



Young Community Mobilizers Share Strategies and Advice about Building Capacity in Under-Resourced Communities

On the weekend of September 22 -23, 2006, two dozen youth (aged 15 – 20) and adults from Nashville, Tennessee; Providence, Rhode Island; and Austin, Texas convened in Washington, D.C. for a mini-summit to discuss core principles for youth engagement and strategies for building capacity in under-resourced communities. The summit, hosted by the Forum for Youth Investment, was an opportunity for youth action teams from the three cities to:

- Share stories and strategies for community change and effective youth engagement;
- Discuss common challenges to building capacity in under-resourced communities;
- Jointly develop strategies and guidelines for reaching youth and supporting youth action in communities.

Participating organizations included [Oasis/Community Impact](#), located in Nashville, [Austin Voices for Education and Youth](#), and two Providence-based agencies – [Youth in Action](#) and Young Voices in Providence. The summit was held as part of a project the Forum is conducting with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, about building the capacity of communities to improve the quality and reach of out-of-school time opportunities for vulnerable youth.

“Young people have to be in the room for the policy conversation. It doesn't make sense for Anderson [adult staff member] to go to a meeting with the school board on college access when our students can cut through all of the talk and say, 'we don't have the books to prepare us,' or something else that makes the argument.”

- Youth Mobilizer

While many youth programs do exist, most struggle with two key challenges: ensuring service-delivery is high quality and successfully reaching and engaging vulnerable young people. These dual challenges of quality and reach are particularly pressing in communities with large populations of low-income families and where the local non-profit infrastructure is weak.

A 20-year-old activist from Providence commented, “It's important to get young people from different places together like this. Adults have more access to this kind of networking, but young people need these experiences too, and the resources that we can take back home with us when we experience meetings like this.”

Shared Stories, Shared Strategies

The group began the weekend together by sharing stories about their own work and community campaigns. In a debriefing session, the group then reflected on each presentation to extract broadly applicable principles and strategies. See Figure 1 for brief summaries of the recent work of these youth teams.

The young people discovered that their stories shared a great deal in common, both in terms of challenges facing under-resourced communities as well as strategies for effective youth action. Some common themes included:

- Youth voice is critically important. At times, decisions have gone in the exact opposite direction that they would have otherwise gone because young people were at the table and vocal.
- The school system is a major potential force for change — both on issues related directly to education as well as for organizing young people on other issues (because students are already there) — but it is also a place where young people experience major obstacles, particularly in disinvested communities where schools tend to be weak.
- To do this work, young people need a home base. An organization or institution that provides them with the supports and skill-building opportunities to affect change. These organizations should promote a family-like environment and attract supportive staff that can build the competencies youth need both immediately and for the future.

Figure 1

Youth Action in Three Cities: Youth Teams Share Stories and Strategies for Community Change

Youth Mobilizers at Oasis/Community Impact in Nashville have taken on education and economics as their lead issues in their East Nashville neighborhood. Earlier this year, the CI education team researched and developed a report on college access for low-income and first-generation students, and the disparities in the public education system among student populations for supporting college preparation and attendance. The CI economic team has focused on educating the community about predatory lending and providing income tax assistance in the low-income East Nashville community. Through both their education and economic work, the CI team has developed a strong reputation as a credible source of information on a range of youth issues, and an effective voice for local youth policy development.

[Click here to read the report on college access.](#)

[Click here to view the Oasis/Community Impact PowerPoint presentation from the Retreat.](#)

Young people working at Austin Voices for Education and Youth lead the community in understanding and responding to the broad based high school reform discourse that is currently the focus of educational policy in the Austin Public Schools. High school redesign is the focus of current debates about how to best educate and prepare young people for the future. The youth mobilizers at Austin Voices have developed surveys and conducted community based research to provide the district with an authentic youth and community-based view — backed by research — of how schools should be designed. Their work has been formatted into a web-based mini-documentary on the conditions of the schools and four responses (rigor, relevance, relationships, respect) that need to be incorporated into any long-term high school redesign plans.

