

2025 NATIONAL YOUTH ORGANIZING FIELD SCAN

Snapshot 4:

From Reactive to Rooted
– Building Campaigns for
Transformative Change



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**"WHAT CAN WE DO TODAY SO THAT TOMORROW WE
CAN DO WHAT WE ARE UNABLE TO DO TODAY?"**

- PAULO FREIRE



CAMPAIGNS ARE HOW MOVEMENTS BUILD POWER THAT LASTS

Transformative change doesn't happen all at once. Instead, it is built step by step through a series of strategic fights that expand what is possible.

In the youth organizing field, campaigns are those steps.

At their strongest, campaigns are the mechanism through which organizations translate their vision into practice — where power is built, exercised, tested, and grown. Each campaign is simultaneously a contest over immediate conditions and a deliberate step in a longer trajectory: developing leaders, expanding organized bases, shifting the balance of power, and laying the groundwork for what comes next.

History's most transformative movements have approached campaigns in precisely this way.

In the early 20th-century, the fight for the eight-hour workday was not simply a demand for shorter hours. It was part of a broader project to reorganize society around the needs of working people. Labor organizers understood each strike, boycott, and workplace campaign as a coordinated step toward broader change — not isolated struggles for a specific group,

but cumulative fights in service of the common good. Their campaigns unfolded over decades, across industries and geographies, strengthened through alliances that linked workplace struggles to broader demands for social justice.

Decades later, the civil rights movement's young leaders took a similar approach as they waged tightly coordinated, strategically sequenced campaigns designed to win more than just specific concessions — they were built to drive national confrontations that could unlock something bigger. From lunch-counter sit-ins to Freedom Rides, each campaign was interconnected, rooted in base-building, and carried out alongside alliances spanning labor, faith institutions, and national civil rights organizations. Ultimately, their power lay not only in the actions themselves, but in how those actions accumulated over time.

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In both examples, while everyday people organized, those in power counter-organized, reasserting their power through their own alliances, lockouts, and violence. The campaigns had to quickly react to changing conditions while holding steadfast to their long-term vision.

The throughline is clear: campaigns were not engaged as standalone efforts. They were aligned with long-term strategy, connected across issues and sectors, and embedded within broader alliances capable of wielding power at scale, all of which created infrastructure that allowed for steadiness during turbulent fights.

In movement today, that level of coherence is less consistent.

We are living through an era of profound upheaval, as racial patriarchal capitalism struggles to retain its long-standing hold as the United States' system of governance. Wide swaths of the population are rising up as social, economic, political, and environmental crises compound in frequency, scope, and scale. In this context, there is no shortage of issues to address, and the youth organizing field persists at the frontlines. Over the past decade, hundreds of thousands of young people have poured into the streets, calling for racial justice and an end to police violence, LGBTQ rights, action to end gun violence, and Palestinian liberation. Young leaders are helping

to build a 21st-century labor movement, leading unionization efforts nationwide. They are helping the climate justice movement and repeatedly proving a decisive electorate, cycle after cycle. Across the youth and intergenerational organizing field, political energy is high, participation is widespread, and campaigns are ambitious.

Yet across FCYO's 2025 Field Scan, youth organizers surface a steady theme: all of this energy, excitement, and movement is not translating into the accumulated broad-based power that structural change requires.

Too many of today's campaigns operate in relative isolation — disconnected from shared long-term strategy, siloed by issue area, or constrained by short-term timelines. As they do this work, youth organizing groups navigate continuous pressure to respond rapidly to emerging crises or demonstrate quick wins for funders, making reactive campaigns more likely than strategic ones. The challenge facing today's field, then, is not creating more campaigns. It is designing them to build power over time.

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WHAT EXACTLY IS A CAMPAIGN?

If base-building is the foundation of long-term power-building, then campaigns are the vehicle that activates, leverages, and transforms that people power into lasting, structural change. Campaigns are where organizations engage people, develop members' skills, and exercise collective power to win concrete victories that both improve people's lives and build their capacity to take on higher levels of struggle.

Campaigns require much more than selecting an issue. Instead, a campaign is determined and implemented through a dynamic process that engages every element of an organization's base and leadership in its execution.

How do you run a campaign?

1. Start with the big picture: your long-term strategic orientation. What are you ultimately trying to win?
2. Identify campaign stepping stones: what's needed to get to your long-term vision?
3. Conduct a situational analysis and assess your conditions and opportunities.
4. Set a campaign strategy, including concrete and achievable short- and long-term objectives and a clear timeline.
5. Analyze the landscape and do a power map to identify your targets and allies.
6. Determine the tactics that best align with your campaign strategy (i.e., direct action, march, rally, letter writing, public testimony).
7. Develop messaging that will mobilize your base and persuade key audiences.
8. Evaluate and re-evaluate strategies.

What is the role of networks, coalitions, and alliances?

Campaigns are an expression of power, meant to compel decisionmakers to take the action necessary to change communities' material conditions. They are often won — or lost — based on the strength of one's allies, as no single organization or constituency can win transformative change on its own. For this reason, organizations collaborate in many ways to strengthen their collective work, taking different forms based on the overarching aim:

- Strategic alliances: Long-term alliances uniting different constituencies and organizations around a shared strategy for social transformation.
- Tactical alliances: Short-term alliances with organizations that may not share most interests, but are united around a specific broader goal.
- Networks: Often longer-term, with the purpose of information and skill-sharing.
- Coalitions: Often temporary, formed to achieve specific campaign goals.



