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AND Strategies
for Success
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EDUCATION
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YOUTH
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AGENT

Education Change and Youth Engagement: Strategies for Success

YOUTH LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE
FEBRUARY 2009

YOUTH VOICE

What are the youth to accomplish when they don't have a voice?

And what do they acquire when they don't have a choice?

Who asks the children, the youth what they need?

Who gives the chance, to say what they mean?

Who takes the time out to answer their questions?

Who looks deep inside their anger and aggression?

Who gives them their love, support, and their trust?

Who gives them the courage, to keep going when stuck?

Who gives them the voice when the voice is too weak to be heard?

Who picks up the voice and not kick it to the curb?

What you don't see violence and you don't see rage

That's all the voices yellin', cuz they've yet to see change

And when the yellin' gets loud, y'all cover your ears

Instead of hearing the words- in the eyes behind tears

They beggin' for quality, not quantity hear

But instead of getting books, they get cases and years.

By, Yusef Campbell

San Francisco Civic Action Innovation Fund, Youth Board 03-04,
Youth Leadership Institute

A spoken word piece written on the occasion of the Youth Voice in School
Change Kick Off Forum, October 23, 2003

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An Open Letter to the Field

Dear Colleagues:

In a recent national survey, Americans said young people should play an important role in addressing education challenges but are not given the decision-making voices or leadership skills and opportunities to do so.² With a growing body of research linking high levels of youth engagement with increased school performance, we must ask the question: How can we engage youth—meaningfully and effectively—in education change?

“Without the voice of students, schools serve no purpose. They are nothing but institutions adults run and tell you what you need to know.”

-High school student,
Critical Voices¹

Over the last decade, numerous articles, research studies, deliberations and conferences have highlighted and reflected the stories and efforts of school and district leaders, policymakers, and community stakeholders making dramatic school system changes in order to achieve student success. The successes have served as models and inspirations, and the challenges as learning lessons, in efforts to stem a national education crisis marked by stark achievement gaps and school resource disparities.

In most of these stories, student engagement is present, though defined differently in each. Very often, student engagement is viewed primarily and exclusively as an outcome. Students are viewed as recipients of adult-designed reform, rather than as critical stakeholders and partners in the process by which effective and long-lasting education change can and must be achieved.

At Youth Leadership Institute (YLI), we join the many youth and adult community stakeholders across the country that believe youth can and must be engaged effectively in education change. Education change brings youth and adults together to fashion better learning environments for students. It requires both equity-based outcomes and equitable resources to prepare all youth with a college option and life success. In this vision, youth are more than recipients asked for their ideas when convenient. Rather, youth are engaged actively as leaders, researchers, decision-makers, and partners both in identifying the problems they face and in crafting the best, most relevant solutions.

We present to you a case for why and how education change efforts must be driven by youth engagement strategies. Based on field stories, research, and YLI’s own work of engaging youth in community policy and decision-making systems, we present a practice-based model for intentional and meaningful youth engagement in education change. We invite you to read, reflect and embrace this challenge together in order to ensure young people have strong roles in education change efforts across the United States.

Respectfully,

The Board and Staff of The Youth Leadership Institute

Five Engagement Strategies for Education Change

The practice-based model in this paper is based upon YLI's own research-based work, a review of school reform literature, and interviews with individuals, organizations and groups engaged in education change across the U.S. The five core engagement strategies draw on stories, research, and action recommendations that articulate the best features of a youth-engaged education change process.

About Youth Leadership Institute

Youth Leadership Institute's 20 years of experience demonstrate the ability of youth to be engaged effectively as community leaders in policy decisions. The Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) builds communities where young people and their adult allies come together to create positive social change. It designs and implements community-based programs that provide youth with leadership skills in the areas of community health promotion, philanthropy, and policy and civic engagement. Building on these real-world program experiences, YLI creates research-based curricula and training programs to engage youth in social change efforts across the nation, while promoting best practices in the field of youth development.

Overview and Trends: Youth and Education Change

EDUCATION CHANGE

Rapidly shifting political, economic, technological and cultural landscapes are shaping both the obstacles and opportunities for schools and districts in their aim to provide high quality education for all youth. Effective education change, then, in this environment is not only crucial, it is time intensive and complex, requiring the engagement of all community stakeholders: from students to teachers, parents to administrators, and policymakers to community-based organizations. Because schools do not exist in isolation, but in these very complex communities, education change must be defined as the dynamic process that works to engage whole communities in the responsibility of education settings, resources, opportunities, and challenges.

As such, education change encompasses:

- **Education equity:** equal access to and opportunity for the best, most relevant supports and opportunities youth need to succeed in school and life.
- **Education reform:** structural (e.g. policy, curricula, evaluation) changes necessary to achieving high quality, equitable education outcomes.
- **Education improvement:** strategies and practices by which education stakeholders achieve education equity and reform (e.g. parent involvement, new technology, safe routes to school).

