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OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

# Youth Organizing

Expanding Possibilities for  
Youth Development

## ABOUT THE FUNDERS' COLLABORATIVE ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) is a collective of national, regional, and local foundations, and youth organizing practitioners whose mission is to: substantially increase the philanthropic investment in; and strengthen the organizational capacities of groups engaging young people in community organizing across the country.

The main goals of the FCYO are to:

- Increase the level of funding directed towards youth organizing groups;
- Support youth organizing groups to develop stable and sustainable organizations; and
- Increase the awareness and understanding of youth organizing among funders and community organizations.

For more information about the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, visit the FCYO web site at: <http://www.fcyo.org>.

## ABOUT THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

The Occasional Papers Series was conceived and developed by a Committee of funders, intermediaries, and youth organizing practitioners, in conjunction with the FCYO. The Series is edited and published by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing. Series Committee members included:

- Californians for Justice
- Forum for Youth Investment
- Edward W. Hazen Foundation
- Movement Strategy Center
- Philadelphia Students Union
- Surdna Foundation
- Tides Foundation
- Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice

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# Youth Organizing

Expanding Possibilities for  
Youth Development

BY SHAWN GINWRIGHT, PH.D

no. 03

OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

## SERIES PREFACE

In 1997, several foundations set out to explore the nascent field of youth organizing, an innovative and effective strategy combining the best practices of youth development with the tactics and strategies of community organizing. In 2000, these foundations and a handful of others launched the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, a formal effort to increase understanding of youth organizing, catalyze support, and strengthen the capacities of youth organizing groups.

This Occasional Papers Series is an important piece of our work. Because the field is relatively young—and because its practitioners may often operate beneath the radar of youth and community development stakeholders—potential allies and supporters have many unanswered questions. What is youth organizing and how does it work? Who leads youth organizing efforts? Can youth organizing really deliver youth development outcomes? Can it create sustainable social change?

These are all fair questions, and we try to tackle them throughout this series. The diversity of youth organizing is one of its chief strengths, and the series overall tries to embody that strength. Rather than trying to argue one approach to understanding youth organizing, the series puts forth multiple perspectives, which as a whole embrace the complexity, diversity, and nuance intrinsic to the field. Capturing this richness, we hope, is the series' principal contribution.

This first installment of the series includes three articles and an annotated bibliography. In "An Emerging Model for Working with Youth: Community Organizing + Youth Development = Youth Organizing," LISTEN, Inc., a training and support organization, tackles the basics of youth organizing—origins, concepts, models, principles, and practices.

In "Youth and Community Organizing Today," journalist Daniel HoSang traces the historical involvement of youth in social change efforts throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and examines how the current phenomenon of youth organizing shapes community issues and community organizing.

In "Youth Organizing: Expanding Possibilities for Youth Development," scholar-activist Shawn Ginwright looks at the nexus of youth development and youth organizing, tracing how youth organizing yields positive youth development and social change.

Although the papers reflect the different approaches, models, and variety of issues within youth organizing, they also reflect the common belief shared by all youth organizing efforts: that all young people have the inherent capacity to be active, contributing partners in their own individual development as well as in the development of their communities.

There are 60 million young people between the ages of 10 and 24 in the United States today. And as we think about the development and role of youth in our society, it is worth remembering that young people grow up in communities, not just community and youth development programs. From this perspective, perhaps the most salient question is this: What would our communities and our society look like if the collective vision, leadership, energy and talents of even a small percentage of all young people were directed toward community transformation?

We hope this series begins to answer that question.

*Vera Miao, Project Director*  
*Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing*  
February 2003

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## INTRODUCTION

Three years ago, when the Oakland, California, public schools announced they would not offer students childcare for mandatory summer sessions, 18 year-old Jasmon Jackson knew she wouldn't be able to graduate with her classmates. Her six month-old daughter needed care, and she depended on the school to provide it. "How do they expect me to go to summer school?" she recalled later. "I can't afford childcare. That's a hundred and thirty-five dollars a week! I don't have that kind of money." Jackson was not alone, either. Many of her friends also depended on school-sponsored childcare to make it through summer school.

