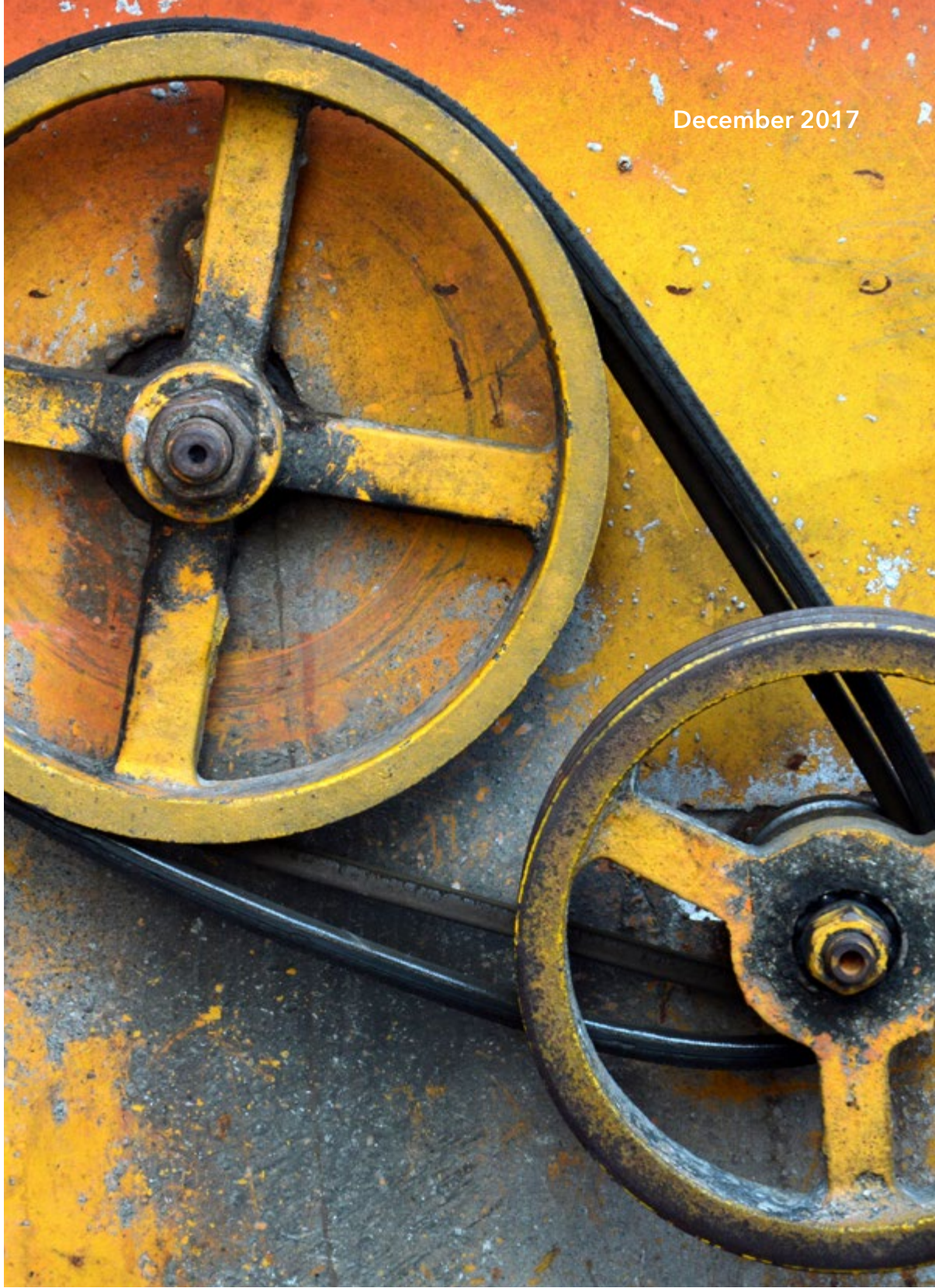


SHIFT HAPPENS

The Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund accelerates systems change

By Monique Miles and Yelena Nemoy



December 2017



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
Forum for Community Solutions

About the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions

The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solution's mission is to support community collaboration — including collective impact — that enables communities to effectively address their most pressing challenges. The Forum works to accomplish this mission by pursuing four complementary strategies including:

- 1) building awareness by documenting and lifting up impactful strategies and stories of success;
- 2) mobilizing stakeholders through knowledge and network development;
- 3) removing barriers by advocating for effective policy; and
- 4) catalyzing investment by encouraging funder partnerships.

www.aspencommunitysolutions.org

For all inquiries, please contact:

The Aspen Institute
2300 N Street NW
Eighth Floor
Washington, DC 20037

Phone: (202) 736-5800

Fax: (202) 467-0790

Copyright © by The Aspen Institute

Published in the United States of America in 2017 by The Aspen Institute

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Shift Happens

The Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund accelerates systems change

By Monique Miles and Yelena Nemoy

December, 2017



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
Forum for Community Solutions

About the Authors

Monique Miles is the Director of the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) and the Deputy Director of the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) at the Aspen Institute. Monique began her career in education reform working as a Case Manager at Youth Opportunity Boston. Yelena Nemoy is the Senior Program Manager for the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) at AFCS. Prior to joining the AFCS, Yelena was the Project Manager at the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC). AFCS funds 24 OYIF grantee communities with the goal of building and deepening pathways for Opportunity Youth to better achieve outcomes in education and employment.

Acknowledgements

This report was a collaborative effort and could not have been written without the assistance of many people. Our team would like to especially acknowledge and thank Nancy Martin for her contributions; Jobs for the Future; Equal Measure; Harder+Company Community Research, and the leaders and communities that comprise the 24 OYIF sites for their research and contributions, specifically Kathy Hamilton in Boston; Tamara Atkinson in Austin, and Nicole Yohalem in South King County Seattle. Finally, our deepest thanks to all of our funders for supporting this important work.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary1

Introduction4

Chapter 1 - Accelerating Progress in OYIF Communities6

Chapter 2 - Moving Toward Sustainable Policies and Practices
to Improve Outcomes for Opportunity Youth11

Chapter 3 - Creating a New Collaborative and Quickly Getting Partners Aligned in Austin, TX14

Chapter 4 - Multiple Waves of Collective Impact in Boston, MA18

Chapter 5 - Building a Vision for a System to Serve Opportunity Youth
in Seattle/South King County, WA22

Conclusion26

Endnotes27

Executive Summary

The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions' Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) seeks to support existing collaboratives and backbone organizations focused on building and deepening education and employment pathways for young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are out of school and work. Using a collective impact or community collaboration approach, the 24 OYIF collaboratives are bringing together multiple stakeholders to remove barriers and improve the systems that serve "opportunity youth," with a focus on creating education and career pathways to help these young people get back on track to education, employment, and, ultimately, successful adulthood.

