

Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund Annual Evaluation Report Year 2 Implementation

Prepared for: Aspen Forum for Community Solutions
May 2017

Executive Summary

The following report shares findings from the second year of implementation of the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF). On the following pages, we highlight key areas of progress and momentum, as well as areas for focus during the initiative's third and final year. With a focus on "systemic shift," this evaluation seeks to elevate changes across the OYIF portfolio, specifically related to how communities develop the collaborative infrastructure necessary to plan, implement, and sustain the opportunity youth agenda; build commitment to this agenda among community members and other stakeholders, including policy makers; and act collectively to implement changes among local systems to enhance pathways for opportunity youth by realigning and creating new programs, services, and supports.

On the following pages, we summarize findings and elevate trends from across the OYIF about the nature of collaboratives' efforts and impacts. We hope these findings continue to inform ongoing learning about the collaboratives' work and shape future thinking about how to best support such efforts.

Key findings include the following:

1. Collaboratives have developed **strong partnerships** driven by **deep partner commitment** to carrying out and sustaining the opportunity youth agenda.
2. Communities are seeing a **shift in attitudes about opportunity youth** and the systems that support them, evidenced by **increased attention to opportunity youth needs and assets**.
3. Collaboratives are **showing promise toward important policy wins**, having **engaged key civic and institutional leaders; implemented organizational changes** to better support opportunity youth; and **had some success influencing public policy**.
4. Nearly all collaboratives have **created pilot programs** to address gaps in services for opportunity youth, while more than two-thirds have **broadened their reach by scaling pilot or existing programs**.
5. While some collaboratives have **reassessed their youth engagement strategies** as they've moved into implementation, others are **elevating youth as collaborative and community leaders**.
6. **Fundraising remains a challenge** for many collaboratives – particularly multi-year funding and support for the backbone.
7. More than 10,000 opportunity youth were served through OYIF collaboratives in Year 2; while they achieved a variety of outcomes, communities saw the most progress in helping youth **earn a high school diploma or achieve a range of employment-related outcomes**, particularly participation in internships.

Taken together, these findings suggest that OYIF collaboratives show promise in building strong partnerships that collectively address the unique needs of opportunity youth. Furthermore, they are building and strengthening local systems in order to seamlessly and more effectively support opportunity youth.

Introduction

The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions' Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) aims to "support strong existing community collaboratives/backbone organizations focused on building and deepening education and employment pathways for opportunity youth."¹ For the past three years, the initial 21 communities participating in the OYIF have been developing their collaboratives to coordinate and implement programmatic and system-level interventions intended to improve education and life outcomes for opportunity youth (since the evaluation's launch, the OYIF has expanded to include two new communities – Phoenix and San Francisco – a testament to its movement building efforts through 100K Opportunities Demonstration Cities and the Social Innovation Fund, respectively).

In this report, we present findings from the second year of our evaluation, which coincides with participating communities' second year of implementation. Our findings draw primarily from the 21 communities' annual reporting on evidence of "systemic shifts" using the online "data dashboard" in the fall of 2016. Additionally, the following evaluation activities informed this report:

- Interviews with each site lead conducted during the summer of 2016
- A site visit to Southern Maine Youth Transition Network
- A review of notes from Aspen's progress calls and communication with OYIF collaboratives
- Participation in April 2016 and October 2016 OYIF convenings

On the following pages, we highlight key findings from communities' second year of implementation (Year 2). We emphasize the following four areas most relevant in understanding communities' progress moving into the third year of implementation and sustaining their work beyond the OYIF:

- Collaborative Infrastructure
- Communications
- Local Systems Change
- Policy Change

Findings in each of these sections are summarized using the following icons:



Most collaboratives have had success here.



About half of the collaboratives have had success here.



About a quarter of the collaboratives have had success here.

Aspen OYIF Communities

- Atlanta, GA
- Austin, TX
- Baltimore, MD
- Boston, MA
- Chicago, IL
- Del Norte County, CA
- Denver, CO
- Detroit, MI
- Greenville, MS
- Hartford, CT
- Hopi Reservation, AZ
- Los Angeles, CA
- Maine (Southern Rural)
- New Orleans, LA
- New York, NY
- Oakland, CA
- Philadelphia, PA
- Phoenix, AZ*
- San Diego, CA
- San Francisco, CA*
- San Jose/Santa Clara County, CA
- South King County, WA
- Tucson, AZ

**Not included in the OYIF evaluation*

¹ <http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/the-fund/goals/>

Additionally, we take a look at youth engagement and youth outcomes during Year 2 of implementation, as well as the role of the OYIF investment strategy in advancing collaboratives' success. In the final section, we offer considerations for how Aspen, its funders, Jobs for the Future, and other OYIF partners might advance work on behalf of opportunity youth nationally – both within and across communities.

Systemic Shifts across OYIF Communities

The underlying theory of the OYIF evaluation is that systems must change in order to improve outcomes for opportunity youth (OY) at scale, and posits that communities need to build and strengthen collaborative infrastructure, build diverse stakeholder commitment, and instigate and sustain collective action among stakeholders. Taken together, these shifts will fundamentally change the ways in which opportunity youth are supported in communities.

The portfolio-level evaluation is designed to track progress on the extent to which the 21 communities have seen “evidence” of these systemic shifts in each of these three areas.

Overall, collaboratives reported the greatest increase in collective action and commitment building, with modest growth in collaborative infrastructure. This finding reinforces what we have seen among other communities using similar strategies to achieve systems change – as collaboratives become accustomed to working together and collaborative infrastructure is stabilized, they continue to emphasize activities associated with commitment building and collective action. These findings show promise for the long-term impact of the OYIF.

For the second straight year, communities have most commonly exhibited evidence of collaborative infrastructure. Consistent with last year’s findings, collaboratives are emphasizing infrastructure development and commitment building, likely as precursors to collective action. Collaboratives showed slight increases in activities associated with each type of systemic shift, yet the relationship among these areas remained consistent (Figure 1).

