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organizing

Transforming Young People and Communities:

New Findings on the Impacts of Youth Organizing

October 2017

Acknowledgments



This report was written and researched by Seema Shah, Will Buford and Eric Braxton.

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The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) works to create a strong, stable, and interconnected youth organizing field, with the power to realize the transformative results that will positively impact young people and their communities. Our work is guided by a vision of young people playing leading roles in broad-based coalitions for social justice and building meaningful power to achieve transformative victories. This vision includes youth organizing being recognized by funders and youth development experts as the most effective way to support the holistic development of marginalized young people as well as the development of sufficient and sustainable resources from diverse sources that support the thriving leadership of young people.

For more information, visit FCYO.org.

Since 2000, FCYO has served to connect funders and practitioners to a wide range of resources designed to strengthen the field of youth organizing. Visit www.fcyo.org to access the latest research on youth organizing, connect to other funders or practitioners involved in organizing, and find free webinars on topics such as organizing strategy and capacity-building.

Visit the Youth Organizing Landscape Map.

This **interactive online map** offers the most up-to-date information about youth organizing groups across the country, including the issue areas they are working on and the support services they provide. Find out who is working in your community and how they are engaging young people. In addition, the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing website features case studies and other resources to help funders and practitioners develop a deeper understanding of the field.

Introduction



Like many, as a young person, J-Mo felt disconnected from her own community. By chance, she got involved in a youth organizing group at her high school, Woodrow Wilson HS, and developed a critical consciousness of the root causes of her community's struggles.

Growing up in East Los Angeles, Jennifer Maldonado (“J-Mo”) felt disconnected from her own community. As a middle school student, she witnessed many of her friends getting involved in gangs. Her brother was in and out of jail, while her adult family members faced precarious employment prospects. In her words, “I started to internalize and develop this hatred for living in my community, and also the impacts [of living in poverty] on my family.” By the time she got to high school, these feelings had deepened, “I didn’t know who to go to, I didn’t believe in change...I really needed social and emotional support.”

In high school, J-Mo became involved in United Students, the youth organizing arm of Inner City Struggle. Through her participation, she started to understand that the difficulties faced by her community were systemic in nature, the result of “institutional systems that were failing us.” Working with other youth in her community, J-Mo became involved in campaigns for educational reform, including increasing access to college prep curricula and advocating for restorative justice counselors in schools. Through this work, she says her “internal hatred started to leave and [I began to] develop and blossom into an activist, a warrior, and a critical thinker,” skills she carried with her to college at University of California-San Diego and now uses as a staff member at Inner City Struggle.¹

In recent years, the number of youth organizing groups has grown considerably. The [Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing \(FCYO\)](#) currently has data on more than 300 youth organizing groups located in 38 states,² up from 180 groups identified 2013.³ A majority of these youth organizing groups work with youth of color and youth from low-income backgrounds. Young people work on a wide array of campaigns that reflect their needs and concerns, including issues such as education, health, gender/sexuality, immigration, and criminal justice. Across the country, youth organizers have scored important policy victories, such as advocating for greater access to college prep curricula and introducing restorative justice models to replace punitive school discipline policies.

As the field of youth organizing expands, a growing body of research is illuminating our understanding of youth organizing and the myriad ways in which participation in organizing shapes the lives of young people. Emerging research shows that involvement in youth organizing

contributes to the social-emotional and academic development of young people in powerful ways, while also promoting their civic and community engagement.

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These outcomes are a product of the distinctive organizational culture and practices that characterize youth organizing. Youth organizing involves a deep and intentional focus on leadership development, along with a political and structural analysis of community problems. Involvement in organizing equips young people with the tools needed to build collective power and make meaningful changes in their neighborhoods and schools. At the same time, youth organizing is not just about activism. Groups also integrate a powerful blend of culturally and contextually resonant support services, from academic tutoring to mental health interventions.

As J-Mo's story illustrates, this combination of community engagement and individual development goes beyond traditional youth development programs to enable a powerful and transformative experience that is particularly well-suited for young people living in low-income communities and communities of color. Organizing provides a vehicle through which young people can understand their life experiences within a broader social, historical, and political context, while developing skills that equip them with a sense of agency in changing the structural forces that contribute to their individual circumstances. **In this sense, youth organizing represents a best practice for supporting the holistic development of low-income young people and young people of color.**

Alberto Retana, president and CEO of **Community Coalition**, describes the relationship between collective and individual transformation that occurs through youth organizing this way: "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." In a similar vein, Dr. Robert Ross, CEO of the **California Endowment**, calls youth organizing "a triple bottom line investment: you get an issue benefit, you get a community benefit, and you get a leadership development benefit for young people."



Dr. Robert Ross, CEO of the California Endowment

"(Youth organizing is) a triple bottom line investment: you get an issue benefit, you get a community benefit, and you get a leadership development benefit for young people."

This report highlights the links between the fields of youth development and youth organizing by synthesizing research on how youth organizing works and what youth organizers learn from their involvement. In doing so, this report encourages funders, practitioners and policymakers who care about the healthy development of young people, **to consider youth organizing as an essential component of a strong youth engagement ecosystem – one that simultaneously nurtures youth development and community engagement.**

Key Takeaways

- Youth organizing engages young people in building power for social change, and uses a distinct set of culturally and contextually resonant practices to build youth leadership within a safe and supportive environment.
- Through these unique set of practices, youth organizing supports the holistic development of young people and reaches young people who are often at the margins of society, including youth from low-income backgrounds, youth of color, LGBTQ youth, and undocumented and immigrant youth.
- New research links youth organizing to positive social-emotional learning competencies and academic outcomes. Coupled with data showing that youth involvement in organizing fosters deep and lasting civic and community engagement, and participation in democracy, there is growing support for the efficacy of youth organizing.
- The research linking youth organizing practices to the development of core social-emotional learning competencies is especially noteworthy, given the importance of social-emotional learning competencies in academic and professional success.

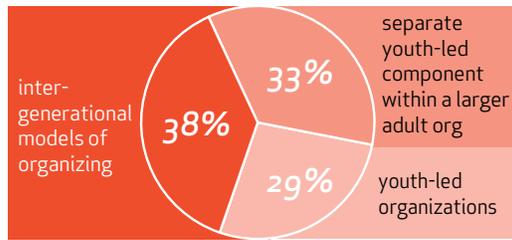
Youth Organizing At-a-Glance

In 2016, the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing launched the **Youth Organizing Landscape Map**, an interactive, online database of youth organizing groups across the United States. The map provides current information on groups, their issue areas, populations served, and the support services they provide.