The OYIF has accelerated progress in OYIF communities through an investment strategy that has helped communities focus on both programming for current opportunity youth and systems change. The OYIF has emphasized systems change in order to help communities improve outcomes for opportunity youth and expand their efforts to scale. In particular, the Aspen Forum has focused on three fundamental systemic shifts: 1) building and strengthening collaborative infrastructure, 2) building diverse stakeholder commitment, and 3) implementing and sustaining collective action among stakeholders. Together, these shifts are improving the ways opportunity youth are supported to reach better outcomes in OYIF communities.

The Aspen Forum investment strategy is accelerating progress in a network of communities seeking to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. The OYIF has aimed to implement strategies that improve outcomes for opportunity youth on a community and national scale by providing (and generating) financial support for communities' efforts, offering technical assistance to increase local capacity, convening stakeholders to encourage and facilitate cross-site learning and build momentum for the initiative, field and movement

"The Aspen Forum for Community Solution's investment strategy, particularly its focus on key systemic shifts in OYIF communities, has encouraged rapid systems change and has also spurred more effective programming and policies to support improved outcomes for opportunity youth."

by featuring successful practices and lessons learned through the initiative. Despite the modest size of the initial OYIF investment in each of the original 21 sites, the Aspen Forum has operated with a funding strategy that has accelerated progress in the OYIF communities through:

Encouraging communities to focus on both youth outcomes *and* systems change

The OYIF has emphasized tracking youth outcomes and as a result, collaboratives are working to implement strategies to meet the immediate needs of opportunity youth. At the same time, emphasis on systems change has meant these strategies are implemented in a context of collaboration, in which effective policy and practice changes can be identified, scaled and sustained.

Providing an initiative backbone with multi-year support

Across all of the collaboratives that received an OYIF investment, a backbone organization—or partnership between more than one organization—has provided critical infrastructure and capacity to drive the community-wide opportunity youth agenda. Multi-year backbone support has been crucial to the OYIF

because it has supported place-based investment aimed at designing a community-wide opportunity youth reconnection strategy, while also providing community collaboratives with a high level of flexibility in implementation.

Intentionally involving young people as partners in the work

As a condition of funding, OYIF collaboratives have agreed to include youth in decision-making processes. Youth voice permeates the collaboratives' approaches and the OYIF learning community's overall work. The OYIF approach has lifted up youth voice locally and nationally and has ensured systemic changes informed by those who are most impacted by the challenges and are best poised to benefit from the resolutions, are partners in problem identification and solution design.

Offering a clear framework, along with flexibility for local context

Communities in the OYIF network are connected by a 5-part framework. The framework includes collaborating for impact; building effective pathways; using data to guide decisions and assess impact; leveraging funding to support and sustain innovation; and developing supportive policies. At the same time, OYIF collaboratives have had significant flexibility in initiative design and implementation in their communities, allowing for tailored approaches that are designed to benefit from and leverage the unique context, assets and conditions in each community. The

“The OYIF has accelerated progress in OYIF communities through an investment strategy that has helped communities focus on both programming for current opportunity youth and systems change.”

OYIF framework informs the national learning agenda of the network and connects effective implementation strategies across communities.

Layering investment in the community for local buy-in and sustainability

The OYIF granted initial funding to 21 community collaboratives with amounts of up to \$600,000 in total over four years, with a requirement of a minimum one-to-one local match. The Aspen Forum has also layered on new and innovative investments for various subsets of OYIF grantees (e.g., Opportunity Works, 100,000 Opportunities Demonstration Cities Pathways to Careers Fund) all aimed at deepening impact in OYIF communities.

Facilitating learning to meet collaboratives' needs in real-time

The Aspen Forum hosts a national learning community designed to allow OYIF sites to exchange best practices and lessons learned. The convenings have accelerated the adoption of effective solutions at the local level while raising the profile of the work nationally. In addition to the bi-annual convenings, the OYIF operates multiple community of practice circles within the broader network of community grantee partners, including OYIF Learning Circles, 100K Demonstration Cities Practice Exchanges and Pathway to Career Fund Partner Meetings.

The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions is encouraging three key systemic shifts to impact, deepen and institutionalize structural change through the OYIF. In their effort to better meet the needs of opportunity youth, collaboratives are focusing on three areas of systems change key to improving outcomes for opportunity youth:

1. Building a collaborative infrastructure.
2. Building diverse stakeholder commitment.

3. Implementing and sustaining collective action among stakeholders.

Together, these changes comprise the systemic shifts necessary to get to better education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth. These systemic shifts are evidenced in OYIF communities and includes some of the following examples:

The Austin Opportunity Youth Collaborative has quickly aligned partners around a goal of improving education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth. The development of a collaborative where previously there was little structure, attracting a diverse group of stakeholders, making a compelling case for a focus on opportunity youth, and brokering incremental but significant systems change, has led to increased private and government resources, increased focus on youth leadership development, increased access to postsecondary education, and increased attention to employment training for opportunity youth.

The Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative has built on existing programming to move closer to an integrated system for all opportunity youth. In Boston the opportunity youth collaborative work has been done with multiple partners – youth and young adults chief among them – and has served to amplify and impact important issues, such as the school-to-prison pipeline, the need for education and employment pathways for older youth and young adults, and the need for employer engagement as a long-term strategy to reducing the number of opportunity youth across the city of Boston.