As *Snapshot 3: From Surge to Structure — Building a Base That Holds* documents, the youth organizing field has made incredible strides in developing strong base-building practices, recruiting and developing powerful bases of youth and adult members. But base-building alone does not produce change. Power must be exercised, and campaigns are the vehicle through which that happens. In *Snapshot 4: From Reactive to Rooted — Building Campaigns for Transformative Change*, we examine how youth organizing groups are working to translate people power into a force capable of shaping lasting change, designing and executing campaigns that can win, and engaging in the networks, coalitions, and alliances necessary to scale those wins, both now and for the long-term.



BREADTH WITHOUT DIRECTION IS JUST ACTIVITY



Campaigns are where strategy becomes action. When campaigns are pointed in a shared strategic direction, that action can compel measurable shifts in power.

YOUTH ORGANIZING HAS EXPANDED ITS TERRAIN – AND ITS POLITICAL IMAGINATION

As a whole, the youth organizing field demonstrates both a commitment to several long-standing key issue areas alongside a steady widening of what counts as a “youth issue.” Rather than narrowing over time, campaigns are increasingly tracking the full range of systems shaping young people’s lives, including how those systems are growing more and more interconnected over time.

Education justice remains the most prominent campaign focus in youth organizing, with 87% of organizations reporting work in this area, particularly around racial justice in schools. This reflects both the enduring role of education as both a primary site of young people’s lived experience and a key launchpoint for youth political formation. At the same time, organizations are actively building across issue areas rather than staying confined within them. For example, while nearly one-third lead campaigns on immigration justice, over half support immigration campaigns led by others. Similar patterns of solidarity-based collaboration appear across criminal justice, gender justice, LGBTQ+ justice, and workers’ rights, showing

Climate and environmental justice, from

24% → 37%
in 2020 in 2025

Housing justice, from

21% → 32%
in 2020 in 2025

Economic justice and workers’ rights, from

12% → 31%
in 2020 in 2025

a field where cross-issue work is not exceptional but a routine feature of its practice.

Alongside this collaboration, the field is also expanding into new terrains of struggle, particularly those that directly shape the material conditions shaping young people’s everyday lives. For example, compared to prior field scans, organizations report increased engagement in climate justice, housing justice, and labor rights campaigns. These shifts should not be viewed as a departure from traditional youth organizing concerns, but instead a broadening of what young people themselves are viewing as urgent, and what organizations are organizing around as a result.

In focus groups, organizations shared their insights on these shifts, discussing how broader conditions such as economic precarity and displacement are



not only impacting their lives, but their ability to even organize: “The challenge around youth organizing...is whether [youth] can afford to stay in their community. Young people are already thinking about leaving when they start high school because they know that in a couple of years, they’re not going to be able to afford to live outside of their family’s home.” Another added, “Gentrification is a huge strike against our ability to build bases that are able to stay in place. It’s extra hard to build localized movements when people don’t have a fighting chance.” Others pointed to how these

conditions are generating political urgency among young people themselves. As one organizer put it, young people are “dealing with extreme poverty and economic crisis,” and increasingly “care about housing injustices, and fighting being evicted.”

Taken together, these shifts show a field widening its frame — not abandoning core issue areas, but situating them within a sharper understanding of the social, economic, and political conditions that structure young people’s lives and shape their ability to organize in the first place.

Campaign Issue Areas



At the same time, wider issue coverage does not automatically produce strategic coherence, and organizations continue to navigate how to connect growing breadth into shared direction. As organizers emphasize, campaigns often emerge in response to immediate political conditions, reflecting the field's proximity to community need. Yet organizers also name the opportunity to build stronger connective tissue between issue areas. As one asked, "How can we motivate youth to really look at organizing in the contextual way of movement-building versus issue-based organizing?"

The field, in this sense, is holding two realities at once: growing breadth in what it is fighting for, and the ongoing work of ensuring those fights connect.

Organizers are already sensing this shift. As one put it, the work is "getting people to think beyond issue-based organizing to what does actual power look like and what are the limits of the power that young people can build." That includes managing expectations honestly: "Look, this is how far we can get. Y'all took it a notch further. Now, we need to figure out how we build on top of that" — rather than treating any single campaign as an endpoint.



A LONG-TERM STRATEGIC ORIENTATION IS WHAT SEPARATES A FIGHT FROM A WIN

Campaigns sit at a critical juncture in the organizing ecosystem. They are where a base stops being an idea — where members' participation is converted into social power and strategy is tested against real-world conditions. They are also where the limits of strategy become visible most quickly, particularly when campaigns are shaped by immediate conditions without being clearly tethered to a longer-term theory of how power accumulates over time.

This is where a long-term strategic orientation becomes decisive. As Snapshot 3 outlines, a long-term strategic orientation is not simply a vision; it is the logic that connects present-day fights to a longer arc of transformation. It clarifies what an organization is building toward and shapes how each campaign functions as part of that build — what it is meant to achieve, develop, and make possible next.

Across the field, 83% of youth organizing groups report having a long-term strategic orientation guiding their work. Beyond shaping day-to-day decisions, that clarity becomes critical in moments of heightened urgency when organizations are pulled toward rapid response or opportunities that emerge quickly and publicly. A clear strategic orientation steadies that pull, not by slowing engagement but by clarifying direction



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— helping groups determine which openings actually strengthen their long-term trajectory and which risk diverting their time and resources away from it.

As a whole, the field's ambitions are high. Most organizations aim to either transform our current social, economic, and political system (65%) or uproot it and build a new one (19%). Yet despite this northstar, most groups still operate within short planning horizons: most organizations plan only one to five years ahead (61%), and just 10% plan ten or more years into the future.² There are many reasons for this beyond an organization's vision for change, including funding timelines, election cycles, and the ability to project

²For more on organizations' long-term strategic orientations, see Snapshot 3.

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organizational capacities. Given that systems transformation unfolds over decades, however, shorter planning timelines can often lead to campaigns that are either reactive or too episodic to accumulate power across cycles of struggle.

