Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change
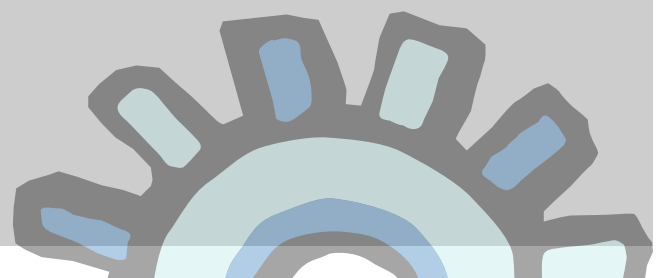
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the forum
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT
moving ideas to impact

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Acknowledgements

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Youth Engagement in Community Change:
The Double Arrow

FACT _____ *The American dream is based on the assumption that all young people can succeed if they work hard and have the support of their families and communities.*

FACT _____ *American neighborhoods vary enormously in the quality and quantity of services, opportunities and supports available to help families support their youth.*

FACT _____ *This variation from neighborhood to neighborhood is not random. Families that have the fewest individual resources live in neighborhoods with the fewest collective resources. Low-income young people, immigrant youth and young people of color are disproportionately affected.*

FACT _____ *The effect of this "opportunities gap" is cumulative. Neighborhoods with weak schools also often have weak civic and social organizations, weak businesses and weak economies. As a result, young people often lack adequate opportunities and supports where they live, learn, work <u>and</u> play. Sometimes they literally lack places to live, learn, work and play.*

FACT _____ *Better individual programs and services in these neighborhoods are necessary but not enough. Young people do not grow up in programs, they grow up in communities. Programs can help a few young people <u>beat the odds</u>, but more is needed to help youth and community members <u>change the odds</u> for the majority of young people in their community.*

FACT _____ *Young people want to be engaged as change-makers in their lives, their families and their communities. They are disproportionately involved in and affected by the problems that beset communities – drugs, violence, poor education, lack of jobs – and they <u>must</u> be part of the solution.*

FACT _____ *Change happens fastest when youth and community development are seen as two sides of the same coin and young people are afforded the tools, training and trust to apply their creativity and energy to affect meaningful change in their own lives and in the future of their neighborhoods and communities.*

The "Double Arrow"

Youth Contributing to Communities

Young people and adults working together to create the necessary conditions for the successful development of themselves, their peers, their families and their communities.

Communities Contributing to Youth
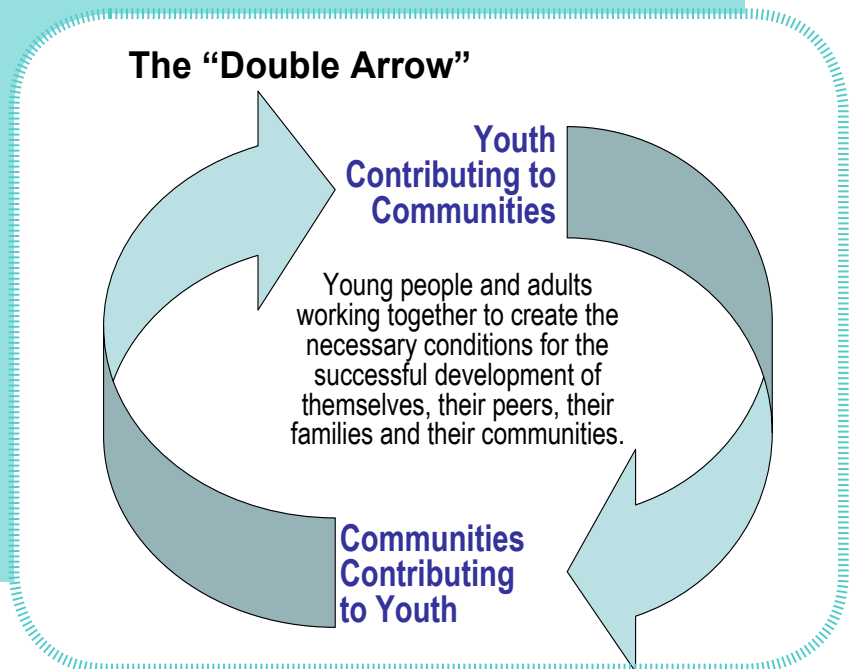
Introduction

In any community, many different organizations and institutions – schools and colleges, youth programs, community centers, United Ways, foundations, human services agencies, businesses – work to increase the services and supports available for young people, helping some beat the odds set by poverty, racism or geographic isolation. There are surprisingly few organizations or programs, however, whose purpose is to be a catalyst for improving the quality and quantity of youth opportunities by engaging young people in meaningful ways in the work itself.

The principles described in this paper can help build the capacity of organizations and communities to ensure that all youth, particularly those least likely to succeed without help, believe that they have the responsibility and resources needed to make their communities better places for themselves, their families and their peers.

The principles emerged from the comingling of lessons from research and practice that occured when the Forum for Youth Investment merged with Community IMPACT! USA and undertook responsibility for documenting and deepening CI!s Youth Mobilizer approach. The Forum brought its field research with organizations that have youth engagement in community change as a primary focus. (see Irby et al, 2001, Tolman et al, 2002) into strategy discussions with experienced Community IMPACT! affiliates. The result: traditional youth service/youth leadership efforts were transformed into powerful forces for community change.