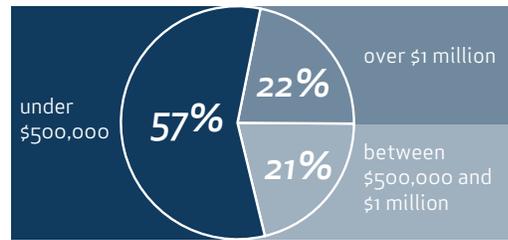
Based on data from the map (as of September 2017), there are more than 300 groups in 38 states, with the largest concentration of groups in California and New York, and nearly 70 groups have been founded since 2010. Below are some characteristics of youth organizing groups.

All data from FCYO Youth Organizing Landscape Map and 2013 National Field Scan

Organizational Models



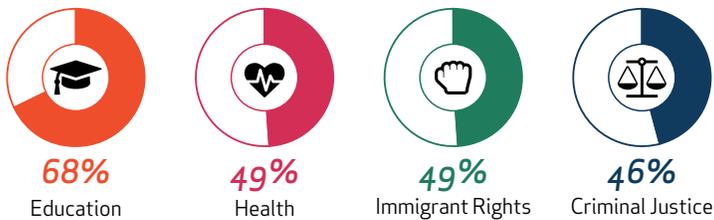
Budget



Age Groups

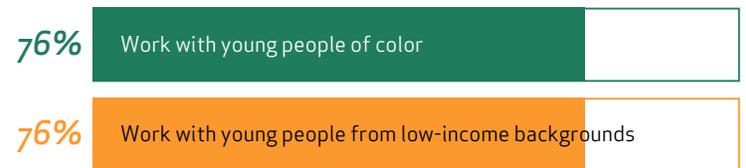


Top Areas of Focus

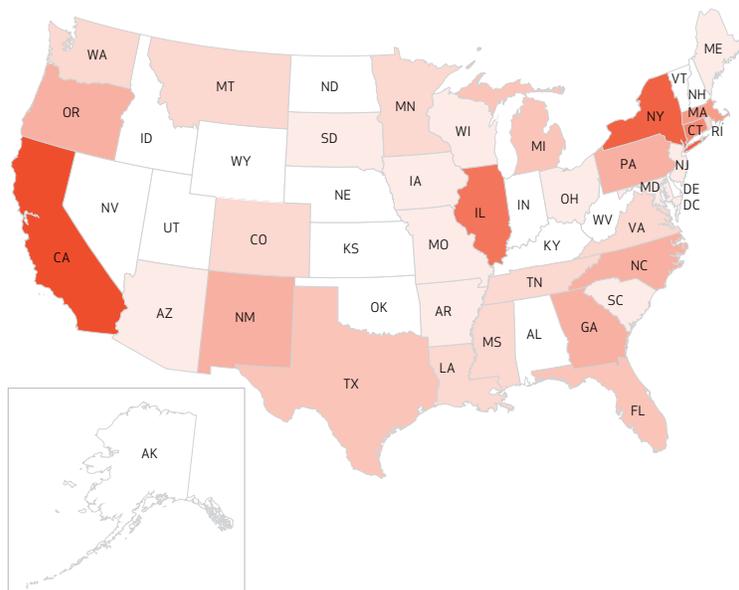


Young people also worked on issues such as housing, gender/sexuality, the environment, and Native rights.

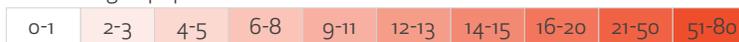
Populations



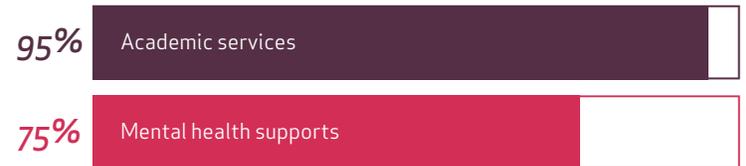
Concentration Of Youth Groups



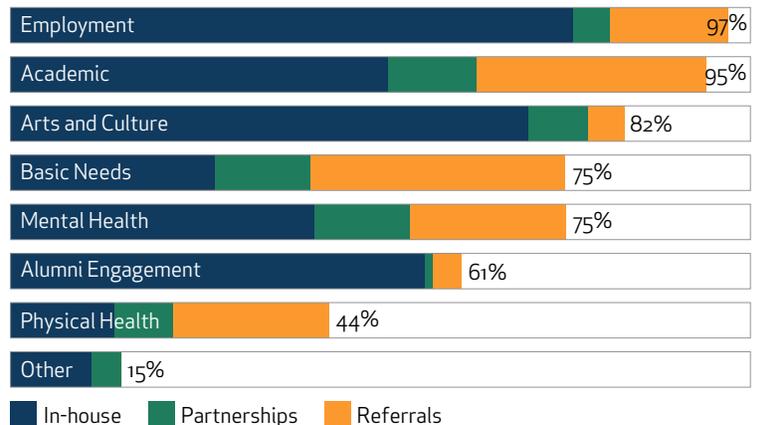
Number of groups per state



Services Provided⁵



Importantly, in recent years these services have moved from informal (referrals to other providers) to more formal, through either in-house services or partnerships with other organizations or agencies, suggesting these types of support are being re-imagined and adapted into a specific style of service provision through youth organizing.



Research Findings: How Does Youth Organizing Work?

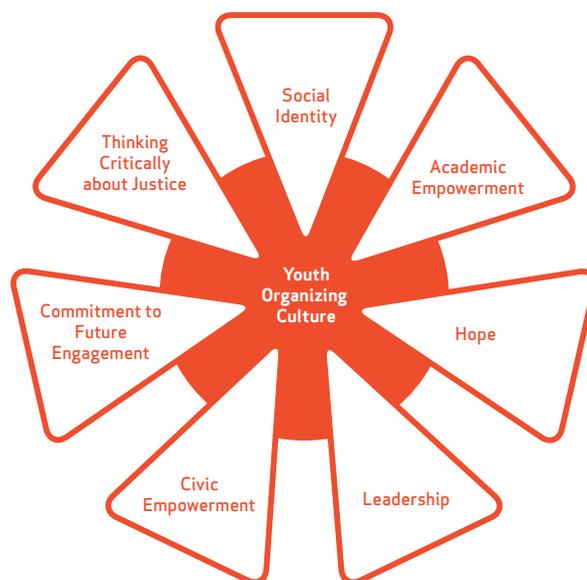


Although models of youth organizing vary, most share a common approach centered on the authentic leadership of young people. Typically, young people involved in organizing identify issues of concern to them, analyze the root causes of those problems, pinpoint solutions to address those problems, conduct education and outreach to build support for their cause, and act to influence policy and systems change.

