

INCLUDING ALL VOICES

Achieving opportunity youth collaboration success through youth and adult engagement

By Yelena Nemoy and Monique Miles

January 2018




THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
Forum for Community Solutions

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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.

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About the Authors

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Introduction

The concept of youth engagement is central to the youth development field and involves young people as active agents in their own growth and development, rather than passive recipients of programs or services provided by others. Increasingly, youth-serving programs and systems are recognizing that they cannot effectively develop and implement programming without youth involvement in the work. The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions' Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) communities have made youth engagement a central pillar of their work with a strong commitment to the concept of "nothing about us without us" and an abiding belief that young people have the right to represent their own interests, identify their challenges and design their own solutions.

Authentic youth engagement offers youth-serving organizations and systems important expertise and partnership, resulting in youth and adults coming together to co-construct systems that are more informed and effective. At the same time, youth engagement provides young people with critical youth development opportunities to refine leadership and other important skills.

This paper frames a continuum of youth engagement approaches from initial youth consultation to youth organizing and youth-led change; draws on experiences in OYIF communities to share examples of significant youth engagement at different points along the continuum; and provides suggestions for how to expand youth engagement efforts in the field so youth are drivers at the local and national levels of improving outcomes for opportunity youth.

The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions and The Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund

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 social and economic challenges. Using a collective impact and/or community collaboration approach, the Aspen Forum supports community collaboratives and backbone organizations to address their communities' needs.

"It's important for adults to make sure to leave space for youth to shape the work. Step back and let it happen, then you can think about how you can support young people so their work is executed effectively."

- Amanda Shabowich, Boston Youth Service Network Youth Council & Youth Voice Project

The Aspen Forum's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF), the first funding collaborative developed and led by the Aspen Forum, seeks to support existing collaboratives and backbone organizations focused on building and deepening education and employment pathways for opportunity youth, young people between the ages of 16-24 who are out of school

and work. Using a collective impact or community collaboration approach, the 24 OYIF collaboratives bring together multiple stakeholders (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.

The Aspen Forum is working with OYIF communities to encourage them to engage youth with three goals in mind: 1) demonstrating metric impact; 2) improving systems and programs for youth, based on youth expertise in the realities of their lives and viable solutions to challenges they face, and 3) developing a pipeline of youth leaders with the skills and expertise to lead this work in the future. The Aspen Forum OYIF collaborates with Opportunity Youth United (OYU), a grassroots movement of young people and allies working to increase opportunity and decrease poverty in America, to support youth leadership development at the local, state, and national levels.

"Authentic youth engagement offers youth-serving organizations and systems, important expertise and partnership, providing adults with information about effective programming and supports for youth."

Youth engagement strategies in OYIF communities and the continuum of youth engagement

“Through our OYIF-funded work we are learning it’s not hard to ask youth what is working and what isn’t. It’s usually very enlightening and very helpful.”

- Nicole Yohalem, The Roadmap Project, South King County, WA



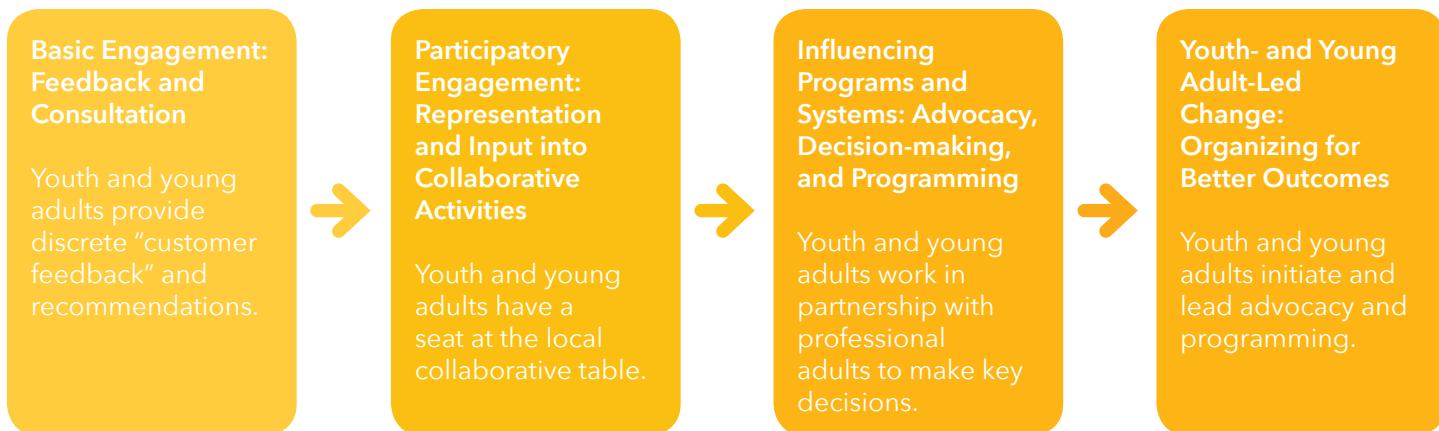
From its inception, the Aspen Forum has taken on the disability rights movement's concept of "nothing about us without us." OYIF collaboratives have thought deeply about the role of youth as partners in development and delivery of programs and services and have involved youth in discussions and decisions about programming, strategy and policy. Instead of designing programs and systems *for* them, OYIF collaboratives have strived to design systems change strategies in *partnership with* youth. This has meant not only enlisting and supporting young people to share their voices, but preparing adults to hear and listen to these voices and demonstrate a commitment to their ideas in future efforts.

