



# THE POWER OF TRANSFORMATIVE YOUTH LEADERSHIP:

A Field Analysis of Youth Organizing in Pittsburgh

Prepared for The Heinz  
Endowments' Education Program  
by the Funders' Collaborative on  
Youth Organizing in partnership  
with the Movement Strategy Center

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) is a collection of national, regional and local grant makers and youth organizing practitioners dedicated to advancing youth organizing as a strategy for youth development and social transformation. Its mission is to cultivate resources for young people who are taking action to build healthy and equitable communities. FCYO also brings together funders and community organizers to support youth organizing and the collaborative's commitment to systemic change and social justice.

The Movement Strategy Center (MSC) builds the capacity of individuals, organizations, alliances and sectors to be strategic, collaborative and sustainable. A national leader in the areas of leadership development, field building and alliance building, MSC supports grassroots organizations in developing the skills, culture, analysis and vision to work together in coalitions. MSC focuses on groups led by youth, women, people of color and low-income individuals on a regional, statewide and national level.

**On the cover:** Fall Back in Love with Public Education rally on Feb. 14, 2012, organized by Philadelphia Student Union. This action marked the first time that high school students from across Pennsylvania — including Pittsburgh, Chester, Reading and Philadelphia — had united to lead the way for adequate, equitable school funding in the state. (Photo by Chris Willis)

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**DEAR COLLEAGUES:**

It could be argued that youth have become the most discussed and the least heard from population in our society. Nowhere is this more evident than in our public education system. In schools today, youth, especially African American youth and youth from low-income families, are seen more as the causes of problems than the creators of solutions for many of the issues that plague the system. Decisions regarding academic course offerings, school closings and disciplinary policies are made every day by school and district leadership across the country; yet those most capable of providing first-hand feedback as to the viability of these efforts are often ignored.

Among the many reasons it is imperative to involve youth in school change work we find this most compelling: Youth, particularly those who have been marginalized by the system, have a knowledge and perspective about their school experience that adults do not. Therefore, if we believe that those closest to the issue are best suited to address it, the case for youth participation in education reform has already been made.

Youth organizing, as defined by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), trains young people in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relationships and create meaningful institutional change in their schools and communities. The work of youth organizing includes galvanizing youth from all cultural backgrounds, educational experiences and achievement levels; recruiting and developing the next generation of community leadership; and catalyzing transformative change in educational systems by deeply engaging youth most affected by systemic inequities.

In 2011, the Education Program at The Heinz Endowments engaged in a six-month process with the FCYO in partnership with the Movement Strategy Center (MSC) to develop further its Youth Organizing for School Change agenda. This is a key piece of the program's larger strategy to strengthen the full participation of young people as active agents in education reform.

We are excited to share with you the report of this work drawn from nearly 40 conversations with local stakeholders, including youth, practitioners, funders and scholars. In addition, this work is informed by conversations with seasoned youth organizing funders from across the country, including program staff representing the William Penn, Hazen, Cricket Island, and NoVo foundations, as well as Public Interest Partners/Communities for Public Education Reform. Of particular note are contributions made by our colleagues at the Endowments in the Arts & Culture Program regarding cultural responsiveness and in the Children, Youth & Families Program in the area of youth development.

To put into practice what we have learned from this report, we have developed a partnership with School of Unity and Liberation (SOUL) out of Oakland, Calif., to build the capacity of local partners to train and prepare young people as organizers. Promising efforts emerging from this capacity-building phase will be resourced for longer-term campaign work.

This work has ignited an excitement at the Endowments about the potential of young people to be agents of change in the fight for educational justice. Our hope is that consideration of this approach does the same for our colleagues committed to ensuring that all young people have unbiased access to equitable, high-quality educational experiences and resources that affirm them as individuals and validate them in their abilities to achieve, attain and contribute to society.

Sincerely,

Melanie R. Brown  
Education Program Officer  
The Heinz Endowments

“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 their communities — drugs, violence, poor education, lack of jobs — and they must be part of the solution.” The Forum for Youth Investment<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2010, The Heinz Endowments announced that “empowering youth as education reformers” would be one of the key strategies within its Education Program. Toward this end, the Endowments’ Education Program staff developed a concept paper outlining the rationale for its approach. This paper highlighted the need to engage young people as active change agents, recognizing that currently, “youth are the most discussed and the least heard from”<sup>2</sup> in the education reform arena.

To develop an effective organizational and field-building strategy, the Endowments provided a grant to the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) to conduct an assessment and make recommendations for building the region’s capacity to engage in youth organizing strategies that strengthen the city’s education system. In 2011, FCYO, a national organization of grant makers and practitioners dedicated to advancing youth organizing as a strategy for youth development and social transformation, formed a consulting team to perform the assessment. The group included an educational equity consultant with a focus on systems change in schools and the Movement Strategy Center, a national nonprofit intermediary with expertise in youth organizing and field building.

This report is the culmination of that work. It builds on the youth organizing scan completed by the University of Pittsburgh’s Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC) in 2008. In that study, LRDC found that only six of 30 organizations investigated were engaged in some form of organizing, and there was “no real network of organizations committed to youth advocacy and organizing in [the] region.” It further found that “few adult leaders, teachers, executive directors, or program managers had the expertise or the resources to support such activity in their respective organizations.” The scan by LRDC also observed that a “communication medium for youth issues in the region is absent,” highlighting the need for cultivating and sharing youth voice in the city.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> K. Pittman, S. Martin and A. Williams, *Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change* (Washington: The Forum for Youth Investment, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Melanie Brown, “Empowering Youth as Education Reformers.” Paper presented at The Heinz Endowments Board Meeting (Spring 2011), 2.

<sup>3</sup> William Bickel, Jennifer Iriti and Catherine Nelson. *Scan of Youth Organizing Activity in Pittsburgh: Evaluation for Learning* (Pittsburgh, PA: Learning Research and Development Center, September 2008), 25.