With a deep and intentional attention to leadership development, this approach catalyzes a sense of both individual and collective power. Moreover, youth organizing groups pay careful attention to creating an affirming social climate, one that is inclusive and non-hierarchical. The culture of youth organizing can be especially powerful for young people of color and youth from low-income backgrounds, who attend under-resourced schools and often do not have access to leadership opportunities through traditional school-based programs. Moreover, many youth organizing groups are led by staff representing diverse social identities and integrate arts and culture into their approach. Collectively, this creates an organizational culture that is contextually and culturally relevant, in ways that go beyond traditional youth development programs.

Indeed, across studies, researchers point to the organizational culture and practices of youth organizing groups as a key factor in catalyzing positive outcomes for young people of color, and low-income youth.⁶ While most research on organizational culture of youth organizing groups relies on qualitative data, Watts and his colleagues bring quantitative data to bear on our understanding of youth organizing culture. In a series of regression analyses, the researchers found that higher ratings of

organizational culture (as reported by youth) predicted a host of positive outcomes, including: racial and social identity, critical thinking about justice, academic empowerment, hope, commitment to future civic engagement, civic empowerment, and leadership.⁷



Source: Watts, R., Kirshner, B., Govan, R., & Fernandez, J. (2017). *Powerful Youth, Powerful Communities: An International Study of Youth Organizing*.

Based on survey and interview data, Watts and his colleagues identify four key features of youth organizing culture that contribute to these outcomes:

1. A learning process that includes cycles of preparation, rehearsal, performance and feedback from peers and supportive adults

As young people engage in campaigns, organizing staff engage them in a distinct cycle of learning that involves preparation, rehearsal, performance, and feedback. Preparation focuses on group discussions, trainings and workshops, skits, reading circles, and artistic expression, followed by opportunities to practice or rehearse. In the performance phase, young people share their policy proposals to public audiences, such as school boards or community members. Some of the most powerful moments of learning take place during these experiences with “performance,” eliciting feelings of nervousness and vulnerability, as well as courage and pride. Feedback and reflection through debriefs helps young people process and reflect upon their experience. Importantly, adult staff members support each phase of the learning cycle and are viewed as trusted coaches and mentors.

2. Accelerated opportunities for leadership

In youth organizing, young people are often promoted quickly into leadership roles, but they receive guidance and support along the way. Most notably, organizing requires public speaking, often a new experience for youth. Across research studies, accounts of public speaking scenarios are frequently mentioned and serve as a powerful source of leadership learning for youth. In addition to these opportunities for public leadership, youth take on roles within the organization—facilitating meetings, planning events, and recruiting new members—that support their leadership development.

3. Relevance to everyday struggles and aspirations

For young people who might feel disconnected from school or society at large, the relevance of campaigns to their everyday lives offers a powerful mechanism to feel connected and affirmed. For example, undocumented youth working on immigrant rights can connect their day-to-day experiences to campaigns that directly affect their well-being. This is consistent with notions of social justice youth development and the recognition that incorporating an analysis of racism, sexism, poverty, and other structural forces helps young people process the “multiple forms of oppression [they] encounter,” and develop a sense of agency by generating effective strategies to change these conditions.⁹

4. Positive and affirming relationships encourage engagement and recognize young people’s dignity and humanity

The quality of young people’s relationships and their sense of belonging are major predictors of other developmental outcomes.

Youth organizing groups use relational practices that affirm the dignity and humanity of young people. Groups place explicit attention on power differentials based on age and address them by creating a set of practices and norms that privilege youth voice and decision-making. These norms tend to contrast with the more hierarchical relationships that exist between adults and youth in school settings. These features of youth organizing culture also facilitated a safe space for dialogue on ideas, debate, and reflection. Moreover, an affirming organizational culture supports social and emotional learning – places where young people could feel vulnerable and deal with personal challenges.

Ultimately, the ways in which youth organizing groups approach their work are aligned with what the research supports as best practices for healthy adolescent development. During adolescence, young people are developing their ability to think abstractly and critically, grappling with their racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities, and exploring questions such as, “Who am I?”

Youth organizing attends to these different levels of development, and goes beyond traditional approaches to youth development by paying specific attention to culture, race, and class, as well as the larger community and political context. The youth engagement continuum shows the ways in which youth organizing operates within the broader ecosystem of youth services, while going beyond many forms of traditional youth development to support the holistic development and well-being of young people.⁹

Each of the five strategies described in the continuum offers services and programs to young people and play an important role in supporting their healthy growth and development as individuals.

Source: FCYO & McCargar, L. (2013). *A New Role for Connecticut Youth*.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM

INDIVIDUAL CHANGE		SYSTEMIC CHANGE			
STRATEGY	YOUTH SERVICES	YOUTH DEVELOPMENT	LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT	YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT	YOUTH ORGANIZING
ROLE OF YOUTH	Client	Participants and interns/staff	Participants, leaders, interns/staff, and board members	Leaders, interns/staff, and board members	Members, leaders, organizers, interns/staff, and board members
ACTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide services to address individual problems and behaviors. Define programming around treatment, prevention, and basic needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide supports and safe spaces Foster caring relationships between youth and adults; support youth-adult partnerships Develop talents and assets Provide opportunities for growth, development, and new roles Build individual competencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate youth development AND Offer leadership opportunities within the program and organization Deepen historical and cultural understanding of shared experiences and community issues Build skills and capacities for making decisions and solving problems Provide opportunities to participate in community projects Support youth-adult partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate youth development, leadership development AND Promote political education and awareness Build skills and capacity for identification and analysis of issues and for action around issues Cultivate and build collective identity as agents of social change Engage in advocacy efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate youth development, leadership development, youth civic engagement AND Offer opportunities to serve as core staff and governing body Build a membership base to which youth leaders are accountable Develop campaigns and utilize tactics—including direct action—to effect systemic change Take active roles in alliances and coalitions

Youth organizing builds upon strong, supportive relationships with adults and develops individual competencies (core features of youth development) alongside deep civic and community engagement that focuses on creating structural change.