Figure 1
As a group, collaboratives reported increased evidence of each systemic shift in the second year of implementation (2016)

N=21

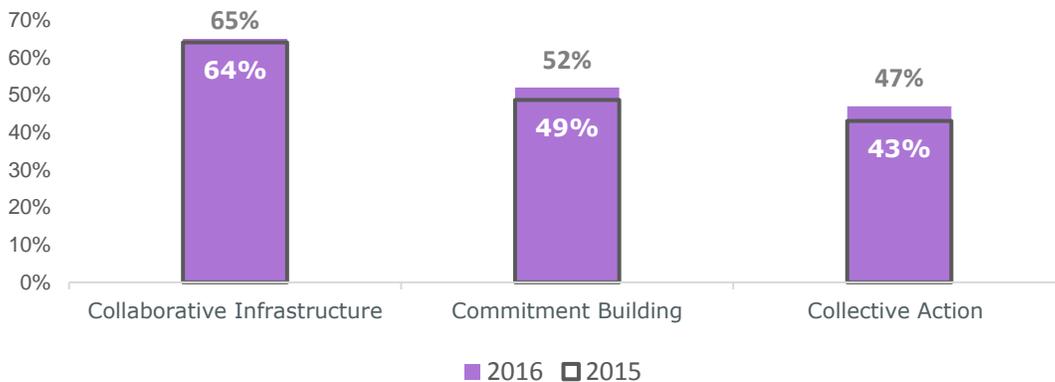


Figure 2 further illustrates this trend. A look at the percentage of items “checked” for each of the TOC’s systemic shifts reveals that OYIF communities, as a whole, saw more progress in collaborative infrastructure and commitment building than collective action. Collaboratives saw the **greatest increase in accountability among partners** and **reframing of issues facing opportunity youth**, while the two systemic shifts associated with **increased investments and support – for both the backbone/collaborative and new pathways – saw a slight decline** from Year 1 (a possible effect of greater early investments in Year 1 that “covered” Year 2). On the following pages, we highlight key areas of progress and challenge across these systemic shifts, unpacking where communities have seen success and where opportunities for improvement exist.

Figure 2
OYIF collaboratives saw increases in most areas from Year 1 to Year 2

Systemic Shift	Overall %		
	Year 2	Year 1	% Change
Collaborative Infrastructure: Commitment among partners to sustaining OY Collaborative activities and structures (and specifically the backbone role)	66%	68%	-2%
Collaborative Infrastructure: Increased accountability among partners to implement collective, mutually reinforcing activities for the shared OY agenda	63%	57%	+6%
Commitment Building: Increased investments in new opportunities and pathways for OY (e.g., new/reallocated funding, in-kind resources, joint leveraging of funding streams)	53%	56%	-3%
Commitment Building: Increased visibility of the shared OY agenda in the community	57%	54%	+3%
Collective Action: Increased number and type of effective OY opportunities and pathways	53%	52%	+1%
Commitment Building: Successful reframing of issues around OY and an asset-based, public OY narrative rebranding	60%	52%	+8%
Collective Action: Increased quality of supports for OY in community (through programmatic, policy, and funding changes)	49%	45%	+4%
Commitment Building: Advocacy and policy wins	42%	41%	+1%
Collective Action: More effective integration of programs and organizations in existing and new pathways serving OY (including incorporation of new partners/players)	42%	38%	+4%

Collaborative Infrastructure

Collaborative infrastructure reflects the extent that the collaborative – the backbone and its partners– are equipped to carry out the opportunity youth agenda. As a group, OYIF collaboratives have made tremendous progress here, having taken time to “set the table” by establishing strong partner relationships and ways of working toward a common vision. To date, collaboratives have established relationships with deeply committed partners, and are beginning to hold one another accountable for their shared agenda.

-  **Deep participation and in-kind support** from a broad base of partners
-  **Shared accountability** toward a common agenda
-  **Financial support** to sustain the collaborative and backbone
-  **Diversity and inclusion** in collaborative decision-making

Partners are taking critical steps to sustain the collaborative. Entering into the final year of OYIF implementation, collaboratives must consider how to sustain their work. Importantly, commitment to collaboratives’ efforts can be seen across communities, as partners are taking critical steps to advance the OYIF agenda and ensure that the collaboratives’ work continues:

- *Offering the support of key decision-makers.* In 90% of collaboratives, individuals with the power to change organizational policies and practices, or to align financial or in-kind resources in support of the collaborative’s work, were at the table (up from 71% in 2015).
- *Tapping into networks.* Nearly every collaborative (95%) saw partner organizations leverage their own partnerships and connections to advance the work of the collaborative (up from 81%).
- *Providing in-kind support.* In nearly every collaborative (90%), partners committed in-kind support – office space, materials, staff, and other resources – to the collaborative’s efforts (up from 76%).

- *Dedicating personnel.* The majority (71%) of collaboratives had partner organizations that dedicated personnel to support the collaborative's goals (up from 67%).

Across communities, partners are using data to hold themselves, as well as the entire collaborative, accountable for the shared opportunity youth agenda. Year 2 saw an increase in the number of collaboratives with an agreed upon action plan (71% in Year 2 vs. 52% in Year 1). As part of these efforts, partners are establishing shared measurement systems to track progress toward their goals. These systems demonstrate significant progress – commitments to shared accountability toward a common agenda. The collaboratives are working across multiple, complex systems, many of which are accustomed to using data for compliance rather than continuous improvement, requiring a significant cultural shift. In Santa Clara County, for example, 14 partners are using common metrics to identify a subset of opportunity youth who need more intensive services. The Hopi collaborative presented data they had collected for the OYIF data dashboard back to the community. The data presentation helped community members understand where youth are performing in regards to college readiness, entry, and completion, while offering insight into the performance of the local education institutions. Across the OYIF, about half of the collaboratives have implemented a data-driven approach to accountability.

