constituents. Such organizations are typically well-established within the community, with strong ties to a seasoned constituency base. As a target group within a broader constituency, young people carry out the strategies and tactics of campaigns developed by adults. Young people's efforts to influence the platform are often minimized in order to maintain campaign priorities. In these cases, young people are positioned as participants rather than key decision-makers.

In other adult-led organizations, the role of young people has been more substantial, whether due to demands from young people themselves or because veteran organizers recognize the importance of youth participation. Either way, youth organizing projects have flourished, and some organizations have made it a priority to build a youth base and integrate real youth leadership throughout the project's campaigns and structure. In these organizations, young people have access to physical and organizational space, decision-making power, and training. Youth benefit from mentoring by veteran activists and receive financial and organizational

support from the parent organization. Moreover, youth projects within an adult-led organization can leverage the parent organization's reputation, making it easier to build relationships with adult leaders and other advocacy groups. Youth decision-making power within overall decision-making in the parent organization differs from organization to organization.

Intergenerational Organizations

In some cases, youth and adults have formed intergenerational partnerships that see youth and adults as equal partners in building and leading campaigns, and developing the organization. In this model, youth and adults develop a common agenda without overly distinguishing youth concerns from adult concerns. Instead, groups work to actively mobilize, educate, and share power with a multi-age constituency. Ideally, youth and adults are able to learn from each other's experiences, yielding a powerful constituency base fueled by innovation and energy. Southern Echo, a multi-issue, statewide organization in Mississippi, pioneered this intergenerational model. According to Leroy Johnson, Southern Echo's executive director, youth involvement is essential. "Young people are less dependent upon the past, have the least fear of change and the best potential for creating a broad vision for a fair and just society," says Johnson. "At Southern Echo, we needed new leadership, we needed folks who weren't scared of stuff, and we knew from the past that young people help to keep old folk accountable. It's easy when you have a mortgage to be paid to make easy decisions. But when you have young people who are pushing you, it makes a difference when you have to look them in the face and say, 'Yeah, but...' They don't buy it."

Youth-Led Organizations

The field of youth organizing also includes youth-led organizations, which typically depend on adults to provide organizing and administrative support. In this model, young people often share power and authority with adults based upon defined roles, responsibilities, and skills. Full implementation of this approach places young people in control of budget decisions, board governance, and campaign decision-making. When possible, young people work with adult staff to facilitate administration, fundraising, and external relationship-building. Youth are trained and supported to conduct outreach, facilitate trainings, and coordinate campaigns with their peers. When seeking to negotiate the expression of youth and adult voice and power, youth-led organizations make a point to defer to the vision and authority of young people.

IMPACT OF YOUTH ORGANIZING

Youth organizing seeks to achieve outcomes on both individual and community levels. Below is a working list of outcomes youth organizing can bring about for youth, young adults, and communities.

Impact on Youth and Young Adults

Youth organizing and other more traditional youth development strategies share a common set of development outcomes: positive identity, increased knowledge and skills, and a deeper commitment to community. Youth organizing's specific outcomes fall into six competency areas.

Cultural Competency is an increased sense of cultural awareness, self-esteem, and self-reflection. Cultural competency enables young people to identify and recognize their own value and identify what they can contribute to their community and to the world.

Personal Competency is an increased ability to solve problems on one's own and for others. Personal competency results in young people consciously making decisions, questioning and weighing choices against their own values.

Civic Competency is an increased connection to community and a developing vision for community improvement. Civic competency enables young people to understand their roles as active citizens within the community. As a result, they assume greater civic responsibility for addressing community issues.

Political Competency is an increased understanding of the value of traditional institutions (i.e., schools), an increased ability to negotiate public and private systems (legal, welfare, education, etc.), and a willingness to critique and change unjust conditions. With political competency, young people are capable of holding individuals and institutions accountable.

Young people are less dependent upon the past, have the least fear of change and the best potential for creating a broad vision for a fair and just society.

Cognitive Competency is an increased ability to make decisions, improved literacy and analytical skills, improved communication skills, and an ability to develop and implement a strategic plan and organizing process. Cognitive competency enables youth to engage in community projects and organizational development in a strategic and meaningful way.

Social Competency is an awareness of group dynamics, team building strategies, conflict resolution, and a respect for the cultures and identities of others. Social competency results in youth that are able to build productive relationships with their peers and adults.

Impact on the Community

Young people do not grow up in a vacuum. As is true for all people, a network of relationships and decisions influence a young person's life. Unfortunately, in communities across the country, relationships between young people, formal institutions, and informal networks of adults have deteriorated. Youth organizing counters this problem by placing young people behind the microphone at city council meetings, on local commissions, and in door-to-door conversations with their neighbors as they work toward community change.

By being present and active within the community, youth demonstrate their capacity to function as community assets and achieve real improvements in the life of the community. As young people assume a more prominent role in civic affairs, there is potential for cascading influence: as young people assert their voices in public discourse, the needs of young people get incorporated into a broader community agenda. Youth organizing helps to generate a respect for youth and their issues among elected officials, policy makers, and key community leaders. Youth engagement in local government, politics, and civic affairs increases, and young people's collective power become a natural part of community change efforts. Youth power generates broader defense of young people's civil and human rights by individuals and institutions within the community. This ideally yields decreased victimization, isolation and criminalization of young people. Finally, youth organizing achieves social change at the neighborhood, city, state and federal level. Youth organizing brings youth into alliance with peer and adult allies who are committed to reclaiming and improving their community.