ADDRESSING EDUCATION INEQUITIES

Disparities in education that often stem from resource inequities are a part of the stark reality for too many youth and communities. Resource inequities—in the form of funding, talent, and opportunities—are pervasive in most districts and find their roots in unaddressed social structures of racism and classism.⁴ As a result, students of color, especially those in poor and working class communities, are more likely to reflect a gap in achievement with their white, middle and upper-middle class peers. Recent national graduation rates, for example, reveal this gap: Black and Hispanic youth average 50.2% and 53.2% graduation rates, respectively, while their Asian Pacific Islander peers have a graduation rate of 76.8% and White youth 74.9%.⁵ Furthermore, according to national research conducted by The Education Trust, funding disparity patterns are persistent on district, state, and federal levels: federal funding tends to reward wealthier states, state funding frequently shortchanges high poverty and high minority districts, and districts spend less money in schools serving disadvantaged students.⁶ Education equity is among the most persistent social justice issues faced by young people today.

While the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has attempted to address these achievement gaps, a host of funding, pedagogical, and evaluation problems have marked its implementation. Moreover, youth have no

Education Change is the dynamic process of engaging whole communities in the responsibility of education settings, resources, opportunities, and challenges.

“Changing this ingrained structure and redefining what it means for students to succeed in high school is a monumental task ... yet change is absolutely essential if all young people are to grow up into competent and confident adults in the new society of the 21st century, and if our society is to deliver on its democratic promises.”

-A Framework for Success for All Students³

The “Who” of Youth Engagement Matters

Youth engagement strategies should reflect the diverse, broad-based involvement of all community youth, especially those youth who are not traditionally identified as leaders. Who is involved matters because it determines the relevance of strategies, reflects the authenticity of youth experiences, and—through the process of engagement—addresses equities of whose voices are heard and how they may be a part of the decisions that affect their lives.

federally defined role in the education change of NCLB.⁷ In fact, as Francine Joselowsky points out, “In the 500 pages of the No Child Left Behind legislation, the notion that students can help improve their schools does not appear once.” She continues, “Therefore, it is no wonder that in many schools students’ levels of disenfranchisement and disengagement are tremendously high.”⁸

Not only do youth experience inequities in the resources that support high quality learning experiences, they remain marginalized from the decision-making processes of education change. Youth engagement is an education equity issue. When youth are viewed as problem-solving partners, education change holds greater possibilities for being more viable, equitable and far-reaching. It also holds greater possibilities for engaging youth more directly in the local, state, and federal decisions that affect their educational environments.

ENGAGING YOUTH IN EDUCATION CHANGE

In broader school reform language, student engagement is often framed as an outcome to be achieved based on thoughtful investments in the personalization of student learning environments and relational connectedness among peers, teachers, and administrators. Because such efforts notably emphasize how positive relationships impact youth experience, voice and development, they reveal the core relational element for education change. Yet, if not viewed from a more comprehensive education change perspective, these efforts risk missing the opportunity to also fully engage youth as *the* critical constituency in the education change process itself. For the education change movement to be effective in achieving the best outcomes, it must engage youth in meaningful roles across its environments, strategies, and efforts.⁹ By engaging the many youth who experience “under education,” according to Barry Checkoway and Katie Richards-Schuster, communities that involve youth “create a new constituency for change.”¹⁰

A number of recent education change efforts have placed youth experiences at the center of their education reform models—that is, the practices of drawing on evidence-based youth development research, listening to youth experiences and ideas, and involving youth in improvement activities. The Forum for Youth Investment, for example, uses the term “youth-centered reform” to prioritize important conversations about youth development and the role of whole communities in supporting education success. And the Schools for a New Society initiative identifies youth engagement as a core component in its model. Not only do youth experiences need to be at the center of education change discourse, youth need to be meaningfully involved in both the process and vision of school reform.¹¹

While youth engagement largely remains a nascent strategy in the field of education change, these models reflect new momentum. A growing body of literature in the high school reform and youth development fields points to the important role and impact of youth engagement in school environments in general and education change in particular.¹² Indeed, new and exciting research confirms the positive and substantial impact on education improvement efforts and student outcomes when youth and other stakeholders are engaged in and mobilizing for education change. According to one recent Annenberg Institute study, for example, schools that employ community-organizing approaches in order to build alliances with other programs and movements, and engage youth and community constituencies, are largely successful in achieving their education change outcomes.¹³ More importantly, their successes are more likely to be sustainable over time because of a mutually accountable community/school relationship built through community organizing efforts. Moreover, youth engaged in these efforts report increased school connectedness, interest, attendance, and plans for higher education and community involvement.¹⁴

Across the nation, many youth are involved formally and informally in changing their education environments, and many more are waiting for the opportunity. The experiences of those involved, and the growing research that supports their involvement, indicates that youth engagement is an active, creative and dynamic process, and is rooted in community partnerships that build the collective capacity of schools and their communities. As a strategy, youth engagement calls on all stakeholders—from students, parents and teachers to school and district administrators and local, state, and federal policymakers—to engage youth as decision-making partners, problem solvers, and change agents.