While the LRDC's previous work identified which organizations were engaged in various forms of youth leadership and which groups might be in a position to pursue youth organizing strategies, the current study seeks to inform the Endowments about potential directions that will build the field of youth organizing to support education reform in the Pittsburgh area.

### **Methodology**

This report provides background on the region, a review of relevant research in the youth engagement and organizing fields, our findings and recommendations, key principles for implementation, and a discussion of the role of philanthropy in field building. The scope of our work included background research and 37 in-depth interviews with representatives from community-based organizations, staff members at local foundations, and university researchers who focus on youth and community engagement. We also conducted one focus group with youth, two focus groups with practitioners from various parts of the youth engagement field in Pittsburgh, a review of best practices across the field, and an analysis of theories and frameworks from the youth organizing research base. Due to staff transitions in the district, requests to include representatives from the Pittsburgh Public Schools were not fulfilled.

We used the University of Pittsburgh Learning Research and Development Center's previous report to identify candidates for the interviews, seeking those with established approaches to youth engagement in the region. We sought recommendations for additional interviewees from participants themselves, building upon existing networks and their relationships in the community.

Our research questions elicited their perspectives on:

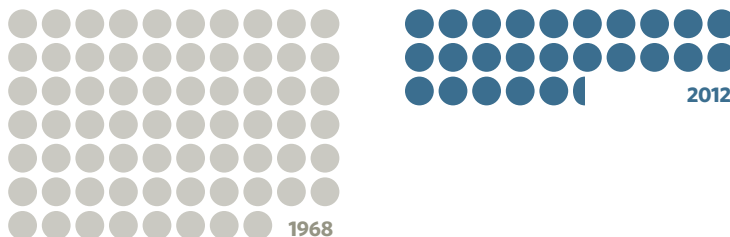
- >> opportunities for and challenges to strengthening the field of youth engagement by including a strong youth organizing strategy to improve schools, reducing racial disparities in achievement, and increasing educational outcomes for African American and low-income students in Pittsburgh.
- >> possibilities for infrastructure development that builds organizational and collaborative capacity to sustain youth organizing work for the long term.

Finally, our landscape analysis and recommendations were informed by seasoned national and local youth organizing funders convened in New York City in January 2012 specifically to provide advice to the Endowments on its proposed work in the field.

## BRIEF BACKGROUND ON EDUCATION IN THE PITTSBURGH REGION

Pennsylvania has 500 school districts statewide, with 42 of these in Allegheny County (not including Pittsburgh Public Schools [PPS]). The PPS student population has been declining for decades, from approximately 68,000 in 1968 to 25,326 today.

### Pittsburgh Public Schools Population, 1968 vs. 2012



Two primary racial groups comprise the city population: Pittsburgh is 68 percent white and 27 percent African American. The city has a higher proportion of African American residents than Allegheny County, which is 82 percent white and 14 percent African American. The city's median age is 36 years old, with a significant proportion of youth under 18 and young adults 18–24 years old. The PPS district inversely reflects the city's overall racial population with about 56 percent African American students.<sup>4</sup>

Like similar urban districts, PPS has a long history of community controversy, planning and reorganization in response to desegregation pressures. At the time its desegregation plan was developed in 1968, approximately 27 percent of PPS students attended integrated schools. This figure rose to 61 percent by 1986. Yet by 2004, the figure had fallen to 39 percent. According to the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center, the re-segregation resulted from a combination of factors (e.g., specific school reorganization decisions, persistent segregated residential housing patterns and changing demographics in the city).

In addition, a 2011 report by A+ Schools outlines the persistent achievement gap hovering at approximately 30 percent in both reading and math between white and African American students.<sup>5</sup> The charts that follow illustrate this gap in the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment for reading and math proficiency.

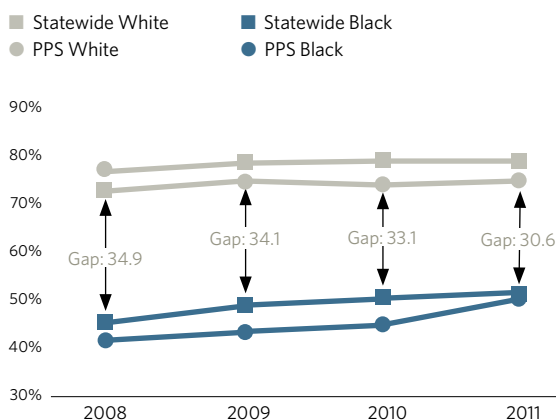
In 1992, the group Advocates for African American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools filed a complaint with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) noting the inequitable education of African American students in the district.<sup>6</sup> Fourteen years later, in 2006, an agreement was reached between all parties. The PHRC cited 94 issues that the district had to address by the end of the 2012 school year. Issues included reducing the racial achievement gap, addressing the disproportionate number of behavioral referrals by race, ensuring equity in special education and gifted placement, and including African American culture in the curriculum.

<sup>4</sup> Iriti, J., and Bickel, W. *The Steel City: A Primer*. University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center: Evaluation for Learning (2011).

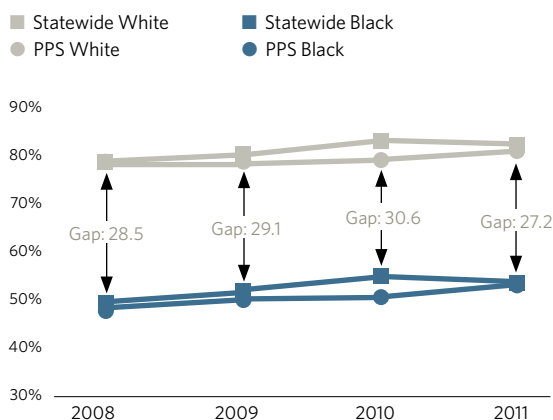
<sup>5</sup> A+ Schools, *Report to the Community on Public School Progress in Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, PA: A+ Schools, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Advocates for African American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, "Overview of Issues and Concerns" (January 10, 2008).