The principles, in many ways, document common sense. They are important but simple principles for moving an idea (youth engagement) to impact (youth-supported change). They are things that traditional organizations that work with youth (e.g., schools, youth clubs, community centers) and change-focused organizations that want to engage youth (e.g., community planning councils, mayor's offices, foundations) can easily use to build a solid framework for getting started.

These principles can be applied to any structure – from a neighborhood-based youth action team of six to eight youth that meets regularly to a statewide youth council that meets four times a year – or any strategy – from inviting youth to join governing boards to engaging youth in service projects or political advocacy.

Youth Engagement 101

Young people are disproportionately involved in and affected by the problems that beset communities and states. Recent research studies suggest that young people are not doing well because communities are not doing well by them. Researchers Gambone, Connel and Klem found that only 4 in 10 young people in their early 20's are "doing well": in college or working, emotionally and physically healthy, and engaged in political or community life (Gambone, et. al, 2002). A study commissioned by America's Promise Alliance, suggests that only 3 in 10 young people 12 to 17 get the supports that they need to flourish: caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education, and opportunities to help others (America's Promise, 2006).

These data are certainly cause for concern. But they are also cause for engagement. Young people are not only at the center of many problems, they are the source of many solutions. And studies show that young people want to be engaged as change makers. The true engagement of young people in change processes, however, requires a fundamental shift in how decisions are made.

Youth engagement as a strategy for community change

Improving the quality and coordination of youth services and supports is critical to improving youth outcomes. Communities need to respond with a greater sense of urgency and commitment. Generating improvements often requires changes in policies and

resource allocations. These happen faster when there is strong community demand. Without direct youth and family input, however, improvement efforts can miss the mark.

These are four basic change strategies the Forum places at the core of its Ready by 21 Approach to long-term change (see graphic below). Three things are worth noting about these strategies.
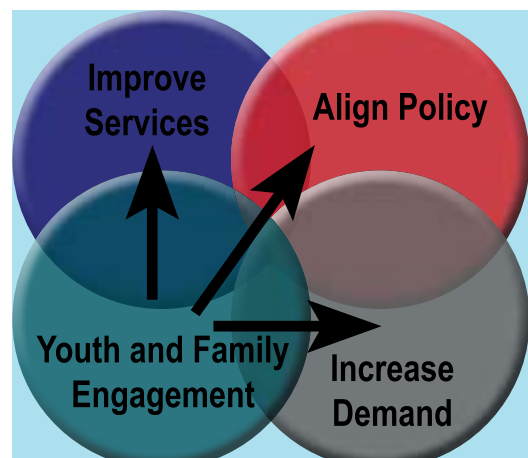
First, these four strategies are interrelated, not independent. Second, youth and family engagement is the most frequently overlooked strategy. Third, youth and family engagement are critical to long-term change. Making change without involving those who have the deepest understanding of what is needed and have the strongest motivation for change is tantamount to making travel plans without a destination.

In order to create opportunities for change, adult change makers focused on shaping policy, improving services and building demand need to do more than engage young people in focus

groups or invite a select few to offer advice. They need to find effective ways to involve large numbers of youth in their core work.

Similarly, those who focus on youth leadership should ask the question "leadership for what?" They should make sure that young people are engaged not just for the experience but for the results. They should also develop strategies for involving maximum numbers of youth.

Youth Engagement as a Strategy for Organizational Change

There are a range of organizations — from diversion and runaway programs to after-school programs to employment training programs — that define their roles not as youth engagement but as youth services or perhaps youth development. These organizations can also benefit from discussions about effective strategies for helping staff and adults think

The Youth Engagement Continuum

Intervention → Development → Collective Empowerment → Systemic Change

YOUTH SERVICES APPROACH	YOUTH DEVELOPMENT	YOUTH LEADERSHIP	CIVIC ENGAGEMENT	YOUTH ORGANIZING
• Defines young people as clients • Provides services to address individual problems and pathologies of young people • Programming defined around treatment and prevention	• Provides services and support, access to caring adults and safe spaces • Provides opportunities for the growth and development of young people • Meets young people where they are • Builds young people's individual competencies • Provides age appropriate support • Emphasizes positive self identity • Supports youth-adult partnerships	Includes components of youth development approach plus: • Builds in authentic youth leadership opportunities within programming and organization • Helps young people deepen historical and cultural understanding of their experiences and community issues • Builds skills and capacities of young people to be decision makers and problem solvers • Youth participate in community projects	Includes components of youth development & youth leadership plus: • Engages young people in political education and awareness • Builds skills and capacity for power analysis and action around issues young people identify • Begins to help young people build collective identity of young people as social change agents • Engages young people in advocacy and negotiation	Includes components of youth development, youth leadership and civic engagement plus: • Builds a membership base • Involves youth as part of core staff and governing body • Engages in direct action and mobilizing • Engages in alliances and coalitions

about redefining roles that allow young people to simultaneously be service recipients to being change organizers.