Youth Leadership Institute defines youth engagement as the active, empowered, and intentional partnership with youth as stakeholders, problem solvers, and change agents in their communities:

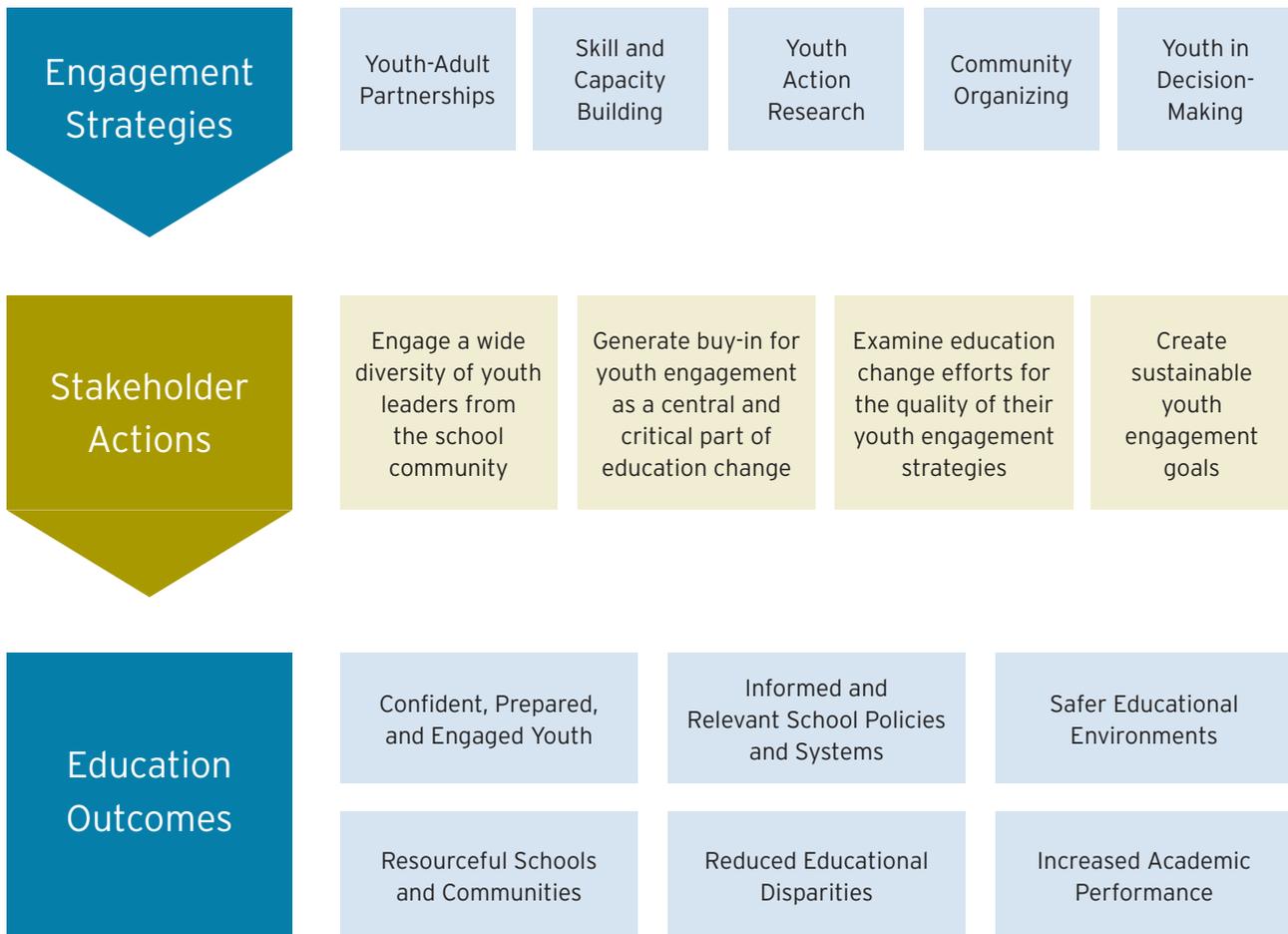
- **Youth as stakeholders and decision-makers.** Because youth are the most important stakeholders in their educational success, they must be actively involved in the decisions that impact their ability to thrive and succeed. Youth are part of the decision-making process, plans, structures, and roles of schools.
- **Youth as problem solvers.** Youth are more than informants; they are critical thinkers, researchers, and partners in identifying solutions.
- **Youth as change agents.** Youth have the ability to organize their peers and communities inside and outside of traditional education boundaries. Education settings must cultivate environments that promote youth voice and action.

Issue Areas: Youth Involved in Education Change

- School climate and cultural competency
- Teacher/administrator training
- Curriculum and technology
- Zero tolerance policies
- Access to higher education
- Trained and enough school counselors
- Nutrition, physical activity opportunities
- Parent and community engagement
- Transportation
- After-school programs
- District and state funding equity

Youth Leadership Institute's Youth Engagement in Education Change Model

Because education change is about schools and communities coming together to guarantee equities and success for all youth, youth must be critical and central stakeholders and actors in this change. Drawing on research, field stories, and our own experiences, Youth Leadership Institute's model provides a vision and methodology of why and how to engage youth. Engaging and partnering with youth in the processes of education change strengthens youth, school and community outcomes by recognizing the central role of youth stakeholders in creating new possibilities and expanding the fields of partnership and action in our communities.