While her friends were resigned to a seemingly irreconcilable fate, Jackson decided to organize her peers to fight for free or reduced-cost childcare. As a member of Leadership Excellence, an Oakland-based youth leadership development organization, Jackson had the organizing skills, personal confidence, and adult support necessary to lead a successful campaign. With guidance from adult allies at Leadership Excellence, Jackson met with pregnant and parenting high school mothers after school and at her friends' homes over the next few months and gathered signatures for a petition. She and other mothers wrote over ten letters to the school district, requesting a meeting with the superintendent. They made numerous phone calls to the school board and to district officials, and when Oakland school superintendent Dennis Chaconas finally visited Oakland Technical High School, 20 teen parents and their crying babies met him at the door. Handing her child to Chaconas, Jackson said, "Maybe you can watch our babies while we go to school this summer." Later that year, officials agreed to open the childcare center at Jackson's school.

The campaign was remarkable not only because a group of young people persuaded school officials to provide the resources necessary for their education, but also because the young people leading the campaign were those typically labeled "at risk" by youth development workers—teen parents from poor neighborhoods whose academic records had landed them in summer school. By traditional youth development standards, these were troubled youth in need of help; yet that is not how they saw

themselves. They were youth organizers. Jackson and her peers placed their struggle for child care in the context of a much larger picture—one in which after-school programs are consistently under-funded, where ostensibly “at risk” young people attend dilapidated schools, and where isolation from caring adults and a lack of safety are often barriers to healthy development. It was these connections—to a broader set of community concerns and political issues—that spurred them to action. It was through their engagement in grassroots organizing and direct advocacy that Jackson and her colleagues began learning how to solve community problems and engage meaningfully in civic affairs. And it was through this engagement with organizing that they began developing the individual skills and personal competencies necessary for them to grow into engaged youth and, ultimately, adult members of their communities.

It is this fusion of community organizing tactics and youth development outcomes that makes the emerging field of youth organizing a potentially powerful tool for individual and community transformation. Youth organizing trains young people in community organizing and advocacy and helps them use these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change in their communities. In the process, youth strengthen developmental skills and capacities critical to positive personal development. As the field develops around the country, youth are actively transforming conditions in their schools and communities to better meet their needs. In 2000, the Institute for Education and Social Policy documented a growing trend among youth from low-income neighborhoods who were organizing to demand changes in their schools and deepen their involvement in community affairs. The Institute’s research found over 200 youth organizing groups across the country— young people who are mobilizing their peers to address issues ranging from education to police misconduct to drug policy reform. And in so doing, they are transforming their own lives and their communities.

## THE SHIFT TO POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The youth organizing framework is perhaps best understood when viewed against the historical discourse among academics and practitioners in the field of youth development. During the 1980s and 1990s, considerable public and private resources were designated to harm reduction and prevention strategies for youth. Adolescence was traditionally seen as rife with pitfalls—pregnancy, alcohol and drug use, crime, violence, and truancy—that needed to be avoided. The underlying assumption was that young people needed to be “fixed” before they could enter into productive adulthood. From Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” anti-drug campaign to more recent character education initiatives, this prevention-oriented framework has had a profound influence on how policy makers, researchers, and practitioners conceptualize young peoples’ lives.

Around the same time, a handful of youth researchers developed new language and models that saw youth as community assets. Public policy, they argued, should shift from prevention to youth development—building supports for young people and creating the opportunities for growth, learning, and exploration that are central to preparing youth for adulthood. Researchers Karen Pittman and Michelle Cahill coined the term “positive youth development,” arguing that youth development was something all young people did, regardless of the type of family they came from or what kind of community support they received. Young people always sought ways to meet their basic physical needs and build their skills and knowledge—and the opportunities to do so could be either positive or negative. Research from Public/Private Ventures, the Search Institute, and scores of academic sources all strengthened the youth development argument that young people need supports and opportunities for healthy development in communities, not just programs.

