

PUTTING EQUITY AT THE CENTER

The Opportunity Youth Forum

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THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
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The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) collaboratives seek a world in which all young people – especially youth who have been disconnected from school and work – have the opportunity to attain the skills needed to succeed regardless of their background or socioeconomic circumstances. In order to make this vision a reality, collaboratives are placing equity at the center of their collective impact efforts for opportunity youth. The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AIFCS) defines equity as just and fair inclusion in a society in which all can participate, prosper and reach their full potential.

Recognizing that community collaboratives operate within a context of structural inequity that makes equitable outcomes unlikely, OYF collaboratives know they must pay explicit attention to policies and practices that reinforce inequity in their communities. In fact, OYF collaboratives know that without constant attention to equity, their work to align and coordinate systems for opportunity youth can easily reinforce institutional patterns of disparity, negating their efforts to improve outcomes for these young people. By using an equity lens to focus on both systems change and the unique needs of priority populations (such as youth in foster care or boys and men of color), AIFCS is ensuring the needs of youth who face the most significant barriers to success are met.

Collaboratives across the OYF learning community are using a range of strategies to keep an explicit focus on equity in their work to improve outcomes for opportunity youth, including:

- **Creating a culture within the local community of focusing on equity**
OYF collaboratives are working to create a culture that focuses on and in some instances prioritizes equity by focusing on system and institutional change with equity at the

center. Some are beginning this process by embedding an equity lens into the practices of the collaborative's backbone. Others are beginning by bringing equity in to community-wide discussions of opportunity youth (or even broader discussions of youth, employment, or education) with local stakeholders, partners, employers, etc.

- **Using disaggregated data to document and track disparities**

OYF collaborative partners are using data to hold themselves accountable for both the community-wide opportunity youth agenda and to establish shared measurement systems to track progress toward goals. Cross-system data collection is helping OYF communities identify and track progress of young people entering and completing postsecondary education and achieving work readiness. This data can be disaggregated by race, gender, and other indicators to identify inequitable outcomes and suggest where resources and attention are most needed.

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- **Focusing on priority populations (such as foster-care youth or boys and men of color) to mitigate the effects of structural inequity**

OYF collaboratives operate with an understanding that youth and young adults

are often marginalized in community decision-making processes. Most have made youth and young adult engagement a central pillar of their work with an abiding belief that young people have the right, and are the most qualified, to represent their own interests, identify their challenges, and design their own solutions. In addition, OYF collaboratives seek to mitigate the effects of structural inequity by devoting additional resources to programming for particular populations who face the most difficult barriers to education and employment success.

- **Challenging existing institutionalized barriers**

Across the initiative, OYF collaboratives are working to change systems and institutions that create barriers to young people's education and employment success. Collaboratives do this by focusing on systems that create disparities and then collectively designing strategies to disrupt them, while also focusing on both administrative and legislative policy changes that protect and sustain better system outcomes for opportunity youth. At the same time, collaboratives focus on serving the unique needs of youth and young adults who are impacted the most by those disparities.

An explicit focus on equity is critical to collective impact efforts to improve outcomes for opportunity youth because it enables cross-system and sector partners to examine historical patterns of institutional and systemic disparities with an aim to address and dismantle these gaps as part of a comprehensive community-wide strategy to get to better outcomes. Absent such a focus, a collective impact effort may

at best move the needle on a set of community-wide indicators that do not address the root cause of the issue. At worst, a collective impact effort may actually reinforce and perpetuate institutional and systemic patterns of inequity.

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