Engagement Strategies that invest in youth-adult partnerships and capacity building, and involved youth as researchers, organizers, and decision-makers can strengthen **Education Outcomes**, including positive youth development outcomes, academic performance, and equitable, safe, resourceful, and relevant school environments. Building a stronger youth engaged education change process requires the **Action of Stakeholders** (teachers, students, administrators, parents, community members, and local, state and federal policymakers), including the examination of existing efforts, the generation of buy-in, the mobilization of diverse youth involvement, and the creation of sustainable goals.

Linking Engagement Strategies and Education Outcomes

YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

Youth-adult partnerships involve youth and adults joining together to impact their communities positively. These partnerships emphasize alliance and shared learning and power. Education settings with high quality relationships and partnerships between youth and adults experience greater student retention, reported connectedness, support from students and adults in education improvements, and the implementation of more relevant school policies.

SKILL AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Effective youth engagement in education change is built upon systematic skill and capacity building for both youth and their institutional and community partners. Skill and capacity building opportunities shape and strengthen academic performance, make education change involvement accessible to more youth, and support greater perceptions of school and community connectedness.

YOUTH ACTION RESEARCH

Youth action research represents a shift in the way youth have traditionally been viewed: from objects to resourceful partners. Primed with data and research tools, youth explore their daily education experiences in order to become critical and informed problem-solvers of their learning environments. Youth engaged in youth action research consistently report feeling more connected to, empowered and enfranchised in their learning environments and, importantly, are more motivated to actively participate in classroom and other school opportunities. School systems stand to benefit from making more informed and effective decisions about school structures, policies, cultures and practices.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Community organizing strategies not only help achieve policy and resource victories, they also build important alliances among youth and community groups both in and out of schools, which produce positive youth outcomes. Because of their experiences as change agents, youth community organizers report increased motivation to succeed in school and be involved both in short and long term civic issues.

YOUTH IN DECISION-MAKING

Based on the notion that youth can and should be involved in the decisions that impact their lives, youth in decision-making encompasses the formal and informal decision-making structures and processes in communities. When youth, like adults, are involved in meaningful ways in decision-making, they feel a greater sense of investment in the success of their school and community. This investment, or increased school connectedness, contributes to higher classroom attendance and participation, greater motivation to succeed, which contributes to improved academic results.

Strategy 1: Youth-Adult Partnerships



Youth-adult relationships that reflect the shared learning, mutual respect and power sharing of partnerships deeply and positively impact the lives of young people.¹⁶

With an emphasis on mutual partnership and shared learning, youth-adult partnerships progress beyond traditional youth-adult relationships of guiding and supporting. Therefore, strong youth-adult partnerships in schools and communities are important because not only do they elevate youth voice and support youth development and expertise, they also build intergenerational coalitions featuring a diversity of school and community experience.

At the center of strong youth-adult partnerships are high quality relationships. For young people, a high quality relationship is most often understood as when youth perceive that adults treat them with credibility and respect. In school and community environments, youth consistently state they feel most connected and successful when treated respectfully by adults and supported in their needs and aspirations. A relational and personalized environment, according to research, is linked to greater student retention and success. In the same way, low quality or nonexistent relationships are actually a liability for both education improvements and student success.¹⁷ High quality engaging relationships, then, are a critical resource for successful education improvements, while low quality or non-existent relationships are a liability for both student and school success.¹⁸

However, high quality relationships hold the possibility of offering more than a psychological and social connection for youth to their learning environments. These relationships have the power to provide foundations for partnership for action. Youth-adult partnerships bridge power relationships between youth and adults by providing new opportunities for youth to share in the leadership of identifying and solving problems. By partnering with adults, youth are provided with new opportunities for their voices to be heard and to participate in decision-making processes, and the capacity and motivation to participate in positive social change. For adults, youth-adult partnerships provide opportunities to listen, become stronger advocates for youth and their involvement, and to have allies in their efforts to more relevantly address youth hopes and needs.¹⁹ Together, partnered youth and adults hold the capacity to craft better educational improvement strategies. Their partnerships serve as the very vehicles for education change.

“Start by including us in your planning and conversations, knowing that we care just as much as you do about creating high schools that bring out the best in students and teachers. Invite our ideas and perspectives. Let us explore together where we agree and differ, what’s doable and what’s not. Make us part of the solution and not the problem.”

-Student voices statement, Students as Allies¹⁵



SNAPSHOT

STUDENTS AS ALLIES

Through the Students As Allies project of What Kids Can Do, youth and adults in five U.S. cities asked, “What if students and teachers become steady allies rather than frequent adversaries?” and “What would it take for students to become stakeholders not just in their own success but also in that of their teachers and schools?”²⁰

In Chicago, Houston, Oakland, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, students explored these questions with their peers, teachers, and administrators. Using participatory research methods, student researchers documented and analyzed youth-adult relationships in their school environments and made improvement recommendations to various school stakeholders. Among their findings: despite the presence of much good will and intention, students and teachers reported the quality of their relationships differently, with teachers reporting more connection to youth than youth reported to teachers. After gathering and analyzing their data, students presented their findings and recommendations in classrooms and to public stakeholders with the major aim of cultivating relationships through safe and thoughtful dialogue and planning action together.

Among the successful school improvements implemented through the “Students as Allies” project have been: regular principal open door time with students; changing class schedules to allow morning student-teacher meeting times; facilitating student-teacher email communication; hosting regular student-teacher symposiums of mutual concerns; and concerted efforts by teachers to reach out to students with academic challenges.