In fact, to be authentic, youth engagement must involve youth participating in youth-adult partnerships that are designed to ensure that both young people and adults contribute to and learn from the experience. Without reciprocal approaches to learning that are integrated and include both youth and adult learning needs, youth may appear to have decision-

making roles but may in fact have little input and simply serve as tokens or decorations. Across the OYIF communities, collaboratives are challenging themselves to facilitate opportunities for youth to develop as leaders so that they are equipped with the tools necessary to effectively share their knowledge and lead their communities to better outcomes for themselves, their families and their peers.

The Aspen Forum has observed a continuum of youth engagement in OYIF communities, with four distinct stages ranging from youth serving as sources of information and recipients of services, to youth serving as decision-makers, leaders, and organizers. While OYIF collaboratives have started at various points along this continuum, most have moved toward more authentic youth engagement over the course of three years of implementation.

Continuum of Youth and Young Adult Engagement



OYIF collaboratives are engaged in a range of youth engagement activities representing each of the four stages of the youth engagement continuum.

1) Basic Engagement: Feedback and Consultation

Across the OYIF, collaboratives are consulting youth to obtain their suggestions and feedback and test assumptions to improve programming for opportunity youth. This consultation helps collaboratives identify problems and consider possible solutions and is often obtained through interviews, focus groups, or surveys with young people. Seeking youth and young adult feedback and consultation is a basic youth engagement practice providing important feedback on programming; each OYIF community is combining this with additional strategies from stages two through four of the youth engagement continuum as described below.

2) Participatory Engagement: Representation and Input into Collaborative Activities

OYIF collaboratives have fashioned a variety of ways to invite formal youth participation and representation in their work. In South King County, the Community Center for Education Results partnered with the local community-based organization, SOAR, to convene a strong existing Youth Council to inform development of the Opportunity Youth Action Plan. In Del Norte, California, the Del Norte County and the Adjacent Tribal Lands Opportunity Youth Initiative gathered stories of opportunity youth in a project meant to tell young people's stories to build public empathy and support for improving outcomes for opportunity youth in the community. Many OYIF collaboratives have added youth representation to the collaborative table, further infusing youth voice into the formal structure of the collaborative.

Hopi Opportunity Youth Initiative: Encouraging and Listening to Youth Voice

During its planning year, the Hopi Opportunity Youth Initiative (HOYI) hosted Youth Listening Sessions to gather insight and help raise the voices of Hopi and Tewa youth. Subsequent information gathering has involved youth assistants working through a summer internship program described below. "We've been thoughtful and had the foresight to use the help of youth in designing how to implement this work. All the work to date has been informed by their opinions and voices," says Kyle Knox, HOYI Program Coordinator. Recently, HOYI created a Youth Advisory Council (YAC) to strengthen youth input by bringing together youth representatives of various youth groups on Hopi. Lexie James, a recent high school graduate who oversees the YAC, plans training and workshops for YAC members. "Youth want to better themselves and raise awareness," says James, "and they are willing to meet you half way if you make the effort to listen to them."

3) Influencing Programs and Systems: Advocacy, Decision-making, and Programming

Some OYIF communities are preparing and supporting youth to engage in advocacy for improved programming and policies, often beginning with participation as a member of a youth advisory council or subcommittee of the collaborative. Where there is strong youth-adult partnership, youth input and decision-making can lead to important new programming ideas. For example, Boston Youth Voice Project (YVP) members' research identified that the city's population of opportunity youth skewed toward 20-24 year-olds with a high school degree and made recommendations to the Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative, focusing the Collaborative's attention on this critical need and leading to the creation of the Connection Center, a one-stop drop-in resource center where older youth can get connected to appropriate training, education, and career opportunities through one-on-one coaching, guidance, placement, and follow-up services. The Connection Center is the first of its kind in the country and is one of the major efforts and successes of the city's recent reengagement efforts.

