

The Value of Youth Organizing

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I. INTRODUCTION

Across the country, adolescents have become deeply involved in struggles for equity and social justice, as they work to promote a kinder, braver world. Although youth have long been leaders in social change efforts, today's young people are increasingly supported in this work through youth organizing programs. This paper explains what youth organizing is, identifies four ways in which it benefits the young people involved, offers suggestions for mitigating any downsides of participation, and addresses barriers that youth organizing groups may face.

II. WHAT IS YOUTH ORGANIZING?

Youth organizing has several characteristics that distinguish it from other types of community-based youth programming:

- Youth organizing is a strategy that trains young people to engage in collective action to improve institutions in their communities that directly affect them. Youth organizers may target systems like the education system, the immigration system, or the juvenile justice system, or they may work to change policy and practice in specific issue areas, such as economic justice or environmental justice.
- Youth organizing adopts the twin goals of fostering youth development and effecting social change. Through political education workshops, retreats, and trainings, youth organizers develop critical understandings and skills. Through direct action campaigns focused on particular policies or practices, youth exert their power to make their demands for change heard by adults in positions of authority. It is this emphasis on positioning youth as advocates, activists, and change agents that differentiates youth organizing from other youth development programs.
- Youth organizing for education reform is one of the fastest growing areas of this field. It focuses on engaging youth to make schools and school systems more responsive to their needs and aspirations and more equitable. A central concern of many youth organizers working to push education reform is ensuring equity and access to high-quality schooling for all children, regardless of their race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or home language.
- Many youth organizing programs are youth led, meaning that the youth decide the focus of the campaigns they run as well as the strategies that will be used. Youth may also lead workshops, trainings, and support groups for one another.

- Youth organizing has been particularly effective at engaging low-income youth of color, undocumented youth, and youth who have been otherwise marginalized by social structures and institutions. Youth organizing pays particular attention to issues of oppression.

Some examples of youth organizing groups include:

- **The Philadelphia Student Union (PSU)**, a youth organizing group founded by a dozen high school students in 1995, includes chapters at eight high schools (six of which are comprehensive, neighborhood high schools) and a Youth Leadership team that coordinates citywide campaigns. Approximately 80 percent of its members are low-income youth of color. Since its inception, PSU has focused its organizing work on educational reform. For example, for nine years it has sustained a campaign targeting teacher equity – the distribution of qualified and experienced teachers across schools. The campaign has included public forums, hearings at city council, a briefing at the U.S. Senate, testimonies at school board meetings, creative actions, and youth-produced videos and radio segments. In addition, PSU students collaborated with the Education First Compact to craft a Teacher Equity Platform, with specific demands and recommendations. For more information, see <http://home.phillystudentunion.org>
- **United We Dream**, a coalition of youth organizing groups focused on improving immigrant youths’ access to legal status and higher education, was founded in Washington, D.C. in 2008. United We Dream developed first as an informal coalition of youth organizers advocating for the passage of the 2001 Dream Act; however, the national structure was created with the vision that young people whose lives are directly impacted by unjust immigrant laws should lead. The mission of the organization is to achieve equal access to higher education for all people, regardless of immigrant status, and to address the inequalities and obstacles faced by immigrant youth. For more information, see www.unitedwedream.org.
- **The Youth Leadership and Development Campaign (YLD)** was founded in 1993 as part of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice. The organization focuses on engaging youth in decision making processes, building leaders, and building community to address local environmental and economic justice issues. By “continually training and incorporating a cadre of youth of color organizers,” YLD seeks to “refresh the environmental and economic justice movement.” The YLD Campaign leadership is comprised of a core group of 15 youth representatives from member organizations that guide the work of the Campaign. One of YLD’s most popular programs is the Southwest Network Summer Youth Placement Program, which was first held in 1994. A 10-week

summer internship program for high school and college age youth, this program helps to build capacity of Southwest Network Affiliates in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, California, and the Northern Border States of Mexico. For more information on the Southwest Network Summer Youth Placement Program and YLD, see <http://www.snej.org/youthandenviromentaljustice.htm>.