From Evidence to Practice: Actions for strengthening youth-adult partnerships

1. Develop district and school-level policy definitions and a shared mission of youth-adult partnerships.
2. Regularly assess the quality of youth-adult partnerships in schools. Document changes in perceptions, contributing factors to strong youth-adult partnerships, and actions that result from youth and adults partnering together. Address needs, gaps, and concerns about youth-adult relationships and connections in a timely and engaging manner.
3. Conduct ongoing youth-adult partnerships training for adults and youth that include youth development approaches to partnering for change and address the roles of adults in sharing power and supporting youth-engaged decision-making.
4. Use curriculum and teaching approaches that promote youth partnership and engagement in learning by building problem-solving, decision-making, and leadership skills and abilities.

Strategy 2: Skill and Capacity Building



Effective youth engagement in education change is built upon thoughtful and ongoing skill and capacity building for both youth and their institutional and community partners.

Such skill and capacity building opportunities are multi-level, extending from program design and evaluation to youth action planning workshops, and require the involvement of different actors, from community members to teachers, parents to policymakers, and students to administrators.

Involving youth in education change improvements provides new opportunities for youth to develop skills and knowledge that are both interesting and meaningful, and encompass areas such as action planning, research and analysis, student and community organizing, and policy design and advocacy. When youth are equipped with these training and capacity building opportunities, they are able to formulate strong and effective projects and actions. While these skill building opportunities shape and strengthen the academic success of those directly involved, they also make education change involvement accessible to more youth through the increased capacity of youth and their adult allies to reach out and engage a greater number of youth and community members.

Skill and capacity building is not only for youth, but also for all stakeholders in school systems. For example, through ongoing capacity assessments, school and district adult and youth stakeholders can identify the settings, practices, and resources for youth engagement and the levels of interest and buy-in to support and provide resources for quality youth engagement. Such capacity building opportunities ensure that youth engagement will be an institutionalized practice for short and long-term education improvements.

"I now observe everything around me and form my own opinions and act on them too. Participating in the research program helped me to learn to do that."

-Student researcher,
Writing to Be Heard²¹

SNAPSHOT

YOUTH AS INNOVATORS

As part of a national project of the Academy for Educational Development, the Youth Leadership Institute launched the San Francisco site for the Youth Innovation Fund. YLI joined with youth and community partners across the school district in San Francisco to build the capacity of and create opportunities for youth, parents, and community members to be creatively involved in educational decision-making processes at a school site level.

YLI's youth group, the San Francisco Civic Action Innovation Fund, received intensive action research training to design and implement a survey, key informant interviews, and focus groups across the district, identifying gaps and opportunities for youth to be involved in school-based change. After developing findings and recommendations which included the need for site based facilities, curricular and safety improvements, they awarded \$15,000 of mini-grants to youth-led projects such as the True History Project and Improve Our Bathrooms—Improve Our School.

A second phase of this initiative focused on expanding the capacity of the San Francisco Student Advisory Council (the official youth advisory board to the San Francisco Unified School District School Board) through intensive skill building in governance, policy, and decision-making processes. The Student Advisory Council (SAC) successfully passed new by-laws that included structures and processes that required the SAC to be involved in innovative education improvement and advocacy initiatives and ultimately required student input in key decisions made by the Board and District.

The final phase of this project focused on youth engagement through media advocacy in order to achieve district level impact. Youth developed a blog website to function as a “school watch” by and for youth, connecting their projects and discussing the ways they were involved as stakeholders and change agents.

From Evidence to Practice: Actions for building skill and capacity

1. Invest in an engagement infrastructure by identifying resources (e.g. staff positions) to support intentional and sustained youth engagement. This will provide resources to address the needs and it will make youth engagement more legitimate.
2. Conduct intensive and ongoing skill and knowledge development training for formal youth governance groups that includes, but is not limited to: youth action research, policy advocacy, community organizing, facilitating meetings for action, and an overview of issues in education change.
3. Host “brown bag” lunch conversations and trainings for youth and adults to learn about innovative education improvement ideas and share collective learning lessons.

Strategy 3: Youth Action Research



Youth-led evaluation and action research efforts are an increasingly popular and primary way youth are involved in education change issues.

In fact, youth action research represents a shift in the way youth have been traditionally viewed: from objects to resourceful partners. In this approach, youth “are the researchers not the researched,” actively involved as “producers of the process and not merely as objects of data collection.”²³ Equipped with data and research tools, youth action research is about empowering youth to be skilled and critical problem-solvers of the learning environments they experience daily.