One organization described how it experienced this tension directly during the uprisings following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Like many groups, they initially moved into rapid response mobilizations, a role they had played before. However, they saw an opening to channel popular energy to advance a campaign on school funding, a demand aligned with their long-term goals to materially change the conditions of their community. The decision to engage was straightforward, but the harder questions emerged in execution. As they began the campaign, they realized there were gaps in the power

analysis underlying their strategy that had led them to misidentify their allies and targets. As one organizer reflected, they had oriented toward their local Board of Education as a primary ally, only to realize that assumption had undermined their leverage. "We were just sitting there kicking ourselves because we knew [in the end they would not support us]" they said. "It made it clear we needed a different approach."

The lesson was structural, not tactical. Without a clear power analysis guiding their work, in seeking to seize an immediate opportunity, their campaign risked reinforcing the very systems it was designed to challenge. That realization ultimately motivated the organization to sharpen their strategic orientation, leading them to build stronger alignment with local allies such as teachers unions and other forces whose interests more closely aligned with their base.



CAMPAIGNS WIN THROUGH ESCALATION, NOT JUST ENGAGEMENT



Campaigns are an expression of power and require both outside pressure and inside leverage.

CAMPAIGN ACTIVITIES PLAY DISTINCT ROLES IN POWER-BUILDING

Campaigns are not defined by a single action or tactic. Instead, they are intentional processes of coordinated activity designed to build, demonstrate, and apply power over time. Each tactic plays a distinct role in the process: some build participation and develop leadership, others signal legitimacy and expand public support, and others apply direct pressure on decision-makers. To conduct effective campaigns requires youth organizing groups to be clear on how each tactic functions individually and how they work together.

Across the 2025 Field Scan, organizations report using a wide range of campaign activities, with consistent engagement in fundamental activities such as community outreach, attending town hall meetings and other public forums, and meeting with legislators or decision-makers. More than three-fourths also incorporate narrative and communications components in their campaigns, including storytelling, community-based research, and digital organizing.

Campaign Activities Reported By Organizations



This breadth is a real advancement, as this sort of dynamism requires both skilled organizers and organizational strength and agility. Organizations are not only engaging young people in campaigns, but doing so through multiple entry points that build participation, develop political analysis, and expand reach.

CAMPAIGNS REQUIRE A CONTINUAL ESCALATION OF PRESSURE

The challenge, then, is not simply expanding the range of activities, but ensuring they are enacted with clarity of purpose and sequenced in ways that build toward desired outcomes.

Take the example of a youth organizing group who decides to launch a climate justice campaign following years of toxic runoff in their community. Staging a school-walk out or writing letters to a legislator may briefly raise awareness, but on their own are unlikely to achieve a win. Instead, the organization begins by building its case: conducting research with students on the presence of toxins in their community, tabling at community events, distributing flyers, and meeting with sympathetic representatives. It then sharpens its targets, running a media campaign that highlights

the corporate actors responsible for the issue and engaging local press to cover a town hall where students and community members deliver testimony and issue demands. Absent a satisfactory response, the organization escalates: staging an action outside a shareholder meeting, joining with local representatives and allied organizations to pursue legal accountability, and attending legislative sessions to present proposed policy solutions.

This is the escalatory logic of campaigns: to engage and strategically leverage the collective power of one's base in ways that make it impossible for decision-makers to ignore a community's demands for change.

The youth organizing field shows strong and consistent engagement in foundational campaign activities. A majority of organizations report frequent community outreach, including meetings, tabling, and workshops (70% at least once per month) as well as direct constituent engagement such as door-knocking, phone banking, and one-on-one conversations (57% at least once per month). These are essential for building a base and sustaining participation over time.

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Campaign Activities	12+ times a year	6-12 times a year	2-5 times a year	Once a year
Community outreach	70%	18%	10%	2%
Direct constituent mobilization	57%	14%	16%	6%
Digital organizing	38%	26%	25%	9%
Storytelling	38%	31%	27%	5%
Writing letters/calling legislators or decision-makers	32%	28%	34%	4%
Attending town hall meetings, forums, and public hearings	27%	21%	44%	6%
Meetings with legislators or decision-makers	27%	28%	36%	6%
News media	25%	29%	33%	10%
Integrated voter engagement	24%	18%	25%	15%
Community-based research	15%	13%	34%	26%
Performance-based direct action	13%	13%	35%	20%
Mass mobilizations	13%	16%	56%	11%
Boycotts	12%	4%	31%	19%
Hosting town hall meetings, forums, and public hearings	12%	25%	41%	12%

However, a key distinction emerges between activities that build engagement and activities that apply pressure on campaign targets. While youth organizing groups demonstrate strong capacity in the former, they report far less frequent use of the latter, with legislative pressure, engagement with news media, performance-based direct action, and mass mobilization used much more intermittently. The pattern is understandable: organizations can face real consequences for challenging those on whose resources they depend. In addition, in the context of heightened political polarization, youth organizers themselves may encounter difficult responses as they represent their

communities' interests. For example, as one long-time organizer explained, the environment has shifted when youth testify in front of their lawmakers; whereas previously they might have to wrestle with their viewpoints and actions being dismissed, they are now more frequently met with outright scorn and derision. Additionally, youth organizers engaged in direct actions must often consider their physical safety as popular mobilizations have been met with a militarized police force and, particularly in the case of organizing work around Palestinian solidarity, a level of risk to their academic and professional futures.

Yet without the ability to progress from engagement to pressure, campaigns risk plateauing, generating visibility without converting that participation into leverage. One organizer named this directly: many in the field still view youth organizing as “inspiring young people to talk about issues” rather than building their capacity to shift the balance of power in their communities. Again, this is not only a question of campaign tactics, but of how organizations understand those tactics’ strategic purpose within a campaign. Where campaigns are structured as escalating systems of pressure, tactics are chosen and sequenced with intention. However, when that structure is less defined, tactics can become disconnected, and campaigns can lose momentum over time.