The proponents of positive youth development came to agree on three basic tenets. First, society must have a vision of what it wants for its young people. Second, youth grow up in communities not programs. Third, youth development must address the overall social and political contexts in which development occurs. Based on these principles, the attributes of positive youth development came to include: safety and



structure; belonging and membership; self-worth and an ability to contribute; opportunities for independence and control; meaningful relationships; competence and mastery, and self-awareness.

Despite the welcome shift towards viewing youth as community assets, the goals of positive youth development focused primarily on the individual—the skills, competencies, and developmental assets each young person needs to make the successful transition to adulthood. To the extent that youth development emphasized the relationship between the community and individual young people, it was a recognition that communities needed to offer young people more than simply “youth work.” In noting that young people grow up in communities, not social programs, positive youth development emphasized the relationship between individual youth and their communities, but it still assumed for the most part that adults would be the custodians of that relationship.

## YOUTH, COMMUNITY, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Yeah, we got problems in my neighborhood. We got police abuse, we got drug abuse, we got drug dealers, and we got dope-fiend parents, molestation and rape. I have seen everything! Like, I have seen police break people's arms. I have seen 'em beat people up. They have even harassed me. They put my face on the hood of a car and just arrest us for no reason. As far as safety in my community, I'm more scared of the police than my own people.

—JR Valrey, 20 year-old Oakland resident

While youth development proponents agree that young people need supports and opportunities, the choices young people make and the support they receive (or don't receive) are informed by broader social and political contexts. These include systemic barriers that are shaped by race and economic inequality: bad schools in poor neighborhoods, high rates of incarceration in communities of color, a lack of living wage jobs, and marginalization from the social networks through which middle-class people gain access to jobs, housing, and education. But they also include more subtle social and political barriers: gender identity, body image, sexuality, self-image, internalized racism, and the psychological deprivations of class. Yet youth development practitioners as a whole are just beginning to understand how young people engage with their communities and form their social and political identities.

Research suggests that civic engagement is a fundamental aspect of youth development. In his work on youth civic engagement, Michael Delli Carpini, director of the public policy program at the Pew Charitable Trusts, observed that youth become engaged in public life “when they have the motivation, opportunity, and ability to do so.” He found that when young people identify with a community's problems they are more likely to get involved in the civic life of that community. Likewise, a recent study published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* found that seemingly apathetic youth can become suddenly mobilized when their interest are threatened. Given the need for young people to be personally and politically engaged, youth organizing is

Given the need for young people to be personally and politically engaged, youth organizing is fundamentally good youth development, for the simple reason that it offers a multi-faceted, grassroots framework for young people to grapple with the issues affecting their lives and their communities.

fundamentally good youth development, for the simple reason that it offers a multi-faceted, grassroots framework for young people to grapple with the issues affecting their lives and their communities.

Moreover, youth organizing is especially appealing to young people traditionally considered “at risk” by traditional youth developers. For a variety of reasons, traditional youth development strategies often fail to capture the imaginations of young people whose lives are most marred by injustice and poverty. What is the point of joining a mentorship program, for example, or participating in after-school tutoring, if the mentorship won’t land you a living wage job and the school has no heat? In the face of these barriers, and the social and political inequalities that engendered them, cynicism and despair are reasonable reactions. Overcoming this cynicism requires that solid youth development programming address young people’s need for meaningful social engagement with the injustices and inequalities that circumscribe their lives *while at the same time* meeting their developmental needs.

In a recent interview by *What Kids Can Do* for a report on emerging young philanthropists, Alex Tom, one of the youngest members of the California Fund for Youth Organizing framed the issue: “People might say that they don’t understand why these youth are getting into trouble. Look at our surroundings. What kinds of things are around to keep them away from bad situations? Are there good jobs and affordable housing? Is there a youth center? Do the police constantly harass youth?” Gun violence and police abuse, lack of health care, under-funded schools, a paucity of livable-wage jobs, and few productive after-school opportunities—all these factors present barriers to healthy development and pose a serious threat to young people’s emotional, psychological, spiritual and mental well-being. For these young people, youth organizing has particular resonance, providing opportunities to reengage with society on their own terms by working to change it.