- 57% of collaboratives collectively reviewed data on progress toward goals and used data to inform strategic decision making
- 57% reported that partners participated in a shared measurement system to track progress toward the collaborative's goals
- 62% indicated they had the processes in place to share, analyze, and reflect on opportunity youth data to refine the collaborative's work

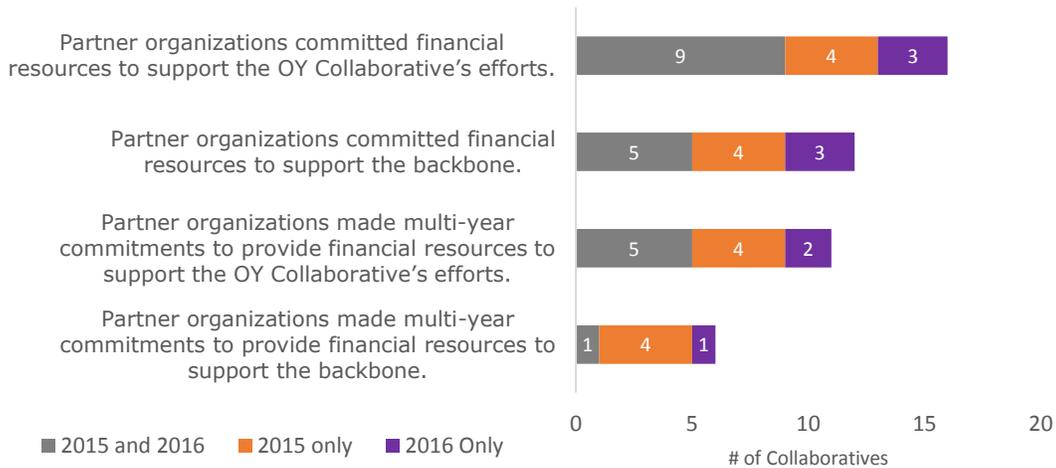
Diversity and Inclusion in Collaborative Decision-Making

While slightly more than half of the collaboratives (57%) reported that partners reflect the demographic diversity of the community "much" or a "great deal," only 38% reported that those with decision-making responsibility reflect the diversity of the community. These findings suggest that, while many collaboratives are broadly inclusive in their makeup, additional work is needed to ensure decision-makers reflect the diversity within communities.

While funder engagement is high, collaboratives are experiencing mixed success in leveraging and raising funds. Securing multi-year support has posed particular challenges. Local funders were reportedly among the most involved partners during Year 2, an important consideration for long-term financial stability. Notably, collaboratives (71%) reported that funders of partner organizations continued to align their resources to support collaborative goals and objectives. The ability to leverage *partners'* funding is a critical step in broadening attention to the opportunity youth agenda and, most importantly, creating an integrated system to focus and advance the agenda. Sites are finding that receiving multi-year financial support from partners is uncommon. For example, among the 11 collaboratives that have received multi-year funding from partners during this investment, two received such funding for the first time in Year 2. Similarly, among the six collaboratives that received multi-year backbone support, one collaborative did so for the first time in Year 2.² Funding to support and sustain opportunity youth pathways fared better, with 67% of collaboratives reporting new public funding was dedicated to support/sustain pathways in Year 2, while 48% reported increased public funding. Private funding was slightly less common, with 57% of collaboratives reporting new funding and 38% reporting increased funding toward opportunity youth pathways.

² Presumably, some multi-year commitments made during Year 1 carried over to Year 2, resulting in fewer commitments in 2016.

Figure 3
While partner support remains high, financial support from partners is uncommon
 N=21



Communications

As collaboratives enter their third year of implementation, communication within and outside of the collaborative is increasingly important. Collaboratives have made strides in building their communication capacity, changing the narrative about opportunity youth, and sharing their goals with the general public. They have made less progress toward sharing these goals with the community.



Drawing attention to the needs of opportunity youth



Communication **capacity**



Elevating the opportunity youth agenda



Communication with the community about **progress toward the collaborative's goals**

Collaboratives have increased their visibility within their communities over the past year, helping to spread the word about their work and set the stage for future efforts. OYIF

collaboratives continue to increase their public visibility. Notably, collaboratives have spent the past year bolstering their communications capacity, with nearly half (48%) having put mechanisms in place for communicating the opportunity youth agenda with community members – a sharp increase from the 19% reported in 2015. Similarly, half (48%) of the collaboratives publicly shared their goals with the community, whereas just a quarter (24%) did the year before; 45% released publications and other products that leveraged recent data on local opportunity youth (compared to 24% last year). While this increased exposure is likely to help advance the opportunity youth agenda and draw attention to collaboratives' work, communication about the collaborative has been less common. Most collaboratives did not communicate with the public about their plans and progress – just 33% shared this information with the public, down from 43% in Year 1.

Increased Understanding of Demographic Differences

In most communities (86%), stakeholders openly talked about challenges that various demographic groups in the community have faced to succeed (up from 67% in Year 1). These findings demonstrate progress in helping stakeholders understand the unique challenges that priority populations face, and set the stage for conversations about how to develop equitable pathways.

Communication about progress – not just the agenda – will be critical for keeping collaboratives accountable to the public and building confidence in their work.

Many collaboratives have made significant progress in drawing attention to the needs of opportunity youth. Across the portfolio, the number of communities showing evidence in this area increased in nearly all facets. Forty-three percent (43%) of communities reported that local community and/or civic leaders elevated the strengths of opportunity youth (up from 24% in 2015), while collaboratives reported deeper conversations among stakeholders about improving the quality of current systems serving opportunity youth — (95% in Year 2 versus 76% in Year 1). In most communities (86%), stakeholders shared challenges that various demographic groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age) in the community have faced to succeed (up from 67% in Year 1). Importantly, 81% of communities reported that opportunity youth shared their own stories with external audiences. In New Orleans, several opportunity youth success stories were shared in local media, particularly connecting the experience of Hurricane Katrina and subsequent disconnection of youth to services in their communities. The mayor has also been consistently elevating the positive stories of young boys and men of color in the media.

Policy and Practice Changes

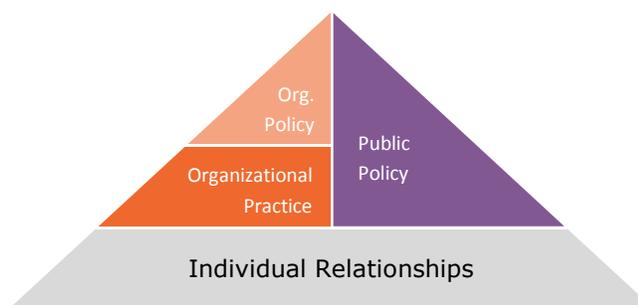
A "systems" approach is permeating communities – collaboratives are working at multiple levels to create communities where youth can thrive, changing policies, practices, and programs while also developing and scaling new opportunities.

