Youth-Adult Partnerships in Public Action:

Principles, Organizational Culture & Outcomes

Shepherd Zeldin, Julie Petrokubi, Linda Camino
University of Wisconsin – Madison

October 2008

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FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

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CENTER FOR NONPROFITS

About the Forum for Youth Investment

The Forum for Youth Investment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan "action tank" dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are Ready by 21® – ready for college, work and life. Informed by rigorous research and practical experience, the Forum forges innovative ideas, strategies and partnerships to strengthen solutions for young people and those who care about them. A trusted resource for policy makers, advocates, researchers and practitioners, the Forum provides youth and adult leaders with the information, connections and tools they need to create greater opportunities and outcomes for young people.

The Forum was founded in 1998 by Karen Pittman and Merita Irby, two of the country's top leaders on youth issues and youth policy. The Forum's 25-person staff is headquartered in Washington, D.C. in the historic Cady-Lee House with a satellite office in Michigan and staff in Missouri, Oregon and Virginia.

About the Authors

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Preface

In 2002, the Forum for Youth Investment merged with Community IMPACT! USA, a move that grounded the Forum's national perspective and linked us directly to the work of grassroots organizations involved in youth leadership and community development. Through that experience we learned a great deal about engaging youth in community change. What we learned both affirmed theoretical work we have done about these ideas in the past and pushed our thinking in important new ways. In particular, we had an opportunity to learn a lot more about how organizations actually do this work – how they get, essentially, from *ideas* about youth engagement and community change to *impact*.

In July 2007, we published *Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change* in an effort to summarize what we learned through our relationship with two local organizations that were part of the Community IMPACT! USA network – Austin Voices for Educational Change and Oasis Community IMPACT in Nashville. The principles offer a framework to help any organization that wants to meaningfully engage youth get started. The principles cluster into four key areas we think must be addressed in order for youth engagement efforts or youth-adult partnerships to result in real change at the individual and community levels: *opportunity* (chance for young people to use skills, act on passions and generate change); *motivation* (understanding, awareness and commitment); *capacity* (knowledge, leadership and action skills); and the *foundation* or infrastructure necessary to support this work.

Identifying these core principles was a useful exercise but it did not fully satisfy our desire to understand and describe the specific practices that occur inside of these organizations and what outcomes they are able to generate as a result. To take that next step we partnered with Shepherd Zeldin, Julie Petrokubi and Linda Camino – a team of experienced qualitative researchers with specific expertise in youth-adult partnership and community change.

Their findings and the case studies described in this report underscore the critical role that community-based organizations can play both in developing young people's leadership abilities and driving positive community change. Specifically, the authors push beyond principles, identifying effective organizational and management practices that can help any organization committed to meaningful youth engagement advance their efforts in concrete ways. Additionally, the outcomes they identify present a useful impact framework for much-needed future program evaluation and research efforts. Documenting the outcomes that organizations like those featured in this report can achieve – with the young people who participate and the adults, institutions and communities they work with – is critical to ensuring further investment and innovation.

Young people are disproportionately involved in and affected by the problems that beset communities and states. Far too many young people are not doing well because communities are not doing well by them. This is cause for concern – and for engagement. Young people are not only at the center of many problems, they are the source of many solutions. Without direct youth and family input into community and state efforts to improve youth services and policies, efforts can miss the mark. This is why youth and family engagement is a core strategy in the Forum's Ready by 21® approach, now being used in communities and states across the country to drive long-term change.

Nicole Yohalem
Forum for Youth Investment

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Executive Summary

When young people are afforded opportunities to make a real difference in their communities, youth benefit as do local residents and community institutions. Despite the potential of these strategies and the range of labels used to describe them (youth action, youth engagement, community service, service-learning and youth organizing or youth-adult partnerships), surprisingly few organizations exist for the explicit purpose of catalyzing meaningful youth engagement in community change. The practices and impact of those organizations that do exist are not well understood or documented.

This study explores key principles of youth engagement from the vantage point of youth and adults involved in community organizing and advocacy. It then explores how organizations create a culture of partnership powerful enough to sustain those principles over time and the range of positive outcomes that result. The findings are relevant for any entity that is interested in involving young people in community change including youth councils, youth-serving agencies, advocacy organizations, community development organizations or community coalitions.

The research focuses on two organizations that are grounded in traditions of youth development, community organizing and system change: Oasis Community IMPACT (OCI), located in Nashville, Tennessee and Austin Voices for Education and Youth (AVEY) in Austin, Texas. Methods included document review; site visits; and interviews with founders, board members, staff and youth.

FIGURE 1: A Model of Organizational Effectiveness: From Principles and Culture to Positive Outcomes

Principles of Youth Engagement
- Opportunity
- Capacity
- Motivation
- Foundation

Outcomes
- Youth
- Adult Staff
- Community Leaders
- Community Institutions

Organizational Culture of Partnership
- Values
- Structures
- Public Action

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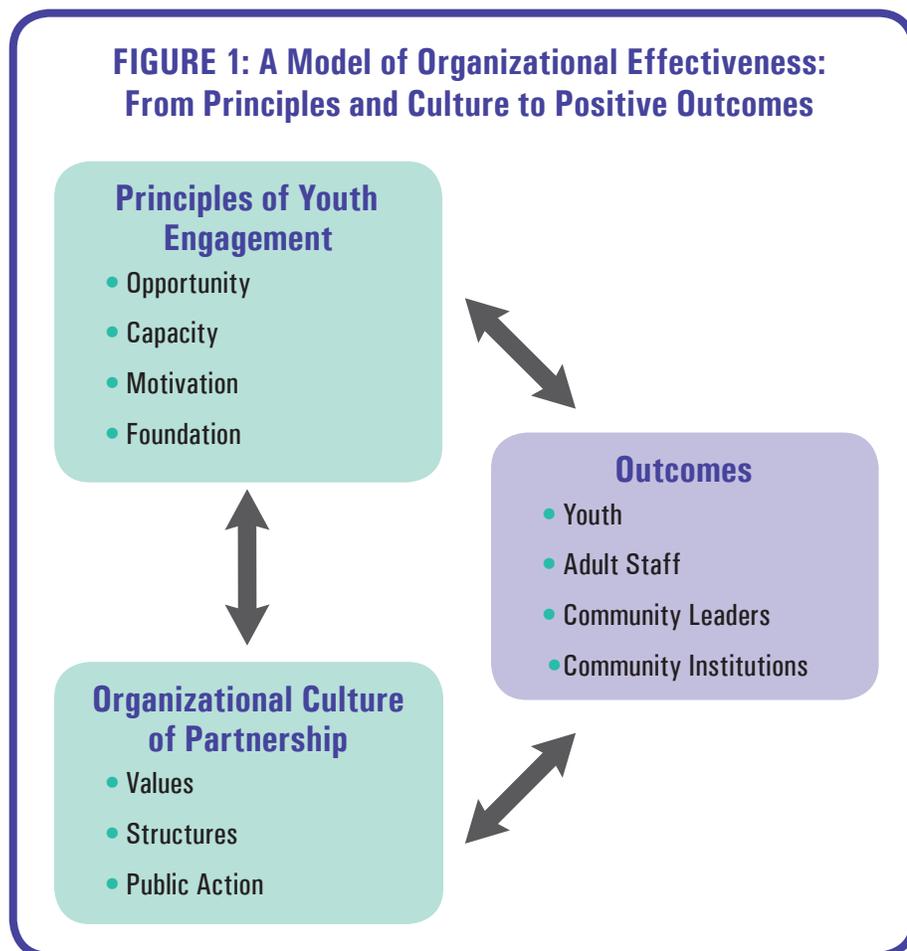
In conducting the research, we found close associations between principles of youth engagement, organizational culture and a broad range of outcomes. These associations, outlined below, are highlighted in Figure 1.

Translating Principles of Youth Engagement into Practice

Pittman, Martin and colleagues (2007) commingled research and field experience to identify core principles of effective youth engagement:

- *Opportunity:* Youth need authentic access to change-makers, as well as connections to the broader youth community.

- *Capacity:* Youth need the training, tools and teams to be prepared to engage in change efforts.

- *Motivation:* Youth need the time to learn about community issues and the chance to decide what issues they want to address.

- *Foundation:* Youth need to be connected to a solid organization or group that is able to foster membership, continuity and a supportive work environment.

These principles were central to the everyday operation of both organizations included in this study. OCI and AVEY translate these principles of youth engagement into practice in several ways. Strategies include:

- Adult staff work hard to build relationships and networks and arrange for opportunities for youth to gain access to and interact with public officials and community leaders. Youth regularly accompany adult staff to formal and informal meetings. While adult staff may arrange for meetings to take place, youth often lead presentations and interactions.

- Adult staff create structures that allow youth to build their own capacity with multiple pathways for participation, learning, mentoring

and employment. Youth have time and resources to learn about the issues, develop research, communications and project management skills.

- Both organizations provide youth with a comfortable and motivational work environment, one where youth have a large say over what happens, when and how. Youth speak clearly about the sense of respect and membership in these settings. At the same time, there are high expectations.

Building an Organizational Culture of Partnership

Both organizations were creating a culture which allowed youth and adults to work effectively within the organization. This culture of partnership – consisting of values, structure and public action – oriented the choices and behaviors of the youth and adults and over time, this culture is what allowed the organizations to reach outside their own walls to have a positive impact on the larger community. The key components of a culture of organizational partnership include:

Partnership Values

- Organizational leaders, by word and deed, establish youth-adult partnership as a core priority, not a side project.

- Youth and adults are expected to learn from one another.

- The organization explicitly addresses issues of trust, power and authority.

- Group processes foster "safe space" for respectful dialogue and problem solving.

- Organizational goals and actions are clearly rooted in the "lived experience" of youth.

- Adult staff people validate youth culture and encourage creative forms of self-expression.

- Programs foster collaboration rather than competition; a sense that "it's not all about me."

Partnership Structures

- Youth have multiple options for participation and receive the support to progressively take on more responsibility as they gain experience and skills.

- There is clarity in the roles of youth and adults, as established by policy, position description, or compensation.

- Youth and adults receive coaching and ongoing feedback.

- The organization has established strategies to recruit and retain youth.

- Organizational resources – budget, staff training, physical space – are aligned to support quality youth-adult partnership.

- Adults and youth each have the opportunity to reflect and learn with their same-age peers.

Public Action

- The action addresses issues that are of high priority to the larger community in addition to being a priority for youth and adults.

- Youth and adults are strategic in how they frame the issue, connect individual projects with larger initiatives and propose possible solutions.

- The action is organized to facilitate intergenerational dialogue and collaborative efforts.

- The action puts youth in key communication roles to ensure that the youth perspective reaches community leaders and constituent groups.

- The work occurs over time, it is not episodic.

- The work visibly models youth-adult partnership to the larger community.

- Organizations continue to maintain a public role in monitoring implementation even after initial "wins" are secured in order to promote on-going accountability.

The Benefits of Youth-Adult Partnership in Public Action

The culture of partnership within AVEY and OCI – the adoption of partnership values, the creation of partnership structures and the enactment of public action – supports the principles of youth engagement and allows the organization to have broad impacts at multiple levels.

This study indicates that the principles of youth engagement, when supported by an organizational culture of youth-adult partnership, promote positive developmental outcomes among youth and staff. Over time, community institutions become more responsive to youth participation and to the agendas advanced by the organizations and the youth-adult partnerships. Specific outcomes at each level include:

Impacts on Youth Development

- **Safety & Belonging:** Youth feel accepted, supported and respected within the organization. They experience a strong sense of collective identity and pride in organization membership.

- **Efficacy & Empowerment:** Youth increase confidence in their ability to effect change within their settings, both as individuals and as members of a group. They come to "own" their own expertise and accomplishments as community leaders.