## THE PROMISE OF YOUTH ORGANIZING

I grew up in Chula Vista, California near the Mexican border. I was in high school during the time when border enforcement and a lot anti-immigrant legislation was happening, and I saw a lot of blatant racism against my community. My mom was born in Tijuana and my dad was born in the United States, and I remember one time when we were returning from visiting family in Mexico, the border patrol harassed my dad in front of all of us—you know, asked him how he learned how to speak English so good and to prove he was a U.S. citizen. I was so pissed off! I think that is when I really got involved with trying to change things.

—Genevieve Gonzalez, youth organizer with the School of Unity and Liberation (SOUL), Oakland, California.

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### YOUTH ORGANIZING BUILDS YOUTH CAPACITY

The major difference between youth organizing and traditional youth development strategies is the degree to which youth organizing embraces both individual development *and* social change. Conventional youth development strategies typically focus on building individual **interpersonal capacity**, which includes meeting young people’s need for belonging, safety, self-awareness, and self-worth, and helping them build a wide range of skills. Interpersonal capacity is strengthened when young people work with peers and adults, develop meaningful friendships and relationships, and develop positive ethnic, sexual, gender and class identities. Interpersonal capacity also involves a broad range of measurable skills such as problem-solving, creative expression, and oral and written communication. In many contexts, youth development strategies like mentoring, leadership training, and volunteering are suitable strategies.

Youth organizing, however, offers two new developmental “layers,” each of which is critical to healthy youth development. The first is **socio-political capacity**, which emphasizes connections between common community problems and broader political and social issues. Socio-political capacity shapes young people’s worldview

about systemic and root causes of social and community problems, and encourages young people to work toward equity, fairness, and social justice. Second, by helping young people develop their skills as organizers and activists, youth organizing develops **community capacity**, which focuses on how communities address and change relevant community and social problems. Strong community capacity occurs when young people collectively work on community issues; develop alliances with institutions, organizations, and individuals; and shape policies to improve their communities. Community capacity also builds important analytical skills such as researching and debating issues, building consensus, and developing a sense of purpose and accomplishment in community improvement efforts.

In offering new layers to the positive youth development process, youth organizing cultivates youth development outcomes by borrowing heavily from the strategies and methods of traditional community organizing. Broadly speaking, these strategies and methods fall into three main categories: **analysis, action, and reflection**. Obviously, categories and specific strategies often overlap—analysis leads to action, action to analysis, and reflection to further analysis—and community organizing strategies are adapted, not adopted. But for the purpose of this paper, the intersection of youth development outcomes and community organizing strategies is outlined below (*see also table 1*).

**ANALYSIS** usually involves exploring the origins and systemic causes of social and political problems. Analysis can encompass issues of personal identity—gender and sexual orientation, for example—as well as broader community issues of poverty and racism. In many cases, youth organizing helps young people unravel the personal and the political, allowing them to understand their personal struggles in broader social and political contexts. Analysis entails transforming a problem into an issue, and identifying parties responsible for bringing about desired changes. Analysis builds skills such as researching, planning, critical thinking, strategy development, debate, consensus building, and discussion—all of which are traditional youth development assets.

Consider the example of Youth United for Change, a youth-led school reform group based in Philadelphia. In 1994, a group of high school students formed Youth United for Change as a way to fight for educational equity. They wanted to hold schools and public officials accountable and to improve the quality of education in Philadelphia public high schools. Like many urban school districts, Philadelphia's high schools are crowded, under-funded, and often unsafe. Many students' families lack decent housing and good jobs. Against this backdrop, says Andi Perez, Youth United for Change's assistant director, the first step is to help young people identify the issues that matter to them and begin thinking about strategies to address them.