III. HOW DOES YOUTH ORGANIZING BENEFIT YOUTH?

Studies have found that high-quality youth organizing can result in specific developmental benefits to youth. While these benefits are not all unique to youth organizing, and while there are other arenas and activity spaces in which youth can develop the knowledge, skills, and developmental assets highlighted here, the constellation of outcomes and the ways in which they are fostered may indeed be specific to youth organizing:

- **Youth learn critical thinking skills that enhance their sociopolitical development.**

Many youth organizing programs help youth learn to identify and analyze the root causes of social inequalities. As they examine structural explanations for the problems they perceive and experience in the world around them, youth become more acute social critics. They learn to probe beneath the surface of issues, to challenge taken-for-granted ideologies, and to think critically about issues of power and oppression.

- **Youth learn interpersonal skills and communication skills that can last into adulthood.**

To run an effective campaign with clear objectives, youth organizers must learn to work together, often bridging divides that typically separate them, including those of neighborhood, class, and race. They come to listen to and appreciate one another's experiences, perspectives, and ideas. They learn to identify shared problems and common goals.

They also learn to speak up. They come to see the importance and value of sharing their understandings not only with one another, but also with adults in positions of power. They learn to craft powerful, persuasive testimonies, delivered at rallies, community forums, such as school board meetings, and in private closed-door meetings with policymakers. They issue press releases, write reports, and respond to journalists. They learn to have confidence in their voice.

- **Youth develop a stronger sense of agency and psychological empowerment.**

As youth organizers engage real-world issues, they participate in authentic problem-solving processes that may result in tangible changes to policy or practice. Youth

have led and won campaigns to hire more college counselors, to increase access to college preparatory coursework, and to obtain more adequate funding for their schools. Such victories fuel their momentum and leave youth feeling efficacious and powerful. At the same time, losses do not necessarily undermine their sense of collective agency. When dealt a blow, youth organizers learn to regroup, to persevere, and to continue to fight for what they believe in, aware that when united together, they represent a potent force with which to be reckoned.

- **Youth develop strong civic commitments and show a high propensity to be engaged in civic affairs as young adults.**

Youth organizers come to care deeply about their communities and issues of social justice, to believe that social change is possible, and to recognize their individual and collective responsibility for pushing for reform. Youth develop not only the skills necessary for participation in civic life, but also the motivation and inclination to participate. One study has found that compared to peers who were not involved in youth organizing but who were active in student government in high school, youth organizers show a greater likelihood to engage in political activities and community activism as young adults.

IV. STRATEGIES FOR MITIGATING POTENTIAL DOWNSIDES TO PARTICIPATION

While involvement in youth organizing can lead to positive developmental outcomes for participants, youth organizing groups must acknowledge and work to mitigate potential drawbacks.

- **When campaigns are not effective at securing the changes youth demand, youth may grow frustrated and question their efficacy.**

Youth organizing groups frequently evaluate their campaigns and extract lessons about what went well and what did not so that they can then apply these understandings to renewed efforts and future campaigns. Such assessment of strengths and weaknesses can help youth recognize their own and their group's growth and progress, while teaching important lessons about perseverance.

In addition, high-quality youth organizing groups help youth recognize successes even in the face of defeat. For example, even though they may not have convinced policymakers to end a punitive youth curfew, youth organizers may have built their own communication skills as well as their groups' credibility and power when they spoke about how the policy adversely impacts them at city council meetings and when they met individually with elected officials.

Finally, well-established youth organizing groups recognize the importance of balancing long-term, sustained efforts to promote change with short-term, immediate “wins” that increase participants’ motivation and sustain momentum. Such “wins” can also stave off the boredom that might arise from the often glacial pace of social change.