In doing so, involvement in youth organizing helps young people look beyond their personal needs and interests to see their relationship to a collective group, organization, or community. Comparative research demonstrates that when youth work together to make change in their community, they develop a sense of individual and collective efficacy.¹⁰ This form of critical civic engagement—what Morsillo and Prilleltensky call “transformational” social involvement—can serve as a key context in which to develop the skills, self-efficacy, and orientation toward community that is so important for all adolescents. In this sense, youth organizing goes beyond traditional forms of youth development to put young people in the driver’s seat in shaping their own individual change goals and the community social change goals they want to bring about. Leidy, a veteran youth organizer, captures much of what is powerful about the culture of youth organizing¹²:

“When I was at Padres [y Jovenes Unidos], we defined liberation as the ability to practice self-determination and self-governance...a lot of communities haven’t been able to practice that for hundreds of years. So, to be able to take young people through a process where they’re practicing that, is big....we take them through trainings that help them explore who they are—their identity and their history. In turn, what that process produces is a person who is completely able to be creative, it allows them to think beyond what people expect them to be. For example, when you teach a student how to express themselves through art or taking a picture, or acting out a skit—those are all things we use as tactics in organizing, and those are all skills they can take to solve other problems in their lives and decide who they want to be. It’s takes them from that place of isolation and darkness to a place that gives them light, it gives them a voice to be who they want to be.”

“It’s takes them from that place of isolation and darkness to a place that gives them light, it gives them a voice to be who they want to be.”



Leidy Robledo is a youth organizer at Puente Human Rights Movement in Phoenix, Arizona. Although she is an Arizona native, her path to becoming an organizer in her home community is due in large part to her experiences away from home. Photo credit: Diego Lozano

How Youth Organizing Works

- Youth organizing reaches young people who are often marginalized in school and community settings and creates safe, inviting spaces for them by using culturally- and contextually-resonant practices that speak to their lived experiences.
- In the face of negative messages from society, youth organizing helps young people from marginalized communities develop positive social identities and discover their own sense of power.
- There is new evidence that, like traditional youth development approaches, youth organizing promotes social-emotional learning and other critical 21st century skills that are strong predictors of future success.
- Youth organizing supports simultaneous individual and community transformation. Individual growth and healing is catalyzed by building a sense of critical consciousness and collective agency to change oppressive systems.

Research Findings: What Youth Organizers Learn



In 2011, the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing published **Building Transformative Leadership: Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing**. The report drew upon survey, observation, and interview data from 124 youth members of three organizing groups and highlighted the ways in which involvement in organizing led to a strong sense of self-efficacy, the development of leadership and organizing skills, greater academic motivation, and a strong future commitment to civic engagement.¹³

In recent years, the knowledge base on youth organizing has grown, utilizing increasingly sophisticated research methodologies, such as comparison groups, longitudinal designs, and larger sample sizes to deepen our understanding of youth organizing. Three research studies are of note:

- John Rogers and Veronica Terriquez collaborated on a California-based study of 410 youth organizing alumni and examined their educational and civic trajectories experiences relative to a comparison group of 2,200 young adults who did not participate in organizing.¹⁴
- Terriquez builds on this work through evaluation research on organizations participating in the California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative, encompassing a sample of 1,396 youth.¹⁵
- Roderick Watts, Ben Kirshner, and their research team undertook a three-year, mixed-methods international longitudinal study to investigate the developmental outcomes associated with participation in organizing and the organizational practices that contribute to those outcomes.¹⁶

The literature review that follows highlights key takeaways from these new research studies, while integrating previous research findings to summarize what we know about the impacts of youth organizing, particularly as they relate to broader youth development outcomes.

The literature supports the position that youth organizing is a best practice for the holistic development of low-income young people and young people of color across three major areas—involvement in youth organizing helps to catalyze healthy social-emotional development, promote positive academic outcomes, and foster deep and sustained civic and community engagement.

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Healthy Social-Emotional Development

Forming safe, positive relationships, managing stressful and difficult emotions, demonstrating empathy for others, and developing a sense of confidence and hope are just a few of the “soft skills” associated with personal well-being and professional success.

It is no surprise that these social-emotional competencies¹⁷ serve as central tenets within frameworks of positive youth development, and that scholars have linked social-emotional learning to a host of positive life outcomes, including higher academic achievement, career and job readiness, lower levels of drug use, fewer conduct problems, and lower levels of emotional distress.¹⁸

In fact, there is a growing evidence that social and emotional qualities rival academic or technical skills in their ability to predict employment and earnings, among other outcomes.¹⁹ As young people, particularly those from low-income backgrounds and communities of color, face a host of challenges that compromise opportunities for success, it is critical for both school-based and out-of-school programs to equip young people with these competencies.

Youth organizing practices weave in many opportunities for emotional reflection and development, particularly as young people tackle high-stakes issues involving themselves, their families, and their communities. Additionally, the inherent interpersonal and team-oriented nature of campaign work in youth organizing create opportunities to develop and practice positive social and emotional skills.

Indeed, when Watts and his colleagues analyzed interviews with youth organizers from across the country and coded the data for instances of “emotional work,” 52 percent of them were associated with experiences relating to community leadership and action, activities such as preparing and rehearsing for actions, testifying before public officials, and debriefing about the outcomes of actions. Experiences relating to critical thinking analysis accounted for another 32 percent of emotional experiences.²⁰ These findings underscore the way in which opportunities for social-emotional learning are embedded within the day-to-day practice of youth organizing groups. This research also suggests that youth organizing may offer added benefits that go beyond those of other social and emotional learning programs. These include: analysis of how to change policies and institutions, agency and confidence in civic and sociopolitical activities, and transforming emotions into constructive action.

Comparing Youth Organizing and Positive Youth Development

Source: FCYO (2017)

THEME	RELATED OUTCOMES	YO	YD
Critical Thinking and Analysis	Understanding root causes of inequality	✓	
	Analysis of how to change policies and institutions	✓	
	Intellectual development	✓	✓
Community Leadership and Action	Working in teams - facilitation and decision-making	✓	✓
	Agency and confidence in civic and sociopolitical activities	✓	
	Public speaking	✓	✓
	School improvement: changes to in-school policing and disciplinary policies; school reform	✓	
Socioemotional Learning	Transforming emotions into constructive action	✓	
	Social skills, affirming relationships and belonging	✓	✓
	School engagement	✓	✓
Health, Safety and Wellness	Physical and mental well-being	✓	✓

More broadly, in survey research, Terriquez found that 84 percent of young people involved in organizing believed their engagement helped them take better care of their emotional well-being “some” or “a lot,” due in part to activities such as healing circles, support groups, and other self-care interventions provided by groups.²¹

EMOTIONAL AWARENESS AND EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT

In interviews across multiple research studies, young people described how involvement in youth organizing has helped them **calibrate emotional responses** that can make problems worse. This came up frequently in the course of campaign work, as young people often had to share personal stories of injustice with public officials or others to catalyze change, yet had to maintain their composure in doing so.