[Click here to view the documentary made by youth mobilizers at Austin Voices.](#)

Youth in Action and Young Voices in Providence, Rhode Island each engage young people in action for community change. The two organizations are linked by a common history. Youth in Action is the older of the two organizations, having been in existence nearly a decade, and Young Voices was created less than a year ago by the founder of Youth in Action and a former youth participant in YIA programs. Young Voices focused on direct policy advocacy whereas YIA focuses on building youth leadership skills for community-based action projects. Both organizations focus on broad engagement of

Core Principles of Youth Engagement

The three initial presentations and the reflection that followed laid the framework for a focused exploration of core principles of youth engagement. The Forum for Youth Investment had earlier partnered with Oasis/Community Impact to develop a list of principles for organizations to consider. That list argued that effective youth engagement strategies:

- Create a **home base** for young people;
- Have a strong **youth and adult team** at their core;

- Are intentional about building youth and adult capacity;
- Balance the need for **individual supports** with the goal of community change;
- Have an intentional **theory of change** or set of core beliefs that young people and adults understand and own;
- Take **issue identification** seriously and define clear focal points for action;
- Create opportunities for **sustained access and influence**;
- Plan for **continuity** of youth leaders over time.

Young people discussed, supported, and expanded upon this initial set of core principles, clarifying some and adding key points they felt were important for youth engagement efforts to be effective. In particular, youth raised the following additional issues:

- Programs need to be clear about their purposes for engaging young people, whether they are a neighborhood center or an advocacy group seeking input from youth on a set of policy issues;
- Young people need explicit information and encouragement about opportunities for leadership. Often, because they haven't been engaged before, young people do not see the importance of an opportunity or know how to appropriately act upon an opportunity.

"I look at it as a business model. If you're trying to market a [product], you have to know what customers think. Policymakers don't get students' ideas often."

- Youth Co-Founder, Young Voices

Making Programs Work for Youth

The Forum team introduced the group to seven key tasks that research suggests are necessary for building the capacity of local youth programs:

- **Organization and network development** to strengthen individual programs and coordinated systems of out-of-school opportunities;
- **Program development**, including strengthening programs' capacity to deliver high-quality opportunities to youth;
- **Quality assessment and improvement** efforts to help programs collect and use meaningful data on the quality of their services;
- **Workforce development**, characterized by youth program staff that are stable, prepared, supported and committed to youth engagement and development;
- **Policy/priority development** which involves increasing public and political will for an improved, coordinated system of supports and opportunities for youth; and
- **Youth and family engagement**, including strategies for engaging youth and their families in efforts to improve the quality and reach of out-of-school time opportunities.

Participants in the summit responded to these tasks by providing concrete strategies for effectively implementing them in low-income communities. Young people prioritized five of the tasks as particularly relevant from their perspective: organization/network development, quality assessment and improvement, youth and family engagement, program content/development, and policy development. Here we highlight key points they shared in each of these priority areas:

Organization/Network Development

- Networks are as important for young people as they are for adults. Programs need to build some capacity to reach out to other groups that might serve the needs of their young people or share common goals.
- Flexible participation requirements are key to effective youth engagement. Flexibility accommodates the real-world schedules that young people must juggle between school,

family, paid work and community responsibilities. Organizations and groups that engage or employ young people should work together to allow youth to participate in each (e.g., sports teams coordinate with the after-school program so that youth can participate in both).

Quality Assessment/Improvement

- Effective programs operating in under-resourced communities are clear about their purposes, include explicit leadership opportunities for youth, build skills (compensating for gaps not addressed by schools where necessary) and pay attention to youths basic needs and mental health issues.
- Effective programs offer an initial hook — music classes, sports, etc — to get youth interested, but follow-up with deeper opportunities that get young people to stay.
- Understand that a lot of programs are not sure how effective they are. They lack the tools to figure out their level of effectiveness.

Youth & Family Engagement

- Some youth suggested broadening the frame from “youth and family” to “youth and adult” engagement. In disinvested communities, familial adults are sometimes over-stressed and over-stretched, leaving little emotional or physical energy to support youth. Some have to find and connect with other supportive adults. In some communities, energy may best be spent on teaching youth to advocate for themselves.
- Personal obstacles prevent youth and families from participating in out-of-school time activities and community-based efforts. Despite the difficulties, students ask that local leaders still try. Low-tech/high-touch strategies for engaging individuals work effectively in under-resourced communities.

Program Content/Development

- Program diversification is important. One youth respondent stated, “Too often cities put up a bunch of basketball programs, but over half of the youth in the city are way off grade level in reading and writing skills. Programs might lead with basketball, but somewhere in the city they need to have access to writing classes because that is what they need.” Programs need to address what youth need, and not just what they say they want on the surface.
- Jobs are critical for older youth. After-school programs that connect to jobs are needed. Jobs for youth need to provide opportunities to gain real skills. This is particularly important for youth who may not be going on to college.

Policy Development

- Communities need to have young people at the table when developing programs. Often when youth are in the room, decisions go a completely different way than if youth were not in the room.
- Organizations need the time and resources to educate young people on the issues so that they can effectively participate and to prepare young people for the political landscape surrounding the issues.