- **Sociopolitical Awareness & Civic Competence:** Youth learn how critically analyze the relationship between their own lived experience and larger social, economic and political structures. Youth also gain the knowledge (understanding of political systems and processes), attitudes (tolerance) and skills (public speaking, group facilitation, deliberation) they need to participate as civic actors.

- **Community Connections:** Youth gain a deeper understanding of their community and a closer connection with their peers. Adults connect youth with professional networks and opportunities.

Impacts on Adult Staff Development

- *Confidence & Competence:* Adults develop the skills and attitudes they need to effectively share power and responsibility with youth on an on-going basis.

- *Generativity:* Adults experience satisfaction in passing along their experience to a new generation.

Impacts on Community Leaders

- *Reflect on Negative Stereotypes:* Adults recognize and address their assumptions about young people. They develop a new respect for youth competence and expertise.

- *Advocates for Youth Participation:* Adults commit to making youth-adult partnership part of their own practice and use the power of their position to promote youth engagement in new settings.

Impacts on Institutions

- *Institutionalized Expectations of Youth Participation:* Norms and traditions change as youth become a standard part of community decision making.

- *Civic Agendas Reflect Youth Voice:* The types of issues addressed by public decision making bodies (eg., school boards, local government) reflect the critical interests, concerns and priorities of young people. Youth raise new, complex issues that require a more nuanced response.

- *New Community Coalitions Emerge:* Youth organizers reach out beyond the youth development field to engage a wide range of community partners in order to address these complex issues.

- *Responsive Public Institutions:* Public institutions respond with resources, policies and programs that better serve youth and communities.

When youth engagement principles become an organizational priority, good things happen. The principles help organizations create a culture of youth-adult partnership. The principles and culture work in tandem to have positive impacts on participating youth, staff, community leaders and public institutions.

This work is not easy. This study and previous research underscore the importance of focused organizational leadership as a primary ingredient to organizational transformation and positive impact. Three management strategies that stand out include: maintaining attention on the purpose and expected outcomes of youth engagement, actively working to translate a vision of youth engagement into quality practice and continually seeking to build a sense of shared ownership for the priority on youth engagement.

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a burst of reports highlighting the imperative to integrate the practices of youth engagement and community development. Tolman and Pittman (2001), for example, assert that youth and community development may be understood as two sides of the same coin. Zeldin and colleagues (2000) emphasize the reciprocal influences that young people and communities have on each other. When youth are afforded an opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of others, the engaged youth benefit as do local residents and community institutions. Increasingly, a similar argument is being applied to school communities. When young people are engaged in educational change endeavors, youth become more motivated to engage in school. At the same time, schools become more motivated and better able to create more challenging and supportive environments for learning (Joselowsky, 2007).

Despite the potential of this practice, there are surprisingly few organizations with the purpose of catalyzing meaningful youth engagement in community change. One reason is that policy and program leaders lack practical frameworks to guide the design and implementation of youth engagement. To help address this gap, Pittman, Martin and colleagues (2007) commingled research and field experience to identify core principles of effective youth engagement. These authors then applied these principles to identify action steps for state and municipal youth councils (Martin, Pittman and colleagues). They stress, however, that the principles are appropriate for any group that is seeking to actively involve young people in organizational change. The principles are as follows:

- *Opportunity:* Youth need authentic access to change-makers, as well as connections to the broader youth community.

- *Capacity:* Youth need the training, tools and teams to be prepared to engage in change efforts.

- *Motivation:* Youth need the time to learn about community issues and the chance to decide what issues they want to address.

- *Foundation:* Youth need to be connected to a solid organization or group that is able to foster membership, continuity and a supportive work environment.

Research Questions

The present study builds on the above body of research. First, we consider the principles of youth engagement from the vantage point of youth and adults involved in community organizing and advocacy. Second, we explore questions of organizational culture and community outcomes. Specifically, we address three fundamental questions for which there is little available research in the field:

- How do the principles of youth engagement translate into organizational practice within the context of community organizing and advocacy?

- How do organizations create a culture of partnership, a culture that is powerful enough to sustain the principles of effective youth engagement over the long term?

- What is the range of positive outcomes that result when organizations build an organizational culture of youth-adult partnership in public action?

In this research, we intentionally use the phrase "youth-adult partnership in public action." Others have used terms such as youth organizing, youth action, youth engagement or youth leadership to refer to similar or related practices. *We chose the phrase "youth-adult partnership in public action" because it reminds us that engagement by both youth and adults is critical to the health of our communities and institutions.* Community change is not about youth leading the charge, nor is it about adults having the necessary life experience. Community change is hard enough. To expect any group – youth or adults – to do it alone makes little sense. The focus

on "partnership," we believe, conveys this sensibility (Zeldin, Larson and Camino 2005).

We also intentionally use the phrase "public action." The emphasis on the word "public" highlights that effective youth-adult partnerships are *for the larger community*. Public action is collective. At the same time, the action is public in that the action *is known by or visible to the community.* We emphasize the word "action" because it conveys energy and influence. Further, action is the word typically used by youth and adults to describe their work.

Methodology

This study focuses on two organizations that are grounded in traditions of youth development, community organizing and system change: Oasis Community IMPACT (OCI), located in Nashville, Tennessee; and Austin Voices for Education and Youth (AVEY), located in Austin, Texas. Three criteria guided the selection of OCI and AVEY for study:

- *The organizations are seeking to translate the principles of youth engagement into effective practice.* Each organization has been experimenting with different strategies over the past three years. Through these efforts, they have reached a point of maturity and quality in practice.

- *Youth-adult partnership is a core priority that focuses the management and operations of both organizations.* Youth take on visible leadership positions within OCI and AVEY, not symbolic roles. Adult staff coach the youth, in addition to taking on active leadership roles themselves as appropriate.

- *OCI and AVEY are explicitly in the business of public action.* Through collective and highly visible action, the organizations are seeking to influence school and community policies and programming.

In brief, OCI and AVEY represent exemplary organizations that are grappling with the research questions presented above. Because the organizations worked hard over a period of years to adopt principles of youth engagement and to create a culture of partnership, they should be well positioned to have broad impacts on youth and community. The purpose of this study is to determine the validity of this hypothesis.

OCI and AVEY are clearly innovators in youth-adult partnership. At the same time, OCI and AVEY are normative organizations. Like other organizations across the country, they are actively adopting youth-adult partnership as a core principle in ways that make sense for their own mission and their own communities. In this way, the lessons learned from OCI and AVEY are highly relevant to all other organizations – community coalitions and partnerships, public agencies, community development initiatives – that are seeking to promote youth engagement in community change.

Methods

This study gathered four types of data on these organizations:

- In order to understand the evolution of organizational mission and programming, the research team analyzed organizational documents (reports, grants, brochures) as well as press coverage of AVEY and OCI. Key stakeholders – founders, board members and Forum staff involved in providing technical assistance – were interviewed.

- To explore the research questions, interviews and focus groups were conducted with 22 "youth mobilizers" and 3 young adult staff who were also former youth mobilizers. Most participants were youth of color from families with limited economic means. Many had histories of disengagement from school.

- To gain an adult perspective on the research questions, interviews were conducted with 12 staff and board members and 8 community leaders who had partnered with or who were familiar with the work of the two organizations.

- The interviews were complemented by observations in community meetings, public events and educational activities.

All interviews were transcribed and field notes were compiled from the observations.

Model and Analysis Strategy

Our model of organizational effectiveness has three parts (see Figure 1). The first is the extent to which an organization is able to translate principles into real practices. The second part is the extent

to which an organization can create a culture that sustains the principles and the practices. And, finally, effectiveness is the extent to which an organization produces positive outcomes. In this study, we assessed all three parts of the model as it relates to youth engagement (See Figure 2).

A bit of clarification on Figure 2 is necessary. The arrows connecting the three parts of the model go both ways. This bi-directionality underscores the fact that principles, culture and outcomes are highly related. As an organization starts to produce positive outcomes, for example, these successes often reinforce the organizational culture. Similarly, as the organizational culture is strengthened, it serves to reinforce the principles of youth engagement.

But the important point is this: Principles of youth engagement, an organizational culture of youth-adult partnership and positive outcomes are all critical to organizational effectiveness. Without all three parts, quality practice is not sustainable.

The first focus of the analysis was to examine the extent to which the principles of youth engagement – opportunity, capacity, motivation and foundation – existed within OCI and AVEY. To do so, case studies were created for each organization. The next step in the analysis was to explore the strategies through which the organizations created a culture of partnership. The data were analyzed to identify the elements of organizational culture – values, structures, public action – that allowed OCI and

FIGURE 2: A Model of Organizational Effectiveness: From Principles and Culture to Positive Outcomes

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Outcomes
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- Adult Staff
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- Community Institutions

Organizational Culture of Partnership
- Values
- Structures
- Public Action
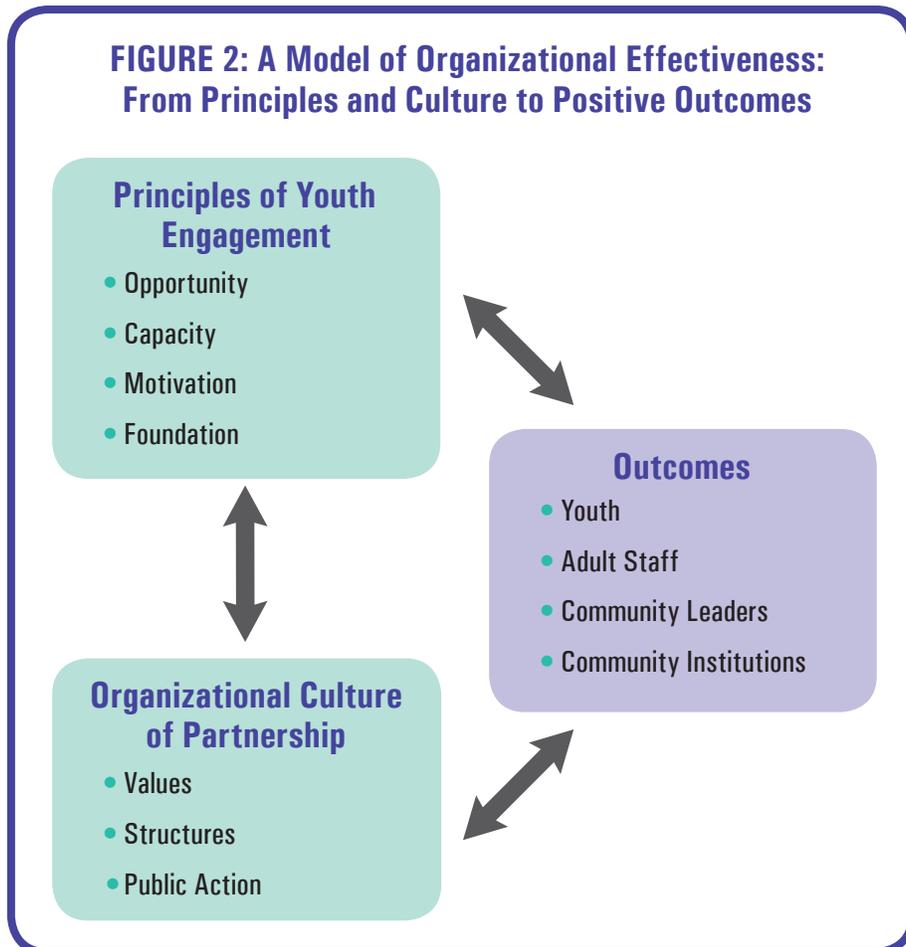
AVEY to integrate youth engagement throughout their organization and community work. The third step was to explore and identify positive outcomes – youth, adult leaders and community institutions – that could be attributed to the organizations' use of youth-adult partnership in public action.