The ultimate impact of youth organizing is both simple and profound: the engagement of large numbers of young people in leading successful efforts for positive community and systemic change. Kim Miyoshi of Kids First! points to the example of Oakland: "Oakland has 400,000 people in it, and 100,000 of those are under 17. So if you're talking about transforming your schools and communities, you have to talk about it from more than just a policy shift or bureaucracy shift. You have to talk about transforming the hearts and minds of the people." Since a quarter of Oakland's population is under 17, the future is in many respects the present. "How are we going to provide opportunities within the schools—within any institution that young people are a part of—for youth to have the skills that they need to be life-long change agents?"

SUSTAINING YOUTH ORGANIZING

Youth organizing is breaking new ground in the areas of youth development and community organizing. This emerging field owes its progress to the creativity, enthusiasm, and self-determination of youth and young adults who recognize the value of supporting youth in their efforts to solve community problems and create change. In order to deepen the impact youth organizing can have upon youth and communities, there needs to be a local, regional, and national infrastructure to support youth organizing. Creating this infrastructure demands a commitment from allies and youth leaders to address four key areas: 1) Creating a Youth Development Infrastructure; 2) Building Networks; 3) Supporting Intermediaries; and 4) Leveraging Resources.

Creating Youth Development Infrastructure

Balancing youth organizing and youth development is challenging. Unlike the youth work that occurs within larger human services or youth development organizations, youth organizing groups are striving to create an internal infrastructure capable of balancing both community organizing and youth development.

In an effort to meet the immediate needs and life transitions of young people, youth organizers struggle to offer or refer services and supports consistent with a positive youth development framework. The primary barrier to a balanced approach is the lack of adequate funding and other resources. Because of its hybrid approach, youth organizing demands experience in both youth development and community organizing, thus making recruitment and retention of staff particularly challenging. Practical concerns like structuring program space, training, and planning are also issues, as is the concern that too much attention to youth development may take away from community organizing efforts.

Building Networks

The benefits of network development can arguably be seen in the Bay Area, the Southeast and New York City where the concentrations and/or history of youth

organizing are greatest. Here, youth organizers are exposed to political education, capacity building, and area conferences that encourage peer interaction and collaboration. Like-minded youth and adults are able to learn from each other, share stories, and consider larger level campaigns and actions. The result is often the emergence of local and state trainings and conferences designed to support the local and regional infrastructure and overall sustainability of youth organizing.

Expanding the number and geographic reach of local, regional, and national networks is crucial to the field's future growth and wellbeing. Today's campaigns suffer from lack of collaboration among institutions and issues. Youth organizing groups share common values; the time is ripe for them to share strategies and tactics. Communication and networking would build capacity for more complex strategies that connect local efforts to broader campaigns at the state, regional, and national levels.

Supporting Intermediaries

Intermediary training and support organizations are well-positioned to provide training, capacity building, and knowledge development to the field as a whole. Youth organizing groups suffer from the same organizational capacity woes as other community-based efforts.

Program officers and foundation boards of directors have been able to engage and learn about this burgeoning new field, adjusting expectations and strategy to accommodate an innovative new approach to youth development and community change.

While youth organizers work to make tremendous gains for communities, the organizational lifespan of many groups is often fleeting. Business matters intrinsic to any non-profit structure—fundraising, human resource management, youth and staff development, fiscal planning, and physical space management—are painstakingly, sometimes resentfully, managed in the shadow of campaign development. Organizational management issues are particularly acute for youth-led groups striving to operate as stand-alone nonprofit organizations. The absence of formal training and guidance in organizational management and administration appropriate for youth-led structure often leads to burnout, organizational crisis, or even program closure.

Intermediaries can play an important role by offering training, capacity building, and knowledge development support to youth organizing groups. The field is currently supported by a limited number of local, regional, and national intermediaries that have expertise in direct action organizing, media advocacy, campaign research, and political education. But the support gap is most significant in the areas of organizational planning and management.

Leverage Resources

The funding base for youth organizing has been anchored by social justice-oriented local and community foundations. In the last few years that base has been significantly strengthened from the emergence of national support from foundations such as the Edward W. Hazen Foundation, the Jewish Fund for Justice, Open Society Institute, the Tides Foundation, the Irvine Foundation, and the Surdna Foundation. This national cohort has supported research, publication of reports, capacity building, and direct funding to youth organizing groups.

The majority of local and regional foundation resources, however, are dedicated to supporting traditional approaches to youth work—job training, community centers, after-school initiatives, and summer programs. Youth organizing continues to operate on the philanthropic margins, and youth organizing groups struggle to translate their work to a broader audience of skeptical funders. In the worst cases, that translation can become adaptation, as youth organizing groups struggle to fit specific grantmaking parameters, risking mission drift and losing control over organizational identity and programs. In the best cases, however, program officers and foundation boards of directors have been able to engage and learn about this burgeoning new field, adjusting expectations and strategy to accommodate an innovative new approach to youth development and community change.

The issues and conditions young people are battling against are deeply rooted in the social, political, and economic structures of society. Youth cannot engage in the struggle alone. Social change cannot be achieved without the engagement of concerned adults to act as supporters, advisers, facilitators, and activists in their own right. Attention must be paid to educating youth, youth workers, and other stakeholders about the success and potential impact of youth organizing. Youth and young adults must be at the forefront of this political and cultural shift.

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Note: This paper is a result of a collaborative effort of LISTEN's board and staff. The original writing team consisted of the late Lisa Sullivan, Ditra Edwards, Nicole Johnson and Kim McGillicuddy. Lisa is deeply missed.

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