**TABLE 1. HOW YOUTH ORGANIZING BUILDS YOUTH CAPACITY**

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING STRATEGIES	YOUTH DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES		
	INTERPERSONAL CAPACITY	COMMUNITY CAPACITY	SOCIO-POLITICAL CAPACITY
<p><b>ANALYSIS</b> Activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Researching</li> <li>■ Planning</li> <li>■ Debating</li> <li>■ Identity Politics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Critical thinking</li> <li>■ Relationship building</li> <li>■ Strategic planning</li> <li>■ Identity development</li> <li>■ Cooperation</li> <li>■ Oral &amp; written communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Youth issues more central to overall community change</li> <li>■ Youth and adult partnerships are strengthened</li> <li>■ Builds issues that cross ethnic boundaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Understanding of root causes of community and social problems</li> <li>■ Awareness of how power is used to change or sustain community conditions</li> </ul>
<p><b>ACTION</b> Activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Recruiting members</li> <li>■ Coalition building</li> <li>■ Direct action</li> <li>■ Political education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Develops problem solving</li> <li>■ Builds leadership skills</li> <li>■ Builds confidence to bring about change</li> <li>■ Conflict resolution</li> <li>■ Collaboration and consensus</li> <li>■ Facilitating meetings</li> <li>■ Public speaking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Greater civic participation among disconnected youth</li> <li>■ Equitable youth policy</li> <li>■ Community building</li> <li>■ Healthier communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Systems change to meet youth needs</li> <li>■ Youth share power in institutions</li> <li>■ Shifts toward positive public perception of youth</li> </ul>
<p><b>REFLECTION</b> Activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Journaling</li> <li>■ Debriefing</li> <li>■ Group discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Sense of purpose and connection to something meaningful</li> <li>■ Sense of accomplishment and mastery</li> <li>■ Sense of agency and ability to change communities</li> <li>■ Healing through emotional, spiritual and psychological wellness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Innovative ideas about community improvement</li> <li>■ New strategies to engage youth in community problem solving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Political awareness and a clear socio-political vision</li> </ul>

Perez recalled a recent listening campaign initiated by Youth United for Change. “Students identify issues that are important to them,” Perez says. “I often talk about curriculum changes and getting ethnic studies into the schools. But they told me before we can learn anything we need heat in our classrooms. In some classrooms we would need coats, gloves and hats.” In group meetings and discussions, Perez encouraged students to ask questions. Why was it always city schools that went without heat? Why could suburban schools depend on heated classrooms? Through

school surveys and classroom presentations, Youth United for Change organizers realized their peers were equally upset with cold classrooms. Through research, they learned that the school's lone boiler was incapable of heating the entire school. Eventually, Youth United for Change brought their analysis to school officials and persuaded them to purchase a second boiler for the school.

In 1999, members of Youth United for Change at Philadelphia's Olney High School felt that their school had dropped the ball when it came to basic academic support and safety issues. Patrick Lonon, an Olney Sophomore told the *Philadelphia Daily News*, "There are fights and fires daily, the alarm bells don't always go off and the doors are chained shut so students can't get out in case of a fire. It's everything, gun problems, drug problems, bomb scares." Lonon and fellow Youth United for Change members surveyed 275 of their peers on conditions at Olney and found that safety was a huge concern among students.

The survey also underscored the organization's growing political savvy and the newfound skills of its members. With support from their adult allies, members of Youth United for Change developed the survey strategy, and used it as a tool to forge consensus and build relationships with peers. They also learned how to negotiate, compromise, and navigate bureaucratic institutions, which included using the media to pressure school officials. As one student put it to the *Philadelphia Daily News*: "When you're dealing with teachers, principals, and cluster leaders, you're dealing with politics. Sometimes you gotta go with, 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.' We learned it early. We see how much of a bureaucracy the school district is."