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THE PULL OF RAPID RESPONSE AND MASS MOBILIZATIONS

In the absence of strong campaign structure, youth organizing groups are often pulled into rapid response work, particularly in today's context of frequent and overlapping crises. As noted in Snapshot 3, organizations report spending nearly equal staff time on campaigns (24%) and rapid response (23%), signaling how easily crisis moments can displace structured campaign plans.

How and whether to engage in rapid response work is an urgent question among the field. It is politically important: given the pace of mass mobilizations over the past decade, it is often where politicization begins, bringing large numbers of young people into political life and shaping their understanding of the world. But it is structurally different from campaigning: it is reactive rather than strategic, immediate rather than cumulative. One organizer described it as “ambulance chasing” — moments of crisis that absorb energy but do not inherently build long-term leverage.

As one organizer put it, “Our task is to convert [those moments] to organizing.”

At the same time, these crisis moments also function as important stress tests, exposing gaps in strategy, clarifying organizational priorities, and creating opportunities to refine decision-making.

Several organizations described how they have begun to navigate this tension more intentionally. One group, reflecting on recent uprisings, noted that the absence of a clear strategic framework led them to say yes to nearly every request for action. “We had absolutely no rubric for what we were saying yes or no to,” one organizer said. “We just had this nebulous idea of what our priority issues were... and if it somewhat fell in between those things, I felt like, ‘Oh, maybe we should say yes.’” In response, they drafted points of unity and a decision-making rubric for crisis moments. They are also redefining their constituency and their

priority issues, all to keep their decisions coherent. Since then, they report significant improvement in their capacity and effectiveness.

Another organization described a similar shift. For years, crisis response had effectively become their primary role. “All it took was an email about something that seemed politically aligned for us to agree to join a coalition,” one organizer said. As a result, they continued, “We were really tired. We were doing more than we ever had, but without a coherent strategy, we were not able to hold on to our victories, and it often felt like we were fighting the same fights year after year.” Developing a clearer long-term vision and a deeper understanding of the organizing terrain gave them the ability to make more disciplined decisions about where to invest their energy. As one organizer put it, they now have “the ability to discern what it is that is going to take us where we need to go — and then just do that.”

Ultimately, rapid response can activate people, but only strategy turns that activation into power. Without clear alignment to long-term goals, organizations risk being driven by urgency rather than building toward transformation. With it, they can engage crisis moments in ways that strengthen — rather than derail — their campaigns.



NETWORKS, COALITIONS, AND ALLIANCES ARE ESSENTIAL POWER- BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE



Networks, coalitions, and alliances are not about collaboration for collaboration's sake — they are the infrastructure required to scale power beyond a single organization

COLLABORATION IS ROUTINE, BUT SHARED STRATEGY IS NOT

No single organization can win transformative change all on its own. While campaigns originate within an organization's base, their ability to advance structural change depends on whether that base can connect to broader networks of organized people power.

The 2025 Field Scan reflects a long-standing feature of the youth organizing field: collaboration is not incidental — it is routine practice. Organizations consistently organize across issue areas, generations, and organizational boundaries, both leading campaigns and supporting campaigns led by others. As one organizer put it, "It seems like there's a lot more of a desire for intramovement coordinating in this moment. People really want to work together."

Networks, coalitions, and alliances are one of the main ways this coordination happens. Nearly all organizations (96%) report participating in networks, coalitions, or alliances, with most of this infrastructure concentrated at the local (82%) and statewide (81%) level. This pattern points to a field that is well-developed horizontally, even as national alignment remains less consistent.

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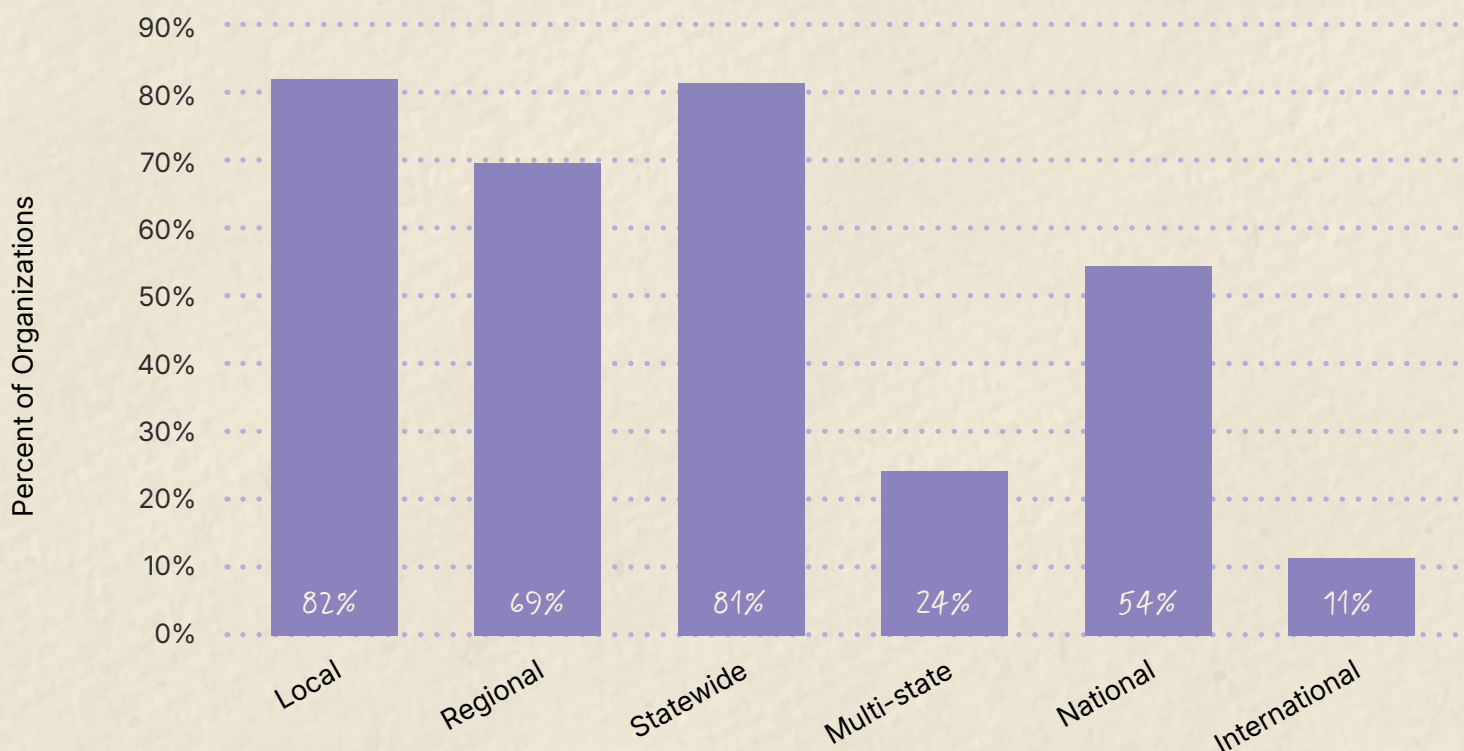
participate at the local level