### PSSA Reading: Black / White Gap in Percentage of Students Proficient and Advanced



### PSSA Math: Black / White Gap in Percentage of Students Proficient and Advanced



Lastly, other challenges attracted additional concern and controversy, such as consistent downsizing in the past decade and the transitions of seven superintendents since 1990, with the most recent turnover in December 2010. These troubles are significant and illustrate the need for a new school reform strategy that engages students who are directly affected by these conditions as problem solvers and leaders of change.

## THE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT FIELD DEFINED

Given the problems facing PPS, youth organizing is a powerful strategy to address structural and cultural issues by engaging those most affected in developing solutions—especially African American youth and young people from low-income families. The following theories and frameworks guide our recommendations for the Endowments' work in this portfolio:

- >> The “**Youth Engagement Continuum**” is a framework used to highlight a range of overlapping approaches in the field of youth engagement. It is employed to assess the scope and variety of youth engagement programs in a respective region and to ensure a balanced set of programs and opportunities for youth.<sup>7</sup>
- >> The theory of culturally responsive pedagogy encompasses a variety of approaches, but one analysis we have found particularly useful is Dr. Theresa Perry’s discussion of the role of “counter narrative” in the lives of African American youth. In her work “Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement in African-American Students,” she posits that black youth must be supported in the development of an internal narrative of academic achievement if they are to persist and believe in their intellectual capacity in the face of a dominant narrative that openly doubts or denies this capacity. From this work we extrapolate that it will be critically important that young people are assisted in the development of personal and collective narratives of agency and change making in order to work against the dominant narratives that assign those roles to different and more “responsible” segments of society. Following the logic of Dr. Perry’s work, if individual achievement is a challenge, school-wide change must be equally so, but we are encouraged that the narratives of agency and achievement appear to be mutually supportive.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ditra Edwards, Nicole A. Johnson and Kim McGillicuddy, “An Emerging Model for Working with Youth: Community Organizing + Youth Development = Youth Organizing,” *Occasional Papers Series on Youth Organizing*, No. 1 (2000), 7-10.

<sup>8</sup> Justin Laing, Arts & Culture program officer, The Heinz Endowments.

These theories and frameworks have been explored in literature and in practice within the youth engagement field. We discuss these and related frameworks below to provide context for their use. Together, they provide a frame for understanding this study's findings and a road map for "quality" youth engagement work overall—they represent a set of informed best practices that will be useful as the Endowments builds out this portfolio. Our recommendations herein draw on this research, as well as on the perspectives and wisdom of the participants in this study.

### The Youth Engagement Continuum

*"Youth engagement is the active, empowered and intentional partnership with youth as stakeholders, problem solvers and change agents in their communities."*—Youth Leadership Institute, 2009

The Movement Strategy Center (MSC) defines a "field" as the coordination of people, resources and institutions around a shared set of ideas and strategies to address a specific problem and advance similar solutions. The youth engagement field evolved from the fields of *positive youth development* and *community youth development*, which viewed young people as community assets rather than as problems to be controlled, intervened upon or "treated."

The youth engagement field provides opportunities for learning and action that help young people develop an understanding of themselves and the world around them.

The youth engagement field views youth as:

- >> **Stakeholders and Decision Makers:** Youth are the most important stakeholders in their success; they must be actively involved in the decisions that affect their ability to thrive and succeed.
- >> **Problem Solvers:** Youth are more than informants; they are critical thinkers, researchers and partners in identifying solutions.
- >> **Change Agents:** Youth have the ability to organize their peers and communities inside and outside schools.<sup>9</sup>

The youth engagement field offers a range of approaches to address young people's need for growth and community participation. These approaches were conceptually illustrated in the Youth Engagement Continuum, a tool developed by LISTEN, Inc. in 2000, and later modified by the Movement Strategy Center in 2011.<sup>10</sup>


















The Youth Engagement Continuum is a tool used to assess the scope and focus of programs in a respective region and ensure a balanced set of programs and opportunities are available for all youth, and specifically marginalized groups. The continuum outlines:

- >> **Youth Services** that provide treatment and support needed to address problems young people encounter. The service approach defines young people as clients, and the work strives to intervene in a young person's life to help him or her confront personal problems.
- >> **Youth Development**, which encompasses but extends beyond young people's basic need for stable homes, services and schooling. This approach focuses on additional supports in the form of relationships and networks that provide nurturing, standards and guidance, as well as opportunities for trying new roles and contributing to family and community.

<sup>9</sup> Shawn Ginwright and Taj James, "Assets to Agents: Social Justice, Organizing and Youth Development," *New Directions in Youth Development* 96 (2002), 27-46.

<sup>10</sup> Edwards, Johnson and McGillicuddy, "An Emerging Model for Working with Youth," 7-10.