For each of the three steps of the analysis, the research team completed multiple phases of coding, with each phase focused on identifying primary categories and themes existing within the data. At the completion of each phase, the research team prepared and discussed interpretive memos. We consistently revisited our organizational observations to connect them with the interview and focus group data. Subsequently, informant checks were used as an additional validation method. A draft version of the report was sent to the participating organizations. Staff were asked to identify errors of fact and questions of interpretation.

Translating Principles of Youth Engagement into Practice

Organizational case studies were conducted to explore how OCI and AVEY translated principles of effective youth engagement into organizational practice. These case studies confirmed that the core principles – opportunity, capacity, motivation and foundation – were central to the everyday operation of both organizations. Organizational culture and processes emphasized youth-adult partnership. There was a clear vision within OCI and AVEY, evident in their organizational planning and strategy, that youth and adults both bring necessary resources to the table.

Key findings from the case studies are presented below. Appendices A and B provide more detailed case study reports of OCI and AVEY. Additional information, including copies of the organizations' reports and newsletters, can be found for Austin Voices at *www.austinvoices.org* and for Oasis Community IMPACT at *www.oasiscenter.org*.

Oasis Community IMPACT

The mission of OCI is to "mobilize neighborhoods – youth, families, businesses and organizations – to increase educational and economic opportunities for young people." Toward this end, high-school aged "youth mobilizers" work in partnership with OCI staff to conduct and disseminate action-oriented research. Recent research focused on exposing the challenges that East Nashville youth face in transitioning into higher education and on confronting predatory lending practices in low-income communities. The findings, documented in reports and other outreach materials, are then used as a platform for vigorous outreach and education directed at community and school leaders. Youth are coached by adult staff to give testimony in public hearings, presentations to public decision-making bodies and workshops to community residents.

OCI translates the principles of youth engagement into practice in several ways. Key strategies include:

- OCI adult staff work hard to arrange opportunities through which youth mobilizers can gain access to public officials and community leaders in Nashville. While adult staff may arrange the meetings and the opportunities for youth to "speak truth to power," the youth mobilizers are the ones who make the presentations. OCI adult staff intentionally play a secondary role in such interactions.

- OCI youth are effective, in large part, because adult staff create structures that allow youth to build their own capacity. Specifically, staff provide youth with ample time to learn about the issues, offer assistance in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data and serve as role models and formal trainers who teach the mobilizers how to communicate findings and policy recommendations.

- The mobilizers thrive because OCI provides them with a solid foundation and motivational work environment, one where youth have a large say over what happens, when and how. The environment – a well equipped office, housed within a high school, with lots of space for interaction and dialogue – is perceived by youth as "their space". To promote continuity, the youth mobilizers take the lead in recruiting and hiring the young people who will be their colleagues.

Austin Voices for Education and Youth

The mission of AVEY is to "mobilize the community to strengthen schools and expand opportunities for Austin's youth." Toward this end, AVEY takes a multilevel approach to systems change. Within high schools, adult staff empower students to take on issues of concern to their home campus. At the district level, a group of "youth mobilizers" are trained and supported by staff as they organize city-wide rallies, public hearings and discussion forums. The most experienced youth ("youth consultants") work directly with the public school system, partner organizations and city-wide youth coalitions. AVEY staff and youth inform district officials through

governance and advisory bodies. Additionally, youth and adult partners co-facilitate community conversations to help bring the concerns of residents to public officials.

AVEY translates the principles of youth engagement into practice in several ways. Key strategies include:

- AVEY adult staff work hard to create strong relationships and networks that result in youth having opportunities and access to district leaders in the public schools. Youth accompany AVEY adult staff as full partners to formal and informal meetings at the district office. Within high schools, AVEY staff actively support youth mobilizers as they build coalitions of youth around campus issues.

- To build youth capacity and motivation, there are multiple pathways for participation. A core group of youth mobilizers learn together in a civics class and after-school program operated by AVEY out of an alternative high school. In these settings, youth learn about the history and methods of civic engagement, while developing the skills to participate. Once youth are prepared, they may be hired by AVEY to help organize events such as rallies, public hearings and outreach campaigns. Youth may then advance to a consultant level, where they work closely with AVEY staff on specific projects such as program development and fundraising.

- Youth feel quite comfortable in their civics class and in the AVEY office. They consider both settings to be "their place," a solid foundation from which to do their work. Youth speak clearly about the sense of respect and membership in these settings. At the same time, there are high expectations. The mobilizers and consultants have written job descriptions that orient their work.

Building an Organizational Culture of Partnership

The idea that youth may make positive and significant contributions to organizations and communities remains an innovative idea in the United States. Research indicates that very few adults have worked closely with youth, in a sustained fashion, on issues of common concern. Indeed, youth are more often considered part of the problem than part of the solution when it comes to community change. This stereotype is especially put on youth from low income neighborhoods and on youth and youth of color. There exist few societal norms or institutions to support the creation of intergenerational partnerships (Zeldin, Camino and Calvert, 2003; Kirby, Lanyon and colleagues, 2003; Ginwright, 2006).

Given this societal context, it is impressive that AVEY and OCI have been able to translate the principles of youth engagement into practice. As noted above and in the case studies (see Appendices), the organizations have created legitimate opportunities and access for youth to have a real impact on community and school policy. Youth participate in an array of trainings and are mentored by adults and peers as they build their capacity and motivation to do the work. The organizations provide a solid foundation – a home base – from which youth and their adult partners may launch their initiatives.

The next focus of the research was to explore sustainability. Specifically, what are these organizations doing that is powerful enough to translate and implement the principles of effective youth engagement over the long term? As the research team analyzed the data, the answer became clear. Most succinctly, the organizations were creating a culture which allowed youth and adults to work effectively within the organization. This culture of partnership – consisting of values, structure and public action – oriented the choices and behaviors of the youth and adults. And, over time, this culture is what allowed the organizations to reach outside their own walls to have a positive impact on the larger community.

The key strategies used by AVEY and OCI to create this culture are highlighted below and in Figure 3.

Partnership Values

OCI and AVEY have made great strides in creating a core set of partnership values. Specifically, there exists a shared belief that the quality of organizational decision making and action is enhanced when youth and adults are fully involved in the process. This belief is salient throughout both organizations. The voices of youth and adults are reflected in all decisions. There is also a shared expectation that youth and adults should learn from each other and in respectful ways. They are expected to work through difficult issues, personal and organizational.

This element of culture is sparked by the organizational leaders. By word and deed, they establish youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) in public action as a core organizational priority, not a side project. The data converges on this point. In reviewing organizational policies, in listening to the executive directors describe their role, in listening to staff and youth describe the executive directors and in observing the executive directors in action, it is clear that the executive directors both "talk the talk" and "walk the talk."

Consequently, the organization creates decision making forums – formal and informal – where staff and youth feel safe to address issues of trust, power and authority. They don't shy away from controversial issues. Within these forums, staff and youth strive to create relationships characterized by mutuality in teaching and learning. Youth and adults see themselves as resources for each other. Choice and accountability are core values within a culture of partnership. Individuals have the opportunity to engage in ways consistent with their own interest and skill. At the same time, they are expected to finish, in a quality way, what they have set out to do. When challenges arise, such as in the case of a young adult who had never written a funding proposal before, it is the individual's responsibility to seek assistance and the organization's responsibility to provide it.

FIGURE 3: Key Strategies: Building a Culture of Youth-Adult Partnership

Partnership Values

- Organizational leaders, by word and deed, establish youth-adult partnerships as a core priority, not a side project.

- Youth and adults are expected to learn from one another.

- The organization explicitly addresses issues of trust, power and authority.

- Group processes foster "safe space" for respectful dialogue and problem solving.

- Organizational goals and actions are clearly rooted in the "lived experience" of youth.

- Adult staff people validate youth culture and encourage creative forms of self-expression.

- Programs foster collaboration rather than competition; a sense that "it's not all about me."

Partnership Structures

- Youth have multiple options for participation and receive the support to progressively take on more responsibility as they gain experience and skills.

- There is clarity in the roles of youth and adults, as established by policy, position description, or compensation.

- Youth and adults receive coaching and ongoing feedback.

- The organization has established strategies to recruit and retain youth.

- Organizational resources – budget, staff training, physical space – are aligned to support quality youth-adult partnerships.

- Adults and youth each have the opportunity to reflect and learn with their same-age peers.

Public Action

- The action addresses issues that are of high priority to the larger community in addition to being a priority for youth and adults.

- Youth and adults are strategic in how they frame the issue, connect individual projects with larger initiatives and propose possible solutions.

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- The work occurs over time, it is not episodic.

- The work visibly models youth-adult partnerships to the larger community.

- Organizations continue to maintain a public role in monitoring implementation even after initial "wins" are secured in order to promote on-going accountability.

Partnership Structures

AVEY and OCI established *partnership structures* – roles, processes and policies – that sustain a culture of partnership. Fundamental is clarity in the roles of youth and adults, as established by policy and position descriptions. Such clarity provides the participants with the structure and boundaries that allow them to manage their limited time and make the best use of resources. The youth especially appreciate this structure. Many of them have never before had their roles and responsibilities articulated in such a clear fashion.

These organizations also offer youth structured opportunities to progressively take on more responsibility. At AVEY, for example, a core group of "youth mobilizers" organize other high school youth in issue-oriented campaigns, projects and rallies. Mobilizers are given wide latitude in choosing their specific roles within the organization. As the mobilizers become even more experienced, they may apply for consultant and staff positions with greater responsibility. Similarly, OCI youth mobilizers may choose where to invest their interest and skill on a specific project. A variety of leadership opportunities are available to youth as they move through the steps of action research process: issue identification; data collection, analysis and interpretation; reporting and public testimony; and organization of action-oriented coalitions of interest. Adult staff support youth in identifying and carrying out the role that best matches their interests and skills.

Organizational resources are aligned to support these structures. Both AVEY and OCI have devoted significant staff time to ensure that everybody receives sufficient training, coaching and supervision to perform their responsibilities. Prior to giving a presentation to local officials, for example, adult staff and youth come together to practice and to provide feedback to each other. In OCI, the youth mobilizers are compensated as employees for their work. And in AVEY, those youth who take on the greatest responsibility – such as leading organizational initiatives or serving as consultants to other organizations – are compensated accordingly.

Public Action

Public action in the community is essential to the partnership culture of AVEY and OCI. Public action reinvigorates partnership values. When talking about their organizations, all youth and adults emphasize "the work" they do in community. They can describe, with clarity, the different phases and steps in organizing and implementing public action. These "stories" provide continuity in spirit for the organizations. They provide an effective means for disseminating best practices over time.

Public action also dictates the structure of the organizations. AVEY and OCI are oriented towards public action. Policies and programming are designed to ensure that (a) youth are prepared to act, (b) power analyses are conducted to determine where and how to act to have the greatest impact and (c) the organizations carefully choose and cultivate collaborations that result in a shared and coordinated action. These structures allow the organizations to become as efficient and effective as possible over time.

Public action is what makes youth-adult partnership a public idea not only within the organization, but in the community as well. By organizing highly visible events (rallies, candidate's forums, community conversations) and creating products (research reports, documentaries, new programs), the OCI and AVEY are explicitly bringing critical attention and offering solutions, to issues of social justice. At the same time, public actions provide salient opportunities for AVEY and OCI to visibly model the idea of youth-adult partnership to the wider community. These organizations are challenging negative stereotypes about youth while demonstrating the power of young people to positively contribute to communities. This modeling is essential to the creation of sustained community support for youth engagement and youth-adult partnership over the long term.

The Benefits of Youth-Adult Partnership in Public Action

The culture of partnership within AVEY and OCI – the adoption of partnership values, the creation of partnership structures and the enactment of public action – supports the principles of youth engagement and allows the organization to have broad impacts. In fact, what makes the organizations stand out is that they are explicitly dedicated to change on multiple levels. They are working on specific policy agendas – for example predatory lending or school reform – and at the same time, they are building leadership skills among young people, building awareness among local leaders and modeling new intergenerational change strategies to the larger community.