-  **Developing new programs** to address service needs
-  **Engagement** with public officials, policy makers, and institutional leaders
-  **Changes to organizational policies and practices** to support opportunity youth
-  **Scaling** new or existing programs, services, or opportunities
-  **Public policy changes**

Collaboratives continue to work toward policy and practice changes at multiple levels to improve pathways for opportunity youth (Figure 4). Collectively, these changes are creating environments where educators, workforce partners, and providers of stabilization supports can work together more effectively to better support youth. To date, collaboratives have laid a strong foundation for public policy change through the development of strong relationships with civic, organizational, and political leaders, and have seen key organizational policy and practice changes emerge. In addition, a number of collaboratives have influenced local or state policies.

The majority of collaboratives have laid a solid foundation for public policy change through relationships with public officials, policy makers, and institutional leaders. Capitalizing on the momentum of Year 1, collaboratives have continued – and increased – their engagement with key institutional and civic leaders. Two-thirds of collaboratives have engaged with public officials, a dramatic increase from 24% in Year 1. Similarly, engagement with “key decision makers and policy makers” was reported by 71% of collaboratives, up from 48% in Year 1. In Boston, relationships with Boston Public Schools administrators have translated into tangible steps to address the “school-to-prison pipeline,” including increasing interventions so that students with absenteeism and disciplinary issues have

Figure 4
Elements of policy and practice change



fewer suspensions, as well as providing positive alternatives like restorative justice and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports.

About half the collaboratives simplified how youth move through pathways by implementing organizational practices to integrate programs and reducing repetitive processes.

Collaboratives have continued to make progress in changing how partners work and work together to support opportunity youth through developing new practices and integrating existing practices into their work. In fact, almost three-quarters (71%) of all collaboratives increased their capacity to partner and to provide complementary services. Notably, more than half of sites (52% in Year 2 vs. 29% in Year 1) made efforts to reduce repetitive processes, particularly through shared intake and referral forms and co-locating services.

- *Shared intake and referral forms.* Many collaboratives have taken steps to ensure that opportunity youth receive seamless services by improving their processes for “handing off” youth from one organization to another. These changes result in a more robust ecosystem of supports. In Year 2, 43% of collaboratives reported implementing shared intake and referral forms (up from 19%) in Year 1. In Del Norte, partners coordinated their supports to have common releases integrated into intake forms. In Hartford, partner organizations have emphasized collaboration, with organizations making referrals to one another rather than duplicating services.
- *Co-locating services.* One-third of collaboratives took steps to reduce repetitive processes by co-locating (targeting opportunity youth services in the same physical location) organizations or services. Examples of successful co-location include the following:
 - ✓ In South King County, Goodwill is working onsite at iGrad, one of the collaborative’s education-focused reengagement programs, to provide job-related training and employment supports to cohorts of their students.
 - ✓ Through the SIF grant, Boston has piloted a Connection Center to provide one-stop outreach, assessments, and referrals for opportunity youth with a high school credential.
 - ✓ A partner at the Hopi Reservation has established agreements with other partners to allow youth to use its computer labs for job, academic, and postsecondary needs.

Applying an Equity Lens to Policy and Practice Changes

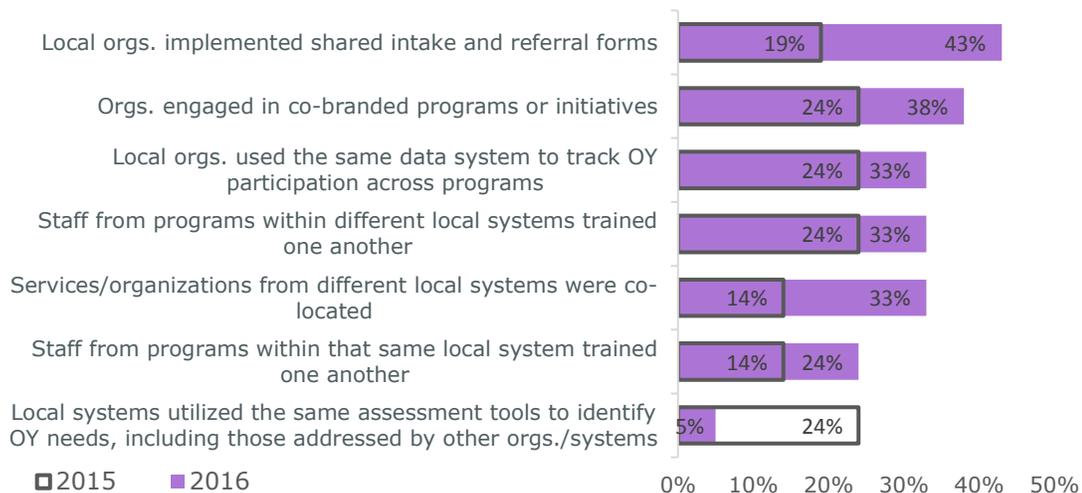
Collaboratives are applying an “equity” lens to much of their work by focusing on policy and practice changes that affect priority populations. Examples of these approaches can be seen in Austin and Boston.

In Austin – The partnership has supported Fair Chance Hiring, which recently passed at the city level. Fair Chance Hiring limits when during an application process an employer can ask about a job applicant’s criminal history, giving applicants with a criminal background an opportunity for employment.

In Boston – The collaborative has been working with the school district to address the “school to prison pipeline,” which disproportionately affects students of color. Strategies include increasing interventions so that students with absenteeism and disciplinary issues have fewer suspensions, as well as more positive alternatives like restorative justice and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports.

Collaboratives have seen partners make key organizational changes that first emerged in Year 1. These tactical changes represent an important shift in creating an integrated system of support for opportunity youth and, ultimately, manifest what key “systems changes” look like. Figure 5 illustrates the progress made in these same areas in Year 2.