	Intervention	Development	Collective Empowerment	Systemic Change	
The YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM	YOUTH SERVICES	YOUTH DEVELOPMENT	YOUTH LEADERSHIP	YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT	YOUTH ORGANIZING
<b>Supporting YOUNG PEOPLE as:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Clients </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Participants </li> <li>▶ Youth Workers </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Participants </li> <li>▶ Youth Workers </li> <li>▶ Leaders </li> <li>▶ Staff Board </li> <li>▶ Members </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Participants </li> <li>▶ Youth Workers </li> <li>▶ Leaders </li> <li>▶ Staff Board </li> <li>▶ Members </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Leaders </li> <li>▶ Board Members </li> <li>▶ Staff Organizers </li> <li>▶ Members </li> </ul>
<b>Providing them with SERVICES and OPPORTUNITIES:</b>	<p>Provide supports to address individual problems and behavior by helping young people with basic needs (personal, health, safety, etc.).</p>	<p><b>Plus:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Access to caring adults and safe spaces</li> <li>+ Opportunities for youth / adult partnerships</li> <li>+ Age appropriate support</li> </ul>	<p><b>Plus:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Authentic youth leadership opportunities built into programming and organization</li> <li>+ Opportunities to participate in community projects</li> </ul>	<p><b>Plus:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Opportunities to engage young people in advocacy and negotiation</li> <li>+ Engaging young people in political education and awareness</li> </ul>	<p><b>Plus:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Involves youth as part of core leadership and governing body</li> <li>+ Engages in alliances and coalitions</li> <li>+ Builds and develops a base of youth</li> </ul>
<b>Focused PROGRAMMING on:</b>	<p><b>TREATMENT + PREVENTION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Meeting young people where they are</li> </ul>	<p><b>GROWTH + DEVELOPMENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Building individual competencies</li> </ul>	<p><b>CAPACITY + SKILLS BUILDING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Supporting young people as decision makers and problem solvers</li> </ul>	<p><b>CAPACITY BUILDING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— For power analysis and action, and negotiation around issues identified by young people.</li> </ul>	<p><b>CAPACITY BUILDING FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Engaging in recruitment, popular education, and campaign development around issues identified by young people.</li> </ul>
<b>What it Looks Like... With Education Reform (College Access):</b>	<p>To ensure that students can focus on school work, school lunch programs offer free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch to students that meet eligibility requirements.</p>	<p>Academic enrichment programs that support middle or high schools students with academic tutoring, college counseling and life preparation.</p>	<p>Leadership programs that provide eligible youth with leadership development opportunities to engage as active leaders on school campuses through student government and district-wide school councils.</p>	<p>Youth leaders research college readiness and access by designing and collecting 1,000 surveys from students. Based on survey findings, youth leaders develop policy recommendations to increase college readiness and access.</p>	<p>Youth leaders are a part of a coalition with parents and teachers to reduce racial/ethnic disparities and increase college access for all students. Youth build collective power for policies that make college preparatory classes mandatory for all students and increase college counselors on campus.</p>

- >> **Youth Leadership**, which is an extension of the last area and helps young people look beyond their personal needs and interests to see their relationship to a collective group, organization or community.
- >> **Youth Civic Engagement** that supports young people in developing the skills and habits needed to actively shape democratic society in collaboration with others. This approach places unique emphasis on engaging young people in a democratic process, both within organizations and within the broader community.
- >> **Youth Organizing**, which combines youth development and youth leadership with community organizing to train young people to lead grassroots organizing efforts and advocacy campaigns. In youth organizing, young people actively employ leadership skills to create meaningful, systemic change in their communities.

At the youth civic engagement and youth organizing portions of the continuum, youth are supported to develop and deepen an understanding of and response to “structural inequalities” (i.e., those social, economic, legal, political, educational and other systemic conditions that predictably and disproportionately affect youth from marginalized communities, especially young people of color and youth from low-income families).

The Youth Engagement Continuum has helped numerous community and charitable organizations evaluate the nature of youth organizing work and regional capacity. As such, the continuum is one of the primary frames we recommend to The Heinz Endowments as it deepens its own understanding and evaluation

of work in the youth organizing field. Each of the approaches along the continuum plays an important role, yet each category incorporates elements from the previous approach, yielding more comprehensive youth engagement and development as capacity for organizing grows. While there is no need for all organizations to employ the full continuum of activities, the intentional cultivation of organizations that can effectively function at each level is critical *to support the overall health and strength of a geographic region*, and to fully build the capacity of its young people to participate in the evolution of communities, cities and states.

The theory of “culturally responsive practice” — also called the *cultural responsiveness lens*—has implications for each approach along the continuum. For youth engagement programs to effectively support the holistic development of youth of color and young people from low-income families, it is essential for organizations to embed culturally responsive practice in program models and larger organizational systems. The work of Drs. Mary Stone Hanley and George Noblit for the Endowments outlined the importance of this concept when they wrote:

*[R]esearch now regards culture as a set of tools, perspectives and capabilities, which students can deploy in the pursuit of learning. It is an amalgamation of ways of being, doing and sense making developed across generations and social contexts. When culture is suppressed or denied, students are educationally disempowered. They find it hard to use their culture to learn.*<sup>11</sup>

Youth engagement workers who are skilled in culturally responsive practice are critical to the success of high-quality youth engagement strategies at all levels of the continuum. The degree to which adults partner with youth to draw on their “ways of being, doing and sense making” determines the degree to which youth of various ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic and other backgrounds feel alienated or welcomed.

The following section on authentic youth participation is closely related to the youth engagement continuum. It details the range of participation levels for young people in groups and organizations.

### **Authentic Youth Participation**

*“Youth-led” [refers to] a specific relationship between youth and adults where adults are supporting youth to gain the skills, information and capacity to make decisions about the organizations in which they find themselves.* — Young Wisdom Project & Movement Strategy Center<sup>12</sup>

To ensure authentic youth leadership, youth engagement programs incorporate youth voice, needs and lived experience in programmatic and organizational decision-making structures. To begin, an organization must define what it means by *youth*. There are varied definitions of “youth.” Some organizations define “youth” as under age 18, others as under 21, and still others as under 25. As part of developing authentic youth participation, organizations should clearly define their target youth populations and create pathways to leadership and participation for young leaders.

Substantial literature exists regarding youth involvement and participation. One of the best-known tools is Roger Hart’s “Ladder of Young People’s Participation.”<sup>13</sup> This eight-rung ladder outlines five levels of participation that reflect the various degrees of partnership between young people and adults, with the first three rungs described as non-participation levels.

<sup>11</sup> Stone Hanley and Noblit, *Cultural Responsiveness*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Young Wisdom Project and Movement Strategy Center, *Making Space, Making Change: Profiles of Youth-led and Youth-driven Organizations* (Oakland, CA: Movement Strategy Center, 2004), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Adapted from R. Hart, *Children’s Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship* (Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 1992).