In South King County, Washington, the Community Center for Education Results partnered with South King County and the United Way to employ a team of young adult peer connectors as outreach workers to facilitate the flow of information about available re-engagement options and to help opportunity youth access the programs that best fit their needs. The Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative regularly deploys youth to tell their stories through speaking engagements, legislative briefings, blogs and media outlets. The collaborative is intentional about preparing youth to tell their stories so that they can be effective advocates, not just "window dressing."

Southern Maine Transition Network: Youth in All Roles, with Major Supports

Emily Thielmann of the Southern Maine Transition Network reports that young people play active roles in the network like adult partners do. They attend meetings; they sit on local, state, and national committees. They take on a variety of advisory roles. They have become paid interns and even staff. They are trainers, actively engaging with partners to train their staff about working with opportunity youth. They are part of the public policy and practice conversations we are having with network partners. They attend multiple site visits by funders. They are part of the public awareness and education campaign, helping to provide materials and outreach to the larger community about their experiences. They help coordinate and provide trainings at national convenings. Basically, youth are asked to do almost anything that a staff member may do. However, staff and partners are more intentional about providing mentoring, guidance, and ongoing support for youth and young adults. Support also includes recognizing that sometimes – in addition to coming together with adults – it is valuable for youth to get together just with other young people.

4) Youth- and Young Adult-led Change: Organizing for Better Outcomes

The OYIF and several OYIF collaboratives are supporting a network of young leaders committed to creating a more equitable world through actions and campaigns across a wide-range of issues, but especially related to public investment in opportunity youth. Opportunity Youth United (OYU) is a youth-led organizing strategy with a goal of building a network of current and former opportunity youth to drive change and expand public investment at the local, state, and national levels in opportunity youth and in combatting structural barriers, such as the school to prison pipeline or policies that marginalize immigrants. OYU partners with the Aspen Forum to support youth leaders in OYIF communities. The Aspen Forum includes youth leaders and a youth leadership track at all of its OYIF convenings, and OYIF communities are striving to continuously improve their youth engagement efforts. For example, Austin's *100 Youth Voices* initiative is preparing a cadre of youth and young adults to be leaders in the community by offering a leadership development program specifically designed to engage opportunity youth and help them develop an action plan for engagement in the community.

The Boston Youth Voice Project (YVP), comprised of trained youth leaders who reach out to opportunity youth and advise the Boston Opportunity Youth Council (OYC), has helped the OYC successfully identify the right structural and programmatic changes necessary to meet the needs of opportunity youth in Boston. YVP is part of a larger ecosystem of youth voice, engagement, leadership, and organizing in Boston in which youth are well-positioned to act quickly and effectively to effect change.

Youth-led Leadership Development: EMPLOY's Youth Action Team

Nearly two years into implementation of its collective impact efforts, New Orleans' EMPLOY Collaborative realized their structure did not reflect their stated value of youth voice. In response, they developed the EMPLOY Youth Action Team (YAT), a youth-led initiative advocating for and engaging disconnected youth who have skills that often go unrecognized and unsupported. The YAT intentionally brings together diverse young leaders from across the city to operate as a team or subcommittee of the OYIF-funded collaborative. They meet monthly for leadership development on topics such as networking, public speaking, strategic planning and then uses these skills through the implementation of a project they design. In addition, the YAT provides participants with stipends and opportunities to attend national convenings (e.g., of the OYIF, Opportunity Youth United, and the Opportunity Youth Network), which can help them to understand the national landscape of this work. Two YAT members serve on the 14-member EMPLOY Leadership Team.

As the wider community began hearing about the YAT, the group received many opportunities to engage in the community (e.g., focus groups, panels, media interviews). "We haven't had to try to get them on the community's radar. The community wants to bring youth voice in, and EMPLOY has become a go-to for those looking for youth voice," reports Nicole Jolly, EMPLOY Senior Program Manager. "We try to clarify requests to avoid opportunities that are tokenizing, but let the members decide."

A Call to Action: Youth Voice in Collective Impact Work

“It’s about moving beyond youth development to thinking of the things you have to do to set a table where young people are leading in the same way everyone else is leading at the table. You don’t just do that immediately.”