Elsewhere, youth organizing groups have used analytical tools and surveys as a stepping stone to formulating a state-wide agenda on school reform. In California, for example, Californians for Justice, a statewide youth advocacy group conducted surveys in several cities across the state, hoping to uncover students' experiences in areas such as how they are treated by teachers, language issues, and information about graduation and access to college. In Los Angeles Unified School District, students said that school bathrooms were so dirty that it impacted their ability to study, and further analysis revealed that the district had grossly neglected sanitation issues in three local high schools. In Oakland, 16 percent of students reported racially discriminatory practices and harassment on the part of their teachers, and 63 percent reported little exposure to important college preparation courses.

The analysis of these issues confirmed what students had already known and offered them tools that they could use in other areas of their lives. The ability to convey complex ideas and present a persuasive argument about school conditions translated to a greater sense of ownership and civic responsibility. One participant

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commented, “I learned that you might be a kid, but you still have rights. We can prove to the adults out there that we do have a voice and we want to stand up for what we believe in.”

While some groups analyze the architecture of political power and systemic inequalities, others also focus on the subtle relationships between identity, culture, and politics. Sisters in Action for Power, for example, is an inter-generational, multi-racial, community based organization that focuses on strengthening the leadership skills of low-income women and girls of color in Portland, Oregon. Through education and cultural analysis, girls develop a critical perspective on issues of gender and power, connecting their personal struggles to broader historical and cultural trends. By connecting the personal to the political, girls are better able to advocate for policies at the nexus of the personal and the political. In 1996, for example, a campaign led by young women in Sisters in Action for Power prompted the school district to track and report sexual harassment cases. Later, Multnomah County passed a resolution that incorporated gender violence in all violence prevention and intervention language.

**ACTION** involves a collective, public activity that confronts decision-makers and pressures them to make a desired change. Action often begins with recruiting allies and members, and engaging in public education. Action includes a range of activities: speaking at a city council meeting, informational picketing, writing letters to officials, circulating petitions, displaying banners, and holding public demonstrations. Other actions, however, are more subtle—but yield equally important youth development outcomes. “Self transformation is important political action,” says Amara Perez from Sisters in Action for Power. “We cannot separate the political from the personal.” Action is not simply creating a ruckus and getting media attention, Perez notes. It also involves living and treating each other with compassion and justice. Sisters in Action for Power works hard to create safe spaces in which girls can be vulnerable and courageous at the same time, where problem solving, conflict resolution, and leadership skills develop through collaboration and consensus. Interpersonal action and direct action go hand in hand. For many young people it is these personal transformations and political affirmations that yield the most significant development.

Action also helps young people build relationships, develop a sense of life purpose, and contribute to their community in meaningful ways. Three years ago nearly 400 youth protested California’s Juvenile Justice Crime Bill by holding a sit-in at the



lobby of Hilton's San Francisco Towers Hotel. Hilton was one of the bill's strongest corporate supporters, and the company stood to profit handsomely from contracts with new juvenile prisons called for in the bill. Although the bill eventually passed, standing up to a corporation that was trying to profit off the incarceration of youth was a crystallizing event for many participants. "That experience really helped me develop more focus about what I want to do with my life," says Fela Thomas, a member of the Youth Force Coalition in Oakland. "It made me see what was really important to me, which is to empower communities for change."

Empowering experiences like these can help shape the socio-political identities of young people well into adulthood. In a 1998 study, Miranda Yates and James Youniss found that black youth who participated in civic and/or political activities developed a greater understanding of social justice and civic responsibility. Action helps young people see their communities as places of possibilities and change, and it helps them understand their personal struggles in the context of broader social issues and community.

**REFLECTION** is an important component of youth organizing because it fosters personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth. Participants learn to evaluate their strategies, monitor their activities and even gauge their own commitment to changing the problem. Reflection can also deepen critical thinking skills as participants explore new solutions and cultivate new allies. Reflection might include journaling, debriefing with peers about an issue or experience, or discussing the effectiveness of a particular event. As a youth development strategy, reflection yields insight and "lessons learned" about experiences that can be applied to other areas of young people's lives.

Reflection often draws pretty major life lessons for our youth . . . Our campaigns can take literally two to three years. What it takes to focus on something for that long, despite the obstacles, is a major lesson in perseverance.