This continuum of youth engagement is powerfully shown below in a frequently cited chart developed by LISTEN, Inc (LISTEN, Inc., 2003).

Studies show that reaching out to disadvantaged youth with services to address individual needs *and* opportunities to address collective issues is extremely effective (Forum for Youth Investment, 2004). Oasis/ Community Impact's story confirms this finding.

Community IMPACT! Nashville began as a youth leadership program in East Nashville. Recognizing that it was not fully living up to its name (community impact) it began to shift from a focus on leadership activities to a focus on community action, taking on issues such as family economics and college access. In 2005 , CI! Nashville merged with the Oasis Center. This link with the city's largest youth services provider ensured that all youth including those most in need were encouraged to take action to improve conditions that affect them.

Eight Principles of Youth Engagement

Research suggests that youth who are actively engaged in social change efforts have three core strengths:

•**Capacity:** knowledge, leadership and action skills

•**Motivation:** understanding and awareness of issues and root causes, systems, and strategies for change, commitment and a sense of responsibility

•**Opportunity:** chances to act on passions, use skills, and generate change through relevant, sustained action

These strengths do not occur by chance. Young people build skills, acquire passions, come to understandings and take on responsibilities for changing their worlds as they grow, learn and develop. Practice suggests that young people are most likely to develop these strengths when they are connected to programs and organizations that have effective youth engagement strategies explicitly designed to address these core needs.

The eight principles are explicitly organized around the three core strengths discussed above, and a fourth category: foundation. Organizations and institutions seeking to engage youth need a strong foundation and a stable operational infrastructure that is suited to the level (e.g., neighborhood, state) and type (e.g., policy advocacy, community mobilizing) of youth engagement desired.

In the pages that follow we provide a brief description and rationale for each principle and pull out the key ideas embedded within it. We also give a concrete example from Oasis/Community IMPACT's experiences of how the principle has been implemented and offer a set of reflection questions designed to help readers analyze their own practice.

Three Strengths, Eight Principles

Opportunity
❽ Sustain Access and Influence

Youth Action

Motivation
❹ Identify Core Issues
❸ Convey an Intentional Philosophy

Capacity
❼ Provide Indvidual Supports
❻ Build Youth & Adult Capacity
❺ Create Youth/ Adult Teams

Foundation
❷ Create a Strong "Home Base"
❶ Design an Aggressive Outreach Strategy

Principle 1: Design an Outreach Strategy

Effective youth engagement strategies must have strong and continuous outreach strategies.

Research shows that young people who are asked to participate in community change are more likely to get involved than those who are not. Therefore, organizations should be intentional about recruiting a diverse group of young people that represent a range of perspectives, experiences and skill-levels.

Recruitment strategies should concentrate on places where young people spend a significant amount of time. These include not only schools, youth-serving organizations and faith based organizations, but informal settings such as community centers, malls and recreation areas. In areas where few programs exist, community-based recruitment events and information sessions can be useful especially when a core group of youth are engaged to do the outreach.

Organizations interested in long-term community change need to have a

long-term recruitment plan. While an organization may develop a few great young leaders, its youth engagement will be undermined if all of the understanding, passion and expertise rest with a particular group of youth. It is important to be intentional about creating a "revolving door" of youth leaders. This requires youth and adults to identify the changing strengths and weaknesses of the overall team and adequately plan for engaging new team members, building skills and awareness, and transferring the ownership of the work.

The integration of new young people and their ideas into ongoing community action work takes effort. Change often takes years to accomplish. New youth should have the opportunity to infuse their ideas within the overall plan of action instead of simply continuing the predecessor's work. This opportunity will ensure ownership and engagement of the new members.

Key Ideas

• Create an outreach strategy that connects with existing organizations and be intentional about asking young people to get involved.

• Plan a strategy that ensures diversity among youth involved in the program.

• Be intentional about creating a "revolving door" of youth leaders to ensure continuity.

• Balance the need for continuity in terms of issues with the integration of new young people who bring new ideas.

Spotlight

In 2005, Oasis/Community IMPACT (OCI) graduated four of its seven youth mobilizers. The hiring process involves balancing several concerns. Ensuring that youth hired represent a younger population that could spend a year or more leading a team is important, but so is ensuring that the overall group represents the range of schools in the community. Once the hiring process is completed, graduating Youth Mobilizers are charged with making sure new youth become experts on the existing issues and strategies and become motivated to own the work themselves.

Reflection Questions

1. Does the makeup of our team reflect the broader population with whom we work?

2. Does the team have a breadth of ages and a sufficient number of people focusing on a given content area to buffer the loss of young people through graduation or other issues?

3. Is there space for new youth to bring their ideas to the process while maintaining a focus on the overall mission?

4. Is there room for new adult staff to bring their own strengths and vision to the process while maintaining focus on the overall mission?

Principle 2: Create a "Home Base"

Effective youth engagement strategies create a "home base" for young people.

Young people need a home base that provides steady connections to adults who can build a team, broker opportunities and facilitate relationships with other adults, organizations and businesses.

But young people also need designated work spaces equipped with phones, computers and other office equipment and supplies needed to do their jobs. They need a serious place to do serious work.