The South King County Opportunity Youth Advisory Group has developed a vision for a system to serve opportunity youth and is moving toward that goal with active partnerships among a wide range of

community stakeholders. With a shared vision and focus, The Advisory Group has been able to leverage significant new resources – \$4 million in private funding and \$12 million in public funding annually – devoted to the opportunity youth population of youth and young adults in Seattle/South King County.

The Aspen Forum for Community Solution’s investment strategy, particularly its focus on key systemic shifts in OYIF communities, has encouraged rapid systems change and has also spurred more effective programming and policies to support improved outcomes for opportunity youth.

Introduction

The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions (Aspen Forum) is a program, established in 2012, that seeks to spotlight and support communities successfully engaging leaders and advocates across all sectors — business, education, non-profit, philanthropy, and government — to collectively solve seemingly intractable challenges at the community level. Using a collective impact and/or community collaboration approach, the Aspen Forum supports community collaboratives and backbone organizations to address their communities' needs.

The Aspen Forum's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF), the first funding collaborative developed and led by the Aspen Forum in 2013, seeks to support existing collaboratives and backbones focused on building and deepening education and employment pathways for opportunity youth. Opportunity youth are defined as young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are out of school and work. Using a collective impact or community collaboration approach, OYIF collaboratives bring together multiple stakeholders and system leaders (e.g., schools, community-based programs, postsecondary institutions, employers, youth leaders, and government agencies) to remove barriers and improve the systems that serve opportunity youth. With a focus on creating education and career pathways to reconnect opportunity youth to school and employment, OYIF collaboratives are making it possible for young people to get back on track to successful adulthood.

In addition to removing barriers and creating pathways of reconnection, OYIF collaboratives are seeking to build awareness by identifying and sharing successful strategies; mobilizing stakeholders through knowledge and network development; advocating for effective policy; and catalyzing investments by encouraging public and private funder partnerships. The OYIF seeks to support community collaboratives to design innovative pilots and approaches aimed at advancing the most effective solutions for reconnecting

opportunity youth.

Rooted in the core values of equity and justice, the OYIF began as a group of 21 communities and has grown to 24, with additional growth on the horizon. By 2018, the OYIF network will evolve and expand to include new community collaboratives—including new rural, tribal and urban centers—eager to take part in bringing this important systems change work to scale across the country.

According to Equal Measure, the independent third-party evaluation partner of the initiative, the OYIF has accelerated progress in the OYIF communities through an investment strategy that has helped communities focus on both programming and systems change. Findings from the Year 2 evaluation report by Equal Measure, noted that the initiative offered communities a clear framework that has provided a consistent structure for communities to track and measure progress. At the same time, each community within the initiative has been granted the flexibility to embed the framework in their local context so that it complements and builds-on local community-based assets. The Forum's emphasis on systems change, in particular has led OYIF collaboratives to move toward more effective and sustainable policies and practices to improve outcomes for opportunity youth in their communities.

Communities have also been able to layer in national and local investments that have served to engender community buy-in and bolster sustainability. The emphasis and impact of the peer-to-peer and group learning opportunities, have been responsive to the needs of the collaboratives in real-time. Finally, by intentionally involving young people as partners in the work, collaboratives have designed solutions that meet the needs of young people, while also providing professional development and leadership opportunities that enable opportunity youth to achieve a community-wide impact.

The OYIF has emphasized systems change in order to help communities improve outcomes for opportunity youth and expand their efforts to scale. In particular, the Aspen Forum has focused on three fundamental systemic shifts:

1. Building and strengthening collaborative infrastructure.
2. Building diverse stakeholder commitment.
3. Implementing and sustaining collective action among stakeholders.

Together, these shifts are improving the ways opportunity youth are supported to reach better outcomes in OYIF communities.

This paper begins by exploring ways the Aspen Forum investment strategy is leading to accelerated progress in a network of communities seeking to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. Next, we examine three key systemic shifts the Aspen Forum is encouraging to drive and institutionalize change through the OYIF. Finally, we highlight systemic shifts in three OYIF communities:



**Austin,
Texas**



**Boston,
Massachusetts**



**South King County,
Washington**

In focusing on the Forum’s investment strategy and key systemic shifts in OYIF communities, we seek to draw attention to funding strategies that enable critical changes necessary to develop and sustain more effective programming and policies to improve outcomes for opportunity youth.

“Finally, by intentionally involving young people as partners in the work, collaboratives have designed solutions that meet the needs of young people, while also providing professional development and leadership opportunities that enable opportunity youth to achieve a community-wide impact.”

Chapter 1

Accelerating Progress in OYIF Communities



In 2013 the Aspen Forum created the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, a funders' collaborative to support the establishment and deepening of successful approaches to engaging opportunity youth that began by awarding one-year planning grants, followed by three-year implementation grants to 21 urban, tribal, and rural communities across the United States. The OYIF sought to inspire changes that improve outcomes for opportunity youth on a community and national scale, aiming to accomplish these changes by providing (and generating) financial support for communities' efforts, offering technical assistance to increase local capacity and impact, and convening stakeholders to encourage cross-site learning and build momentum for the effort and field by featuring successful practices and lessons learned through the initiative.

Many of the OYIF sites had a previously existing cross-sector collaborative with a focus on opportunity youth or agreed to form one. Communities also agreed to work toward higher rates of reconnection to education and employment among opportunity youth by adopting and scaling effective pathway approaches, including leveraging system and policy changes to remove barriers that undermine outcomes for opportunity youth.