More specifically, reflection yields at least three important youth development outcomes. First, reflection fosters a sense of commitment. Young people come to realize their role in fostering change in their communities, and with this gain a sense of civic responsibility. "Reflection often draws pretty major life lessons for our youth," says Abdi Soltani, executive director of Californians For Justice. "Our campaigns can take literally two to three years. What it takes to focus on something for that long, despite the obstacles, is a major lesson in perseverance." Likewise, Andi Perez of Youth United for Change notes that, "We learn to be dedicated to a movement rather than a particular issue because it gets frustrating. Students who come to us in 9th grade usually won't see the changes that they fought for by the time they graduate. Change takes time."

Over time, this ability to make commitments translates into other areas of young people's lives—family, relationships, school, and career.

Second, reflection builds young people's identities at a critical developmental stage, fostering a sense of hope and agency. New experiences and opportunities encourage young people to apply these characteristics in other areas of their lives. In a report by *What Kids Can Do*, Alex Tom from the California Fund for Youth Organizing recalled how he began to focus on political issues in his community after he attended an eight-week summer leadership camp. "One of my main transitions was at age 15 when I went to an eight-week summer camp for youth leadership. The camp was mostly for poor youth of color from all over the nation. We learned about society's inequities—racism, classism, sexism, homophobia—and what we as young people could actually do to change our communities." Through activities, small group discussions and informal rap sessions with his peers, Tom gained a deeper appreciation for his ethnic identity and learned strategies for building multicultural solidarity at his school. The training he received and the opportunity to reflect on community and social issues gave him both the skills and confidence he needed to host a multicultural festival at his high school.

Third, reflection helps young people heal from harmful social and personal experiences by creating emotional and spiritual wellness. By focusing on mind, body, and spirit, *Sisters in Action for Power* creates a safe and supportive space for girls to reflect, learn from each other and simply be themselves. Through support groups, meditation sessions, walks, and learning how to breathe during stressful times, girls develop psychological, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness. Studies have shown that when youth are exposed to traumatic experiences such as physical and emotional violence, death, and generally unsafe environments, they are less likely to excel in school or participate in after school programs. "Some of our girls have sexual abuse issues, exposure to violence and general sexual harassment from school," says Amara Perez. "Our Self Defense classes give them an opportunity to learn how to defend themselves not just physically but emotionally as well." Self-transformation is a necessary first step towards effective political work. Through role-playing and group reflection, girls learn how to make empowered decisions about sex, sexuality, communication, and intimacy—connecting the personal to the political.

## OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN YOUTH ORGANIZING

Youth organizing offers an exciting opportunity to expand the boundaries of youth development and at the same time to cultivate a new generation of community leaders. As in any emerging field, there are gaps and shortcomings, but that also means

youth organizing is replete with opportunities. Three specific areas of opportunity warrant special attention.

### Build Organizational Capacity

Young people's development demands they work with youth organizing groups with sufficient capacity to meet their needs. Too often, however, youth organizing groups must contend with the ambitious goals of both individual development and social change. With limited resources, organizations struggle to balance individual development and community organizing. For young people who experience personal trauma, family crisis or economic hardship, youth organizing programs need to direct scarce resources to young people in need. "We have youth who have great organizing skills but they are failing math. It's a challenge because we have to support their academic needs as well as their leadership development," says Amara Perez from Sisters in Action for Power.

Given these challenges, youth organizing groups have done an admirable job of balancing these two priorities. Given adequate resources they could do more. Youth organizing groups need to document, share, network, and learn about each other's challenges and successes. They need to build social capital within organizations and ongoing, meaningful networks with other community-based groups, including social service providers, to maximize the development opportunities for their youth. Such lessons would deepen the quality of existing youth organizing work, and could be translated into new curriculum models, staff training, and improved infrastructure management. Building the capacity for youth organizing groups will build new knowledge in the youth development field and help overcome the challenges of fostering healthy communities.