A good home base creates an environment in which young people can develop work relationships, hone their ideas, manage their tasks and responsibilities and develop a sense of accountability.

Ideally, a home base should be physically accessible, located in or near a neighborhood or community where young people live and where they will focus their work. The home base does not have to be housed within the sponsoring organization. For example, a community organization may support a youth action group that has dedicated workspace in a local high school.

Young people involved in neighborhood-based youth engagement efforts may use the home base daily. Some youth engagement efforts, such as state or local youth councils, meet less frequently (monthly or quarterly). These may not have dedicated physical space. Distance and transporation issues may make it difficult for youth to come frequently as well. In this case, special efforts need to be taken to ensure that members have ample opportunities to connect to each other and to staff.

Key Ideas

- A "home base" provides a system of support that connects youth to organizational resources and designated reliable adults.

- Youth need designated, accessible work space, access to basic office resources and facilitated opportunities to engage in community change work.

- Creating a "home base" in the neighborhood is important to ground youth engagement work at the neighborhood or community level and to create ownership.

Spotlight

Young people must play a role in defining their home base. Initially, the OCI space included a TV, DVD player and a variety of board games, with a couple of old computers in one room. Over time, the board games became clutter, the TV and DVD player sat unused and the young people were complaining that they needed better computers in order to do their jobs. The organization now has a designated youth workroom (with doors) that includes eight computers, a central work table and an easel. This is the young people's space. Adults are welcome but should know that when they enter, they are visitors in a youth space.

Reflection Questions

1. Based on the scope of our program or initiative, where is the best place to have a home base for young people?

2. Who is the point person for young people to connect to on an ongoing basis?

3. Is the workspace appropriate for the type of work being done, responsive to the needs of the team and tied to appropriate resources?

4. Have young people had a role in defining their own space in terms of how it looks and its operating culture?

Principle 3: Convey an Intentional Philosophy

Effective youth engagement efforts are driven by an intentional philosophy about change that young people and adults understand and own.

Any social change effort is complex and requires a clear roadmap that includes short and long-term goals as well as intentional strategies for achieving those goals.

In terms of goals, young people and adults do better when short-term actions are embedded within a long-term agenda. For example, young people's immediate concerns about lack of textbooks, bathroom doors or advance placement classes can be linked to long-term goals such improving college access and decreasing the achievement gap.

Organizations can employ a range of change strategies, from issue research to outreach to organizing. Young people should be briefed on the options and given opportunities to discuss the organization's philopophy of change (beliefs about what it takes to make change happen).

Whatever strategies are used, it is important to help young people understand how they can create a "ripple effect." Frequently, youth action groups involve relatively small numbers of youth. Organizations need to help these youth expand their impact to their peers, families, neighborhoods, cities and beyond through issue research, public education, community partnerships, policy advising and advocacy.

In addition to being clear about their philosophy about change, organizations should be clear about their philosophy about youth engagement. Young people are disproportionately involved in and affected by the problems that beset communities, and they want to be engaged as change makers. Adults recruiting youth need to be clear about why they want young people involved.

Key Ideas

• Be clear about why you are engaging young people in the first place.

• Have a clear roadmap that includes short and long-term goals and strategies.

• Short-term actions should be embedded within a long-term agenda.

• Be intentional about creating a "ripple effect" to increase impact.

• Articulate clear roles for young people and adults across multiple levels and strategies.

Spotlight

The original theory of change behind the work of OCI was to increase neighborhood support for young people both financially and in terms of positive messages, which in turn would increase youth and community engagement and, therefore, increase college attendance. As the organization deepened its goals, it developed deeper strategies to accomplish those goals, which simultaneously expanded and deepened roles for young people. The organization now emphasizes organizational partnerships and develops a Youth Opportunities Network that creates leadership roles for youth in community organizations committed to change. These opporutnies to influence the work of other organizations create a "ripple effect" that helped expand OCI's impact beyond its core members.

Reflection Questions

1. Why are we engaging young people?

2. What are we trying to accomplish, in the long-term and the short-term?

3. What strategies will help us accomplish those goals?

4. What roles can young people and adults play in implementing these strategies?

5. What is our plan for expanding the impact of our work beyond those immediately involved or affected?

Principle 4: Identify Core Issues

Effective youth engagement strategies take issue identification seriously and define clear focal points for action.

Providing youth with authentic decision-making power on issues they want to focus on is a critical step in youth engagement and youth/adult partnership efforts. However, it is also possible to integrate young people into existing community change agendas by working with them to connect the issues they are passionate about – typically those that affect them on a regular basis and are part of their lived experiences – to a broader framework and agenda.

An example of this process is connecting immediate issues like broken school bathrooms to systemic challenges such as crumbling school infrastructure, which can be further linked to root causes like racism and poverty. This process is critical for both adults and young people engaged in community change.

The first important component in moving this kind of process along is having a framework that explains the full scope of the specific problem that has been identified and how it relates not only to other community challenges but also community assets. Such a framework could also connect local neighborhood realities to city, state and national policies and create natural bridges between the work of the young people and the agendas of community initiatives and organizations.

A second critical element is conducting research because it helps youth and adults deepen their knowledge on the issues, understand the root causes and develop effective responses.