A student involved with **Youth Making a Change (YMAC)** in California shares, “I was able to learn how to control myself verbally. I got kicked out of like tons of classes, but after working with YMAC, I’m able to understand when is a good place to speak up and when isn’t, and how

to better utilize my opinion than to just be angry about everything... you can’t make any change if you’re just angry about everything.”²⁴

“I’m able to understand when is a good place to speak up and when isn’t, and how to better utilize my opinion than to just be angry about everything...you can’t make any change if you’re just angry about everything.”

Moreover, when faced with challenging situations, many young people went a step further and transformed their difficult emotions into constructive action. Jessica, a young person who uses a wheelchair and is a member of **EmpowerMT**, shares this about her first trip

to the Montana state capitol to advocate for an anti-bullying measure, “If you get upset, it’s OK to feel everything, but you need to do something with that emotion while you’re there. I got there feeling empowered, like we were gonna make a change.” As Jessica reflects on her involvement in youth organizing, she says, “I’ve definitely noticed changes in myself. The biggest one is confidence in myself.”²⁵



Jessica Beers is a high school senior in Missoula, Montana. She is part of the LGBTQ community, lives with muscular dystrophy and is a wheelchair user. Jessica not only found her voice and passion for social justice through EmpowerMT, but she found an inclusive, accepting community—something that didn’t always come easy to Jessica.

Interviews with young people underscored how this ability to speak with decision-makers and engage them in dialogue was associated with a **sense of confidence**.²⁶ Related to this sense of confidence and empowerment, Watts and his colleagues found a positive, statistically significant correlation ($r=.68$) between a **sense of hope and optimism** and the critical thinking and analysis that are the hallmarks of organizing.²⁷ Thus, even though young people were fighting to change unjust policies and likely to experience their own personal challenges in doing so, being involved in organizing was connected to a sense of hopefulness.

SOCIAL AWARENESS

Studies of participation in youth organizing consistently find that young people become **more in-tune with their own social identity, as well as that of others**. Seventy-nine percent of young people in the Building Healthy Communities sample said they learned about their own ethnic racial group “some” or “a lot”, and a slightly larger percentage – 83 percent – said they learned about other racial groups. In addition, young people indicated they learned about gender issues (77 percent), economic inequality (80 percent), and LGBTQ issues (65 percent).

Youth Organizing Practices & Social-Emotional Learning

Research shows that effective programs for social-emotional learning are sequenced, focused, active and explicit (SAFE).²² **Sequenced** programs apply a planned set of activities to develop skills in a step-by-step fashion. **Active** programs use role-plays and rehearsal with feedback to help youth learn new skills. **Focused and explicit** refer to successful programs’ ability to target social and emotional skills specifically and devote programming time to these skills.

While more research is needed to explore this area of work, the core set of practices that make up youth organizing align closely with the SAFE framework: they develop clear and sequential plans at the individual development and campaign level; emphasize learning through interpersonal action and direct action, and; devote specific space and time to reflection to foster personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth.²³ Because youth organizing develops these competencies in the course of their work together during “real-life” scenarios, versus the type of learning that occurs through curriculum-based SEL trainings, the impacts are potentially more meaningful and relevant for young people.

● Sequenced

- Develop individualized movement development & education plans
- Research topics and community issues
- Design and conduct surveys on community issues
- Develop power analyses, campaign plan and goals
- Collect and analyze data
- Explore social identities