- Kristin McSwain, Boston Opportunity Agenda, Boston, MA



While youth engagement is challenging work, the potential rewards are tremendous. OYIF collaborative leaders report the following benefits of youth engagement in their opportunity youth-focused work:

- Young people gain knowledge, skills, confidence, and opportunities for connection, networking and building social capital – experiences that young adult leaders need in order to build professional experience and expertise that will enable them to take ownership of this work in the future.
- Adults gain the ability to better understand and value young people's experiences and leadership.
- With youth and young adults helping to co-design programming, organizations improve their offerings, increase impact and are better able to attract youth and young adult participants and funders.
- Communities and collaboratives are better able to coordinate services for youth and young adults and direct resources where they are most needed, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for opportunity youth.
- Engaging youth and young adults provides a sustainable pipeline of leadership.
- The field is strengthened by policy/advocacy co-led by youth and young adult experts, such as the Opportunity Youth United Policy Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America.¹
- Community and stakeholder engagement in the initiative are increased.

OYIF collaborative leaders make the following suggestions for communities getting started in youth engagement work:

¹ Opportunity Youth United, <http://oyunited.org/policy-solutions>

Employ strategies to limit and overcome adultism

A system of beliefs that adults are smarter, more prepared, and better leaders than children and youth (and even young adults), or adultism, is one of the most serious challenges to authentic youth engagement. Combined with the inherent power imbalance between adult professionals and opportunity youth and young adults, adultism frequently serves to limit youth and young adult voice in decision-making.

One of the first activities of the newly formed Youth Action Team in New Orleans was hosting an Undoing Adultism training for all members of the EMPLOY Collaborative facilitated by Rethink New Orleans, a local youth advocacy organization staffed entirely by young people. “This experience was incredibly valuable to everyone involved and laid the foundation for a mind-set shift,” says EMPLOY Senior Program Manager, Nicole Jolly. “A year later, it still comes up in conversations, both with adults and young people. To continue addressing adultism, we have begun offering the training once a year.” Adults need to change their approaches and practices. They need to trust the power of relationships and be patient. They also need to respect youth and young adults as peers, not resources, representatives, or customers.

Ensure adequate adult preparation

Often youth are the only ones expected to prepare for engagement, even though adults often lack the skills and abilities necessary for working in partnership with youth. Youth are taught how to act, dress, speak and must enter a confusing world of jargon and patronizing assumptions with adults unprepared to see them as important contributors.

Institutions should make sure adults are prepared to receive and partner with young people before youth are invited to the table. As part of this preparation,

it can be helpful to learn about and discuss adulthood and consider whether meetings are accessible to youth. The Southern Maine Youth Transitions Network has spent considerable energy changing adult views through trainings, coaching, and technical assistance designed and led by youth and young adults.

Provide youth and young adults with adequate skill development and necessary supports

Youth need professional development and other supports to properly engage in collaborative decision-making in similar ways to adults. At the same time, youth and young adults should be compensated for their time and expertise, just as all adults are compensated as experts. In fact, with real-world experience that can help inform more effective solutions, youth hold critical knowledge. Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative's youth-led Youth Voice Project (YVP) is composed of youth leaders trained by facilitators from the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and the Boston Youth Service Network. To make sure youth are fully prepared prior to presentations and meeting participation, YVP offers youth participants training on topics such as the importance of sharing one's story, orientation to the work of the Collaborative, event planning, resume building, participatory action research, etc.

The Austin Opportunity Youth Collaborative (AOYC) recently developed a summer-long leadership program for youth led by the well-respected professional development organization, Leadership Austin. AOYC and Leadership Austin have created a youth-focused curriculum to offer youth the skills they need to engage in policy advocacy to create opportunities for themselves. The Austin OYC has partnered with sponsoring organizations committed to offering youth participants stipends. Youth may also have need for other supports, such as child-care, help with transportation, work-readiness training,

and advising and counseling. Finally, whenever appropriate, youth should be provided professional references and assistance in networking.

Highlight youth voice, but avoid tokenism and help youth and young adults to be strategic in sharing their stories

Youth advocates should be proactive about positioning youth and young adults as experts in the community, intentionally creating spaces for youth and young adults to share their ideas and be supported and positioned to implement those ideas. However, it is important to avoid tokenizing youth and young adults by placing them individually on committees and panels to "check the box" of youth engagement. In addition, while individual young people's stories can be very powerful in building a movement placing youth voice front and center, it can be difficult for young people to navigate sharing their stories strategically so they are not reliving trauma and are able to control their message in ways that highlight resiliency, agency, and self-determination.

Youth should be supported to plan how they will share stories and should be consulted before any particular aspect of their story is shared publicly. "We have a responsibility to make sure they are feeling good about process and moving forward and not feeling more isolated as a result of their advocacy," says Emily Thielmann of Southern Maine Youth Transition Network. Support the well-being of youth and young adults above all else. Make sure those working with young people learn to recognize signs of trauma and seek to avoid experiences that might cause young people to relive trauma through their involvement.

To learn more about the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions and Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, please visit us at
<http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/>