Hart's ladder offers a guide for assessing current youth involvement and decision making and identifying the level of adult-youth partnership a program or organization seeks to create. The ladder's rungs do not imply that one level must lead to the next, or that the ultimate goal for every program is reaching Rung 8. The reality is that organizations have different missions, and organizations in the youth engagement field often strive to more authentically involve youth in programmatic and organizational decisions than their counterparts.

### Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



Note: Hart explains that the last three rungs are non-participation.  
Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). "Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship."  
Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

## THE YOUTH ORGANIZING FIELD DEFINED

From civil rights to environmental health, young people have been instrumental in vibrant, effective social change efforts for decades—serving both as catalysts in their own right and as leaders working in partnership with adults. One poignant example exists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the principal organizations in the 20th-century civil rights movement. SNCC began in 1960 when a group of Black students refused to leave a lunch counter where they had been denied service. This sparked a wave of sit-ins in towns across the South. SNCC was effective in advocating for racial desegregation and fighting for voting rights for all Americans. For the last 50 years, its legacy has influenced the political and social landscape of the United States.

Many youth organizing groups view their efforts as building on these rich traditions. Emerging in the 1990s, these organizations combined youth development and community organizing approaches in response to a surge in social policies that blamed youth as the primary source of social problems. The field of youth organizing emerged to address issues such as teen curfew laws, zero-tolerance discipline policies, and drastic funding cuts in K–12 and higher education. These organizations mostly comprised and were led by youth from low-income families and young people of color. Over the last 20 years, these organizations have won victories that improved their communities, trained thousands of young leaders, and built relationships that formed

the foundation of the youth organizing field. A recent field scan recognized more than 160 youth organizing groups in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

*Youth organizing* is a youth development and social justice strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change. Youth organizing relies on the power and leadership of young people to identify and address the issues affecting youth and their communities. Within youth organizing groups, young people are involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of their efforts, and engage as both participants and leaders in activities such as political education and analysis, community research, campaign development, direct action and membership recruitment. In addition to organizing for immediate social and community improvements, youth organizing groups help young people develop the skills to become lifelong community leaders, and thus are helping to create a sustainable base of social justice leaders for the broader movement.

Research in the field has demonstrated the following:

- >> **Youth organizing is an effective strategy for creating policy change.** Youth organizing infrastructure has grown and strengthened over the past decades. Youth organizing groups have been effective in the passage of policies that ensure college preparatory curriculum for all students in school districts including Los Angeles, San Jose and Denver. In addition, young people in Philadelphia, Los Angeles and the District of Columbia have led campaigns for new schools and building repairs, which reflect necessary and significant investments in low-income communities.
- >> **Youth organizing engages young people in solving the problems that affect them.** Structural inequity in public education disproportionately affects young people of color and youth from low-income families. Youth, therefore, have a critical role to play in informing the development of policy interventions that address the causes of inequity and create workable solutions. Attempts to solve social problems that do not engage the people most directly affected often fail, while youth organizing has proven outcomes for youth, their families and communities.

For example, many youth organizing groups across the country, including in San Diego, Oakland, Philadelphia and Denver, have organized to address issues of school climate and discipline. Students are often seen as the cause of the school violence problem, but not part of the solution. By engaging student leaders in constructive dialogue with school staff, youth organizing groups have helped many schools to create cultures of trust and mutual respect that reduce violence and encourage learning.

- >> **Youth organizing helps prepare the next generation of community and education reform leaders.** By engaging young people in community leadership at an early age and connecting them to other organizations and networks, youth organizing creates a pool of skilled leaders rooted in the most affected communities and invested for the long haul.

Studies show that young people engaged in youth organizing have higher rates of civic participation than their peers, and many individuals involved in youth organizing go on to become significant community leaders. For example, Luis Sanchez and Alberto Retana, longtime youth organizers from Los Angeles, have become major school reform leaders. Sanchez is the chief of staff for the president of the Los Angeles School Board; Retana is the director of community engagement for the federal Department of Education.

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<sup>14</sup> Torres-Fleming, Valdes and Pillai, 2010 *Youth Organizing Field Scan*.

### Youth Organizing for Education Reform

Over the past 20 years, community organizing has gained traction as an effective strategy for education reform in the United States. A growing body of literature documents the impact of community organizing in schools, school systems and the national education policy arena.<sup>15</sup> While adults led most school reform efforts before the growth of the youth organizing field, today it is clear that youth-led and intergenerational school reform organizing is on the rise. This exciting trend was illustrated clearly in FCYO's national *2010 Youth Organizing Field Scan*, which found that 65 percent of youth organizing groups were engaged in campaigns for public education reform.<sup>16</sup> The work being done in this area demonstrates that young people are well-positioned to address structural inequities in public education by cultivating the leadership of young people to reduce disparities and increase access and achievement for all students.

Research in the field and direct experience demonstrate the following:

- >> **Successful organizations often start small.** For example, the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) began with just 12 members and few resources until funders saw the significant efforts of the youth founders and decided to invest. Now, 17 years later, PSU boasts thousands of members who have benefited from their renowned leadership-training program and have helped PSU achieve numerous victories for educational improvement over the years.<sup>17</sup>
- >> **Victories start small and increase in scale and scope.** Many groups have early victories that address “surface issues” (e.g., ensuring books and other needed materials for students, improving building conditions, etc.). As organizers become more skilled, they develop the capacity to address issues of teaching and learning, and express concrete demands to help improve academic achievement. It can take up to five years for youth organizing efforts to build the capacity to win substantial citywide or regional victories, such as policy changes.
- >> **Youth organizing is most successful where high levels of collaboration among youth organizing groups (and between youth and allied community organizations) have existed for some time.** For example, in 2004 in Los Angeles, three youth organizing groups came together with a concern that the high school curriculum was not providing adequate preparation for college coursework. They formed a coalition that put the weight of research, advocacy and well-established civil rights organizations behind their organizing. In 2005, they convinced the Los Angeles Unified School District school board to pass a resolution mandating college preparatory courses as the default curriculum for all students in the district. The school board president noted publicly that he thought this was the most significant reform the district had made in 25 years.<sup>18</sup>
- >> **Youth organizing for education reform has become much more sophisticated.** While many early victories were small in scale, youth organizing groups are now demonstrating the ability to win victories that significantly improve the quality of education for students from low-income families and students of