The specific outcomes are presented in Figure 4. The research indicates that the principles of youth engagement, when supported by an organizational culture of youth-adult partnership, promote positive developmental outcomes among youth and staff. As organizations reach out to the community through public action and through the individual efforts of youth and staff, community leaders take notice and respond. The cumulative impact, over time, is that community institutions become more responsive to youth participation and to the agendas advanced by the organizations and the youth-adult partnerships.

Impacts on Youth Development

The culture of partnership existing within AVEY and OCI contributed strongly to *a sense of safety and belonging* among the young people. The youth understood deeply that the adult staff "would follow through," and "had their backs." They expressed that adult staff had important things to teach them and would actively help out in a crisis. The youth spoke just as passionately about their peers – the other youth mobilizers – "being there" for each other. During the focus groups, for example, it became clear that the youth knew, in a specific way, about the life challenges that their peers faced. The youth also acknowledged the accomplishments and contributions of their peers.

This sharing promoted a sense of trust, healing and interdependence among youth.

A sense of safety and belonging provided a foundation for personal growth. Moving from this base, youth were able to take risks, to "step out" and to garner the confidence to plan and implement complex projects. For many in these organizations, this *enhanced sense of efficacy and empowerment* was a powerful impact, one that the youth believed they would take with them into the future. This theme is illustrated by one youth mobilizer:

> My experiences have really changed me on a personal level. I am now a person that I can depend on. I think that anybody could call on me in this organization and I can do what they need me to do. I am usually a pretty busy, flighty person and now I'm trying to really be devoted to certain things. I think that I really feel my devotion as I am leaving high school – graduating high school – just to be involved as a youth mobilizer. I'm really proud of myself to have that devotion and to be dependable.

This experience of efficacy, in turn, allowed the youth to take advantage of existing opportunities to participate and to create new opportunities. Consequently, all of the youth reported specific *gains in their sociopolitical awareness and civic competence.* The depth and thoughtfulness in their learning was impressive. The majority of youth spoke about their ability to critically analyze community problems, or in the words of OCI youth, to "explode the issues." Youth learned how to develop agendas, communicate their concerns and persuade others. Most youth expressed a greater appreciation for the power of collective work and the need for tolerance, as indicated by the following comments by two youth mobilizers:

> We feed off each other, so I think that being respectful at all times, while still holding your own values, is important. I've totally never been thrown into such a situation like this. I am surrounded by people who are so diverse. So, to realize where I stand on issues and things – and yet still have so much in common with them – it is an amazing place to be. It really helps to have learned about movements and what groups of people have gone through.

> This program changes you, changes who you are. It's just really defined who I am and what I want to be doing. It's really instilled the idea of social movements in me. I love that idea and that's what I really want to pursue in the future. Wherever I am with this, I want to be mobilizing people to do what they feel is important.

The opportunity to work with others on significant community issues also resulted in *strengthened community connections.* Working with AVEY and OCI provided youth with the chance to interact with influential community leaders, politicians, school board members and other types of professionals. While not all of these adults were supportive of the young people, of course, the youth could readily identify multiple adults with whom they had developed reciprocal and respectful relationships. These relationships helped the youth feel more emotionally connected to their schools and communities. Moreover, these relationships led to instrumental benefits. Youth gained access to information, recommendations and networks through these influential adults which led directly to jobs and referrals to needed community services. One youth concludes:

> That there is such a group of adults dedicated to children's learning is amazing to me. I didn't even know. I just knew I wasn't satisfied with school and that is the reason I joined this organization. I didn't know that they would actually help me get professional experience in the field that I am interested in. They helped me get an internship as a fashion designer.

The youth spoke just as frequently about their own efforts to create emotional and instrumental connections for others. These young adults perceived themselves as organizational pioneers. They expressed a great deal of pride in knowing that they were creating opportunities for future cohorts of youth.

Impacts on Adult Staff Development

AVEY and OCI adult staff also benefited from youth-adult partnership. For these stakeholders, the central learning curve revolved around *gaining the skill, confidence and experience to establish one's personal practice*, especially in terms of working in partnership with groups of young people. With few role models and norms to emulate, staff often spoke about how they were "making it up as they went along." Staff spoke about learning when to "step up" and when to "step back" while still being aware of and "owning" their own status within the group. These adults had to learn when to "come on strong" with the group and when to be more passive. A culture of partnership within the organization accelerated this learning. Be it feedback from youth or from other staff, all of the adults spoke about how they developed their own approach to youth-adult partnership through negotiation and reflection with others.

As staff members gain confidence in their own practice, *partnering with youth becomes a powerful source of generativity.* That is, the staff felt as though they had extended their own

FIGURE 4:
Youth-Adult Partnership in Public Action: Different Levels of Impact

Impacts on Youth Development

- *Safety & Belonging:* Youth feel accepted, supported and respected within the organization. They experience a strong sense of collective identity and pride in organization membership.

- *Efficacy & Empowerment:* Youth increase confidence in their ability to effect change within their settings, both as individuals and as members of a group. They come to "own" their own expertise and accomplishments as community leaders.

- *Sociopolitical Awareness & Civic Competence:* Youth learn how critically analyze the relationship between their own lived experience and larger social, economic and political structures. Youth also gain the knowledge (understanding of political systems and processes), attitudes (tolerance) and skills (public speaking, group facilitation, deliberation) they need to participate as civic actors.

- *Community Connections:* Youth gain a deeper understanding of their community and a closer connection with their peers. Adults connect youth with professional networks and opportunities.

Impacts on Adult Staff Development

- *Confidence & Competence:* Adults develop the skills and attitudes they need to effectively share power and responsibility with youth on an on-going basis.

- *Generativity:* Adults experience satisfaction in passing along their experience to a new generation.

Impacts on Community Leaders

- *Reflect on Negative Stereotypes:* Adults recognize and address their assumptions about young people. They develop a new respect for youth competence and expertise.

- *Advocates for Youth Participation:* Adults commit to making youth-adult partnership part of their own practice and use the power of their position to promote youth engagement in new settings.

Impacts on Institutions

- *Institutionalized Expectations of Youth Participation:* Norms and traditions change as youth become a standard part of community decision making.

- *Civic Agendas Reflect Youth Voice:* The types of issues addressed by public decision making bodies (e.g., school boards, local government) reflect the critical interests, concerns and priorities of young people. Youth raise new, complex issues that require a more nuanced response.

- *New Community Coalitions Emerge:* Youth organizers reach out beyond the youth development field to engage a wide range of community partners in order to address these complex issues.

- *Responsive Public Institutions:* Public institutions respond with resources, policies and programs that better serve youth and communities.

contribution and productivity within the organization. Some of the older staff in the two organizations spoke to the satisfaction of passing along their historical understanding and personal experience with social movements. Others spoke about teaching "tried and true" organizing strategies. This "passing of the torch" clearly helps to sustain the motivation of staff.

Impacts on Adult Community Leaders

Not having partnered directly with youth in the past, many of the adult leaders in the study – whether a school administrator, organizational board member, or city politician – initially harbored some question about the ability of youth to work productively with adults. These concerns were not realized, however. Rather, all of the leaders were impressed with the high level of youth motivation and competence that they observed. These adults commonly described youth mobilizers as being "prepared," "thoughtful," and "respectful." In brief, Y-AP *subverts the assumptions, often negative, of community leaders.* One Nashville leader observed:

> When I think of Community IMPACT, I think of youth gathering outside of the City Council office last year. The youth had really thought out their position, they were very organized in a way that you don't usually see in youth. You can tell the students think about things critically. They are not just voicing a typically teenage opinion because they are upset or didn't get their way. It's like: "This is what needs to be improved. And, here are some steps that we think can be taken.

These types of experiences are powerful. After collaborating with youth on specific events, all of the leaders reported that, over time, they became *stronger advocates for youth participation.* They took steps to enhance youth voice in community governance. External adult leaders were not the

only ones who deepened their understanding of youth capacity through Y-AP. The adult staff of AVEY and OCI, in their role as community leaders, also experienced a learning curve as they worked with youth over time. One youth mobilizer explained how the adult staff listened and learned from youth during the first year of the program:

> By the end of the year, I guess they [organizational leaders] were kind of surprised by how much potential we had. And the next year, they knew. They listened, you know. I think they realized that, wow, the youth, we have a good resource here.

Impacts on Community Institutions

AVEY and OCI have come to symbolize high quality youth participation within their communities. Their focus on partnership, their public action and their positive reputation have allowed them to have a broad impact. First, *youth participation is becoming an institutionalized expectation.* Policy makers in both cities, for example, are coming to view young people as constituents. They are taking the initiative, on their own, to solicit the opinion of young people. In Nashville, city council and school board members emphasized how public officials are now more likely to seek out and listen to youth voice, "something that we didn't do very well in the past." In Austin, policies have been changed to ensure that youth participate on school district task forces and campus advisory councils.

As this collective expectation emerges in communities, *civic agendas begin to better reflect the concerns, priorities and voice of youth.* Through careful research and strategic outreach, OCI has influenced Nashville's public agenda. Their College Access report, for example, documented neighborhood disparities in college preparation resources for high school students. According to community leaders, this report raised awareness and served as a "wake up call" for policymakers to make this issue part of

their agenda. Using similar strategies, the youth have recently taken on the practice of predatory lending in low-income neighborhoods. The issue is now on the action agendas of business groups and nonprofit organizations. According to local leaders, much of the success of AVEY and OCI is due to the way that the organizations are "persistent," engage in "consistent messaging" and "keep the issue on the table" even after the media hype has died down.

AVEY and OCI are catalysts for collaboration and consequently, ***new coalitions have been formed to take collective action on key community issues.*** In addition to bringing together citizen groups with the school district to address plans to restructure "failing" high schools, for example, AVEY is leading a multi-sector council to coordinate and strengthen youth policies in Austin. OCI has recently established a new coalition of state and local leaders to address issues of predatory lending. One city council official reflected on the impact of the economic literacy work conducted by OCI over the past several years:

> These guys [OCI] are the only people really talking about predatory lending. They are up against enormous odds, Tennessee is where the predatory loan industry got started. For a small, not super-funded group of young people, its an incredible impact. They started the Weathbuilding Alliance. And to have the United Way take on a [new] program – that was remarkable.

As illustrated above, ***public institutions are responding to the youth-adult partnerships in ways that address specific community needs.*** Responsiveness is evident at multiple levels. AVEY's organizing within high schools, for example, has led Austin principals to affirmatively address issues of safety, privacy and racism. The district has adjusted the job descriptions of staff to strengthen the voices of parents and youth on school-wide

issues. In Nashville, OCI and its partners were not only able to fend off threatened budget cuts for school counselors, but also succeeded in increasing the numbers of counselors available to help youth in under-resourced schools prepare for college.

Conclusions

This research demonstrates that when youth engagement principles become an organizational priority, good things happen. As seen by AVEY and OCI and as portrayed in Figure 1, the principles help organizations to create a culture of youth-adult partnership. The principles and culture work in tandem to have positive impacts on participating youth, staff, community leaders and public institutions. In brief, communities benefit. These benefits – be they at the individual or collective level – always appear incremental. Over time, however, the changes become substantial and significant.