Key Ideas

- Give young people authentic decision-making power.

- Issues should connect to youths' lived experiences.

- Connect immediate issues to broader systemic challenges.

- Link systemic challenges to root causes.

- Simple frames are important.

Spotlight

For OCI, a useful framework for thinking about community change has consisted of the three Es: Economics, Education and Environment. Young people and adult staff work together to identify critical issues within that framework. They regularly return to the framework to keep their individual projects and campaigns grounded in a systemic under-standing of root causes and their overall community change agenda. Their committment to identifying root causes, for example, led OCI to transform a financial literacy program developed for youth mobilizers into a financial stability movement led by Youth Mobilizers that included youth-led efforts to offer financial literacy classes to adults, replace check-cashing places with credit unions and increase EITC enrollment.

Reflection Questions

1. How were our focal issues identified? Were youth involved in that process? Were other adults involved? How were they involved?

2. What are the systemic challenges and/or root causes that underlie our focal issues?

3. Do these issues connect to the lived experiences of the young people that we are trying to engage?

4. Where do the issues fit within a broader framework?

5. Have we researched our issue to better understand how it plays out in this community, how it links to other issues, what its root causes are and what strategies may be most effective to address it?

Principle 5: Create Youth/Adult Teams

Effective youth engagement strategies have at their core a youth and adult team.

In order to realize true youth/adult partnerships and capitalize on the strengths that both young people and adults bring to the community change process, it is important to develop teams in which youth and adults work together. The team model involves a group of individuals that share a common purpose, goals and strategy for affecting change.

Team members work interdependently, share strengths and weaknesses, and take on specific roles and responsibilities toward the goal. Effective teams have a structure through which all youth and adults members are held accountable.

Young people can and should assume a range of meaningful roles as team members, including being involved in research, planning, training, recruitment and office management. Young people bring important insights to all of these functions and should be involved as leaders, not just in the community but across the organization.

Compensating young people, whether it is through salaries, credits, or other creative strategies, is an important way to send the message that they are not recipients of services but rather colleagues in the community change work.

Key Ideas

• Youth/adult teams are made up of individuals that share a common purpose, goals and strategies.

• Teams need to have clear and meaningful roles and responsibilities for all members that connect to the shared goal.

• All youth and adult team members are held accountable.

• Young people should be engaged as leaders across the organization itself, not just in the community.

• Compensating young people is key.

Spotlight

As a result of several important factors, the youth/adult team at OCI evolved over time in its effectiveness and authenticity. These factors included team members':

- Willingness to name their individual strengths and weaknesses;
- Willingness to recognize ways in which they experience both privilege and oppression;
- Development of a collective sense of purpose and vision for change.

By voicing strengths and weaknesses, OCI recognizes that each youth and adult has something to bring and something to learn. This diffused the natural instinct to defer to an adult for answers and empowered young people to find answers and develop skills among and for themselves. The naming of privilege and oppression allows for a team that is diverse in terms of race, economics and age to surface and address social and cultural tensions that may be underlying our relationships. Finally, when each member of the team has a clear understanding of the mission of the team and the organization and has a sense of how the organization works — "how we do things" — it is easier to vet ideas about activities and projects that individuals may want to do through the lens of long-term change in neighborhood systems.

Reflection Questions

1. Do young people take an active role in the development and realization of strategies for community change?

2. Do young people and adults understand and own the mission of the organization?

3. Do young people and adults understand their specific roles and responsibilities as they relate to the broader mission of the organization?

4. Do youth and adults share both workload and accountability for their work?

5. Are there structures and times in place for the youth and adults to come together to celebrate small wins and bring personal or professional issues to the group?

Principle 6: Build Youth and Adult Capacity

Effective youth engagement strategies are intentional about building youth and adult capacity.

Supporting young people to fulfill specific roles in community change work in a way that reflects their own goals and is not patronizing prepares them to negotiate spaces where youth are not typically present. Building the capacity of youth and adults to tackle real issues requires a dual focus on building skills and awareness.

Skills. Young people need a range of individual, leadership, team work and basic skills. Personal skills include a sense of personal power, self-efficacy, purpose and future. Leadership skills include public speaking, writing, problem identification, goal setting and project planning. Team skills include communication, facilitation and the ability to work with diverse peers and adults across a variety of settings. Basic administrative skills such as office management, planning and organization are also important.

Adult staff must also possess the above skills and be able to facilitate the development of systems thinking and critical thinking, supporting youth agendas within the overall mission of the organization. They must also be able to communicate and connect with young people on a variety of levels, inboth personal and professional.

Awareness. Youth and adult teams must be aware of how local systems function and must understand the relationship between specific problems, systemic contributions to the problems and their root causes. They need an awareness of local history as it relates to issues the community faces and a sense of personal and social responsibility for the conditions they see around them. All of these are developed through an active, collaborative process of research and reflection.

Key Ideas

- Have a dual focus on building skills and awareness.

- Balance formal training activities with "on the job" leadership development.

- Provide young people and adults with a range of opportunities to build personal, leadership, teamwork and basic skills.

- Help youth and adult teams develop a shared awareness of the issues, systems and root causes and how they relate to the community's local history.