Figure 5
Partners continue to change how they work with one another
 N=21



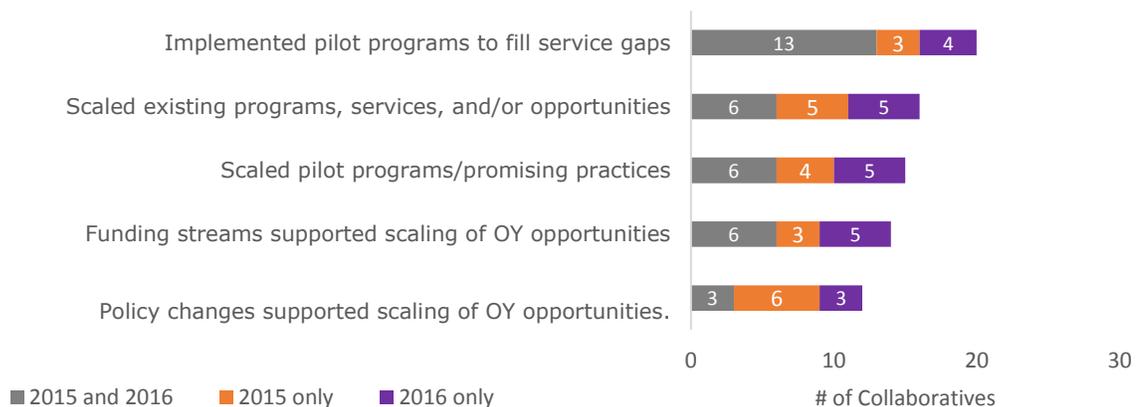
Many partners have made changes to organizational policies. Collaboratives reported an increase in *changing* and *implementing* administrative policies to better support opportunity youth. Such changes, when embedded into the fabric of institutional partners, increase the likelihood that supports will “stick,” while also reflecting systemic – rather than programmatic – changes. In six communities (29%), key institutional partners aligned their strategic plans or priorities with the collaborative’s goals. In Los Angeles, the Education Coordinating Council of the County of Los Angeles, charged with raising the educational achievement of foster and probation youth, recently included an action specific to the backbone and collaborative in its strategic plan. The plan calls for the county to “Support the Alliance for Children’s Rights’ ‘Opportunity Youth Collaborative’ and other partners, by helping to bring together public agencies, nonprofit organizations, educational systems, and employers to coordinate services and align strategies to improve access to education and employment opportunities for transition-aged youth in Los Angeles.”

While many collaboratives are in the early stages of influencing public policies, a handful have made progress. In Year 2, five communities reported that policies addressing barriers facing opportunity youth were passed in local councils or legislatures. Notably, four of these collaboratives reported this success for the first time in 2016, indicating that, to date, nine (43%) of OYIF communities have had success here. The nature of these policy changes allows communities to support opportunity youth at an unprecedented scale, and to embed these supports – and dollars – in approaches to supporting opportunity youth. In South King County, The RoadMap Project has supported the passage of Best Starts for Kids (BSK) – a major tax levy that voters approved last November. BSK is generating roughly \$60 million a year for six years, and focuses primarily on prevention activities for the 0-5 population. Approximately \$5 million a year is allocated to strategies to reconnect opportunity youth to education and employment, and to stop the school-to-prison pipeline. RoadMap Project is working closely with South King County to inform the investment strategy for these funds in alignment with the collaborative’s opportunity youth action plan.

Piloting programs to fill service gaps continues to be the most common approach to enhancing pathways for opportunity youth. Nearly all (95%) collaboratives implemented a pilot program in either Year 1 or Year 2 (Figure 6). Piloting programs has not necessarily translated to scaling – almost two-thirds of the collaboratives (65%) piloted programs during both years of implementation and, of those, less than half (38%) scaled their pilots during the same timeframe. A slightly higher proportion of collaboratives scaled *existing* programs than *pilot* programs during the two years (76% versus 71%). Of the 21 communities, only three scaled both pilot *and* existing programs/practices in Years 1 *and* 2.

The slower rollout of scaling is not surprising, given the challenges collaboratives have faced securing policy and funding opportunities to support scaling. Collaboratives continue to need support leveraging policy and funding opportunities to scale programs/practices for opportunity youth – just over half have secured funding or policy changes to support scaling to date (Figure 6). In Year 2, only four collaboratives secured funding *and* policy changes for scaling. Funding was not necessarily a requirement for scaling – of the seven collaboratives that had *not* secured funding to scale in either Year 1 or Year 2, four scaled a pilot or existing program in Year 2. The *combination* of funding and policy changes to support scale, however, may serve as a catalyst for scaling – of the seven collaboratives that secured funding *and* policy changes for scaling in Year 1, six scaled a pilot or existing program in Year 2 .

Figure 6
Pilot programs remain the most common approach to supporting opportunity youth
 N=21



Six Common Barriers for Opportunity Youth

A look at the array of strategies OYIF communities are deploying to better support opportunity youth has revealed six common barriers. Developing policies, practices, and new systems of support that address the following barriers is critical to creating systemic change that can benefit opportunity youth.

Organizational silos. One of the “root causes” of many systemic challenges facing opportunity youth, organizational silos prevent service providers and educational institutions from working with one another. Collaboratives have discovered that many educational institutions, for example, fail to address challenges affecting academic performance outside the classroom, including health issues, childcare, housing, and food security, among others. Similarly, many social service providers overlook needs not directly met by their agency. Through the OYIF, communities have taken steps to integrate education, employment, and service offerings through new policies, procedures, and communication that breaks down organizational silos. Many collaboratives, such as Southern Maine, are also working to shift educator and provider mindsets – helping those working directly with youth to think *holistically* about who, within their networks, is best positioned to provide support for the youth they work with.

Financial constraints. Financial constraints pose challenges for a substantial number of opportunity youth. In many instances, these constraints include relatively small expenses, typically under \$500. Stipends, funds for textbooks, and fee waivers can make a significant difference for youth, providing just enough momentum and hope to open doors to new opportunities. Austin and Santa Clara are addressing these barriers.