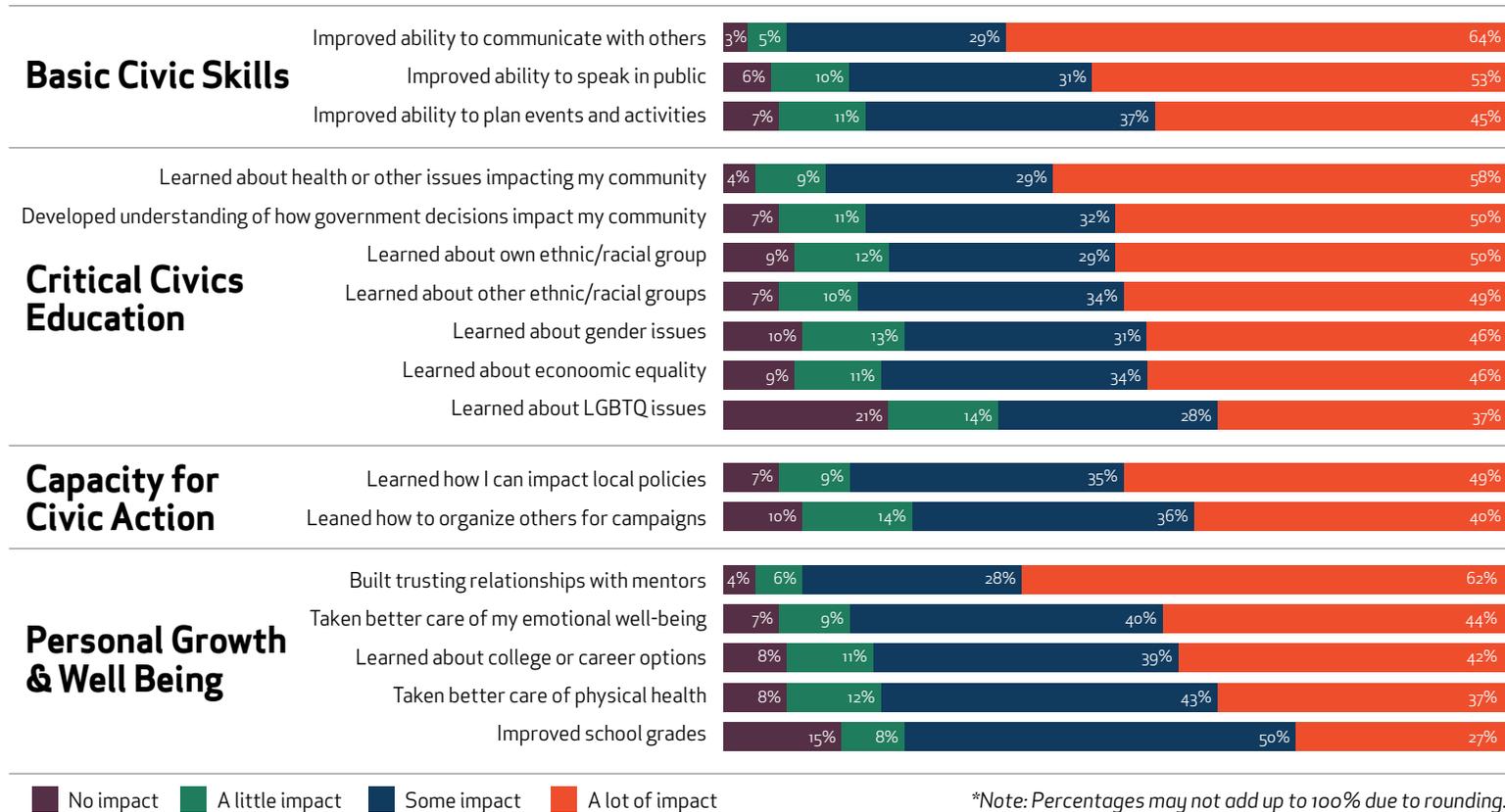
● Active

- Facilitate dialogue with peers and community members
- Recruit new members, peers, and allies
- Plan and implement direct actions
- Encourage collective visioning and problem solving
- Engage in role playing and public speaking training
- Develop campaign plan and goals

● Focused and Explicit

- Structured group discussions and debriefings
- Reflect through journaling & other creative activities
- Evaluate lessons learned

Outcomes Associated with Involvement in Organizing



■ No impact ■ A little impact ■ Some impact ■ A lot of impact

*Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Terriquez, V. (2017). *Building Healthy Communities through Youth Leadership*.

These findings are likely related to both the political education that occurs within groups, which highlights the histories and experiences of diverse communities, as well as the culturally resonant and affirming messages that are embedded within the practices of youth organizing. The ability of youth organizing groups to support an awareness and appreciation of one's own identity has a particularly strong relationship to a host of other social-emotional outcomes. Research shows that a positive sense of one's own identity, particularly racial and ethnic identity, is associated with better social interactions, higher self-esteem, stronger academic outcomes, and fewer problems with drugs and alcohol.²⁸

Moreover, as the United States becomes increasingly diverse, the ability to understand the experiences of people of different backgrounds, to communicate with them effectively, and to build cross-cultural relationships is essential both to individual and collective well-being and represents an important dimension of social-emotional learning.

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Through their engagement with youth organizing, young people develop **strong relationships with adults, as well as with their peers**. Embedded in these relationships are teamwork, mutual support, and the ability to communicate effectively. Seventy-three percent of youth in the Building Healthy Communities cohort indicated that their involvement

in organizing improved their ability to communicate with others “some” or “a lot.”²⁹

Strong relationships with youth organizing staff, many of whom are people of color as well and have themselves come up through the organization, meant that young people viewed staff as valuable mentors, who could provide culturally relevant support and advice.³⁰ In the Building Healthy Communities sample of more than 1,300 youth, 90 percent of young people indicated that being involved in organizing helped them develop a trusting relationship with a mentor.³¹ Tylo James, a youth organizing alumnus of **Community Coalition** in Los Angeles, affirms this sense of mentorship. She shares, “The secret sauce is folks who care. Folks who dedicate their lives to this, who validate people’s experiences, who are committed to this work and the communities they serve.”

In addition, Watts and his colleagues found that young people develop **empathy and interpersonal skills** by working collaboratively with their peers. This often translated into a strong sense of community with peers and staff, with young people commonly describing their experience in familial terms. Lành, a member of **VAYLA** in New Orleans, states, “That’s my family now... I’ve never, ever been in a place where... so many students [are] so passionate about the same thing.” Research shows a statistically significant predictive relationship between this sense of community and other positive outcomes, such as feeling hopeful about the future.³²

Positive Academic and Educational Outcomes

Youth organizing groups generally do not “cream” the best students. Rather, they are intentional about recruiting a range of students, including those who may not be performing well academically. The experience of a member of South Central Youth Empowered thru Action, the youth organizing arm of Community Coalition, is typical. Because his siblings had dropped out and because he struggled in school as well, he observes, “When I started high school, it was kind of like a bet to see when I was going to dropout.”³³ Through his involvement with Community Coalition, however, he became engaged in his education and graduated from high school.

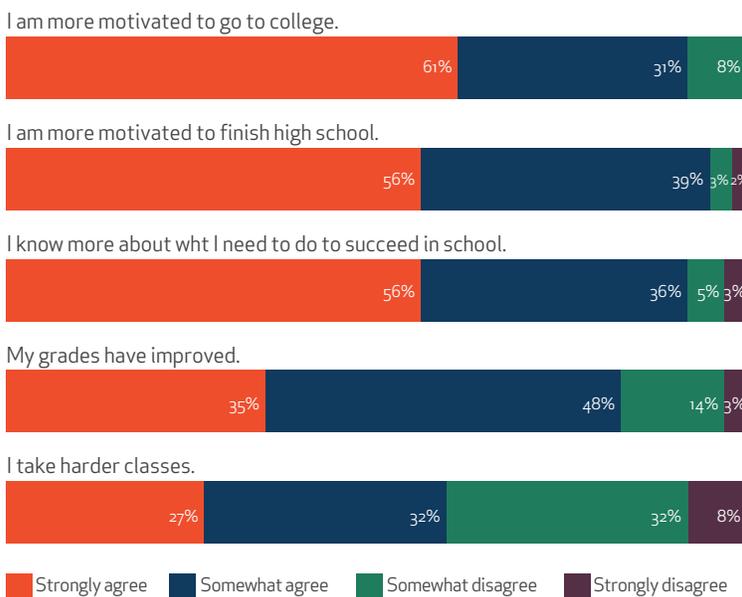
Data show that young people involved in organizing have positive academic and educational outcomes, due in large part to the academic supports groups provide. In addition, young people involved in campaigns for educational justice often start to think more critically about their own academic trajectories.

ACADEMIC MOTIVATION AND EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

In Shah’s survey of members from three youth organizing groups, 95 percent of students reported they were more motivated to finish high school because of their involvement in youth organizing and 92 percent said they were more motivated to attend college. Moreover, 74 percent of youth in the sample indicated they expected to finish college and/or earn a post-graduate degree, substantially higher than comparable national samples of Black and Latino youth. A majority (83 percent) indicated their engagement in organizing led to improved grades.³⁴

Impact Of Involvement On Academic Engagement

Because of my involvement in this organization...