<sup>15</sup> K. Mediratta, S. Shah and S. McAlister, *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools: Strategies and Successes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009); M. Warren and K. Mapp, *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing for School Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Torres-Fleming, Valdes and Pillai, *Youth Organizing Field Scan*.

<sup>17</sup> Philadelphia Student Union, <http://home.phillystudentunion.org/> (Last accessed May 13, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> K. Mediratta, S. Shah and S. McAlister, *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools: Strategies and Successes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009).

color. There is now a national network of youth organizing groups addressing education reform—the Alliance for Educational Justice—and significantly more partnerships exist between youth and adult groups than in past decades. Groups that have existed for years are now winning victories at the individual school, district and statewide levels.

### **Models of Youth Organizing for Education Reform**

Youth organizing groups use a range of different organizational models determined by their respective geographic region; the larger nonprofit, community organizing and youth development ecology; and their core constituency and mission. Across these various factors, there are three common models for effective youth organizing programs: (1) school-based youth organizing; (2) citywide coalitions; and (3) intergenerational models in which youth, parents and community members address problems together.

#### **1 School-Based Youth Organizing Model: Philadelphia Student Union (PA)**

The Philadelphia Student Union was started in 1995 by a group of young people concerned they were not receiving the quality education they deserved. In 1997, the organization opened chapters at two high schools. Today, PSU has chapters in seven schools and members from an additional six schools. Each school-based chapter offers an opportunity for students to learn organizing skills and apply them to individual school improvement campaigns, which have won victories that include repairing decaying buildings, improving school climate through programs that build trust between students and staff, and creating new academic programs that emphasize learning through solving community problems. Students convene citywide every Saturday to meet with other PSU members, discuss campaign strategies, and receive advanced training and political education. These meetings are also used to plan citywide campaigns that bring young people from across Philadelphia together to work on shared issues. Citywide campaigns have resulted in increased funding for schools, and the creation of Student Success Centers that offer college and career guidance as well as social and emotional supports to students.

#### **2 Citywide Youth Organizing Coalitions: Urban Youth Collaborative (NY)**

In 2004, New York City high school students formed the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) to advocate for youth voice in high school reform. Young people felt excluded from decisions on the restructuring of large high schools. In response, youth leaders from six organizations formed a citywide entity that connected youth across neighborhoods and schools, leveraged each organization's strengths, and resulted in collaborative campaigns for citywide change. Each organization's needs are equally represented, and the UYC is coordinated by staff who responds to members' needs by providing opportunities for learning and cross-organizational relationship building. The youth leaders of UYC work together to challenge the many conditions they are facing in schools, including metal detectors, the lack of transparent policies governing campus police, and overly harsh and punitive discipline policies.<sup>19</sup>

#### **3 Intergenerational Youth Organizing Models: Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (IL)**

Founded in 1965 by community and religious activists, Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) is based in Chicago's South Side. For more than 40 years, KOCO has served as a vehicle for community organizing, engagement and empowerment for low-income and working families in Chicago. KOCO aims to develop new generations of African American leaders who will build stable, viable and just communities in which no one's opportunity is denied based on race or economic status.

<sup>19</sup>Urban Youth Collaborative, <http://www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org/>, (Last accessed May 13, 2012).

To accomplish this, KOCO runs both youth- and adult-led grassroots campaigns. Youth work together on issues that directly affect them, such as relevant curriculum, school funding and teacher effectiveness. Youth leaders then partner with parents and community members to form strong intergenerational unity. KOCO's youth organizers have created successful campaigns to increase social and academic resources available to youth in Chicago.<sup>20</sup>

### The Impact of Youth Organizing

There is an emerging body of literature on the levels of impact youth organizing achieves in the short and longer term. These levels include individual, community and social outcomes, demonstrating both the interconnected nature of young people's lives and the various spheres that influence their schools and communities.

For *individual* leaders, youth organizing supports personal growth and development by building a sense of agency, hope and optimism; positive identity formation and cultural awareness and respect for other identities; and, finally, cognitive and communication skills such as decision making and critical thinking. Young leaders also build social skills and an awareness of group dynamics, conflict resolution strategies, a deeper understanding of political and social systems, and a lasting commitment to civic leadership and responsibility.

*Community*-level impacts result from targeted change efforts within schools and districts, such as public education or policy campaigns. Within education reform, these changes can be either institutional or cultural. These types of school reform outcomes include passing education policy, increasing school capacity, improving student educational achievement, improving the safety of neighborhoods surrounding schools, and expanding student participation in decision making.

*Social* impacts include producing greater civic participation and commitment to social change, and building healthier democratic societies and long-term social well-being. Dedicated support to build these skills and capacities is especially significant for marginalized youth for whom such resources are too often rare.



<sup>20</sup>Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, <http://www.kocoonline.org/>, (Last accessed May 13, 2012).