- Develop awareness through active, collaborative research and reflection on real issues.

Spotlight

It is important for adults to recognize when young people are "ready" to get out in the public and take on more visible leadership roles. Like other types of development, these skills evolve over time and present themselves unevenly. For example, one Youth Mobilizer at OCI conducted her own research about her school and then requested help with her speaking skills so that she could communicate her ideas more clearly and professionally with adults (specifically the school principal). She then worked with her peers to create a presentation to take out into the community.

Reflection Questions

1. Do young people and adults in our organization understand the systems that are at work in our community and how they affect our lives?

2. Have we identified the specific skills that young people working with our organization toward our mission need to realize their goals?

3. Does adult staff have a clear vision and understanding of the mission of the organization and how to facilitate youth skill development toward that mission?

Principle 7: Provide Individual Supports

Effective youth engagement strategies balance the need for individual supports with the goal of community change.

Working with young people toward community change requires seeing youth development in much the same way that organizations see adult staff development—as a means to an end. If the organization believes in the power of engaging youth as a strategy, then it knows that it cannot change the community unless youth feel safe and supported and have the skills to handle themselves professionally in a variety of settings. Therefore, the accountability and supports must range from personal health and safety to quality of work and professional development.

Youth need supports to manage daily life stressors, such as family dynamics, relationships and school. These stressors can lead to youth feeling overwhelmed, which can impact their performance. The struggles or absence of a team member affects the group, both personally and in terms of productivity.

While adults focused on youth engagement may not feel they have the time or skills to be personal mentors, some attention to individual needs is critical, especially when dealing with youth who have weak supports systems and high stressors. Therefore, organizations should pay attention to young people's individual development and should help youth build effective coping skills. Immediate personal support can be given to individuals in crisis, while using the experience in such a way that all youth in the program can better understand the problem, connect it to the mission of the organization and work toward changing the conditions that led to it. The underlying issue is the challenge of balancing what is good for the young person with what is good for the community.

Key Ideas

- Youth must feel safe and supported.

- Organizations should provide personal supports and develop their coping skills as well as their professional skills.

- It is important to strike a balance between supporting individual development and focusing on community change.

Spotlight

Recently, one young person at OCI was faced with the birth of a nephew to her unwed, unemployed sister who lives at home. With her own mother disabled and her sister hospitalized, this young person played the role of parent for her mother, sister and infant nephew while trying to maintain her school work and her job with OCI, not to mention her life as a teenager. To make matters worse, a 15-year-old friend was shot and killed outside her door by a 16-year-old who she also knew. This situation spawned two days of intense discussion and reflection on the realities of the neighborhood, the roles each of us play within the neighborhood, and an assessment of whether OCI's work was truly responding to the systemic needs of our neighborhood. It offered an opportunity to reflect on race, class, power, opportunity and education as these issues connect with specific events like this murder.

Reflection Questions

1. Do individual team members understand how their own personal development is a critical piece of the larger mission of the organization?

2. Is the process of individual skill development and support continually framed and informed by the larger community mission?

Principle 8: Sustain Access and Influence

Effective youth engagement strategies create opportunities for sustained access and influence.

It is not enough to engage young people in identifying issues they care about and implementing specific projects related to those issues. Unless there are intentional efforts to cultivate an audience, create demand among influential adults and connect the work they are doing to other organizations and ongoing initiatives, there is a risk that the work either falls on deaf ears or fails to "stick" within the community in a meaningful way.

Developing deliberate linkages to other organizations in the community that have a stake in community change can lead to a sense of collective efficacy around a shared agenda and can expand opportunities for meaningful youth participation. Programs should guide young people to develop a communication plan, which will ensure that youth voices are heard by the public at large. This plan should include strategies for media outreach, such as writing letters to the newspaper editors, holding press conferences, producing press releases and developing Web sites to inform the public about their work.

Similarly, clear channels for youth to present their findings and recommendations to key decision-making bodies ,such as elected officials or community coalitions and the public, are essential to facilitating and sustaining youth involvement. Utilizing opportunities to bring young people together in policy settings to allow them to speak out on issues important to them also provides them with hands-on experience with the policy-making process and builds their civic knowledge and skills. It also gives policy makers the opportunity to see young people where they normally don't — in the halls of government — which helps them to connect with young people as their constituency rather than as invisible, non-voting citizens.

Key Ideas

- Cultivate an audience and create demand for young people's work.

- Create deliberate linkages to other organizations in the community.

- Build a sense of collective efficacy around a shared agenda.

- Expand the range of concrete opportunities for meaningful youth participation.

- Create clear channels for youth to present their findings and recommendations.

Spotlight

In East Nashville, OCI's Youth Opportunity Network evolved out of a desire to create sustained opportunities and community-wide demand for young people's involvement. By building relationships with a diverse range of organizations interested in both community change and youth engagement — including local high schools, churches, a science museum, other youth organizations, a local university, banks and credit unions — OCI has been able to deploy "Youth Mobilizers" to work with these organizations toward meaningful change – broadening the scope of their influence, increasing demand for their perspectives and cultivating new partnerships within the community. As the OCI approach has matured, community partnerships have developed in a more organic and sustained way around common agendas on common issues (e.g., college access work that involves schools, school board representatives and other youth serving organizations).