81%

participate at the statewide level



Geographic Focus of Networks, Coalitions, Alliances



Where these collaborative structures are most effective, they do more than coordinate campaigns — they create pipelines of political development across organizations, connecting young people to sister organizations, distributing skills training and political education across the ecosystem, and creating pathways for alumni to move into roles across organizations and sectors (including advocacy, labor, and legislative spaces). As one organizer explained: “Our coalition partners... know who to send to us when [young people] are asking certain questions or they need certain skills or they’re interested in certain campaigns. And we do the same where we’re pipelining folks out to the appropriate places in the ecosystem, and a lot of our alumni now are in those places.” That alumni network, they continued, has “deepened the ability to build power in different areas.” Over time, the field’s participation in networks, coalitions, and alliances extends youth organizing beyond what a single organization can hold, embedding young people within a broader political infrastructure that strengthens campaigns today and builds long-term capacity across the field.

At the same time, organizers point to real unevenness in how collaboration actually feels on the ground. Some describe strong alignment and shared work, while others describe fragmentation that has grown more pronounced in recent years. As one field leader explained, “It feels like we’re all kind of allies in the fight, not like this is our shared fight or we’re actually in this together.” “We’re so siloed in our own issues... we don’t even do peer exchanges anymore like we used to,” another reflected. Another noted the presence of broad movements but fewer concrete spaces for shared strategy, saying “I know there are a lot of grassroots movements, but there are few other institutions or organizations to look to for support or sharing ideas or to collaborate and build power together.” This gap matters because it suggests that while collaborative mechanisms are widely present, they are not always consistently activated as strategic infrastructure for the field.

SHARED STRATEGIC CLARITY IS WHAT SHAPES THE POWER OF CROSS-ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION

Organizations are clear that networks, coalitions, and alliances are important, but often less clear on how they function strategically. When asked about the most useful support provided through their participation, organizations most often pointed to relationship-building functions, including connecting to strategic partners (85%) and linking with other youth-led or intergenerational groups (77%). Fewer organizations (69%) identified direct campaign support as a primary benefit.

Most Helpful Supports Offered by Networks, Coalitions, and Alliances



Desired Supports from Networks, Coalitions, and Alliances



Organizations also identified training and resource-sharing (particularly fundraising and communications) as key needs, suggesting that these spaces often function more as support networks than as coordinated power-building systems.

Organizers' responses highlight a gap between participation in these formations and clarity about their role in winning campaigns. That ambiguity is reinforced by a frequent lack of distinction between strategic alliances, which align organizations around a shared long-term vision for transformation, and tactical alliances, which engage short-term collaborations to achieve specific goals.

Organizers named this tension more directly in their descriptions of building across organizations. One reflected on the need to move beyond spontaneous coordination toward something more intentional and structured, asking "How do we foster these ad hoc coalitions of folks that are not just, 'No, it has to all be youth and the youth have to do everything,' but actually building something that is more aligned and durable?"

The field's challenge is less about whether collaborative structures exist for organizations — they clearly do — and more about what they are currently designed to hold. In some cases, networks, coalitions, and alliances function as connective tissue that moves people, ideas, and resources across organizations in ways that expand what any one base can do alone. In others, they remain looser forms of coordination that are responding to shared moments without necessarily shaping shared direction. The difference ultimately shows up over time in whether that collaboration results in multiplied activity, or in concentrated capacity that outlasts any singular campaign.

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SHAPING STRATEGY OR FUNDING CAMPAIGNS: THE ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY



Funding structures often shape what campaigns are possible — and how far they can go.

WHEN FUNDING DRIVES STRATEGY, CAMPAIGNS STRUGGLE TO BUILD POWER

If campaigns are the primary vehicle through which organizations build and exercise power, then funding structures play a decisive role in shaping which campaigns are possible — and how far they can go.

Private foundations are by far the largest source of support for youth organizing groups, accounting for an average of 68% of budgets. Government funding (13%) and individual donors (10%) are also meaningful sources of funding across the field, while earned income, corporate giving, and membership dues collectively make up only a small fraction (1–2% each) of groups' budgets on average.