### Develop a Socio-Political Vision for Youth

What type of skills, knowledge, supports and opportunities do young people need to transform social and community problems? How does youth participation in addressing these issues prepare them for productive adulthood? Answering these questions requires a clear socio-political vision for young people. Funders, researchers, and practitioners need to think more broadly about effective youth development strategies and more deeply about how to support meaningful civic participation for youth. Several foundations are already moving in that direction. The Ford Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, the Edward W. Hazen Foundation, the California Wellness Foundation, the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, and the James Irvine Foundation have all sponsored initiatives that support youth organizing as an innovative youth development strategy.

Youth organizing pushes the field of youth development to consider how issues like inequality and discrimination affect the developmental process.

Yet developing a socio-political vision will require all stakeholders to be more intentional about how they view the relationship between young people and community change. Service learning, a popular youth development model, is a good start, but it rarely goes far enough in its analysis of community and social problems. “Service learning models are just out of context for our youth,” says Andi Perez from Youth United for Change in Philadelphia. For youth in the suburbs who have time to volunteer after school and don’t have to worry about childcare and transportation, she argues, service learning works. But for youth from poor and working class communities, service learning can be another barrier. “Some of our youth have to work after school, need to arrange childcare and often have to help raise their siblings.”

Youth organizing, on the other hand, offers an opportunity to rethink the relationship between youth development and community change. In order to meet this challenge, youth development proponents need to articulate socio-political vision that places issues of justice and equity at the center of youth development work. The missing link within the youth development framework is an understanding of socio-political realities young people face and a deeper appreciation for how they challenge, navigate and sometimes transform social conditions.

### Expand the Possibilities for Youth Development

Increasingly, youth development proponents are broadening their understanding of how youth development practices support youth outside mainstream communities—among young people of color, GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) youth, young women and girls, and youth from poor and working-class communities. Because race, class, gender, and sexual identities are often the basis for discrimination, youth organizing uses these identities as a foundation for building youth development strategies. In so doing, youth organizing pushes the field of youth development to consider how issues like inequality and discrimination affect the developmental process. Expanding the possibilities for youth development will involve deeper exploration into practices that support youth as they build and explore their ethnic, gender, and sexual identities. Practices might include support groups, summer camps based on particular aspects of youth identity and organizations devoted to identity-based advocacy.

Finally, despite the fact that youth development researchers agree that civic participation is an important aspect of the youth development process, engaging vulnerable youth in civic activities remains an elusive task. Youth who are incarcerated, who

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have dropped out of school, or who are unemployed rarely have access to traditional youth development opportunities, and youth organizing is one strategy to engage them in solid youth development programming. For example, since 1993, the Center for Young Women's Development in San Francisco, California has supported young women who lack family support. Many are homeless, and because of their involvement with street economies (prostitution or drug trading), many end up in the juvenile justice system. Through their Girls In Charge program, the organization supports girls in jail by advocating for change in the juvenile justice system. The process of changing hostile policies, and empowering girls to transform their lives, begins a healing process that allows them to be more effective change agents.

#### MEETING THE CHALLENGE

There is a growing concern that America is experiencing dangerously low levels of civic, community, and political participation, particularly among youth. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom, however, many young people are engaged in community-minded efforts, including through youth organizing. The challenge for youth development stakeholders is to develop and fund strategies that support young people as they struggle to improve the quality of their lives. Youth organizing offers an opportunity to address a number of concerns at once. First, by emphasizing socio-political and community capacity in addition to interpersonal capacity, youth organizing offers two new layers to the youth development process. Second, as youth people organize for educational equity, criminal justice reform, or access to affordable health care, they become part of the current, and hopefully, next generation of community-based leaders. Third, given adequate resources and opportunities for scale, youth organizing can build more effective youth development policies and institutions. And it is here that youth organizing may well reach its potential as both sound youth development and the harbinger of democratic possibilities.

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### **Center for Young Women's Development**

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### **Kids First!**

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### **Leadership Excellence**

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### **School of Unity and Liberation**

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**What Kids Can Do**

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