Reflection Questions

1. What organizations that we already connect with might be interested in engaging youth?

2. What new organizational partnerships might we build thanks to our commitment to youth engagement?

3. What personal relationships might we build on or strengthen in order to expand opportunities for young people?

About the Oasis Center & Community Impact

For almost 37 years, Oasis has worked to improve conditions for young people in Middle Tennessee. Our mission is "to help youth grow, thrive and create positive change in their lives and in our community." Our work is to assist youth in serious crisis, provide community-based supports, and create opportunities for youth leadership and civic action.

As an organization, our efforts are balanced so that programs not only respond to the immediate critical needs of youth but also work to transform the conditions that create problems in the first place. We empower youth to become informed, active and engaged citizens, who are prepared to lead change in the world. Working in this way, we tap the potential of all of our young people, no matter how they come to us, and our work endures throughout future generations.

Each year Oasis Center provides life-changing opportunities to more than 2,500 youth and their families, representing more than 60 different schools and homes that speak 26 different languages. We reach an additional 5,000+ through outreach.

In July of 2005, Oasis Center merged with Community IMPACT! Nashville, a neighborhood based, youth-organizing initiative. The merger was a strategic move to bring the grassroots organizing approach of Community IMPACT! together with the established infrastructure and breadth of youth services and supports of Oasis Center.

Oasis Center operates 13 programs, which are distributed among five primary areas: Crisis Services, Transitional Living, Prevention, Counseling, and Youth Leadership and Action. Programs are aligned under three core strategies.

Assisting Youth in Crisis: We offer Middle Tennessee's only continuum of services for youth ages 13-21 that are in crisis, have run away or are experiencing homelessness

Providing Community-Based Supports: We provide individual and family therapy, family mediation, special issue groups and school-based prevention services.

Promoting Youth Leadership: Youth develop leadership potential and commitment to community change through several initiatives that engage them in promoting youth voice in community decision making. These initiatives are grouped within our Youth Leadership and Action team and include: Oasis Youth Innovation Board; Nashville Youth Leadership; Oasis Youth Council; and Oasis/Community IMPACT.

For this work, Oasis Center was recently named the "2006 Organization of the Year" by the National Network for Youth. The work of Oasis/Community IMPACT specifically was recognized as one-of-ten finalists for the Peter F. Drucker Award for Nonprofit Innovation from over 500 nominations nationally; and the youth co-founder of the OCI economics team was one-of-nine national recipients of the Hitachi Yoshiyama Award for Exemplary Service to the Community.

You can visit the Oasis Center at: www.oasiscenter.org.

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RELATED RESOURCES
From the Forum and Oasis/Community IMPACT

Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making
This guide is designed to help state and localities to create or strengthen their own youth councils. It is a synthesis of theory and practice. This guide provides a general framework for thinking about youth councils, explaining the principles of youth action and the importance of youth engagement. It also incorporates advice and lessons from people "in the field" who have started or currently staff youth councils across the country.
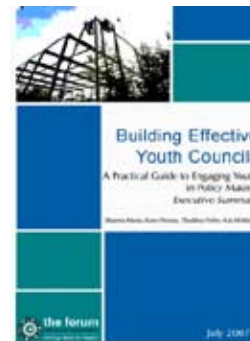
College Access: From the Inside Out
A resource from Oasis/Community IMPACT of Nashville. The Forum's partners in Nashville and Austin have both demonstrated the amazing roles that youth mobilizers — young people trained and supported to use the Youth IMPACT! approach — can play in moving the high school reform/college access messages in their schools, communities and local governments. This innovative report and recommendations on college access is written from the perspective of students going through the challenges of getting adequate support for their pursuit of higher education. www.forumfyi.org/Files/CollegeAccessReport.pdf

Youth • Action • Community • Development: The Community & Youth Development Series Guide
The Guide documents are described in this guide. We cannot emphasize enough that th[ey do] not represent all of the best thinking in community youth development. We encourage yo[u to go] directly to the organizations represented by the U.S. members of the ILG (see list in the [back or] browse the Web sites and resources of some of the project contributors and Forum mer[nbers listed] in the guide). For a glimpse of the work and thinking of many of these organizations (as [well as] others), you may find *Youth Action: Annotated Bibliography and Key Resources* a usefu[l place to] start.   www.forumfyi.org/Files/YDCC_Guide.pdf
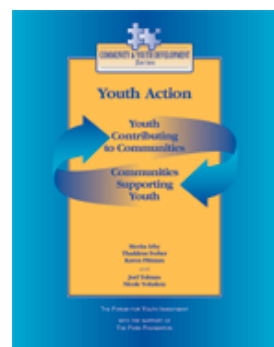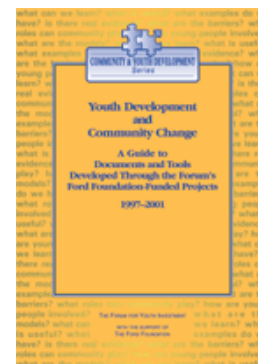
Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth
Youth Action provides the fullest treatment of the question, "What is youth action and how can it be supported?" This volume explores the converging trends in youth development, civic engagement and community development, identifies common themes and important differences between the strands of youth action, introduces the concept of creating action pathways for youth, and offers recommendations for planning and policy.   www.forumfyi.org/Files/YouthAction.pdf