Eligibility criteria. Collaboratives have discovered that, when trying to access employment and educational programs, especially those that are publicly funded, youth are either “in” or “out.” Programs or policies that exclude youth because of age, documentation status, or criminal history can create challenges, and are often counterproductive. Collaboratives have tackled eligibility criteria to

extend benefits for foster youth (Southern Maine and Los Angeles), as well as to give youth with a criminal record a second chance in obtaining employment (Austin). Policy makers – at the organizational, local, state, and federal levels – must consider who’s being denied opportunity because of their “status,” and to examine whether these rules truly are helping youth who most need it, or are just perpetuating inequity.

Disconnected educational offerings. In the OYIF, as well as in many cradle-to-career initiatives geared toward improving educational pathways, youth commonly “stop out” at transition points – like upon graduation from high school or completion of a job training program. Without a clear handoff or help transitioning to “next steps,” youth can get lost in the system or lose momentum toward their ultimate goal. Educational institutions – such as GED programs and community colleges – can work together to encourage a seamless transition from completion of one program to enrollment in the other. Communication and coordination among educational institutions can keep youth on a pathway toward success. Collaboratives tackling this barrier include Austin, Boston, and Chicago. In Austin, the partnership identified that its youth completing high school were ineligible to take a “College Ready” course offered by the community college. The course, offered as an adult basic education class, started one week before students finished high school. In order to accommodate youth finishing high school, the community college began offering the course at the end of the school year, making it accessible to youth.

Timing and inefficiencies. When opportunity youth enroll in workforce or education programs, timing is critical. Long, drawn out program offerings, or seemingly endless courses or training programs without tangible effects, keep youth in a perpetual state of “waiting” while they continue to balance many competing demands, costing both time and money. By shortening college courses, offering college credit through paid internships, and offering stackable credentials, OYIF communities have helped youth move efficiently through the education-to-career pipeline, condensing the time it takes for youth to earn a credential or enter the workforce. Boston, Greenville, and Atlanta, among other communities, are addressing this issue. In Greenville, students can receive a national certification in construction through the Home Builders Institute after nine months learning trade skills, and gain hands-on experience building a home from the ground up. Three partners in the business sector have agreed to take on the graduates as apprentices.

Location and transportation. Creating the conditions for youth to enter and succeed in education and the workforce means not only addressing systemic barriers, but physical barriers as well. Access to places of education and employment is critical. Denver is tackling costly bus fares that can make it hard for youth to access programs, services, and jobs. Collaborating with partners that are nearby and accessible, and addressing other commuting-related barriers, is essential.

Youth Engagement

The youth engagement focus of the OYIF is a unique and innovative approach among initiatives focused on systems change. Collaboratives’ youth engagement strategies are raising awareness of the importance of this perspective within and across communities, and have provided opportunities for youth to inform, implement, and assess key strategies within their communities. Collaboratives’ strategies are also providing opportunities for youth to demonstrate leadership within their communities.

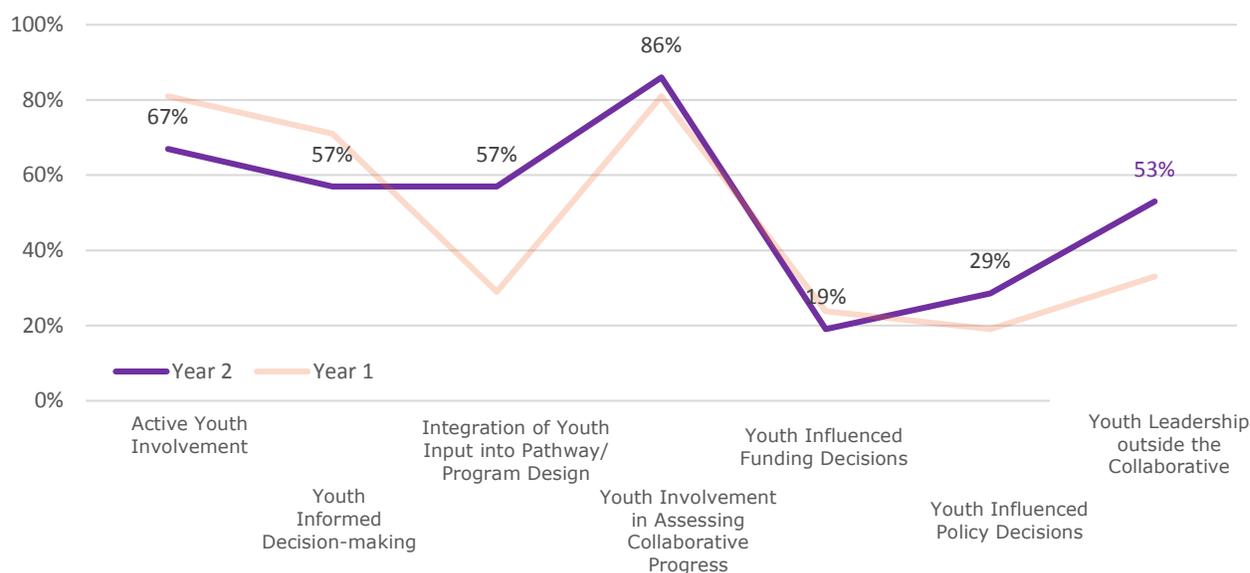
Youth engagement continues to be a hallmark of the OYIF, with a number of collaboratives reporting increases in youth leadership and input into pathway design and policy decisions. With key strategies now defined, the role of youth is being reimagined. Although some aspects of youth engagement have decreased, other, more substantive aspects of youth engagement – and influence – have increased (Figure 7). The quality and authenticity of youth engagement is at the forefront of many collaboratives’

“We listen [to opportunity youth at meetings,] but we know that this is not enough. This coming year we are initiating a more youth-led component...”

-OYIF Collaborative

minds. For some communities, this has meant taking time to pause or reset youth engagement strategies in order to engage youth in ways that make them true collaborators, decision-makers, and advocates. Several collaboratives, including Austin, Detroit, Hartford, and Santa Clara, have explored new methods of engagement, such as securing youth seats at decision-making tables across multiple agencies and organizations that create and/or implement policies and practices affecting opportunity youth. Collaboratives, in general, are working toward a gradually stronger, more empowering role of youth, from youth working within the collaborative to youth taking on leadership roles within the community.