In 2010, Dr. Seema Shah sought to understand and document the impacts of youth organizing from the perspectives of youth, school and district administrators, and the adult staff working in youth organizing groups.<sup>21</sup> This research yielded five critical findings:

- 1** Youth organizing groups represent uniquely **supportive organizational settings** that provide a necessary and important structure for youth to become engaged in the civic and political life of their communities.
- 2** Involvement in organizing helps **young people feel a sense of agency** in their lives, instilling the belief that they have control over their actions and can make a difference in the world around them. As a result, youth build confidence that they can research a problem, create a plan to address the problem, and get other people to care about the problem.
- 3** Involvement in organizing helps **young people develop a critical social analysis**. Youth organizing groups do more than develop the competencies of young people. Through their involvement in organizing, young people begin to understand the systemic nature of problems in their communities and schools, and thus the need for corresponding systemic solutions. They also gain the organizing skills to address community problems through collective action.
- 4** Youth involved in organizing plan to **remain committed to activism** for the long term.
- 5** Involvement in organizing **increases young people's educational motivation and aspirations**. Although there are significant disparities in educational outcomes for young people of color and students from low-income families, young people involved in youth organizing seem to counter these trends. Eighty percent of students noted their improved grades and plans to pursue a college education. Close to half of the sample said they expected to obtain a graduate or professional degree beyond college.

These findings illustrate the deep stake youth have in participating and leading community and educational change. Young people of color and youth from low-income families are burdened by the need to navigate failing institutions, challenging social and economic spheres, and opportunity and achievement gaps in public education. These young people are acutely aware of these realities and seek authentic opportunities to create meaningful and lasting change in their lives and communities.

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## RESEARCH FINDINGS

**B**ased on our research, interviews and focus groups, we have several key findings about the state of youth engagement in Pittsburgh. This section is followed by recommendations for next steps the Endowments might take in building the field of youth organizing.

- 1** **There is a desire to build more powerful approaches.** There is a clear sense of eagerness and receptivity for the work the Endowments is undertaking. Participants indicated that “the time has come” for pursuing more powerful, aligned approaches to youth engagement, with some calling this “the next logical step” in a region where “the ground is fertile.”

Yet, there is a lack of understanding among most stakeholders about the range of powerful youth engagement approaches that are possible. There is a great need for a new narrative and vision about opportunities for youth advocacy and youth organizing. Participants are seeking a narrative that

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<sup>21</sup> Seema Shah, “Building Transformative Youth Leadership: Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing,” *Occasional Papers Series on Youth Organizing*, No. 11 (New York: Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing, 2011).



can unify and link the fragmented efforts in the area and one that helps youth workers, community members, educators, parents and youth to see further ahead than they may currently be seeing with existing approaches. This new narrative would also help raise awareness about the need for a regional education advocacy agenda—a new way of understanding and approaching both youth development and educational improvement.

- 2 **Few local groups engage in deep, comprehensive youth engagement.** While there are only a few groups currently engaged in youth advocacy and youth organizing, there are other groups poised to move along this continuum with appropriate support and resources. These organizations are interested in expanding their youth engagement efforts to include more youth leadership, advocacy and organizing.
- 3 **There is a significant need for organizational and individual capacity building.** Many participants mentioned the need for high-quality learning opportunities and training intermediaries in the area to provide space for building knowledge, cross-fertilization of efforts, collaborative forums, joint analysis of regional issues and opportunities, and joint strategy development. Respondents also mentioned the need to study and visit places where powerful, effective work is occurring, to dispel mythology about what is and is not possible, and to learn from and network with those further along in youth engagement approaches. They indicated that such visits would help with imagining and “reframing how things could be” in the region.
 

Participants also mentioned the need for a capacity- and skill-building pipeline for youth and adults, which could provide the expanded vision and awareness of the continuum of youth work that they need. Such a pipeline would support long-term sustainability of the work by supporting a cadre of youth who are primed to be the current and next generation of community leaders.
- 4 **There is a need to build coherence across the youth engagement landscape.** Given the number of organizations working with youth, a lack of a recognizable ecology (i.e., an awareness of how people and organizations link together, define their roles, and understand complementary aspects of their work) was evident from the responses. Supporting authentic collaboration and building a sense of the interrelationship between youth organizations is critical in the region. If there is incentive to collaborate, the Endowments should take care to support symbiotic partnerships between organizations, skillfully addressing turf and funding issues, supporting organizations to build collaborative skills, and providing funding that builds in time for joint strategizing.
- 5 **Approaches must be culturally responsive, address structural inequity, and have leadership based in low-income and African American communities.** Participants raised the importance of implementing culturally based strategies that address the root causes of structural inequity by engaging and empowering marginalized communities to lead efforts for change. These approaches must help young people develop critical consciousness around how problems in their schools and communities relate to broader issues of structural inequity. The focus on culturally responsive approaches should ensure that organizations based in low-income communities and communities of color are supported. These are often the areas from which the strongest youth organizing groups emerge.
- 6 **Differing perspectives exist about Pittsburgh Public Schools as a partner in the work.** Participants raised important questions about the potential for partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools. Some were confident about the readiness and receptiveness of district leadership; others expressed skepticism about the district’s ability to support truly transformative work. Still others were concerned about the capacity of educators (both teachers and administrators) to understand, embrace and support such work given the existing narrow focus on testing.

Some participants felt that the new PPS administration would be receptive, whereas others expressed concern that the system itself—due to the federal legislative and test-focused environment—is designed to be the “antithesis” of youth empowerment. Some participants perceive teachers to be generally more receptive and skilled in areas related to powerful youth engagement than administrators.