Youth Acts, Community Impacts: Stories of Youth Engagement with Real Results
Youth Acts, Community Impacts forces the question of whether or not we have powerful examples of community impacts that are the result of youth acts. In response to this challenge, *Youth Acts, Community Impacts* offers eight case studies — and a number of short profiles — documenting efforts in the United States and around the world, all connecting the dots between youth action and meaningful community change. The publication begins with reflections on why it is often so hard, especially in the United States, for young people to find the space needed to make a difference in their communities. And it offers detailed and abbreviated case studies of successful efforts — in the United States and abroad — in order to understand better how and why some youth acts do yield positive community impacts. www.forumfyi.org/Files/YouthActsCommunityImpacts.pdf
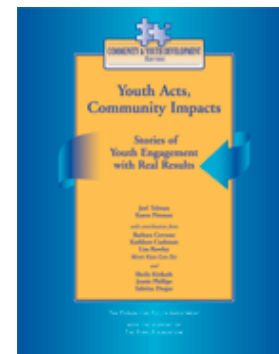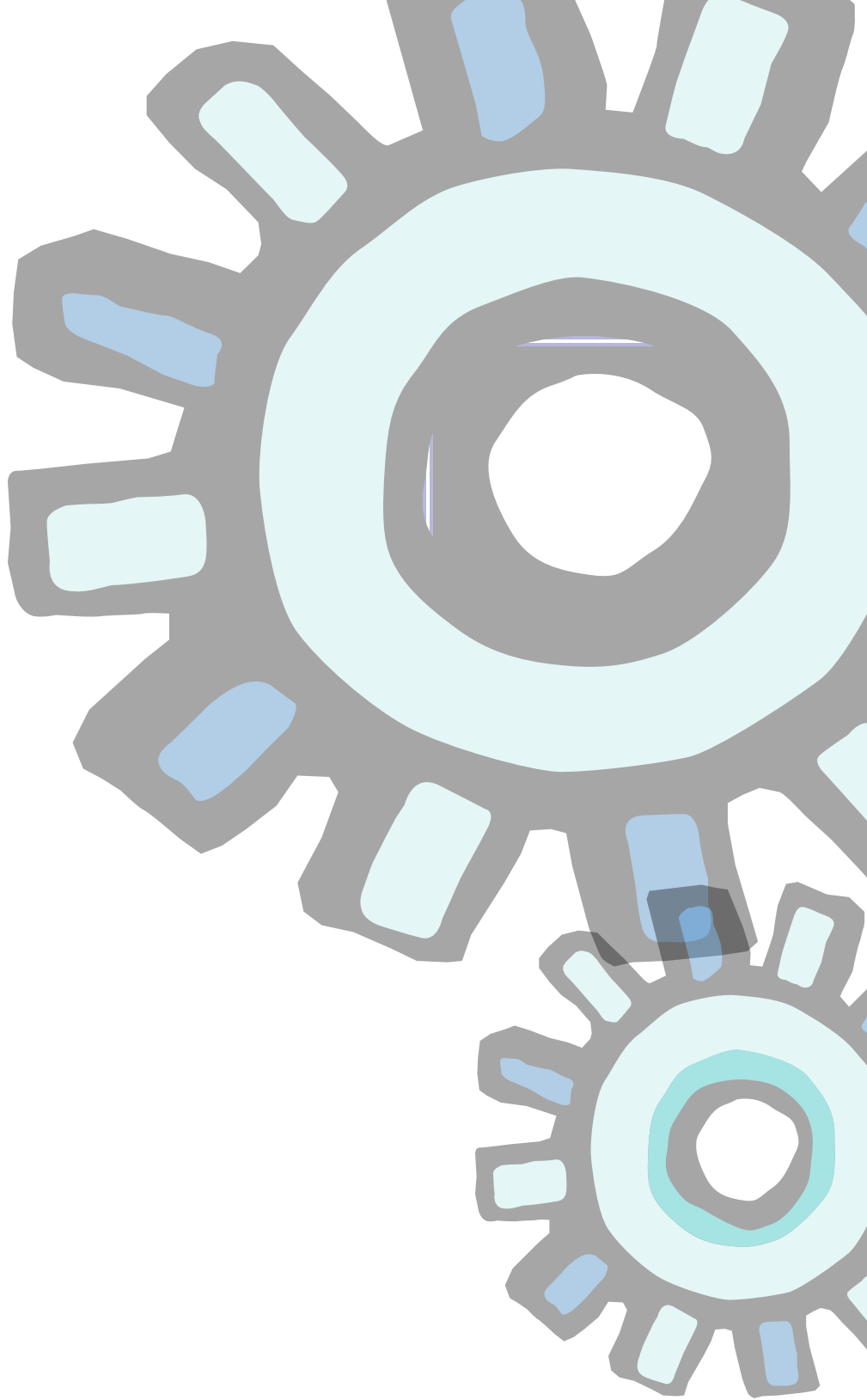
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