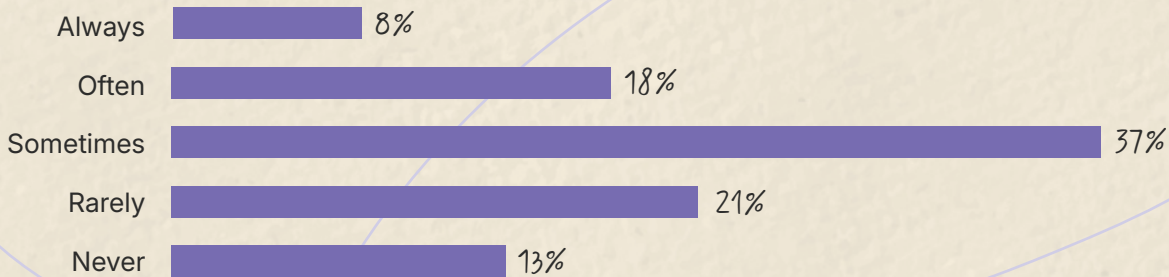
In the 2025 Field Scan, nearly two-thirds of organizations (63%) shared that funding has shaped their strategy and organizing work, including which campaigns they take on. While philanthropy has made critical shifts in recent years to better align its resourcing strategies with long-term change, the sector's traditional emphasis on short-term wins, measurable outcomes, and discrete issue areas can often narrow the scope of campaigns, privileging what can be counted over what builds power. This top-down dynamic can force organizations into reactive positions — scrambling to meet funder expectations or

align with trends, rather than advancing their long-term strategies and being responsive to their communities. As one organizer put it, "All of a sudden we've got organizations getting lots of funding to do work that was decided somewhere else." Some organizers shared that they were pushed into campaigns or coalitions that are not strategically or ideologically aligned with their work and were then held accountable for organizational decisions that fell outside the scope of the grants they received just to keep receiving funding. These experiences leave many organizers feeling that funders are "organizing the organizers" rather than supporting their leadership.

"All of a sudden we've got organizations getting lots of funding to do work that was decided somewhere else."



Frequency of Funder Influence on Organizational Strategy & Campaigns



The consequences are material. When groups are required to align campaigns with funder priorities, campaigns can become fragmented and disjointed from a long-term strategy — functioning less as strategic stepping stones and more as isolated activities designed to meet external expectations. This dynamic is compounded by a broader gap in understanding: 59% of organizations say funders understand their organizing only slightly or moderately well.

This gap reflects a long-standing structural mismatch between how organizing builds power, how philanthropy has been designed to fund it, and how funders are supported to understand it. Campaigns centered on leadership development, base expansion,

59%

of organizations say funders understand their organizing only slightly or moderately well

and long-term power-building are often harder to measure in conventional terms, and have historically been harder to fund as a result, even as they are essential to structural change.



RESOURCING ORGANIZING ON ORGANIZING'S TERMS

Yet organizers are direct about what could shift this dynamic. Beyond multi-year general operating support, organizers cited regular check-ins with funders (82%), greater clarity on their organization's political work (77%), and deeper engagement in organizing strategy conversations (26%) as the types of support they most desired from their funders — supports that would enable them to plan beyond immediate deliverables, invest in long-term campaigns, and build the alliances necessary for structural change.

Philanthropy has begun to move in this direction, with a growing number of funders committing to general operating support, longer grant cycles, and deeper political education about the work they fund. Many organizations also reported receiving meaningful non-monetary support: 80% said funders provided them with capacity-building support, 63% were introduced to additional funders, and over half received rapid response funding or were connected to peer organizations. A few noted a recent shift toward more general operating support, which they described as essential for maintaining stable, strategic operations.

That movement matters and deserves to continue. The question is whether it can move at the pace and scale required to match what the field needs. The implication is straightforward: without continued shifts in how campaigns are funded, the field's ability to build and sustain power remains constrained. Resourcing organizing to align with the true terms of organizing is not a concession to grantees' self interest, but a precondition for the stated social change outcomes the field shares with its funders.

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Desired Support From Funders