Despite the modest size of the initial OYIF investment in each of the original 21 sites, the Aspen

Forum has operated with a funding strategy that has accelerated progress in OYIF communities through:

Encouraging communities to focus on both youth outcomes and systems change

Given that the OYIF emphasized tracking youth outcomes, OYIF collaboratives are working to implement strategies to meet the immediate needs of opportunity youth. Indeed, more than 1 million opportunity youth are touched by the systems meant to serve them across the network of 24 communities. At the same time, emphasis on systems change has meant these strategies are implemented in a context

“Indeed, more than 1 million opportunity youth are touched by the systems meant to serve them across the network of 24 communities. At the same time, emphasis on systems change has meant these strategies are implemented in a context of collaboration in which effective policy and practice changes can be scaled and sustained.”

of collaboration in which effective policy and practice changes can be scaled and sustained. OYIF communities are effectively shifting systems by building or deepening a collaborative infrastructure needed to plan, implement, and sustain a community-wide opportunity youth reconnection agenda; generating stakeholder buy-in and commitment to this agenda across a range of partners, actors and systems; and acting collectively to make changes in systems in order to increase the efficacy of education and career pathways for opportunity youth.¹

Providing an initiative backbone with multi-year support

OYIF grants were awarded to backbone organizations leading community collaboratives focused on building and deepening education and employment pathways for opportunity youth. These backbone organizations are defined as “organizations with a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies.”² Across all of the collaboratives that received an OYIF investment, a backbone organization – or organizations sharing the backbone role (known as a shared backbone) – have played a leadership and coordinating role. These organizations have provided critical infrastructure and capacity to drive the community-wide opportunity youth agenda. They have also played a lead role in establishing a vision and plan for reconnecting opportunity youth, with an emphasis on bringing together system leaders and programmatic partners to ensure alignment of goals and key activities. Additionally, these organizations have worked to establish shared measurement with community partners, including tracking metrics such as the number of youth to attain a secondary and postsecondary credential, or identifying the infrastructural shifts that are necessary to remove institutional barriers so that opportunity youth can learn and earn at the postsecondary level. Building public will and mobilizing philanthropic

partners have all been key functions of backbone organizations across the OYIF network.

“Youth voice permeates the collaboratives’ approaches and the OYIF learning community’s work overall.”

This type of multi-year backbone support is crucial to an initiative such as the OYIF because it invests in organizations that are poised to lead community-based change with a flexible implementation approach. OYIF evaluator Equal Measure has noted that while OYIF collaboratives have received critical support from partners, financial support for the backbone role has been uncommon, but is critical to sustaining the progress and impact of the collaborative. In the second year of implementation of the OYIF, while 16 of 21 collaboratives indicated partners had funded resources to support their efforts, only 12 indicated partners had committed financial resources to support the backbone. Of those 12, only 6 were multi-year commitments.³

Intentionally involving young people as partners in the work

As a condition of OYIF funding, collaboratives agreed to include youth in decision-making processes. Youth voice permeates the collaboratives’ approaches and the OYIF learning community’s work overall. In some instances, this has meant youth representation on the board or committees of the collaborative or a separate youth council serving in an advisory role. In other cases, young people have conducted focus groups or surveys to gather information about the experiences and needs of opportunity youth in their community. Across OYIF communities young people have played

a critical role in problem identification and solution design. The OYIF approach has engaged youth locally and nationally and has ensured systemic changes are informed by those they are intended to assist.

Offering a clear framework, along with flexibility for the local context

The Aspen Forum OYIF, working with Jobs for the Future as the implementation partner identified the following five areas of work that OYIF community partners are asked to take on as part of the initiative:

1) collaborating for impact, 2) building effective pathways, 3) using data to guide decision and assess impact, 4) leveraging funding to support and sustain innovation, and 5) developing supportive policies. Within each area, sites have significant flexibility in initiative design and implementation in their communities, allowing for the initiative to be tailored to the conditions of each community, including leveraging the unique assets in every place. For example, some communities have designed pathways to address the needs of all opportunity youth, while others have focused their efforts on a subset of opportunity youth, such as older youth who have completed a secondary credential but are under-attached to the workforce or youth in the foster care system. Given that OYIF-funded sites are at diverse stages of progress, have different levels of access to other sources of funding, prioritize specific sub-populations of opportunity youth and leverage different system partners based on their local needs and assets, etc. such flexibility has been crucial to driving local progress.

Layering investment in the community for local buy-in and sustainability

The OYIF granted initial funding to 21 community collaboratives with grants of up to \$600,000 in total over four years. The Aspen Forum required grantees to secure a minimum one-to-one match locally.

OYIF funds were used to launch and/or deepen the existing work of local communities, including engaging foundations, state, and federal government partners to support opportunity youth. At the same time, the OYIF has layered on new and innovative investments to bolster the original set of grants made to communities. In 2014, the Aspen Forum partnered with Jobs for the Future to secure a Social Innovation Fund grant – titled Opportunity Works – to support communities in the OYIF network to deepen their focus on boys and men of color and postsecondary completion. Several communities in the OYIF received Opportunity Works grants that built on their OYIF efforts. In 2015, the Aspen Forum launched the 100,000 Opportunities Demonstration Cities to support a subset of communities to leverage a national coalition of employers committed to better hiring, supporting, training and retaining opportunity youth. Most recently in 2017, the Aspen Forum launched the Pathways to Careers Fund (P2C) to deepen partnership pilots between community-based organizations and employers committed to training and hiring opportunity youth. Each of these efforts has afforded many of the OYIF communities the opportunity to build on their investment and deepen their community-wide efforts to improve outcomes for opportunity youth.

Facilitating peer-to-peer and group learning to meet collaboratives' needs in real-time

The Aspen Forum hosts a national learning community designed to allow OYIF sites to exchange best practices and lessons learned, and this has accelerated the adoption of effective solutions at the local level.⁴ The OYIF national learning community convenings for communities, national partners, technical assistance providers, youth and other leaders, actors and organizers across the field occur twice each year. In the spring, the OYIF convenes in an OYIF community, allowing participants to learn

more about the local opportunity youth ecology. In the fall, the OYIF convenes in Aspen, CO on the campus of the Aspen Institute to support field and movement building that advances the opportunity youth agenda more broadly. OYIF site leaders participate in monthly learning circles to discuss and share best practices related to topics they identify as important to their work, including topics such as data, reengagement, equity and improving outcomes for priority populations such as foster care and/or justice involved youth.

Chapter 2

Moving Toward Sustainable Policies and Practices to Improve Outcomes for Opportunity Youth



At its core, the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund investment strategy seeks to support communities to change systems in order to improve outcomes for opportunity youth at scale. Each OYIF collaborative is gathering data using a set of common indicators to document progress in two areas: 1) creation of policy and systems change necessary to provide appropriate programs and pathways for opportunity youth and 2) impact of these programs and pathways on reconnecting young people to education and employment opportunities. Thus the OYIF investment strategy guides the OYIF communities to work simultaneously toward both systems change and improved outcomes for current opportunity youth. The former—collaboratives’ progress in changing systems and providing new opportunities and pathways for opportunity youth—is particularly important to the scaling and sustainability of this effort and is the focus of this paper.