Source: Shah, S. (2011). *Building Transformative Youth Leadership: Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing*.

Similarly, Terriquez found that 77 percent of youth organizing members in California said involvement in organizing improved their grades “some” or “a lot.”³⁵

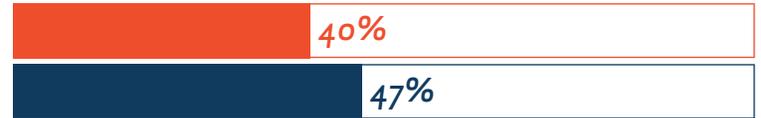
COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

Due to lack of information and support, aspirations don’t always translate into reality, particularly when young people are attending schools with over-extended guidance counselors, or no guidance counselors at all. Youth organizing helps to fill this gap. Indeed, 81 percent of young people in Terriquez’s sample said they learned about college or career options through their involvement in youth organizing.³⁶

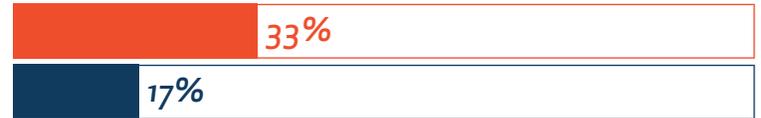
Rogers and Terriquez found that youth organizing alumni were significantly more likely to attend a four-year college, compared to youth from similar backgrounds (33 percent versus 17 percent). Moreover, youth organizing alumni were more likely to attend a selective four-year college (Ivy League, University of California, or other highly ranked institutions) (17 percent versus 5 percent).³⁷

Academic Outcomes For Youth Organizing Alumni And Comparable Peers

Predicted Probability of Enrolling in Community College



Predicted Probability of Enrolling in CSU or Similar



Predicted Probability of Enrolling in Selective 4-Year College



Legend: Youth Organizing Alumni (orange), Youth from Similar Backgrounds (dark blue)

Source: Rogers, J. & Terriquez, V. (2013). *Learning to Lead: The Impact of Youth Organizing and the Educational and Civic Trajectories of Low-Income Youth*.

Rogers and Terriquez attribute these outcomes to several factors, including: the intentional development of academic skills and intellectual interests, via homework support, political education, and research on campaign issues; access to culturally relevant college guidance and mentoring, particularly from staff of color who had navigated similar experiences; and an understanding of how one’s own educational trajectory connects to a broader agenda for community empowerment.³⁸

CRITICAL THINKING

Consistent with these findings, youth organizing promotes critical thinking and analysis skills more broadly. Critical thinking skills are essential in the knowledge economy and central to the Common Core State Standards for successful student learning. Moreover, as young people learn to analyze sources of information, rather than accepting

them at face value, they learn the importance of asking critical questions, a skill that is increasingly important in an era of proliferating information. Participation in youth organizing builds these skills through political education, as well as the use of data and research.

Through political education, young people learn to analyze the political and social structures that impact their lives and begin to ask critical questions about disparities and inequities. An alumnus of **Asian Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL)** shares, “We watch documentaries and then read articles about what’s going on in the world. It’s like receiving all this information that isn’t given to us at school. That are so many injustices and AYPAL has educated us on what’s happening around the world.”³⁹

Youth organizing also exposes young people to data and research methods, a key mechanism through which they develop critical thinking and analysis skills. As young people engage in campaigns, it is common for them to collect data about conditions in their schools and communities and use that data to craft their case for policy change. They may also look critically at policy options and consider pros and cons before making recommendations. For example, young people at **Padres & Jóvenes Unidos** in Denver created an **Accountability Report Card** and other policy briefs to advance their agenda.⁴⁰

Importantly, the brand of critical thinking developed through involvement in youth organizing is associated with the notion of critical consciousness, that is, a process of understanding and challenging the systems that affect the lives of young people. Youth organizing helps young people understand their experiences, both on an individual and community level through an analysis of dynamics such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. Youth organizing is a unique form of youth development that acknowledges these issues and provides young people with the tools for emotional growth through taking direct action to oppose these forces.⁴¹



Deep and Sustained Community and Civic Engagement

In the past several decades, scholars have documented diminishing civic engagement, especially among young people. Moreover, researchers have noted a civic learning opportunity gap – data show that Black and Latino youth and students from low-income backgrounds have less access to civic learning and conversations.⁴²

Indeed, many concepts related to social justice were new to youth in organizing groups, suggesting that youth organizing settings offer an opportunity for youth to engage deeply in civic and political dialogue.⁴³ As one student observes, “If it weren’t for my involvement, I probably wouldn’t have thought about politics or social justice and changing my community in that particular way.”⁴⁴

“If it weren’t for my involvement, I probably wouldn’t have thought about politics or social justice and changing my community in that particular way.”

This quote underscores the ways in which youth organizing is an especially potent means of engaging young people in civic life. Through their involvement, young people gain deep exposure to the political process, more so than traditional civics courses in school or after-school civics programs. Most young people involved in organizing say their involvement helps them understand not only the basics of how government works, but the mechanics of how to engage public officials, change policy, and participate in collective action. Youth organizing does this by giving young people real opportunities for leadership, from researching community problems to testifying before policymakers.⁴⁵

In an era where political and cultural divides seem to be growing by the minute, there is renewed interest in fostering civic and community engagement and ensuring that all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, are active participants in a vibrant democracy.

CIVICS EDUCATION

As a precursor to civic engagement, it is important to have a basic understanding of how democracy functions. In Terriquez’s survey of young people, 82 percent indicated they had learned more about how government decisions impact their community.⁴⁶

CAPACITY FOR CIVIC ACTION

Through political education, young people involved in organizing become more aware of democratic processes and the ways in which government and institutions affect their lives and communities. By working on

specific issues of concern to them, 84 percent of youth in Terriquez’s survey said they learned how to impact policy “a lot” or “some,” while 76 percent said they learned how to organize others for campaigns “a lot” or “some.”⁴⁷

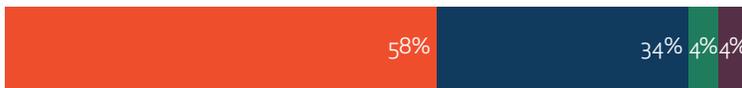
Similarly, Watts and his colleagues found a statistically significant correlation between critical thinking on sociopolitical issues and feeling more capable as a civic actor ($r = .46$). Young people demonstrated their capacity as civic actors by using evidence-based policy arguments and raising public awareness of their issues through a variety of artistic and digital media, such as videography, Twitter, visual art, and performance.⁴⁸

FUTURE COMMUNITY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Looking ahead to the future, Shah found that almost all young people involved in organizing expressed a desire to stay involved in activism (94 percent), while 38 percent indicated they would consider running for public office.⁴⁹ Similarly, Watts and his research team found a strong positive correlation ($r = .30$) between young people’s critical thinking skills related to socio-political development and their expectation that they would be civically engaged five years later.⁵⁰

Future Plans

I plan to learn more about politics in the future.