Focused Organizational Leadership

We do not wish to imply that creating a culture of partnership and positively impacting youth and community is an easy task. Previous research, for example, highlights the importance of focused organizational leadership as a primary ingredient to organizational transformation and positive impact (Zeldin, Petrokubi and MacNeil, 2007; 2008). This finding was replicated in the current study. In interviewing and observing the organizational leaders of OCI and AVEY, it became clear that their commitment to principles of youth engagement, to youth-adult partnership and to community change were realized through focused and creative management. These leaders understand how to take the innovative idea of youth-adult partnership and transform it into a public idea and collective action. Three strategies stand out most clearly:

- ***Organizational leaders maintain attention on the purpose and expected outcomes of youth engagement.*** The leaders were consistently building consensus among staff, youth and community leaders that the purpose of youth engagement was not only youth development, but equally important, community change. With such agreement, the organizational leaders were best able to secure buy-in for the effort. Over time, this clarity in purpose provided stakeholders with guideposts for implementation. Youth and community outcomes became standards for accountability.

- ***Organizational leaders actively work to translate a vision of youth engagement into quality practice.*** To do so, the organizational leaders cultivated the knowledge base of all stakeholders. "Success stories" and "real life models" were shared to help youth, adults and community members visualize the practice. Organizational leaders actively "coached" stakeholders through direct experience, so that they could learn to "walk the talk." Reflection was also key. The organizational leaders understood that both youth and adults need time to discuss best practices and emerging implementation issues.

- ***Organizational leaders continually sought to build a sense of shared ownership for the priority on youth engagement.*** While the priority may have initially been perceived by many community institutions as originating from OCI and AVEY, the leaders sought to demonstrate that youth-adult partnership is something that should be collectively owned by local stakeholders. By bringing youth "to the table" and by allowing the youth to display their competence, the organizational leaders demonstrated to community stakeholders that "this is how we do business." By having access to youth and having positive experiences with youth, the community stakeholders gradually came to perceive youth-adult partnership as something they personally endorsed.

External Assistance for Oasis and Austin Voices

It is important to emphasize that OCI and AVEY received support from external sources at key points in their own organizational development. This support was highly influential in helping both organizations create a culture of youth-adult partnership and produce a full range of positive outcomes.

Community IMPACT (CI), as discussed in the Appendix, is a program housed in the Oasis Center, a large and well established human services

organization. In CI's early days, Oasis served as their fiscal agent. When CI merged with Oasis, however, the start-up received a number of benefits, all of which allowed the "start up" to focus more exclusively on their mission and less on the creation of their own organizational structures. Specifically, Oasis provided CI with citywide connections, thus allowing the organization to reach key stakeholders outside of their original "target" neighborhoods. The back office support was also key – Oasis provided a full range of budgetary, personal and administrative services to CI. On a program level, Oasis provided CI's youth participants with ready access to personnel counseling and career advising. And, finally, CI's staff found a new set of colleagues and peers within the larger organization of Oasis.

Similar to OCI, it is unlikely that AVEY could have achieved such a large measure of success, so quickly, without external support. Early in its development, AVEY became an affiliate of the Public Education Network (PEN) national intermediary network, This affiliation offered AVEY staff a strong source of legitimacy, as well as a sense of identity and connection to something larger than itself. PEN also provided useful resources, models and technical assistance on issues of school reform. Over time, AVEY staff have secured significant funding from PEN. This funding has been used to hire a staff person, employ young people part-time and ultimately, to launch a middle school initiative with the Austin Schools. All of this has resulted in AVEY being viewed not only as an advocate for youth in the school reform process but also as a partner in providing services. Not unimportantly, the funds were also used to furnish AVEY's office, thus helping to create an environment that fostered collaboration and professionalism.

AVEY and OCI also benefited from their relationship with the Forum for Youth Investment. While the Forum did offer the organizations some financial support, the organizational leaders did not focus on

this type of assistance during the interviews. Instead, they spoke highly about the "conceptual assistance," "contacts," and "collegial friendship" that the Forum offered to them, especially during the early, most stressful and challenging years of implementation. Staff spoke vividly about how Forum staff helped the organizations craft their core strategies of youth engagement. Specifically and most importantly, staff pointed to the Forum as a catalyst for their own organizational learning and their commitment to continuous learning. One leader observed:

> They've been pushing us since before we knew what we were doing to write stuff down. This is one of the benefits of working with the Forum. I was being asked: What are you doing? You need to document that. It was this constant battering… because of that, constant self-analysis is in our DNA as an organization.

Through ongoing coaching, sometimes in person and sometimes over the phone, the Forum helped the helped the organizations articulate and refine their theories of change. To buttress the organization's conceptual and strategic planning, the Forum exposed them to other "on the ground examples" and "robust models" for how to structure their own programming. The organizations use this information to shape the direction and design of their own programming, but also to explain and justify their approach to external stakeholders.

The Forum also connected OCI and AVEY to national networks. In addition to sparking ongoing communications between OCI and AVEY staff, the Forum helped the organizations connect with a broad array of national experts and foundations. The Forum, according to one leader, provided him with "access to a broader conversation" about youth development. Since both organizations are pioneering youth-community hybrid models in their communities

and felt somewhat isolated at times, the leaders appreciated that the Forum staff could function as peers who were able to brainstorm and offer perspective on their work. One leader noted of the support received from the Forum:

> I think they've been really more than wonderful personal friends of ours. I mean, they always take my calls, they always talk through what I want to talk through and they always have vouched for us with national vendors and tried to get us in front of some national funders.

Future Research

We hope this report provokes further research that examines, concurrently, *the individual and collective aspects* of youth engagement. As highlighted in this research, principles of youth engagement and a culture of youth-adult partnership underlie quality practice and positive outcomes. Most certainly, we need to know more about how organizational managers create and sustain such a culture. Such research, we believe, will advance discourse about the types of benchmarks that practitioners may use to demonstrate their progress when adopting youth engagement and youth-adult partnership as core organizational approaches to practice.

This research also highlights that youth engagement, when implemented in a quality manner, has powerful and broad effects on youth, adults and community institutions. These results remind us that youth engagement is not only about youth development, it is about community health. We most certainly need more research exploring the community-level impacts of youth-adult partnerships in public action. Until that research is conducted, documented and widely disseminated, it is unlikely that youth engagement will become a sustainable public idea or practice.

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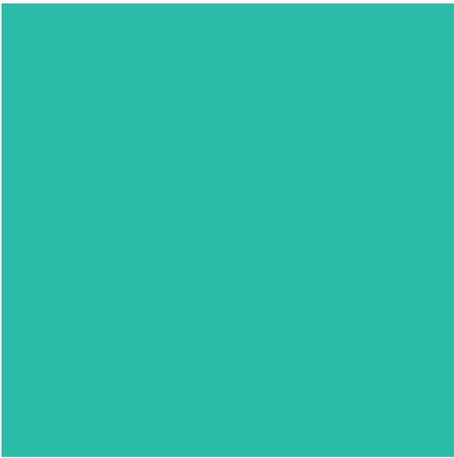
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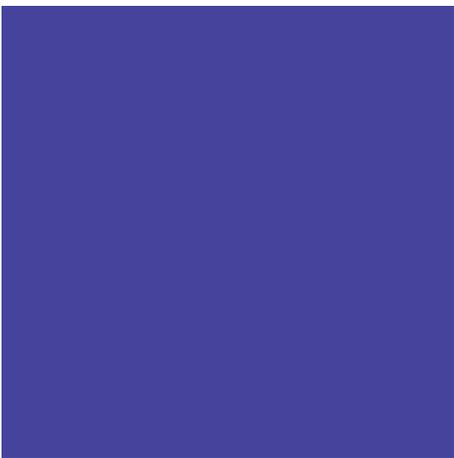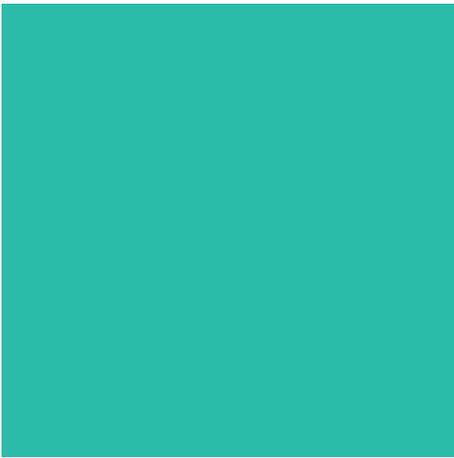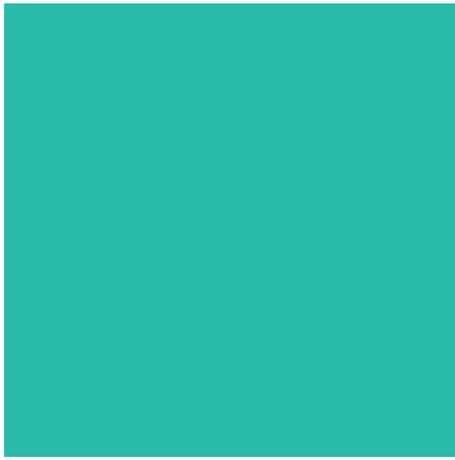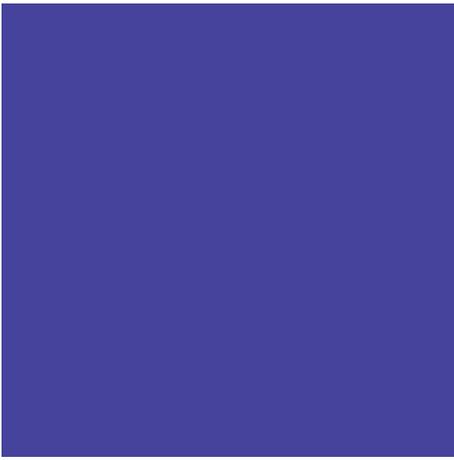
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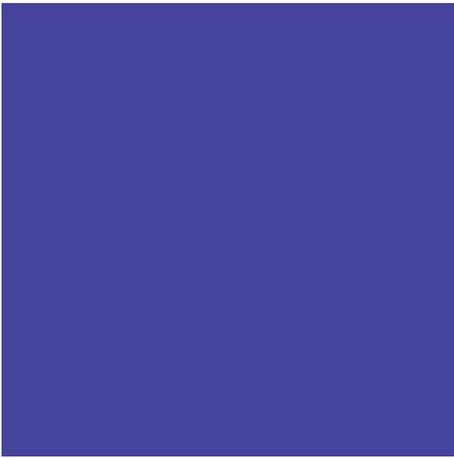
Introduction

## Overview of Austin Voices for Education and Youth

Established in 2002, Austin Voices for Education and Youth (AVEY) is an advocacy and intermediary organization that brings the voices of diverse Austin residents – in particular students and their families – into public discussion around education and youth issues. AVEY's mission is to "mobilize the community to strengthen schools and expand opportunities for Austin's youth." Towards this end, AVEY uses a multilevel approach to change that involves outreach and advocacy at the campus, district and citywide level.

Engaging Youth on Campus and Citywide

There are multiple "pathways" through which young people come to participate in Austin Voices. The Garza Youth Mobilizers after-school program, located in an alternative high school, is the core model for youth engagement in AVEY. About 6-8 mobilizers are hired each year to draw attention to district-wide issues through youth-driven events such as rallies, public hearings and discussion forums. An AVEY adult organizer coaches youth in developing and carrying out these projects. High school and college students with a high level of experience and commitment work with AVEY as Youth Consultants. Consultants advise AVEY adult staff and community partners on specific projects such as: new program development, event planning and fundraising.

While the youth mobilizers and consultants organize youth citywide, Stand Up Club members carry out action projects related to specific concerns on their own campus. AVEY adult organizers work in three under-resourced high schools to facilitate weekly meetings with groups of about 10-20 students to identify and address campus issues such as unsafe facilities, lack of class materials and teacher behavior. Stand Up Club students also organize community-building events to foster mutual understanding and support among students, families and school staff.