In their effort to better meet the needs of opportunity youth, OYIF collaboratives are focusing on three areas of systems change key to improving outcomes for opportunity youth: 1) building a collaborative infrastructure, 2) building diverse stakeholder commitment, and 3) implementing and sustaining collective action among stakeholders. Together, these changes comprise the systemic shifts necessary to better meet the education and employment preparation needs of opportunity youth.

Collaborative Infrastructure is the foundation on which the work of each of the OYIF collaboratives is built. At the core of the collaborative is the backbone organization, which brings partners and stakeholders together around a common vision, and creates enabling conditions for collaborative members to work together toward this goal. As collaborative infrastructure develops and/or deepens, ideally partners reflect the diversity of the community, demonstrate commitment to supporting the collaborative and backbone functions, and hold each other accountable for their work and contributions toward a common agenda. The OYIF collaboratives have engaged a variety of partners, especially youth partners. The collaboratives have received support from community members through in-kind resources and funding. The establishment of a collaborative infrastructure helps partners share ownership of the work, increases accountability and impacts practice changes.

The Year 2 evaluation report of the initiative states that as a group, the OYIF collaboratives made incredible progress in the area of collaborative infrastructure, spending time establishing deep partner relationships and structures for working toward a common vision. According to Equal Measure, a full 90 percent of collaboratives had key decision-makers at the table, and an equal number reported partners committing in-kind support to achieve

collaborative goals. Nearly every collaborative reported partner organizations leveraging partnerships and connections to advance the collaborative's agenda. Most collaboratives had partner organizations that dedicated personnel to the collaborative's efforts.⁵

Building Commitment to the collaborative's agenda is a critical component of advancing and embedding the collaborative's vision within the community and improving outcomes for opportunity youth at scale. As collaboratives have built public commitment, they have expanded the visibility of the shared agenda; increased awareness of opportunity youth within their communities, reframed the narrative about who opportunity youth are and the challenges they face; and increased new investments in programming and pathways for opportunity youth. In Year 2 of the OYIF, collaboratives increased their visibility within their communities, which in turn, generated support for future work. Nearly half of all collaboratives increased their communications capacity, and half of all collaboratives also publicly shared their goals with the broader community. Additionally, collaboratives have achieved important local advocacy and policy wins.⁶

Collective Action involves partners working together to provide opportunities and pathways for youth to succeed. Communities developing collective action have created and integrated new programs and organizations into existing pathways, while also scaling education and career pathways for opportunity youth. They have also made programmatic, policy, and funding changes to increase the quality of supports for opportunity youth. In many OYIF communities, organizations have begun to work together in new ways to better support the success of opportunity youth. In the second year of implementation, collaboratives worked at multiple levels to change policies and practices so that young people can thrive. Nearly all of the OYIF collaboratives piloted programs to fill service gaps. Nearly three-fourths of

collaboratives reported engaging with key decision makers and policy makers. More than half of OYIF sites worked to streamline processes for young people moving through pathways, such as through co-locating services or creating shared intake and referral processes. In six communities, partner organizations intentionally aligned their strategic plans or priorities with the collaborative's work.⁷

These three categories of systemic shifts do not represent stages that collaboratives move through sequentially; instead, they represent various aspects of the ecosystem of a community using a collective impact framework or other community based collaborative approach to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. We now present a more detailed look at how three OYIF collaboratives are making these shifts in their communities.

“In their effort to better meet the needs of opportunity youth, OYIF collaboratives are focusing on three areas of systems change key to improving outcomes for opportunity youth: 1) building a collaborative infrastructure, 2) building diverse stakeholder commitment, and 3) implementing and sustaining collective action among stakeholders.”

Chapter 3

Creating a New Collaborative and Quickly Getting Partners Aligned in Austin, TX



“The Aspen planning grant gave us the chance to have deep conversations about the need for alignment and an opportunity to strategically and thoughtfully plan better ways to work together to serve Opportunity Youth. Our biggest win is we have a true collaborative and we’re working together to create better outcomes for the young people in our community. That wasn’t the case prior to the OYIF investment.”

- Tamara Atkinson, Workforce Solutions Capital Area

Although there were multiple organizations doing effective work in the youth-services arena, Austin, Texas did not have an opportunity youth-focused collaborative prior to being awarded an OYIF planning grant in 2013.⁸ Today, the Austin Opportunity Youth Collaborative (AOYC) is strongly rooted in the community and is working to build a system for opportunity youth in Greater Austin. Workforce Solutions Capital Area, the leadership and governing body for the Austin/Travis County workforce system, has served as the backbone for the AOYC since its inception and provides strong community connectivity as well as financial and operational support. In the last four years, the Greater Austin community has moved from having no common understanding of the concept of “opportunity youth” to having this terminology commonly used across a wide swath of sectors in the community. In fact, collaborative members say there is now a community mandate for their work. With the support of the OYIF, the collaborative has been very successful in its efforts to make the case for the importance of equity, education, and employment for opportunity youth. Now, with the collaborative well-established and deep community trust, the AOYC is poised to accelerate its work to improve outcomes for opportunity youth in Austin and Travis County.

The ongoing conversation in the community about the needs of opportunity youth has led to

numerous systems change, including significant additional resources devoted to this population of youth and young adults. For instance, most local education funders, who had previously focused almost exclusively on traditional K-12 education, are now seeing opportunity youth as part of their funding portfolios. One large regional foundation has expanded its funding to include young people up to age 24 specifically to include opportunity youth as a priority area of focus. The City and County both now contribute funding and other resources to initiatives to support Opportunity Youth and the Collaborative’s priorities have been aligned with the region’s new Workforce Development Community Master Plan to ensure a community-wide focus on improving employment outcomes, and to honor funder and employer priorities aimed at growing the youth talent pipeline.