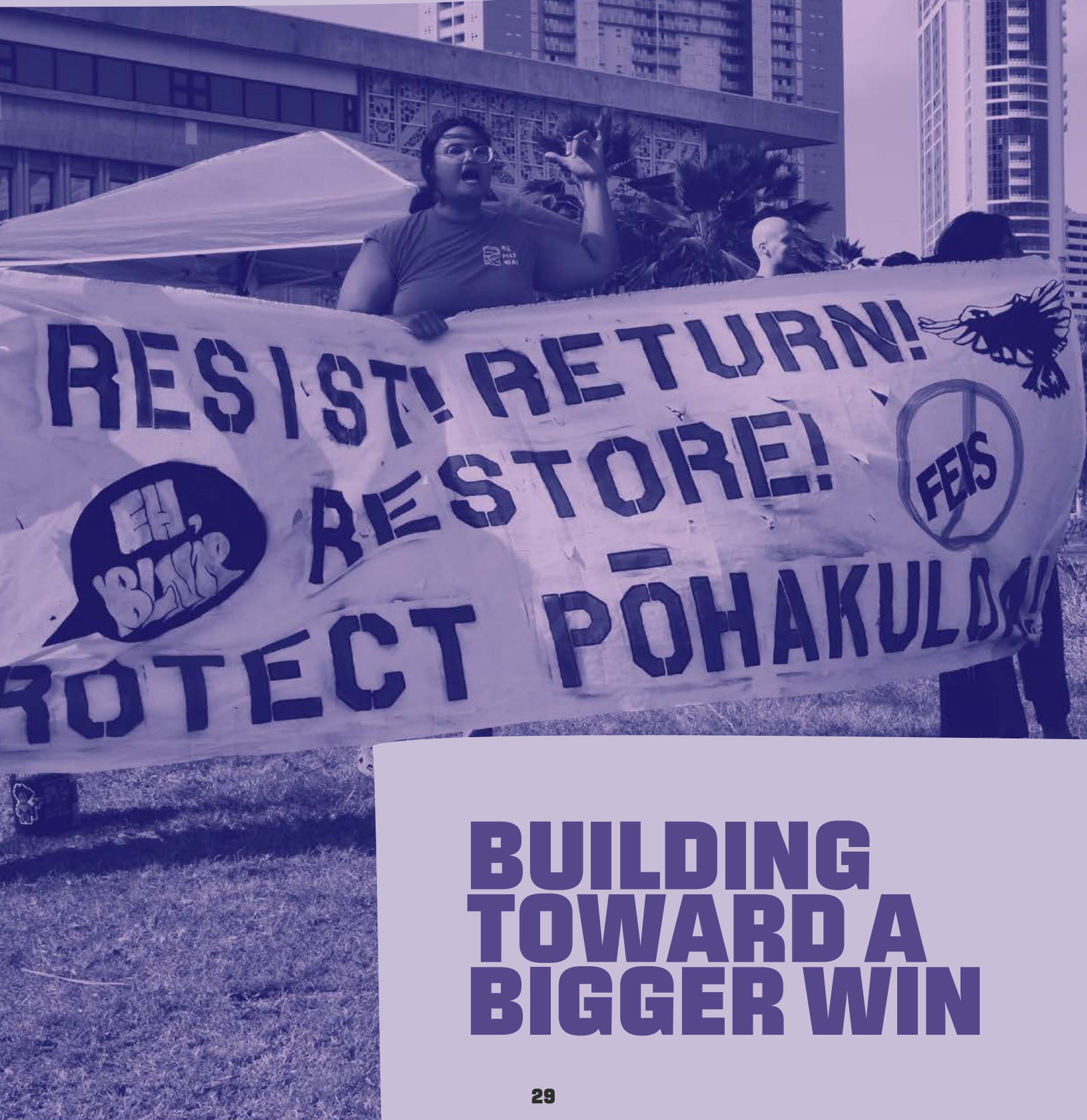
Regular check-ins: **82%**

Greater clarity on their organization's political work: **77%**

Deeper engagement in organizing strategy conversations: **26%**



LOOKING FORWARD:



BUILDING TOWARD A BIGGER WIN

Youth organizing today is working across more issues, more constituencies, and more forms of collaboration than at any point in recent memory. Campaigns stretch from schools to worksites to apartment complexes to city halls and statehouses, from climate to education to immigration, often at the same time. That breadth reflects both the urgency of the conditions young people are living in and their expanding sense of what counts as political struggle.

At its strongest, this work is not fragmented activity — it is a system of practice guided by a long-term strategic orientation that connects leadership development, base-building, campaigns, and alliances into a single arc of power-building. When those elements align, youth organizing groups are able to do much more than respond to crises: they are able to accumulate wins that carry forward.

What youth organizers return to, again and again, is the question of how activity becomes something that holds over time, including the difficult act of translating political energy into political formations that outlast urgency, funding cycles, and moments that rise as quickly as they fall. As this Snapshot underscores, the field's most critical shifts are not necessarily visible in the volume of its activity, but in how organizations are working to structure that activity: tightening how campaigns are selected and ended, building stronger links between members'

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lives and strategic direction, and treating collaboration less as coordination around moments and more as an ongoing infrastructure for shared development.

These advances are early but consequential adjustments in how power is understood as something that has to be built with intention across time versus seized in bursts. Without that discipline, even the most energetic campaigns will continue to risk resetting at the end of each cycle, requiring groups to recoup and rebuild rather than build upon what came before. With it, the field begins to shift from accumulating activity to accumulating capacity, including the ability to learn across campaigns, carry relationships forward, and convert short-term wins into longer-term leverage.

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Ultimately, what will sustain the youth organizing field's work over time is the conviction — held by organizers across the country, in every kind of community, in every stage of the fight — that a better world is not only necessary but possible, and that building it is a collective responsibility. As one organizer put it: "We

all do this because we believe that a better world is possible and because we love our people. I think any human being who exists at this point in time and throughout history can sense and would want to fix things when they realize that things are bad. So I think it's an opportunity to keep reminding ourselves of that, and I think re-emphasizing the point that young people have a particular role to play in all of this. So we need more people, we need everybody."

Across the 2025 Field Scan Snapshot Series, the youth organizing field echoes a shared sentiment: this period of ever-escalating crises is putting immense pressure on social justice organizations. Within that pressure, the field is attempting to find its way through to a world aligned with its vision, striving as it does to avoid reactive patterns that may temporarily serve to alleviate pressure but ultimately only defer the crises. Across its work, from transformative leadership development, to base-building, to campaign work and alliance building,

it is continuously innovating new practices in service of long-term solutions.

In a famous 1965 speech "Tell No Lies, Claim No Easy Victories", Cape Verdean revolutionary Amilcar Cabral said, in a speech to his organization as it was fighting a better-resourced opponent: "Never has it been more certain that our victory depends principally on our own actions." Our actions can determine history. How we understand the practices of organizing can point us towards the reactive or the transformative. History depends on that choice.

The youth organizing field is a field of practice. It is a field with a rich legacy. And it is a field in motion.