In addition to providing youth with hands-on training and support in carrying out action projects, AVEY also offers classroom-based learning opportunities. Stand Up Club students participate in monthly trainings on topics such as: community organizing, group facilitation, public speaking and research. Youth from across the city are invited to participate in Social Justice Summer School, where they learn social movement history and strategies from veteran youth and adult community organizers. At Garza High School, AVEY staff people co-teach with school staff a service learning course on social movement history for which students receive social studies credit.

Influencing Public Institutions

At the same time that they are mobilizing youth for change at the local level, AVEY adults and youth also work from within the public system. They sit on district governance bodies and campus advisory boards in order to provide direct input into policymaking. As part of this strategy, AVEY facilitates "community conversations" to solicit the opinions of community members from across the city, especially those who live in marginalized areas such as public housing. AVEY then compiles these findings into reports which they use to inform their advocacy with school district leaders.

AVEY also directly influences the policies and practices of public institutions through system-wide initiatives. They are providing resources, training and support to promote youth development and service learning in middle schools district-wide. As part of the Ready by 21 Initiative, AVEY is also taking the lead on the development and support of a citywide youth council.

Study Context

Austin Voices evolved with guidance and support from two influential national organizations: the Forum for Youth Investment and the Public Education Network. This report summarizes key findings from research, conducted by Community Youth Connections and commissioned by the

Forum for Youth Investment, to document the promising practices and positive impacts of AVEY. This report is based on information collected via interviews, observation and focus groups with 4 AVEY adult staff members, 2 youth consultants and 10 youth mobilizers. Researchers also interviewed 6 key community leaders in order to gain multiple perspectives on how AVEY has impacted local organizations. AVEY documents and media were analyzed to provide additional insight. AVEY staff provided feedback to the research team at several points throughout the study.

At the time of this study in 2007, AVEY was emerging from a significant period of growth. In addition to operating their core programs – Garza Youth Mobilizers and community conversations – AVEY was leading three collaborative projects designed to promote youth-adult partnership in public institutions: engaging residents in the high school redesign process; providing resources to encourage middle schools to adopt youth development; and coordinating a citywide youth council. This report provides a snapshot of Austin Voices during this critical phase of development.

Three key questions organize the presentation of this report: 1) How do key stakeholders describe the *niche* of Austin Voices in the community? 2) What types of *impacts* are emerging from the work of Austin Voices? and 3) What are the core *organizational practices* that support these positive outcomes?

Organizational Niche

Austin Voices Fills a Critical Gap in the Austin Community

During the study, we asked participants to describe for us the "niche" of Austin Voices in order to get a sense of where the organization fit in the local field. Talking about niche moves us beyond the official rhetoric to a more informal impression of what stakeholders think that the organization "is all about." Diverse study participants – youth mobilizers and youth consultants, adult staff, board members, public officials, agency partners – all agreed that AVEY plays a unique, yet critical, role in the city. Several indicated that AVEY emerged to "fill a vacuum" in education advocacy by offering resources and information not available from other organizations in the city. All described AVEY as an innovative leader and model. Stakeholders repeatedly returned to two concepts in describing the niche of Austin Voices: 1) expanding participation and representation in the public dialogue around education and 2) promoting opportunities for youth-adult partnership in schools and communities.

Expanding Participation and Representation in Public Dialogue Around Education Issues

All study participants raised the issue of "voice." More specifically, they focused on how AVEY promotes the inclusion of diverse students and their families – especially those whose voices are seldom heard in public discussion – in community dialogue around education issues. One school board member describes how the presence of Austin Voices has raised awareness of the need to integrate students and their families into the dialogue around public education issues:

> I think for a while student voices have been excluded [from discussion of public education issues]. There has been a surge to bring back that voice. And Austin Voices is not just about the students – it is also about empowering the other partner, the parent… the time was right for Austin Voices.

Austin Voices expands participation and representation in three key ways. First, *Austin Voices is strengthening the capacity of diverse youth and their families to participate in public dialogue.* Their forums and activities offer a safe and accessible environment for local residents to build their skills and knowledge through on-going study and discussion of important issues.

In addition to building the participation capacity of students and families, stakeholders indicate that *Austin Voices is facilitating the two-way flow of information between schools, students and families.* Many study participants suggested that AVEY serves as a "bridge" between the public school system and the community. They document the concerns expressed by community members and communicate these concerns to policymakers. At the same time, community conversations and newsletters translate complex education policy information into terms that students and families can relate to. One AVEY board member explained that the organization is a "neutral provider of information" on public education issues, saying: "Austin Voices isn't necessarily the cheerleader, but we're the group that gets the information out there so people know what's going on and can be involved in it."

And finally, *Austin Voices is increasing community engagement and accountability for public education.* Stakeholders described the organization as a "critical friend" that provides resources and support to the district while at the same time sharing feedback that may be critical of current policy.

Expanding Opportunities for Youth-Adult Partnership in Schools and Communities

In talking with stakeholders, it is clear that Austin Voices is seen as the "go to" group for youth voice in Austin. By placing youth in visible roles in public work, *Austin Voices is demonstrating that youth can serve as leaders and change agents in the present tense.* Not only are they modeling Y-AP with

their organization, but *Austin Voices is advocating for policies and systems change to support Y-AP.* AVEY does not want to be the only "youth voice" organization in the city – they are working to help make sure the practice becomes the norm across a wide range of community organizations and public institutions. As innovators in this area, they are able to help institutions such as the school district to develop policies that ensure youth are engaged in meaningful and supportive manner. One school district administrator described how, through "persistent messaging" and "quiet infiltration," Austin Voices has assisted the district in making a "seismic shift" in the way it does business:

> AVEY is a community partner that taught us a lot about community outreach. The district always has included students, to some extent, in conversations. Historically, it's been about things like speed bumps, innocuous kinds of topics. It was a sort of novel idea about three years ago that [AVEY] introduced: bringing students into really substantive discourse about things that really matter about their education… AVEY has managed to get attention of leaders in the district and now those leaders expect that there will be student representation on district bodies.

Austin Voices is providing practical resources and support to partner organizations seeking to adopt Y-AP. As in the above quote, AVEY was repeatedly described as a "good partner" that is willing to put in the work necessary to create the types of system change they are advocating for. A key example of this is AVEY's leadership in the start-up of a citywide youth council.

Organizational Impact

AVEY Leads to Powerful Outcomes for Individuals and Communities

Austin Voices works for change on multiple levels, engaging both individuals and institutions in the process. This integrated strategy means that AVEY works intensely in specific schools while acting as a key player in citywide forums. By engaging young people in the central work of this relatively small organization, Austin Voices has been able to attain significant developmental and community outcomes, as highlighted below.

Developmental Outcomes: Benefits to AVEY Youth and Adult Staff

Individual youth and adult staff gain many personal benefits from participation in this process of mobilization and partnership. For example, youth spoke easily and with great enthusiasm about their experiences with AVEY. Many of their stories and examples indicate that *they developed a sense of efficacy and personal empowerment* from the experience, as described by one Garza student:

> I used to have this impression that those [policy] decisions are left up to grown-ups and that's just how it is. This class has really taught me that kids can do stuff too... AVEY has affected my personal character a lot. I feel much more confident and assured of myself. I feel empowered, like I can actually have an effect. It's a really good feeling to voice what you have learned.

Many youth described how t*hey gained sociopolitical awareness and civic competence* as a result of participating in AVEY. One Youth Mobilizer explained his learning in this manner:

> This program changes you, changes who you are. It's just really defined who I am and what I want to be doing. It's really instilled the idea of social movements in me. I love that idea and that's what I really want to pursue in the future. Wherever I am with this, I want to be mobilizing people to do what they feel is important.

Additionally, adult staff provided many examples of the way in which partnering with young people on social action projects promote their own development. These experienced community organizers described gaining *a sense of generativity*, or personal satisfaction from passing along their wisdom, skills and expertise to a new generation of activists.

Community Outcomes: Benefits to Adult Leaders and Public Institutions

In addition to individual gains in youth and adult members, many positive changes have occurred outside the organization, in the community leaders and institutions that AVEY is trying to engage.

For example, several adult stakeholders highlighted institutional impacts from a recent school board candidate's forum facilitated by the youth mobilizers. Youth raised new and challenging issues – such as the lack of educational opportunities for parenting students – that helped to ensure that *civic agendas better reflect the interests and concerns of diverse youth.* One AVEY board member suggested that this school board candidate's forum was also an opportunity to model effective youth-adult partnership practices to a wide audience of adults, instilling in new school board members the idea that *youth participation in civic life is becoming an institutionalized expectation* within the school district:

> To me, because [a project such as the school board candidate's forum] deals with real, substantive issues and it's putting the kids right up front, not in a superficial way, but they're genuinely driving the conversation. You're not feeding the students the questions to ask the candidates. They're coming to them with the questions that are important to them. It's an opportunity for everybody, every adult in that room, to recognize and acknowledge the value, the expertise of that student, with respect to their own education.

Public sector leaders report that the "impressive" public work of AVEY youth has forced community leaders to admit and *overcome their negative stereotypes about youth*, especially youth of color. AVEY youth present information in a manner that adults are able to hear, prompting many of these community leaders to themselves *become advocates of youth-adult partnership*.

Organizational Practices

AVEY is a Model for Building a Culture of Partnership

A key strength of the Austin Voices model is that the organization successfully balances attention to youth development and community development. This is not an easy balance to maintain and one that AVEY manages with a great deal of intention and skill. A deep commitment to partnership ensures a fairly tight connection between the grassroots organizing and the policy work of the organization. Active participation by young people was repeatedly cited as being critical to the credibility and effectiveness of the organization. Therefore, it will be necessary to sustain this *culture of partnership*, as expressed through organizational values, mechanisms and public action, as AVEY expands the scope of its work.

Partnership Values

The culture of Austin Voices reflects a strong set of *partnership values*, or a shared belief that group decision making is enhanced when diverse stakeholders are involved in the process. Youth, families and adult organizers - not just administrators - are all considered 'experts' to be regularly consulted in organizational decision making. Stakeholders provided many examples of how youth input informed the overall agenda for AVEY's advocacy work, as well the structure of specific youth programs and policies.

Partnership values were evident in the respectful manner in which adult staff people interact with youth, consistently taking care to validate the young person's lived experience. Dialogue activities that promote group reflection, collaboration and mutual respect are a regular part of youth and adult meetings. Partnership values are also expressed in the collaborative approach AVEY takes in working with the school district and other partner agencies.

Partnership Structures

Austin Voices has many *partnership structures* – roles, policies and processes – in place to make sure that youth have the opportunities and support that they need to actively participate. By offering a range of "pathways" to participation, AVEY is able to engage diverse youth in their work and benefit from youth input at multiple levels of the organization. While some youth may choose to become a mobilizer, other youth prefer to express their opinion at a forum or rally, or to participate in monthly social networking events. Highly motivated and experienced youth are encouraged to work alongside adult staff as consultants on organization-wide projects such as grant writing and new program development. Once youth choose to take on a significant responsibility, the duties are formally clarified through job descriptions and ongoing feedback from adult supervisors.

Youth-adult partnership is infused throughout Austin Voices, both as an organizing strategy and as an outcome. Yet AVEY staff emphasized to us that they are a "youth-centered" rather than a "youth driven" organization, in recognition of the need for clear and complementary roles for adults. Adults describe themselves as "conductors" who help youth to channel their energy into productive action. They provide youth with practical coaching and strategic support for carrying out this action.

Public Action

The partnership values and structures within Austin Voices provide youth with the confidence and competence they need to take their participation to another level through visible *public actions*. Public actions distinguish AVEY from conventional youth leadership programs: youth are doing "real work" that directly impacts policies and programs that affect large numbers of people. AVEY youth and adults co-facilitate intergenerational dialogue around significant education issues through community conversations, rallies and candidate's

forums. Youth-produced media (photo essays, documentaries, newsletters) and message-oriented products (t-shirts, buttons) raise the visibility of AVEY issues among youth. And youth communicate insider knowledge and research-based information directly to policymakers by giving public testimony and presentations to government bodies. At the same time that youth are implementing these various public actions, AVEY adult organizers and youth mobilizers are working behind the scenes to connect these individual actions with the organization's larger campaigns. This coordinated strategy is powerful.