Youth involved in school research and evaluation activities build a host of academic skills and are provided with opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and leadership roles. Of those youth who engage in youth action research, they consistently report feeling more connected to, empowered and enfranchised in their learning environments and, importantly, are more motivated to actively participate in classroom and other school opportunities.²⁴

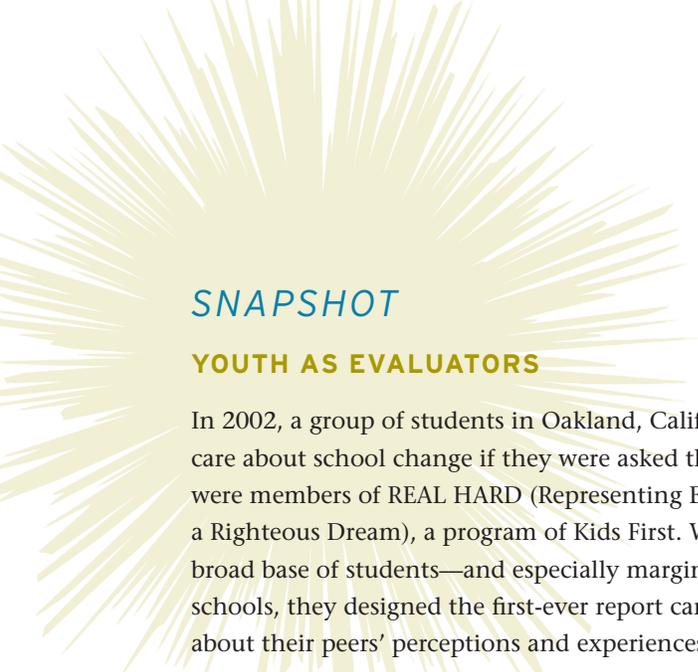
Adults also benefit. In youth action research, adults have co-researchers with creative ideas and commitments to change. For adults who take youth research findings seriously, they benefit from making more informed and effective decisions about school structures, policies, cultures and practices.²⁵

Engaging youth in action research is central to identifying and implementing effective school improvement actions. However, a widely felt challenge by many youth and youth-adult research teams is the frustration with often-times-stunted action that follows the presentation of findings and recommendations. The lack of action and follow-through can risk further marginalizing youth and their experiences and miss crucial opportunities to identify the most effective improvement actions.²⁶

While youth-led evaluation and research projects are thorough and exciting for their ability to be innovative and tangible, it is critical that they are connected to actions and have an impact on larger school and district education change efforts.

“No one ever asks us our opinion. The truth is, we have the most to lose when our schools aren’t working right, and the most to gain when they are.”

-High school student,
Student Voices Count²²



SNAPSHOT

YOUTH AS EVALUATORS

In 2002, a group of students in Oakland, California felt their peers would care about school change if they were asked their opinions. These students were members of REAL HARD (Representing Educated Active Leaders Having a Righteous Dream), a program of Kids First. With the goal of empowering a broad base of students—and especially marginalized students—in Oakland schools, they designed the first-ever report card survey to gather information about their peers' perceptions and experiences of school.

Surveying over 1,000 students, the findings supported their observation that many students experienced disconnection and frustration with school. They made a set of recommendations to school officials based on their findings: expand the role of student councils to better represent the issues of students; implement student evaluations of teachers; increase the number of counselors and advisors, and make information about college requirements more accessible to all students.

With this research in hand, youth were able to mobilize action teams in each school to advocate for these specific school improvements. They continued to research and mobilize around academic counseling needs. After three years of researching and presenting tangible action recommendations (increase the number of counselors, implement youth-friendly transcripts, and train student counselors to support their peers in study skills, and college requirement knowledge) REAL HARD youth achieved a major victory in 2005: a new peer counselor program in their high schools!

From Evidence to Practice: Actions for supporting youth action research

1. Plan to conduct ongoing youth-driven research and surveys to identify youth experiences and concerns across schools and districts. Make findings and recommendations widely available to students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other community stakeholders.
2. Encourage and call for school and district decision-makers to work with and act on student research and recommendations. When research and recommendations are presented, youth and adults should immediately partner together in developing an action plan.
3. Incorporate youth action research methodology into the practices of student body groups and advisory councils.
4. Provide training and ongoing capacity building resources to youth groups interested in youth action research.
5. Make school and district data available and accessible to students, parents, and other community members by holding workshops on how to interpret and analyze student data, and evaluate existing and historic knowledge about improvement actions.

Strategy 4: Community Organizing



Community organizing strategies not only help achieve policy and resource victories, they also build important alliances among youth and community groups both in and out of schools, which produce positive youth outcomes.

Because of their experiences as change agents, youth community organizers report increased motivation to succeed in school and be involved both in short and long term civic issues.²⁹

According to a recent Annenberg Institute study, community organizing not only positively contributes to education change by increasing quality school-community relationships, parent involvement, and teacher morale, it specifically contributes to many of the performance measurements schools are concerned with: increased student attendance, increased test scores, higher graduation rates, and college-going aspirations. The study also found that school sites using community-organizing strategies are more likely to influence policy and resource distribution, achieve increased equity in youth experiences, and increase the overall capacity of low-performing schools.³⁰

Indeed, community organizing is particularly important in addressing education equity issues in underserved communities. Because the process of good community organizing engages diverse and marginalized stakeholders, including diverse youth stakeholders, it holds the power to elevate the voices, experiences, and expertise of these stakeholders in addressing their hopes and needs in education equity policies and maintaining their investment in decision-making processes.