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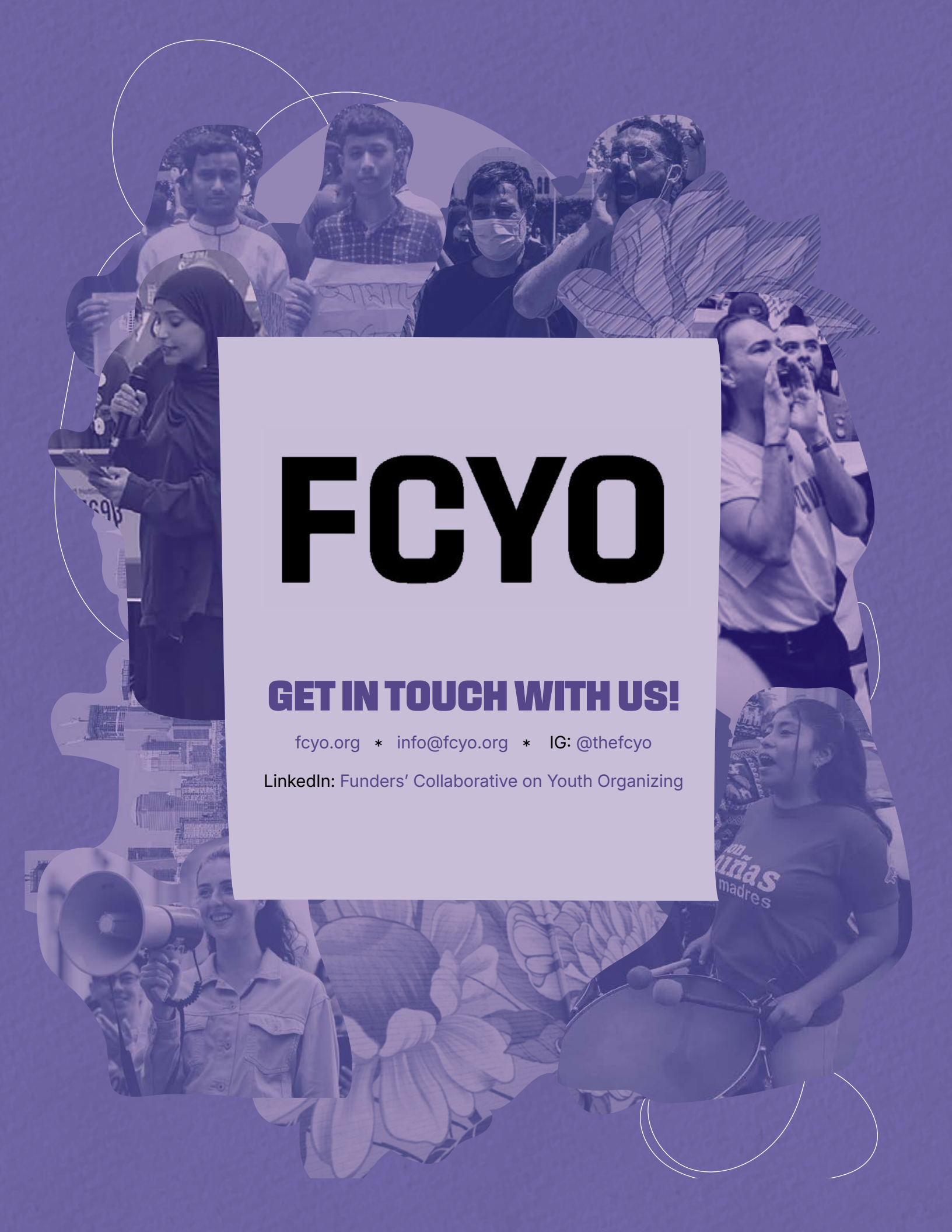
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Data for the 2025 Snapshot Series was collected between 2024-2025 via a year-long, mixed methods scan of the youth and intergenerational organizing field, including a survey completed by 142 youth organizing groups as well as 11 focus groups with 40 youth organizing leaders. The survey was developed and administered by Research for Action (RFA). The focus group protocol was developed in partnership with FCYO and administered to organizational participants in FCYO's cohorts both virtually and in-person at FCYO's Year of Praxis convening. RFA led the initial analysis of the survey and focus group data. Over six months, the RFA team worked alongside FCYO to engage a Field Scan Advisory Team composed of organizing practitioners tasked with reviewing and providing feedback on key findings from the survey and focus group data as well as participating in a series of targeted conversations on "emergent dialogues in the field" including healing and wellness, arts and culture, and youth leadership in intergenerational organizing. In partnership with FCYO, Esther Wang rendered a final analysis on the survey and focus group data to author the Snapshot Series. Together, the Snapshot Series reports reflect a synthesis of the analyses conducted by RFA, Esther Wang, and the FCYO team.

A note on the data and comparisons with previous FCYO Field Scans: The research processes for each of FCYO's Field Scans have been methodologically

distinct and led by different research teams. Some years, as with the 2020 Field Scan, we issued an open call for responses. In the field's formative years, we began by identifying youth organizing groups and then engaged in targeted outreach. Over time, our outreach sharpened as well to focus more exclusively on organizations that prioritized organizing. Likewise, the questions we have asked in our survey have changed over time, based both on the needs of the field and evolving framing and language. As we draw comparative insights across field scans, we acknowledge that we're making the best comparisons we can with the data that we have. Still, our conclusions are reinforced by focus group data as well as observations and analysis from the FCYO team over the past two decades.

FCYO is grateful to each of our research partners in the design and execution of this project. Special thanks go to Keerthi Rajesh, Kevin Burgess, Maja Pehrson, and Sieltah Parks at Research for Action, Esther Wang, and the Field Scan Advisory Team members: Cecilia Prado, Lindsey Matson, Maya Sheppard, Omar Cardenas, and Phoebe Dolan. And, as always, our deepest thanks and appreciation to the youth organizers who dedicated their time and energy to respond to the survey and participate in our focus group conversations, as well as the countless organizers whose tireless fight for a better world provide not only the inspiration for this report but the whole of our collective work ahead.



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