- **The urgent and often exhilarating work of reform may consume youth to the point that they either neglect other areas of their life or burn out.**

High-quality youth organizing groups offer structures, such as mentoring, tutoring or homework help, internal support groups or healing circles, and connections to other civic organizations to ensure that youth have the support they need to succeed in school and secure admission to college or a job following their high school graduation.

Many youth organizing groups maintain an “open door” policy, wherein members who have needed to limit their involvement for a period of time are always welcome to return to the group and recommit to the efforts. Some groups even encourage youth to moderate their participation, to “step up and step back”, as the demands of their lives dictate.

- **When youth “age out” of youth roles, they may struggle to find opportunities to sustain their involvement in organizing and activism.**

Several youth organizing groups recognize the importance of engaging their alumni. They send electronic newsletters to keep alumni updated, host parties for alumni to remain connected with one another, invite alumni to attend campaign-related actions and events, and even create consultant or advisory roles for alumni who wish to maintain their involvement in the organization.

Youth organizing groups build bridges to other civic organizations in their own community and create networks with similar organizations in other communities, facilitating what Shawn Ginwright, a leading researcher in this area, calls a “leadership pipeline,” so that as youth mature, they can draw on these networks to maintain their involvement in the issues they care about most.

V. WHAT BARRIERS DO YOUTH ORGANIZERS FACE?

All community organizers must struggle with securing funding for their work, building their base, enduring the slow process of social change, and navigating the unique politics and bureaucratic peculiarities of the institutions they are targeting. Due to their age, however, youth organizers face additional challenges that their adult community organizing counterparts may not. These challenges include the following:

- **Adulthood.** Organizing is a strategy typically employed by those who have been excluded or marginalized by virtue of their socioeconomic status or their racial, ethnic, or linguistic background. Youth organizers must confront the added challenge of adulthood, manifest in the view that they are naïve, inexperienced, or incompetent. Because most youth organizers are also low-income students of color, the dynamics of race and class add further layers to this deficit perspective.
- **Access.** Because they are restricted from voting until they are aged 18, youth lack a formal political means for making their voices heard. Furthermore, because they must spend most of their day in school, youth also have little connection to professional networks and organizations (such as unions) or to traditional broadcast media. Even in schools, the dominant hierarchical structure precludes youths' voices from being solicited or heard.
- **Aging Out.** A final challenge particular to youth organizing is the transitory nature of its participants. Youth only remain youth for a finite period of time. Therefore, the leadership base these organizations establish is ephemeral. The most experienced youth organizers inevitably “age out,” taking with them important institutional memories. The bounded nature of “youth” results in high organizational turnover and a constantly revolving door of core members.

Despite the barriers that stand in the way of youth organizers, youth possess unique strengths that can help them persevere and prevail. Youths' firsthand knowledge of institutions such as schools and juvenile justice systems provides essential testimony for those who seek to improve social infrastructure. Additionally, youth are energetic and often idealistic. When they recognize injustice, they insist that conditions can and should be better, rather than accept the status quo. Finally, youth organizers often incorporate humor and fun into serious, even infuriating work. This tendency to combine work with play, which may have the added benefit of strengthening group ties, may well be a particular strength of youth organizers.

VI. CONCLUSION

Youth organizing offers a rich context for learning and growth, particularly for youth who have been traditionally least well-served by our institutions and systems. It positions youth not as the leaders of tomorrow, but as leaders today, and acknowledges that youth have a right to participate in conversations about the decisions that affect them the most. Those of us committed to this enterprise of creating a kinder, braver world would do well to look to and learn from the bold, courageous work of youth organizers, who are challenging injustice, commanding respect, and forging the way forward.

USEFUL WEBSITES

- The Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing: <http://www.fcyo.org>
- The Forum for Youth Investment: <http://forumfyi.org>
- Movement Strategy Center: <http://movementbuilding.movementstrategy.org>
- What Kids Can Do: <http://www.whatkidscando.org/>

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