I plan to stay involved in activism in the future.



I plan to find a job in organizing in the future.



I plan to run for political office in the future.



Very Likely Somewhat Likely Not at all Likely Don't Know/Not Sure

Source: Shah, S. (2011). *Building Transformative Youth Leadership: Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing*.

Research on young organizing alumni shows that these intentions bear out. Alumni were more likely to belong to a political organization (36 percent versus 5 percent) or a community based organization (49 percent versus 20 percent) and more likely to take on leadership roles in these organizations. They are more likely to volunteer (55 percent versus 29 percent) and feel that there are issues in their community that they care deeply about (80 percent versus 44 percent). Moreover, alumni are more likely to have worked on an issue affecting their community, shared their perspective on social/political issues online, participated in protest or rally, and registered to vote.⁵¹

Civic Engagement of Youth Organizing Alumni

Youth Organizing Alumni CA General Population Low-Income Young Adults

Organizational Membership and Participation			
Belongs to an organization	56%	30%	23%
Belongs to a school-sponsored organization	29%	15%	9%
Belongs to a religious organization	8%	11%	10%
Belongs to a community-based organization	49%	20%	16%
Belongs to a political organization	36%	5%	4%
Helps makes decisions for an organization	45%	19%	15%

Volunteering: How often have you volunteered in the last 12 months?			
Very often	25%	10%	9%
Somewhat often	30%	19%	17%
Not very often	15%	16%	12%
Rarely	1%	1%	1%
Did not volunteer	29%	54%	61%

Civic Beliefs: Percentage responding with “Strongly Agree”			
There are issues in your community that you care deeply about	80%	44%	40%
You believe you can make a difference in your community	68%	42%	37%
You feel connected to others working to improve society	55%	33%	32%
In the USA everyone has an equal chance to succeed	19%	44%	54%

Civic Actions Completed within the Last Year			
Worked on issue affecting own community	65%	27%	21%
Shared perspective on social or political issue online	56%	30%	24%
Participated in a protest or rally	51%	13%	12%
Registered to vote	75%	68%	61%

Source: Rogers, J. & Terriquez, V. (2013). *Learning to Lead: The Impact of Youth Organizing and the Educational and Civic Trajectories of Low-Income Youth*.

Coming Soon

Supported by the William T. Grant Foundation, a forthcoming study from New York University’s Metro Center and the University of Michigan will follow two cohorts of 250 youth organizing participants over several years and examine relationships between youth organizing, critical consciousness, and school engagement. Findings will inform broader efforts to support critical consciousness development in school and out-of-school settings as strategies to reduce inequality.

Recommendations and Resources



The findings of the research highlighted in this report define a strong case for the efficacy of youth organizing as a best practice for supporting the holistic development of low-income young people and young people of color.

Thus, FCYO offers the following specific recommendations to funders and leaders committed to improving outcomes for young people:

Invest in youth organizing as a fundamental piece of a successful youth development strategy.

Research shows that youth organizing is a highly effective strategy for supporting the holistic development of low-income young people and young people of color, that it reaches young people that other approaches often do not, and that there are unique benefits for young people engaging in collective action for systemic change. However, the majority of youth development funding goes to strategies situated at the earlier stages of the youth engagement continuum. For too long, youth development funders and youth organizing practitioners have missed the opportunity to work together to achieve their common goals simply because they use different terminology to describe their shared objectives. To create a more inclusive and robust ecosystem of supports for young people's success, funders should invest in youth organizing as a proven strategy for reaching young people who may be unlikely to participate in traditional youth development activities. Similarly, youth organizing funders should help youth organizing groups to articulate their approach in ways that a broader range of funders will recognize.

Invest in approaches that connect individual and community transformation.

While some exceptional young people will succeed despite adverse conditions, the positive emotional, physical, and intellectual development of young people is inextricably linked to the quality of their schools and the health of their communities. Thus, funders focused on positive youth development should invest in programs that nurture communities and neighborhood ecosystems, as well as young people themselves. Youth organizing is a powerful strategy and a best practice because it attends not only to individual development, but also to structural forces that impact the well-being of low-income young people and young people of color. In this way youth organizing represents an investment with multiple levels of return.

Focus support on the groups committed to aligning their work with recognized best practices in youth organizing.

Over the past twenty years, youth organizing has developed into a field with identifiable practices that support individual development and social change goals. Taken together, these practices create a unique environment in which young people place themselves in a cultural context and experience their own agency and worth. Because this work requires a commitment to the leadership and power of young people as a basis for all organizational decisions, efforts to learn from and increase the prevalence of youth organizing practices should focus on supporting the groups that have already demonstrated the ability to authentically engage young people.

Expand conceptual frameworks on youth development to incorporate aspects of youth organizing as essential components.

The research included here shows that engaging young people in collective action to create change in their communities offers long-term benefits that are especially relevant for low-income young people and young people of color. Critical consciousness, collective agency, transforming emotions into constructive actions, and linking individual and community transformation are among the elements that should be included as essential components of healthy youth development. Support for additional research is needed to increase our understanding of how these practices support young people and the long-term benefits that result from engagement.

Endnotes

- 1 For more of J-Mo's story, visit <https://fcyo.atavist.com/j-mo>.
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- 13 Shah, S. (2011). *Building Transformative Leadership: Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing*. New York: NY: Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.
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- 19 Kautz, T., Heckman, J., Diris, R., ter Weel, B., & Borghans, L. (2014). *Fostering and Measuring Skills: Improving Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Skills to Promote Lifetime Success*. NBER Working Paper No. 20749.
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- 24 Rogers & Terriquez (2013).
- 25 To read more of Jessica's story, visit <https://fcyo.atavist.com/jessica>
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- 48 Watts, et al. (2017).
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