Public actions are designed primarily to create more equitable and responsive communities, however they are also an opportunity for AVEY publicly model youth-adult partnership to the wider community. They are challenging negative stereotypes about youth while demonstrating the power of young people to contribute to communities.
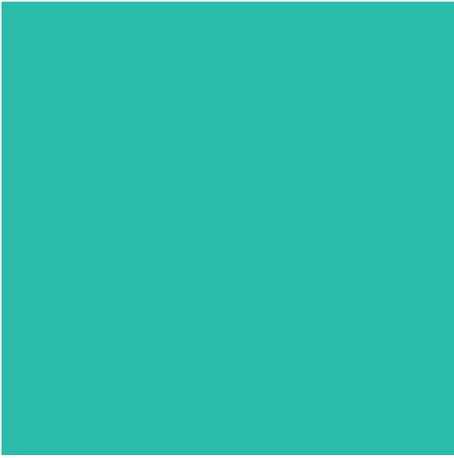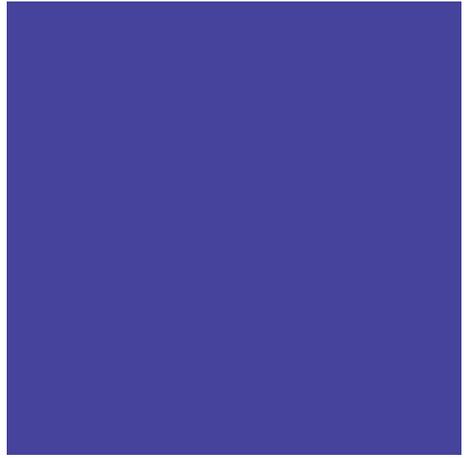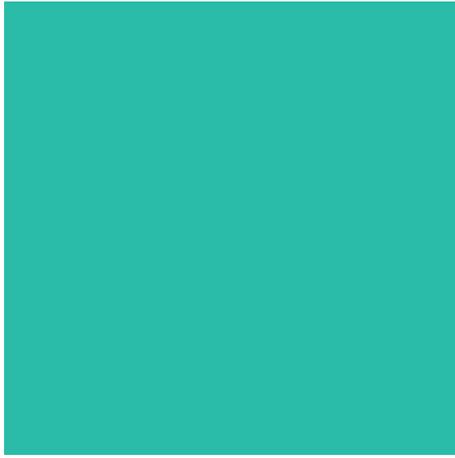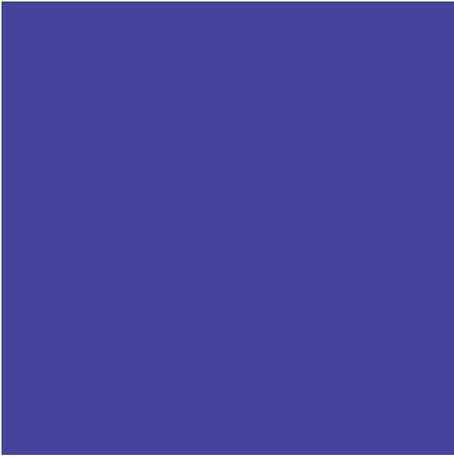
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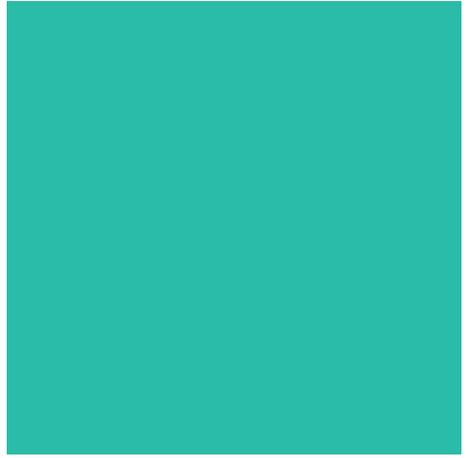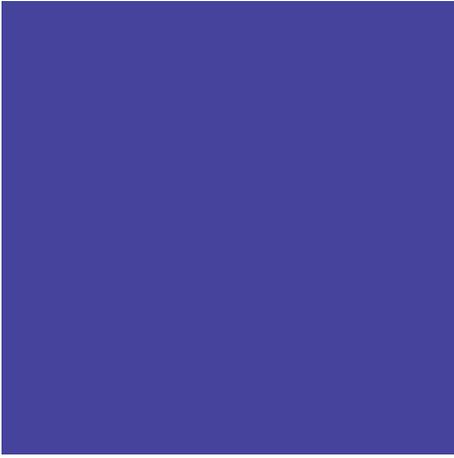
Introduction

Overview of Oasis Community IMPACT

Since 2000, Oasis Community IMPACT (OCI) has been working to increase educational and economic opportunities for young people in East Nashville. The program was originally established as Community IMPACT Nashville to promote the personal development of low-income youth through service, leadership training and college scholarships. Working in partnership with the Forum for Youth Investment, OCI has since made social change a more explicit part of its strategy, in 2004 adopting a youth organizing approach for engaging youth in real-world research, outreach and action. OCI now seeks to affect not only individual youth, but also the larger systems that limit their education and economic opportunities.

A neighborhood-focused program housed in an East Nashville high school, OCI works intensely with 12 youth from three local schools. These "youth mobilizers" work on teams to identify and address economic and education issues of importance to them. Youth mobilizers are paid employees who work very closely together in an office environment almost daily during the school year and summer. Youth mobilizers take their job seriously and consider themselves to be "24-7 mobilizers" who are always representing the organization. Each team of high school students is supported by 1-2 adult staff, most of whom are recent graduates of Oasis youth leadership programs.

OCI uses action research as a platform for advocacy. Starting with their own personal experience, youth mobilizers expand their understanding of issues by collecting their own local data (via surveys, interviews and focus groups) and researching information on-line. They produce reports, curricula and outreach workshops to communicate their findings to their peers and the broader community. Mobilizers also use this research in giving presentations to public bodies such as the school board, providing testimony in public hearings and developing multi-agency coalitions. Adult staff play a critical "behind the scenes" role in helping youth to gain the attention of influential adult leaders.

Youth mobilizers manage the recruitment and selection of their peers, with most youth hired and trained during the summer program. OCI training activities address issues of power and oppression, as well as "basic skills" such as public speaking, research skills and group decision making. Adult staff regularly facilitate dialogue that encourage youth to develop a critical analysis of the root causes of social problems, or in their words: "teach youth how to explode the issues." Each team meeting starts with a group check-in and ends with a debrief. Youth regularly facilitate teambuilding breaks.

In 2005, Community IMPACT! merged with the Oasis Center, a citywide agency which offers youth programs ranging from crisis intervention services to leadership training and media production. The merger has been productive for both organizations. The Oasis Center gained access to a social action-oriented model of youth engagement, as well a direct connection to youth and networks in East Nashville. Community IMPACT youth gained access to counseling services and connections with a citywide network of youth and adult leaders. Since the time of the study, OCI Director Anderson Williams - who managed the development of the new program model and merger with Oasis – has transitioned into a new position as Director of New Initiatives at Oasis.

Study Context

This report summarizes key findings from research commissioned by the Forum for Youth Investment and conducted by the Community Youth Connections research team of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This case study of OCI was part of a larger study documenting the promising practices and positive impacts of organizations engaging youth in social change work. Researchers Linda Camino and Julie Petrokubi conducted a site visit to OCI in summer 2007.

This report is based on information collected via interviews, observation and focus groups with 4 Oasis adult staff members, 3 young adult staff, 11 current youth mobilizers and 1 former youth mobilizer. Researchers also interviewed 5 adult community leaders in order to gain multiple perspectives on the broader impact of OCI in Nashville. OCI documents and media were also analyzed to provide additional insight. OCI staff provided feedback to the research team at several points in the study.

Three key questions organize the presentation of this report: 1) How do key stakeholders describe the niche of Oasis Community IMPACT in the community? 2) What types of impacts are emerging from the work of Oasis Community IMPACT? and 3) What are the core organizational practices that support these positive outcomes? This report is designed to provide a snapshot of Oasis Community IMPACT during this particular point in its development. Additional information on the larger study will be available in an upcoming publication from the Forum for Youth Investment.

Organizational Niche

Oasis Community IMPACT is "The Real Deal"

During the study, we asked participants to describe for us the "niche" of Oasis Community IMPACT, with the goal of getting a better idea of where the organization fit locally. Talking about niche moves us beyond the official rhetoric to a more informal impression of what stakeholders think that the program "is all about." Diverse local stakeholders – youth mobilizers and consultants, adult staff, board members, public officials, agency partners – all portrayed OCI as being "the real deal." In describing the role of the program in Nashville, stakeholders kept returning to the ways in which OCI was "authentic," "dedicated" and "a good partner." OCI has a reputation for acting with integrity and for being grounded in the interests of young people. Study participants frequently expressed that working with OCI was a refreshing experience in contrast to "politics as usual."

Stakeholders focused on two features of the program in describing the niche of OCI: 1) OCI offers a realistic portrayal of the strengths and challenges of East Nashville youth and 2) OCI doesn't just offer problems, they also offer solutions.

OCI Offers a Realistic Portrayal of the Strengths and Challenges of East Nashville Youth

In talking about what makes OCI "the real deal", study participants highlighted the program's long-term commitment to the East Nashville community and willingness to allow the "unfiltered" voices of local youth to come through. The neighborhood focus appears to be a critical feature that distinguishes OCI from other youth programs in the city. OCI was lauded by stakeholders for being able to simultaneously: a) draw attention to inequalities and injustices that limit youth and community development in East Nashville, while also b) challenging stereotypes by highlighting the abilities of youth in the community and instilling in

those youth a sense of pride in their neighborhood. This is a complex task and one that OCI seems to be managing well.

One East Nashville city council member describes the niche of OCI in this manner:

> Community IMPACT is a completely unique asset in Nashville. [They provide] a direct way to have communication and thoughtful discourse with young people… During budget cycles, when we've had big funding questions to be decided, Community IMPACT has been there and has been able to give a student perspective – a youth voice perspective – that is decidedly different from the blue ribbon, magnet school kids, private school kids from all over Nashville. It is what's really going on in a very urban, very challenging area of town.

As representative of this rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, this council member says that without OCI: "the voices of the kids who have always been here can get lost" in a public dialogue which he views as dominated by newer and more privileged members of the community. A youth mobilizer puts a finer point on what makes OCI "the real deal" in the eyes of youth:

> I think what makes that group so powerful is because it's the students that are livin' it who are actually telling the stories, not just some adult who is concerned about what's going on.

OCI doesn't just offer problems, they also offer solutions. They are a good partner.

OCI has been successful in getting issues on the agenda. OCI is not necessarily offering adults brand

new issues. Sometimes they simply provide leaders with a new angle on an issue; or use the "shock" of youth voice to refresh adult engagement in the issue. Stakeholders explained that what is most powerful about the OCI strategy is that *they have been able to sustain attention on the issue beyond the initial hype*. They do this by: a) communicating the message in a manner that will be heard by influential adults, b) pairing personal stories with group-level data and c) building alliances and other structures to expand understanding of the issue and move the community towards action. OCI seems to be effective in part because they offer specific targets and strategies for action on issues – such as education equity – that may have before seemed intractable.