Additionally, youth voice has been prioritized like never before in Greater Austin. “No decision about youth, without youth” has been a central theme for AOYC since the inception of the collaborative, and AOYC seeks to ensure authentic, meaningful youth engagement in its efforts. As part of an initiative titled 100 Youth Voices, Austin area youth have been actively engaged in the work of the AOYC, including frequent inclusion in public events such as community panels and conference sessions. Through 100 Youth Voices, young people have participated as delegates

at convenings, provided testimony to government bodies, and become members of local non-profit boards of directors. To enhance the 100 Youth Voices initiative, AOYC has partnered with Leadership Austin, an organization with a mission to develop community leaders and offers leadership development programming specifically designed to engage opportunity youth and help them develop an action plan for engagement in the community around an issue of interest to them. This initiative has increased energy around youth engagement in Austin.

Finally, a series of administrative changes in the community college system are poised to have a big impact for opportunity youth in Greater Austin. Through AOYC, Austin's Youth Employment Partnership (YEP), a collaboration of 4 youth-serving organizations that helps young people transition from high school to postsecondary or employment training, is working with Austin Community College (ACC) to ensure it is better prepared to support opportunity youth. AOYC partnered with the Adult Education Division at ACC to create a dedicated College Prep course that helps students bypass developmental courses and provides referrals and wrap-around supports from case managers at YEP partner agencies. The College Prep course is supplemented with a weekly Life Skills class (including instruction in financial literacy, stress management, and study habits), and graduates continue to receive supports through their first year of college.

In addition to these new courses and supports, AOYC and ACC have made the following changes to encourage more opportunity youth to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education:

- ACC has agreed to prioritize the enrollment of opportunity youth referred from YEP; lower the enrollment age from 18 to 16; and delay the start of the summer session by 1 week to allow recent graduates to enroll.

- AOYC has leveraged private and federal funds to cover the costs of textbooks, school supplies, testing fees, and tuition, as well as stabilization and other supports (such as childcare assistance, bus passes, meals to address food insecurity, and stipends). Going forward, ACC has also agreed to absorb all tuition, textbooks, and testing costs thanks to a grant they received for this work.
- AOYC has worked with ACC to remove financial holds for opportunity youth seeking to re-enroll at the college. Feedback from the Youth Voice initiative revealed that financial holds accrued during previous attempts at pursuing a postsecondary education. Even when youth had sponsor organizations or financial aid to help with tuition, these funds could not be used to cover previous fines or account balances (many of which were past due balances from dropped courses or unpaid book loan fees). Through a joint effort, ACC has now established a fund at the ACC Foundation to clear financial holds between \$0 and \$100 for AOYC-affiliated students, and AOYC has established a private fund to assist with amounts above \$100. This policy has already helped 10 students reengage with postsecondary education during the Fall 2017 pilot semester, and AOYC expects to serve a much larger number of young people in the future.
- AOYC has also partnered with the Austin College Access Network (ACAN), another local collaborative, to share data between ACC and local community-based organizations, so that it is possible to identify in real-time when students drop out, transfer, move, or reenroll (via FERPA waivers). This makes it possible to implement an informal "early warning system"

as students with shortfalls in financial aid, those who are in danger of falling below the satisfactory academic progress measure, and/or those who do not reenroll after the first year, are identified to receive additional supports. AOYC is eager to include the Austin School District in this data system in the future.

These types of administrative shifts are not easy to make in a community college system that operates within a larger ecosystem of policies and procedures that have been created primarily to accommodate adult learners. However, these shifts in structural administrative policy are critical to removing the types of barriers that opportunity youth face in their efforts to attain a postsecondary education.

Building a strong employment pipeline for opportunity youth in greater Austin is also a high priority for AOYC. By working with several business associations and employers, AOYC partners are actively building high-quality internship and work opportunities that have the unique needs of Opportunity Youth in mind. Youth-serving partners provide training and preparation opportunities that align with the needs of the workforce as well as support youth with case-management services to bolster their success.

The development of a collaborative in Greater Austin where there previously was little structure, attracting a diverse group of stakeholders, making a compelling case for a focus on opportunity youth, and brokering incremental but significant administrative policy changes, has created a strong community-wide focus on, and commitment to, improving outcomes for opportunity youth.

“The ongoing conversation in the community about the needs of opportunity youth has led to numerous systems change, including significant additional resources devoted to this population of youth and young adults.”

Chapter 4

Multiple Waves of Collective Impact in Boston, MA



“With the OYIF, we’ve built on some strong existing programs and added bridges to support opportunity youth in accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education and careers. The challenge that remains is the real synergy—getting all the workforce and education programs working together in a system.”

- Kathy Hamilton, Boston Private Industry Council

There were numerous programs and initiatives to improve outcomes for struggling students and young people not connected to education or employment in Boston when the community was awarded an OYIF grant in 2013.⁹ In fact, the city had spent more than a decade focusing on disconnected youth and had an impressive menu of alternative education options, including a re-engagement system for high school dropouts that served as a model to other communities across the country. Additionally, a public-private collaboration among city leaders had led to a significant increase in college attendance and completion among Boston Public School (BPS) graduates. The national opportunity youth movement and the Aspen OYIF gave Boston the chance to draw from both movements to create pathways into postsecondary and careers for disconnected youth.

For the past four years, the Boston Private Industry Council and Boston Opportunity Agenda (a cradle-to-career initiative) have served jointly as the backbone of the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC), made up of 80 different partners across the city of Boston representing community-based organizations, BPS, philanthropy, city and state agencies, and postsecondary institutions. The OYC has raised visibility of the opportunity youth population and its potential as an untapped resource in the regional economy; set out to dismantle the school-to-prison

pipeline; strengthened connections between the community’s workforce investment, alternative education, and K-12 education systems; and built stronger bridges to community colleges. It has done so through a collaborative process that includes listening to youth, conducting research, piloting new approaches, and engaging a broad base of support to drive solutions.

The financial support and national learning community of the OYIF, along with coaching support from Jobs for the Future, have helped opportunity youth advocates and various stakeholders organize as a collaborative to greatly increase visibility of existing work and spur new interest in developing and improving education and employment pathways for opportunity youth in Boston. For instance, after a BPS Deputy Superintendent attended an Aspen OYIF convening, the district began a major effort to end the school-to-prison pipeline in Boston. This includes efforts to decrease the use of disciplinary suspension, increase social emotional learning and trauma-sensitive practices and decrease chronic absenteeism. The district has even created a management level Opportunity Youth Coordinator position to supervise the district’s attendance team and oversee the mayor’s homelessness initiative.