Successful education change involving community organizing draws on actors both “inside” and “outside” of traditional systems and processes. Community organizing strategies typically build the strength and capacity of external partners to engage with institutional actors in system change. Pressing for actions that address education equity, these external actors “help ensure depth, spread, and ownership” while often bringing equity and access lenses to the decision-making processes.³²

“I attended many rallies, passed out hundreds of petitions, and talked to my family and friends... The Board made a promise to students and has failed to keep it...You can't expect students to succeed if you're not giving them the support they need. Students need extra support and motivation to pass A-G. It's been three years since I was an eighth grader fighting for A-G. Now I am a junior and almost out of high school. How long will you keep us waiting? It's time to keep your promise.”

-Kamia, high school student.
Testimony to school board about lack of implementing a district resolution supporting college preparedness.²⁸



SNAPSHOT

YOUTH RESOURCE ACTIVISTS

Community Coalition of South Los Angeles' youth group, South Central Youth Empowered Action (SCYEA), has been a powerful force for education change in the Los Angeles School District. In the last five years, they have advocated for college readiness supports and resources, and have brought both attention and resources to repair neglected schools and address overcrowding issues.

In 2005, SCYEA surveyed their peers about their college interests and barriers. They found that while 72% of students surveyed said they wanted to go to a 4-year university or college after high school, they perceived their barriers to be grades, family income, and not having completed all A-G classes (the set of California curricula requirements for admission into the University of California system). Prepared with this data, SCYEA mobilized students across the district in a campaign to direct college readiness resources and opportunities for their schools. The "A-G resolution" asked the district to start a process of providing the supports and resources to make A-G classes a requirement for all youth. While considered a major victory at the time, the school board and school administrators did not immediately act upon it. In 2007, SCYEA students returned to the school board and testified about their disappointment, including delivering a grade of "F" to the school board for failure to implement the resolution. At present, the struggle to implement college readiness resources continues and involves youth, community, and school allies working closely together.³³

From Evidence to Practice: Actions for supporting community organizing

1. Assess and connect with community coalitions and groups in order to identify shared interests and commitments in education and youth engagement. Create outreach goals to build and maintain a diverse, broad-based coalition.
2. Convene and train youth and adults together in community organizing skills and strategies.
3. Develop a youth organizing plan for education change. Identify roles of various youth groups as both decision-making internal and external advocates.
4. Through resource sharing, skill and capacity building, and coalition involvement, support youth-driven parent and family engagement in education projects.
5. Collect and make accessible relevant data and research to community coalitions and groups.

Strategy 5: Youth in Decision-Making

Based on the notion that youth can and should be involved in the decisions that impact their lives, youth in decision-making encompasses the formal and informal decision-making structures and processes in communities.



"I know it's important for people in decision-making positions in government to listen to young people. They have lots of ideas. They are experiencing lots of things. It cannot be the case that we are constantly imposing decisions on them. They have to be a part of that and I do it not only because it's the right thing to do but because it improves the work we do as a government."

-Mayor Cicilline, Providence, RI,
In the Mix³⁴

In the education environment, this includes, but is not limited to: formal student body groups, student town hall events, school and district committees, student clubs, short-term initiatives, and elected school boards. These settings only begin to reflect the many spheres of youth involvement in the decisions that shape their schools.

More than the structure of groups, events, and committees, youth in decision-making is also about the quality engagement of diverse youth voices, experiences, and skills in decision-making processes. Extending beyond sometimes token and static participation, youth engagement calls for the meaningful involvement of youth in school governance. Importantly, it also calls on communities to engage youth who have been historically marginalized in decision-making.³⁵ When youth, like adults, are involved in meaningful ways in decision-making, they feel a greater sense of investment in the success of their school and community. This investment, or increased school connectedness, contributes to rises in classroom attendance, participation, and motivation to succeed, which all contribute to improved academic success.³⁶

Youth engagement in decision-making must first examine and explore the effectiveness of existing structures and processes, and then identify new and different strategies and opportunities to engage diverse youth. In addition to an examination of youth and student groups, engaging youth in governance also entails identifying the decision-making tables and processes where youth are not currently represented or supported in full participation, such as co-evaluators of curriculum, teacher performance, and safe school climates; fellow school board and committee members; and key stakeholders to convene as schools face new challenges and opportunities, such as funding changes.

Youth in decision-making, at its core, is about approaching school decision-making differently. It is not only about valuing youth at the table, it is about crafting the most relevant and wise education change strategies and improvements together. Because of this, youth engagement in education change efforts should signal long-term and sustainable roles and processes for youth in the successful schools youth and adults envision together.³⁷

SNAPSHOT

YOUTH POLICYMAKERS

The Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) represents a systemic effort to strengthen youth voice in the policies of Boston Public Schools. In 2004, Boston Public Schools partnered with Youth on Board to increase youth voice in policy decision-making at a district level through strengthening the BSAC. In the last four years, youth have conducted regular, ongoing research about student experiences and issues of concern in their schools. From this research, the Boston Student Advisory Council has worked closely with district administrators to pass new policies to address homework, cell phones, attendance/lockouts, and a host of other issues.³⁸

Most recently, the Boston Student Advisory Council has worked closely with junior high and high schools to strengthen student engagement in local school governance. Because each school in the district is now required to have a student engagement policy, the BSAC has co-written model policies, including one that defines the decision-making roles and opportunities of student government. Additionally, this policy work has been coupled with training of students and school administrators in youth-adult partnerships and student engagement. According to Maria Ortiz, the project specialist, because of the district's investment in student engagement and the positive attention BSAC's policy work has brought to the role of youth as decision-makers, more students are at the table when policies are being made in schools and at the district.