Figure 7
While some collaboratives took to time to reassess youth engagement strategies, many increased the influence of youth in their work
 N=21



- **Active youth involvement.** 67% of collaboratives reported that youth were actively involved in the work of the collaborative, down from 81%.
- **Informing collaborative decision-making.** 57% of collaboratives reported youth informed decisions, down from 71%.
- **Integrating youth recommendations into program and pathway designs.** Collaboratives moved beyond soliciting youth recommendations solely to inform program and pathway design to actually *integrating* the recommendations into program and pathway designs. Fifty-seven percent of collaboratives reported the integration of youth recommendations into program and pathway designs, up from 29% in 2015.
- **Assessment.** Consistent with findings from 2015, most (86%) collaboratives sought input from youth about the progress of their work, up slightly from 81%.
- **Informing funding decisions.** One fewer collaborative reported that youth influenced funding decisions in Year 2 than Year 1 (19% vs. 24%).
- **Informing policy decisions.** Across the OYIF, collaboratives reported a slight increase in the role of youth in informing policy decisions (29% in Year 2, up from 19% in Year 1).
- **Leadership.** Most prominently, 53% of communities reported that opportunity youth became visible, and engaged as leaders and decision makers outside of the collaborative in 2016, compared to 33% in 2015.

Youth Outcomes

Uniquely, the OYIF is focused on two levels of change – systems change (described previously) and youth outcomes. This investment approach allows collaboratives to develop strategies for improving youth outcomes at scale without losing site of the youth these improvements are intended to benefit. In Year 2, more than 10,000 of about 1.2 million³ youth in OYIF communities were directly affected by collaboratives' interventions and pathways strategies, although the number of youth affected by the systems collaboratives are working with is much larger. While areas of focus varied across OYIF communities, collaboratives most consistently reported gains in helping youth earn a high school diploma and achieve employment related outcomes.

Snapshot: OYIF Opportunity Youth

10,703 youth served during Year 2

Race/Ethnicity

- African American: 49%
- Latino: 18%
- Native American: 17%
- White: 11%
- Asian American: 2%
- Other Race: 2%
- Biracial: 1%

Gender:

- Male: 50%
- Female: 50%

Age

- 16-19 years old: 58%
- 20-24 years old: 32%
- Other: 10%

Education

- HS credential: 36%
 - GED: 15%
 - Diploma: 21%

Priority populations

- Foster care: 13%
- Court involved: 10%
- Pregnant/parenting: 9%
- Homeless: 4%

Boys and Men of Color: 41%

Percentages for race/ethnicity, gender, and age are based on 10,340; 10,531; and 8,431 youth, respectively.

In Year 2, more than 10,000 opportunity youth were directly served and supported through OYIF collaboratives' pilot programs and promising practice innovations; efforts most commonly focused on postsecondary/career bridging, helping youth earn a high school credential, and helping youth gain work experience. As seen in Figure 8, collaboratives' areas of focus were well-distributed across the education-to-career continuum, with the majority focused on postsecondary/career bridging (81%) or helping youth achieve a high school credential (76%) or gain work experience (76%). Communities were in general focused on more areas than the previous year – the majority (86%) of communities reported *at least* two areas of focus, and one-fifth of the communities (19%) were focused on all areas.

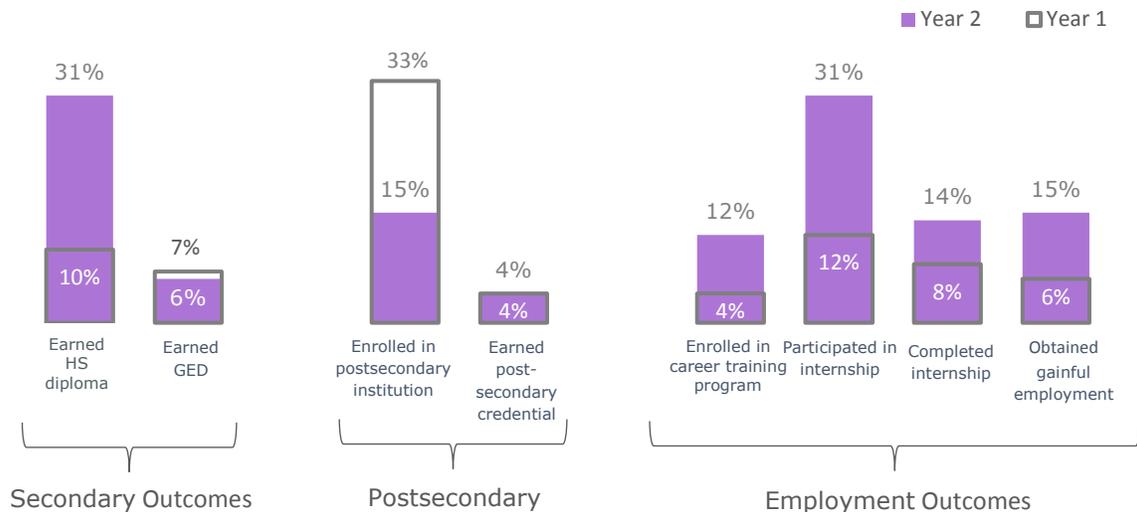
³ Based on data available from Measure of America, a program of the Social Science Research Council: <http://www.measureofamerica.org>

Figure 8
Collaboratives are primarily focused on helping opportunity youth earn a high school credential, postsecondary/career bridging, and helping youth obtain career training
 N=21



The second year of implementation saw a marked increase in work-related outcomes (Figure 9).⁴ While less than one-fifth of youth (12%) enrolled in career/industry training programs within communities focused on this area (N=15 collaboratives), nearly one-third of youth (31%) in these communities participated in an internship, 14% completed an internship, and 15% of youth obtained gainful employment in the communities focused on work experience (N=16). Among education-related outcomes, more than one-third of youth (37%) served by communities focusing on high school credentials (N=16) gained a credential (31% earned a HS diploma, 6% earned a GED). Only 15% of youth served by the communities focusing on helping youth earn a postsecondary AA/BA (N=12) enrolled in postsecondary institutions, while 4% earned a postsecondary credential.