Aspen’s elevation of opportunity youth nationally has created a wave of interest in Boston, which has

helped make all aspects of efforts to connect different sub-populations more visible. OYIF work in Boston has also led to a reaffirmation of commitment to the community's previously existing, but often forgotten alternative education programs for opportunity youth who have dropped out of high school. Local funders are increasing their support for a range of activities related to the work of the OYC. For example, a regional foundation recently put out a request for proposals to fund alternative education programs in Boston and throughout New England. As one collaborative member puts it: "People who used to run away from opportunity youth are now running towards them. It is now popular in Boston to identify with the OYC." Partners have been inspired by the OYIF to focus more attention on improving outcomes for opportunity youth in Boston.

While the OYC has built commitment to this work among a diverse group of stakeholders, it has invested most heavily in having young people at the table as equal partners. Building on a strong history of youth development, youth organizing, and youth-led change in Boston, the OYC has carefully considered how best to set the table so young people are leading along with adults. The OYC's Youth Voices Project (YVP) is composed of trained youth leaders who reach out to opportunity youth and advise the OYC. YVP's Peer Leaders provide research and outreach strategies to help the OYC better engage youth in Boston, and they define and implement their own advocacy strategies around policy issues they identify as important. With youth as the bedrock of all of its work and youth leaders involved in all levels of decision-making, the OYC has successfully kept the community conversation focused on youth as assets and has been successful in identifying the right opportunities and structural changes that are necessary to meet the needs of young people in Boston.

During initial planning on how best to leverage OYIF resources, action research conducted by the

first cohort of youth from YVP identified that the city's population of 11,000 opportunity youth skewed heavily toward 20-24 year-olds with a high school degree (outnumbering dropouts more than two to one), while existing programming for opportunity youth skewed toward struggling students and high school dropouts. This led to OYC efforts to improve college bridging for older opportunity youth with a high school diploma, with the establishment of the Connection Center as the centerpiece.

Operated by X-Cel Education, the Connection Center is a one-stop drop-in resource center where opportunity youth with a secondary credential can get connected to appropriate training, education, and career opportunities through one-on-one coaching and knowledgeable guidance, placement, and follow-up services. In addition to developing the Connection Center, the OYC sought to create more program seats for opportunity youth by contracting with four high-performing partner programs to provide college bridging and navigation support, employment coaching and referrals, and job training for opportunity youth. Connection Center staff continue to build a network of local organizations that will both refer to and accept referrals from the Center, and the OYC continues to work with community colleges to increase student supports for opportunity youth on their campuses.

"Building on a strong history of youth development, youth organizing, and youth-led change in Boston, the OYC has carefully considered how best to set the table so young people are leading along with adults."

Another system inroad made in Boston has been with adult workforce development providers. Two training programs, the Asian American Civic Association (AACA) and Jewish Vocational Services (JVS), have used this grant to focus more on serving youth and young adults. In fact, after successfully providing employment services for opportunity youth through OYIF, AACA successfully applied to do the same as a WIOA youth vendor. In a recent development, Boston Career Link, one of Boston's America's Job Centers, has co-located the Connection Center in its site, to extend its services for this population.

The Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative has leveraged the OYIF to draw on the city's previous work on dropout prevention and reengagement strategies, including increasing college attendance and completion rates to deepen pathways to postsecondary and careers for opportunity youth. The collaborative has done this work with a wide array of committed partners which has allowed the OYC to amplify important issues, such as the school-to-prison pipeline, the need for education and employment pathways for various groups of young people, and the need for employer engagement. The collaborative continues to strive to encourage existing adult training programs and community colleges to map backwards toward an integrated system for opportunity youth.

Chapter 5

Building a Vision for a System to Serve Opportunity Youth in Seattle/South King County, WA



“Once there was a vision of a robust system and people understood this was about system-building and not scaling up a program, folks saw themselves as part of that system and momentum continued to build.”

- Nicole Yohalem, Community Center for Education Results

When Washington State’s Open Doors dropout retrieval law went into effect in 2011-12, allowing state K-12 education formula funding (\$6,300 per student annually) to follow students outside of public schools for high school completion, very few programs were operating and those that had begun were operating in isolation.¹⁰ With an estimated 20,000 opportunity youth in the South King County/South Seattle region, it was clear individual program solutions would not be sufficient, and partners involved in the area’s Road Map Project, a cradle-to-career initiative, wanted to get ahead of this dropout recovery opportunity to avoid what some feared could be a proliferation of unconnected, perhaps low-quality reengagement programs. The Road Map Project’s backbone, the Community Center for Education Results (CCER), believed that an OYIF grant could provide an opportunity to create a linked system of programs with a shared vision and structures, along with a focus on postsecondary success.

OYIF support allowed the Opportunity Youth Advisory Group of the Road Map Project to develop an action plan to build a regional system to reconnect opportunity youth to education and employment pathways. The collaborative worked hard to develop a shared vision and shared structures among reengagement providers, with the goal of moving toward an increasingly coordinated system

for reengaging youth with a robust and differentiated program supply, improved program quality, increased coordination among programs, and increased access for young people. Since late 2014, the collaborative has developed systems for shared marketing, outreach, and referrals; shared metrics, data collection and reporting; shared quality improvement and professional development opportunities and shared employer engagement and college/career navigation.

The Opportunity Youth Advisory Group, one of several work groups of the Road Map Project, developed the original system-building action plan and continues to serve as the OYIF collaborative for South King County, meeting quarterly to examine data, track how the work is going and identify new opportunities for partnership and alignment. In addition, CCER launched the Reengagement Provider Network, a community of practice now co-convened by CCER and King County Employment and Education Resources division, to support regional coordination, professional development and data-driven learning and improvement.