OCI's willingness to be part of the solution reflects their core value of portraying youth as agents of change, rather than simply victims of oppression. For example, in addition to conducting research and doing outreach on financial literacy issues, OCI youth and adults are spearheading a coalition to address the issue of predatory lending in East Nashville. Rather than waiting for adults to create opportunities to address the issue, these youth are inviting adults to join them at the table.

Another way that OCI takes part in the solution is by using popular education strategies as part of their organizing. In their report on college access opportunities for youth in East Nashville public schools, the mobilizers included empirical data was well as practical information such as a college prep checklist to assist their peers in making sure that they are taking the right steps for getting into college. The Economics team regularly offers financial literacy workshops to the community. OCI produces accessible materials and resources make the issues tangible – for their peers, their families and for the adult decision makers they target.

Organizational Impact

OCI Leads to Powerful Outcomes for Individuals and Communities

Oasis Community IMPACT works for change on multiple levels, engaging both individuals and institutions in the process. This section discusses some of the highlights.

Developmental Outcomes: Benefits to OCI Youth and Adult Staff

Individual youth and adult staff gain many personal benefits from participation in this process of mobilization and partnership. We heard a great deal during the site visit about the many ways in which participation in OCI enhanced the lives of youth mobilizers. First, youth expressed an *increased sense of safety and belonging*. Youth spoke with warmth about their teammates, referring to OCI as "a workplace we call family." They described the program as a "safe space" where "you can tell people anything and its all going to stay within the group." Youth described this sense of trust and mutual respect as being essential to their ability to work as a team on collective action projects.

In addition to developing positive relationships with their peers, youth gain *new community connections* through their partnerships with adults. Adult staff people were described as being reliable role models, who demonstrate for youth how to interact with – and sometimes disagree with – others in a manner that is respectful and fair. One youth mobilizer described his impression of adult staff:

> What I have seen with all of these adults here is that they all show responsibility... Like where I come from, I have never seen as many adults help kids and be on time and stuff.

Several former youth mobilizers told us stories about how instrumental relationships that they developed with adults through the program helped them in future education and employment endeavors. Additionally, youth mobilizers gained a deeper understanding of resources and issues in East Nashville. As part of the action research process, youth mobilizers *expanded their sociopolitical awareness and civic competence*. During our focus group, youth expressed that they were "blown away" to learn how using high-interest payday lending services may limit the financial mobility of their families. They also say that OCI taught them how to "break down the issues" into manageable steps for action. In addition to developing knowledge and skills, youth expressed that they gained an *increased sense of efficacy and empowerment* from the process of collective action. One veteran mobilizer explained how OCI helped her to channel her frustration into productive action by developing "professional skills" she needed to effectively engage with influential adults:

> Community IMPACT just brought out some of my good qualities. Like, I've always been outspoken. But now I know how to speak out in a good way so that my voice can be heard... I can get a group of adults' attention and get them to listen to me, conference with me, like a peer.

Youth are not the only ones who benefit from participation in OCI. Adult staff cite many examples of how working with the teams *enhanced their own confidence and competence in partnering with youth*. Given that OCI staff are pioneering a new way of working with youth, adult staff say that they learn "on the job," relying on continuous feedback from youth to let them know when to "step up" and when to "be more passive." The experience of youth-adult partnership has been essential in helping these adults to develop their own youth work practice.

Community Outcomes: Benefits to Adult Leaders and Public Institutions

In addition to individual gains in OCI youth and adult staff, many positive changes have occurred outside

the program, in the adult community leaders and institutions that they are trying to engage. Public sector leaders report that the work of OCI has forced community leaders to admit and *overcome their negative stereotypes about youth*, especially youth of color. They describe OCI youth as being very "professional," "respectful" and "prepared" in their interactions with adults leaders.

OCI youth present information in a manner that adults are able to hear, prompting many of those leaders to become *advocates of youth-adult partnership*. One local business leader described the power of seeing youth mobilizers in action:

> When I think of Community IMPACT, I think of youth gathering outside of the City Council Office last year. The youth had really thought out their position… you can tell that the students think about things critically. They are not just voicing a typical teenage opinion because they are upset or didn't get their way. They are like: This is what needs to be improved. And here are some steps that we think can be taken.

As a result of their successes in engaging adult community leaders, OCI has also been able to impact public institutions on a number of levels. We may trace this impact by looking at recent efforts by youth mobilizers to raise awareness of why more East Nashville youth do not attend college. After identifying college access as a major barrier for local youth, the mobilizers analyzed national trends and collected data from their peers in order to get a better understanding of the issue. Their study revealed that while 90% of students surveyed in East Nashville schools aspired to post-secondary education, less than one third had met with a guidance counselor about how to get there. In addition to publishing their findings in a report titled *College Access from the Inside Out*, OCI youth

offered presentations and workshops on the issue. A documentary was also produced chronicling how OCI contributed to significantly increasing the college enrollment rate of graduates from one high school.

OCI's on-going efforts to "keep the issue on the table" have had several outcomes for the community. First, *they helped to make youth-adult partnership an institutionalized expectation*. Local public officials, such as city council and school board members, now come to OCI to solicit youth input on policy issues. One school board member says that the report and subsequent presentation by youth mobilizers "had a major impact on of our way of thinking about the issues, how we approach policy."

Second, *they succeeded in getting the issue of college access on the agenda* of several powerful groups, including a citywide coalition of community-based organizations and foundations working on education issues. Third, *new coalitions have formed to take action on the issue*. For example, the report resulted in a new partnership between Vanderbilt University and several public schools to provide college counseling to high school students.

And finally, *the public school system responded with changes in resources, policies and programs*. For example, the schools were able to not only retain threatened funding for school counselors in their budget, but they also placed an additional counselor in all high schools. This is critical for high schools such as those attended by OCI youth, where the small counseling staff is so overwhelmed with students in crisis that there is little time or resources left for helping students get into college.

Organizational Practices

OCI is a Model for Building a Culture of Partnership

Oasis Community IMPACT successfully balances attention to youth and community development. This is not an easy balance to maintain and one that OCI manages with a great deal of intention and skill. A key ingredient to maintaining this balance is OCI's organizational *culture of partnership*, as expressed through partnership values, partnership mechanisms and public action. As one staff person explained, the program "starts with the youth and then moves to the issues."

Partnership Values

The culture of OCI reflects a strong set of *partnership values*, or a shared belief that group decision making is enhanced when diverse stakeholders are involved in the process. The words and actions of adult staff – from the college students who support the teams to the Executive Director of Oasis – communicates that youth-adult partnership is a core organizational priority, not just a side project.

In response to this affirmation from adults, youth clearly "own the work" and perceive themselves to be "experts". Youth and adults are expected to listen and learn from each other and youth expressed comfort in persuading adults in order to reach consensus. On-going dialogue around issue of trust, power and authority - among adult staff, between youth and adults and among youth - helps to make this type of collaborative relationship possible by "keeping tabs on respect."

Partnership Structures

OCI has *partnership structures* – roles, policies and processes – in place to make sure that youth have the opportunities and support that they need to actively participate. All youth are expected to find a way to contribute their personal "gifts" to the group and are held accountable by their peers and supervisors. Youth have defined roles outlined in position descriptions and are provided with the resources (coaching, compensation, office supplies) they need to accomplish their work. OCI uses a peer-to-peer recruitment process and more experienced youth are expected to coach their peers.

Yet there is a clear and complementary role for adults in OCI. Adults "keep youth on their game" while taking youth concerns seriously. Adults provide intensive coaching to "over prepare" youth so that they may effectively interact with powerful adults in stressful situations. One youth mobilizer explained youth and adult roles in this manner: youth are responsible for mobilizing their peers, parents and teachers, while adults act as their "promoters" by bringing the issues to groups that are not part of the youth's daily lives. In this way, adults help youth to get more exposure for their work.

Public Action

The partnership values and mechanisms within OCI provide youth with the confidence and competence they need to take their participation to another level through visible *public actions*. Public actions distinguish OCI from conventional youth leadership programs: youth are doing "real" work that directly impacts policies and programs that affect large numbers of people.

OCI youth communicate insider knowledge and research-based information directly to policymakers by giving public testimony and presentations to government bodies. They also produce events, workshops and reports that engage the broader community in intergenerational dialogue around significant issues. These public actions reinforce the internal partnership values of OCI, while at the same time demonstrating the value of youth-adult partnership to the entire community.
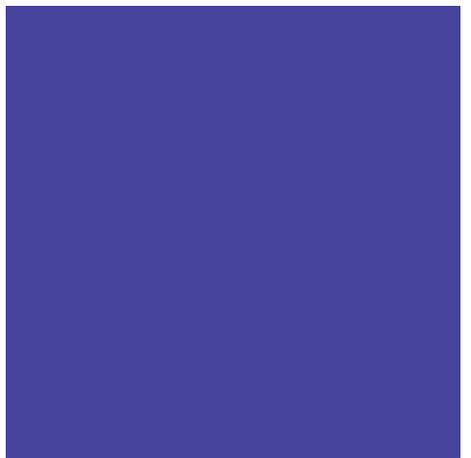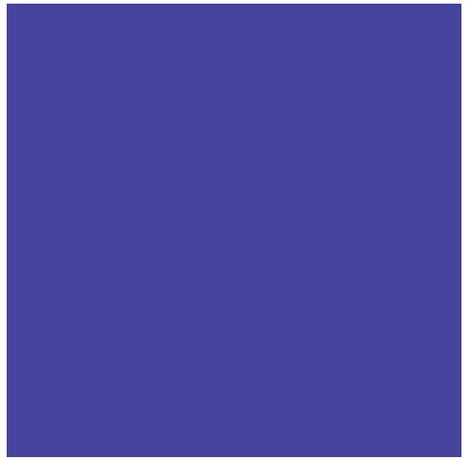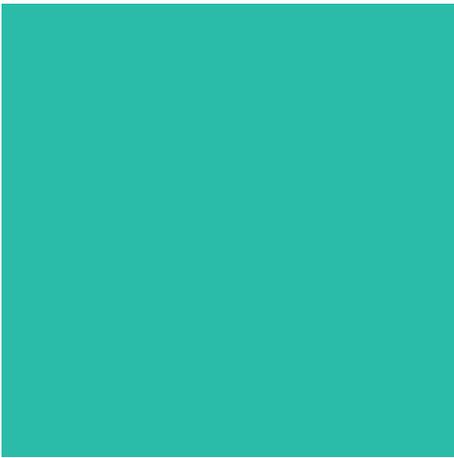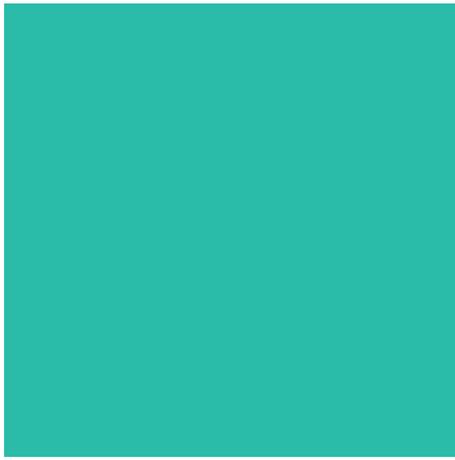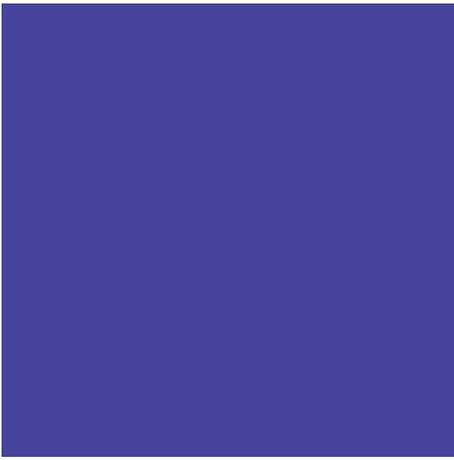
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