The Boston Student Advisory Council has a viable, institutionalized role in the governance of Boston Public Schools. Based in the new Office of Family and Student Engagement of the Boston Public Schools, the BSAC provides structured avenues and processes for students to engage in both local school and district level decisions.

From Evidence to Practice: Actions for supporting youth in decision-making

1. Identify key school and district decision-making settings and processes, and what roles, if any, youth currently have in these settings. Set realistic goals to begin to increase youth engagement.
2. Create a plan for placing and supporting youth on school boards and committees. An effective plan should provide staff resources and capacity building training.
3. Involve youth in evaluating factors in their education success, specifically teacher performance, curriculum interest and effectiveness, and the safety of the education climate.
4. Shape and strengthen school and district student governments to be more representative of student diversity, attentive to education improvement issues, capable of participating in school administrative decisions, and broadly accessible to the student body.
5. Identify and promote processes in schools that are inviting for youth and youth groups to raise ideas and concerns about their education and schools. Most importantly, communicate follow-through on actions taken.

Stakeholder Actions

As education change encompasses multiple stakeholders and spheres of action, the task of youth engagement in this challenging and complex environment requires the broad-based stakeholder commitment, time and creativity to refashion new and existing opportunities for youth as partners in change. The outcomes of these efforts will lay new directions for more successful education reform and more democratic schools and communities for youth.

The following stakeholder actions frame a path of involving and sustaining youth engagement in education change. They represent the shared collective responsibility of each actor in education systems, from youth to teachers, parents to administrators, and more.

“As members of their school communities, young people are central actors to whether their schools flounder or flourish. More than stating a fact, however, saying that young people are at the center of education is a value judgment. It reflects a commitment to take young people—their perspectives, their individual experiences, their developmental needs and processes—seriously in the education process.”

-Tolman, et. al.,
What Works in Education Reform.³⁹

Examine education change efforts for the quality of their youth engagement strategies.

Map existing youth engagement opportunities, gaps and challenges, including but not limited to: structures and processes, and student perceptions and experiences. Incorporate and evaluate high quality youth engagement as an indicator of student success in school and district performance evaluation.

Generate buy-in for youth engagement as a central and critical component of education change.

As a school or district, develop a student engagement policy and support its implementation through training and capacity-building, and defined opportunities for youth in decision-making.

Engage a wide diversity of youth leaders from the school community.

Who is engaged in school improvement matters. It is critical to engage specific youth voices, experiences, knowledge, and skills that aren't often recognized or utilized. Youth drawn from a cross section of the student body—reflecting income, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, GPA, level of school activity involvement, and other characteristics—will help ensure the broadly representative effectiveness of their participation.

Create sustainable youth engagement goals.

Goals should reflect the specific roles and processes that promote a vision for schools and communities, including long-term institutional roles for youth. Design and provide resources for meaningful and rewarding roles for different levels of youth participation in education improvement projects.

Conclusion

In *Critical Voices in School Reform*, a student named Sheila describes her experience of being invited to sit at the table with other school decision-makers:

And this is where our title comes in. The Broken Mic. After all we did, they had this big full-day conference with us and staff and administration and some head facilitator guy. There's this big table and we're all sitting around trying to make our points, thinking they're gonna hear us and they're gonna make changes. But you know, after all that, we were given the chance to go to this meeting, handed the mic, and it was like it was turned off. Like when you tap a mic and you're like, '...one, two, three...testing' but nothing came out. It was dead. Broken.⁴⁰

Indeed, we have done a major disservice to youth like Sheila when we go through the motions of hearing, but not actually listening and effectively engaging Sheila and others as co-problem-solving partners in the serious challenges of education change. Effective youth engagement can and must involve a commitment to partnering with youth; investing in the skills and capacity of youth and school systems; supporting their inquiry, research, findings, and ability to organize their communities; and involving them in the multiple processes and structures of making decisions. It has been the hope and aim of this report to highlight and support the many groups who employ these strategies and actions, as well as to challenge us to do better in advancing this important work.

Resources and Acknowledgements

KEY FIELD RESOURCES

- **Annenberg Institute for School Reform:**
www.annenberginstitute.org
- **Academy for Educational Development:** www.aed.org
- **Give Kids Good Schools (AED):** www.givekidsgoodschools.org
- **Research for Action:** www.researchforaction.org
- **Soundout: Student Voices in Schools:** www.soundout.org
- **What Kids Can Do:** www.wkcd.org
- **Public Education Network:** www.publiceducation.org
- **KidsFirst:** www.kidsfirstoakland.org
- **The Education Trust:** www.edtrust.org
- **The Forum for Youth Investment:**
www.forumforyouthinvestment.org
- **Youth Leadership Institute:** www.yli.org

ADDITIONAL YLI RESOURCES

Youth Leadership Institute specializes in training and curriculum for youth and community groups on youth-adult partnerships, youth engagement in policy advocacy, and youth action research methods. Please visit www.yli.org to learn more these offerings and additional upcoming training and curricula on youth engaged in education change.

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