Having a community-wide vision and system-building strategy for opportunity youth, along with the growth of programming, has leveraged significant new resources – building on the Aspen OYIF investment – devoted to opportunity youth in Seattle/South King County, including:

- United Way of King County’s Reconnecting Youth campaign is investing \$20 million in reengagement programs and system-building to reengage 9,590 opportunity youth and ensure 4,795 opportunity youth complete secondary credential between 2014-2020.
 - South King County is one of seven Opportunity Works communities receiving federal Social Innovation Fund (SIF) support from JFF and Aspen to reconnect underserved young adults with education and employment on-ramps and pathways. This investment of \$720,000 over three years is accompanied by support from a JFF coach.
 - The Raikes Foundation seed-funded two reengagement system infrastructure positions at King County Employment and Education Resources, allowing the County to step into a leadership role across the system; both positions have been sustained by King County.
 - The Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County was awarded \$700,000 for a federal Performance Partnership Pilot (P3) to pilot a sequenced Open Doors/ WIOA co-enrollment strategy, strengthen regional outreach and referral efforts, and advance system data alignment and sharing for programs serving opportunity youth in 2016-17.
 - The Seattle region is one of five Annie E. Casey Foundation Generation Work partners. SkillUp Washington is working with various local partners to embed paths to employment in state-funded dropout recovery programs, connecting low-income young adults with opportunities in trades and logistics and with training for jobs in the maritime, construction, and advanced manufacturing industries. This investment is \$800,000 over three years.
 - The 100K Opportunities Initiative, with support from the Schultz Family Foundation and Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, are investing \$500,000 over three years to support South King County’s efforts to connect opportunity youth with education-friendly employment through opportunity fairs and partnerships between 100K employers and reengagement programs.
 - The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions’ Pathways to Careers Fund is investing \$200,000-400,000 in South King County’s efforts to create, accelerate, and expand career pathways to improve job placement and retention for opportunity youth.
 - The recently passed Best Starts for Kids tax levy allocates \$2.4 million per year over the next six years to reconnecting opportunity youth to education and employment, in addition to addressing the school-to-prison pipeline in King County.
 - An estimated \$11 million in state K-12 Basic Education Funding (Open Doors) supported local reengagement programming in 2016.
 - In 2017 King County is piloting, with support from Ballmer Family Giving, opportunity youth employment training services that by 2018 will likely be funded through a combination of Basic Food Employment & Training and County funds.
- Before there was an opportunity youth table, various funding sources supported reengagement and youth work in some areas of the region, but in a disjointed way. Since OYIF support provided the impetus for the development of a cohesive regional plan for an

opportunity youth system in Seattle/South King County, an estimated total of \$4 million annually in private funding and \$12 million annually in public funding has been devoted to this population of youth and young adults.¹¹

The Opportunity Youth Advisory Group is now turning its efforts to improving program quality and has identified the five highest volume Open Doors programs in the region—which serve a total of about 1,500 young people each year—to offer targeted capacity building through ongoing continuous improvement coaching and other supports. Expanding embedded college and career navigation and behavioral health supports, including social and emotional learning, within the reengagement system, is another priority. Even with the Open Doors policy in place, the Advisory Group is continually working with the state on improvements, such as identifying new indicators of academic progress, for which programs can bill and moving from a 10 to 12-month funding formula.

OYIF-supported work in South King County began with a vision of a coordinated system of youth reengagement, and it is moving steadily in that direction with active partnership among a wide range of community stakeholders. As opportunities arise that help the collaborative move closer to that vision, it is poised to leverage them. Reconnection efforts are paying off: as of April 2017, over 2,500 youth are enrolled in best-fit education and employment opportunities and since January 2016, 829 reengaged youth have earned a high school or college credential.

“Having a community-wide vision and system-building strategy for opportunity youth, along with the growth of programming, has leveraged significant new resources - building on the Aspen OYIF investment - devoted to opportunity youth in Seattle/South King County.”

Conclusion

Through its innovative funding strategy, the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions has accelerated systemic change in a network of communities seeking to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. Despite a relatively small investment in each of the 24 OYIF communities, the Aspen Forum has accelerated progress by using a funding strategy which has included encouraging communities to focus on both youth outcomes and systems change; providing an initiative backbone with multi-year support; intentionally involving young people as partners in the work; offering a clear framework, along with flexibility for the local context; layering investment in the community for local buy-in and sustainability; and facilitating learning to meet collaboratives' needs in real-time.

The central aim of the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund is to encourage communities to change systems to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. OYIF-funded collaboratives have focused on three fundamental systemic shifts: 1) building and strengthening collaborative infrastructure, 2) building diverse stakeholder commitment, and 3) implementing and sustaining collective action among stakeholders. Evaluation data suggest collaboratives have been making these shifts in their communities, making it much easier for them to establish and scale best practices to better meet the education and employment preparation needs of opportunity youth in their communities.

“Through its innovative funding strategy, the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions has accelerated systemic change in a network of communities seeking to improve outcomes for opportunity youth.”

Endnotes

- 1 Equal Measure. (2017). *Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund Annual Evaluation Report: Year 2 Implementation*. http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Aspen-OYIF-Year-2-Annual-Report_Final_11May17.pdf
- 2 Corcoran, Mimi, Fay Hanleybrown, Adria Steinberg. (2012). *Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth*. Seattle, WA: FSG. <https://www.fsg.org/publications/collective-impact-opportunity-youth>
- 3 Equal Measure. (2017). *Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund Annual Evaluation Report: Year 2 Implementation*. http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Aspen-OYIF-Year-2-Annual-Report_Final_11May17.pdf
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Young, Molly and Tamara Atkinson. Interviewed by Nancy Martin. Telephone interview. June 7, 2017.
- 9 Hamilton, Kathy and Kristin McSwain. Interviewed by Nancy Martin. Telephone interview. June 15, 2017.
- 10 Yohalem, Nicole. Interviewed by Nancy Martin. Telephone interview. June 5, 2017.
- 11 Private funding includes intentionally aligned investments made by the United Way of King County, Raikes Foundation, Schultz Family Foundation, Ballmer Group, Aspen Forum on Community Solutions, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Public funding includes Open Doors/K12 funding, Federal Performance Partnership grant, and Social Innovation Fund support, but does not include \$2.4 million annually in Best Starts for Kids funding, which will begin in January 2018.