Figure 9
Year 2 outcomes increased in nearly all areas
 N=21



⁴ Note: The percentage of youth who earned a high school credential is based on the number of youth who did not have a high school credential upon entry to the program among the 16 communities that were focused on a high school credential. For all other outcomes, we used the total number of youth served by the communities focusing on certain program areas as the denominator since "pre" program data were not provided.

The Role of Key OYIF Investment Strategy Design Elements

While not an explicit focus of the evaluation, the OYIF investment strategy has influenced collaboratives in a number of ways. Specifically, five elements of the initiative's design have played an important role in how collaboratives approach their work.

Dual focus on youth outcomes and systems change. In Year 2, OYIF collaboratives directly served more than 10,000 youth. The OYIF emphasis on tracking youth outcomes has prompted collaboratives to develop strategies that directly influence youth in their communities. At the same time, the parallel emphasis on "systems change" has affected the nature of these interventions which, even if implemented as small scale pilots, reflect the type of collaboration and policy and practice changes that can be scaled and sustained. Collaboratives can assess and improve their approaches with a relatively manageable set of partners and youth in order to "test" their strategies before going to scale. This approach does, however, bring some tension, as collaboratives – and Aspen – must balance meeting "systems" needs and reaching "metric impact." The ability to point to some "wins" with youth has, in some instances, prompted pressure from funders to scale direct impact on opportunity youth more quickly.

Commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As one of the three cross-cutting priorities of the OYIF Theory of Change, diversity, equity, and inclusion play a critical role in collaboratives' approaches. The focus on systems change, as well as on diverse priority populations (e.g., boys and men of color, parenting youth, and youth in foster care) ensures that the needs of youth facing unique barriers are addressed. Efforts in San Diego focused on youth in three high-need neighborhoods, attention to the "school-to-prison pipeline" in Boston, and support of Fair Chance Hiring in Austin provide tangible examples of how an equity lens has directed collaboratives' efforts. Additionally, the mix of OYIF communities – which includes a cohort of rural communities – also demonstrates a desire to integrate these principles into the investment's design, and a commitment to advancing the work of communities at varying stages of development and without a history of deep funder engagement.

Prominence of youth voice. A unique component of the OYIF investment, youth voice permeates collaboratives' approaches. As discussed earlier in this report, youth are becoming leaders in their communities and playing a critical role in informing and assessing collaboratives' efforts, including policy decisions. This approach not only empowers youth locally, but ensures that systemic changes are informed by the intended beneficiaries.

Commitment to a learning agenda. Aspen Forum for Community Solutions' deep commitment to a learning agenda is an important aspect of the larger investment. Semi-annual convenings have played a critical role in connecting communities with one another and national experts. Collaboratives report applying lessons from convenings – whether about policy or practice changes or incorporation of an equity lens – into their work. The addition of a new partner, Harder+Company, to facilitate a community of practice and provide space for collaborative reflection and learning has elevated the role of the learning agenda between convenings.

Requirement of a local funding match. A required local match has helped ensure that local funders are committed to the opportunity youth agenda in their communities, and that the OYIF is not seen as an isolated investment. While some small or rural communities have reported greater difficulty securing a match, its requirement has catalyzed work locally. The role of local and national funders will be critical entering the third year of OYIF implementation as collaboratives develop long-term plans for their work and look to sustain backbones and the opportunity youth agenda.

Considerations for Aspen's Investment Strategy and Learning Agenda

At the investment level, the OYIF aims to inspire changes that improve outcomes for opportunity youth and reduce the number of opportunity youth on a community and national scale. The OYIF aims to accomplish these significant changes by providing and encouraging financial support for sites' efforts, providing assistance to strengthen local capacity, convening stakeholders to connect learning and build momentum, and by showcasing lessons and successes working with opportunity youth. Drawing from the findings described above, and our evaluation activities through the second year of implementation, we offer the following considerations for the OYIF investment strategy and learning agenda.

Fundraising for backbone sustainability. Collaboratives have had mixed success in raising funds to support their work, particularly funds for multi-year support and for the backbone. As collaboratives complete their final year of OYIF implementation, consider how the national network of funders can continue to support backbone functions while helping collaboratives move away from grant-based funding. Consider helping collaboratives and local funders align expectations and "case make" for long-term investments focused on bringing about systems change, and placing a strong emphasis and recognition on the critical role that a backbone entity plays in these change strategies.

Changing the narrative about opportunity youth, and aligning the OYIF agenda with current "high resonance" national agendas. Collaboratives continue to make progress in raising awareness about opportunity youth, including positioning youth as leaders within their collaboratives and the community. Given the current national context, consider how youth can continue to play an active role in "changing the narrative" and deepening an asset-based narrative on behalf of disenfranchised priority populations. Beyond continuing to support youth leadership and narrative change efforts, consider how the OYIF agenda might be fine-tuned to realign with "high resonance" national and philanthropic priorities including workforce development, career pathways and job creation, youth economic viability, and multi-generational strategies – all of which are well aligned with the OYIF priorities.

Developing data infrastructure and building continuous improvement muscle. While some communities have made significant progress in using data to design, implement, and assess pathways for opportunity youth, many continue to struggle with tactical aspects of data use and continuous improvement (e.g., developing common indicators, sharing data across organizations). As collaboratives continue to seek ways to expand their work and deepen systemic changes, data will play an increasingly critical role. Consider technical assistance and peer-to-peer learning that allows communities to troubleshoot these issues while simultaneously building their capacity. There is a particular opportunity to focus on helping collaboratives collect and use data for continuous improvement, as well as refining local strategies and priorities.

Moving from pilot to scale. Collaboratives continue to make headway in developing and scaling pilot programs, although funding opportunities to scale have been limited, especially given the uncertainty of public dollars. Funding mechanisms can be leveraged to seed pilot initiatives, then expand "proven" practices by tapping into provider and funder networks to embed these practices more broadly. Consider helping collaboratives build "business plans" for scaling pilots and tapping into new investors – both public and private – and helping support a collaborative or community of practice to help funders and social investors understand what scaling "business plans" look like for communities. Additionally, consider helping funders frame their own investments as supporting "social sector research and development," promising practice adaptation, incentivizing systemic shifts, and/or backbone infrastructure.