- 7 A range of possibilities exists for improving educational opportunities, but there is no clear consensus across stakeholders.** Respondents shared a diverse range of ideas for educational improvement, yet there was no immediate agreement on the most pressing or strategic opportunities for school reform among adult respondents. Youth, however, expressed more consensus around shared priority areas, including: increasing the number of youth leadership programs in schools, improving teacher effectiveness, addressing funding disparities, enhancing the school climate, and advocating for transparent and equitable discipline policies. The following table describes the various issues and concerns shared by respondents:

#### Educational Improvement Areas

##### Administrator, Principal and Teacher Effectiveness

- Improving the quality of *teaching* and professional development
- Improving the quality of *leadership* at superintendent and principal levels
- Examining the role of *racism and cultural competence* in the performance of teachers, administrators and other district staff

##### Funding Disparities

- Ensuring school *funding equity*
- Developing strategic uses of funding given state budget cuts juxtaposed with the relatively high per-pupil spending amount within PPS

##### School Climate and Discipline

- Decreasing disproportionate *suspensions*, especially among African American students
- Treating students, parents and others with *dignity and respect* when they enter school buildings

##### Raising Achievement, College and Career Readiness, and Access

- Raising *achievement* for all students
- Addressing the imbalance in school *readiness* among students in the early grades
- Infusing a *focus on culture* into curriculum and academic programming
- Preparing students for both *college and career*

##### Authentic Parent and Student Engagement

- Creating *parent engagement* programs
- Ensuring that the district *reports* regularly to the community on the progress improvement agenda

##### Reflection for Improvement

- School and district staff should begin *evaluating improvement efforts* and engaging in transparent dialogues with the school community about progress and improvements needed, and work on co-developing plans to address continuing challenge areas.

- 8 Respondents see The Heinz Endowments as a valued leader.** The Endowments is seen as an innovator in youth empowerment work and is looked to as a leader and catalyst. There is overwhelming support for this work and a great deal of hopefulness about its potential to convene and galvanize communities and to help coalesce efforts, which may include incentives to form strategic partnerships.

Participants also cautioned that the Endowments’ role should facilitate or strengthen efforts, making sure this is done in a way that builds authentic partnership with communities and organizations, and remains responsive to their sensibilities and interests.

These efforts could be in partnership with other, aligned funders in the area, but respondents noted that some funders may be nervous or skeptical about work focused on youth organizing if they have a learning curve in this area. So, there is an additional opportunity for the Endowments to play a leadership role among its peers.

Respondents want to ensure that the Endowments' investment in the field is for the long haul and is intended to last long enough to yield impact in the region. Participants noted that major strategy changes in the Endowments over the years have been stressful on youth, the community and organizations, even while they have tremendous respect for Endowments staff, their expertise and their commitment.

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## FIELD-BUILDING RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are based on analysis of our qualitative research findings, particularly that few groups are engaged in youth advocacy and youth organizing, and our assessment of the best-practices literature documenting what it takes to build a strong youth engagement and organizing field at the regional level.

### RECOMMENDATION 1: Build Leadership Pathways and Pipelines

**Support a new generation of young leaders who can shape the field today and lead powerful organizations tomorrow.**

There is a great need to develop a *leadership pipeline* that generates a growing base of young people and adults with the skills to lead strong youth engagement organizations. We recommend offering targeted support, knowledge building, training and opportunities for individuals, organizations and networks to build this pipeline of youth and adults who have the commitment to support ongoing youth leadership development.

Areas of training should include how to develop and maintain culturally responsive practice, how to build and strengthen quality work along the youth engagement continuum, and how to support authentic youth participation at multiple levels. Strategies to pursue this recommendation include:

- >> Regular *training* for staff, volunteers, community members, activists and young leaders.
- >> *Learning visits* to effective youth advocacy and youth organizing groups in Pennsylvania and nationally.
- >> Longer-term *leadership cohort opportunities* in youth engagement broadly, and youth advocacy and youth organizing specifically (e.g., quarterly or biannually).

### RECOMMENDATION 2: Build Organizational Infrastructure and Capacity

**Provide direct support to organizations ready to strengthen youth-led education advocacy and organizing efforts.**

There was a strong desire to “power up” existing work that is of high quality and/or promising at various parts of the youth engagement continuum.

There is also a strong sense that many organizations are ready to strengthen their youth leadership and youth advocacy work and move along the youth engagement continuum. Hence, support will be needed for those organizations to build their capacity and effectiveness in areas of work that may be new to them.

Additionally, we recognized that groups are at various stages of growth. Our assessment showed that there are some nonprofit, community-based or volunteer organizations that are small and neighborhood-based while having significant youth leadership and strong community advocacy agendas. These organizations may be “off the radar” in the sense that they are nascent or emerging organizations with varying levels of infrastructure, but possibly high levels of potential for youth advocacy and youth organizing.

**Develop or Support Place-Based Youth Engagement Strategies in Pittsburgh.** There is readiness for a coordinated set of youth engagement strategies in Pittsburgh. “Place-based” strategies that operate in geographically defined neighborhoods or communities with the goal of creating specific systemic changes in education reform will provide an effective focus. Place-based strategies can strengthen the capacity of specific leaders, organizations, networks and communities by building local leadership, shared language, advocacy opportunities and other field-building activities. To most successfully achieve structural reform, there needs to be a critical mass of youth engagement organizations with a shared vision and purpose. Focusing on building the capacity of organizations, leaders and networks working in the City of Pittsburgh will advance the overarching goals of the Endowments’ Education Program.

Strategies to pursue this recommendation include:

- >> Funding a cohort of groups committed to moving along the youth engagement continuum. Provide general operating support, regular technical assistance and learning opportunities to build a cadre of leaders and organizations that have an aligned vision and set of strategies for empowering youth as education reformers.
- >> Providing professional coaching and consulting support for youth engagement organizations interested in strengthening the voice and participation of youth leaders.
- >> Providing mini-grants or capacity-building grants to groups representing a range of structures (youth-led and youth/adult-led) and infrastructures (established, emerging and nascent). Such support would provide opportunities for increasing the visibility of nascent and emerging groups, and foster strong youth advocacy and organizing groups as active hubs of youth leadership and community change.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: Build the Youth Engagement Field with a Core Focus on Youth Advocacy and Youth Organizing**

**Raise public awareness about the need for meaningful youth engagement.** We have found in our work that ensuring ongoing awareness building among those directly and not directly involved in strengthening the youth engagement capacity of the region is a key component of the success of such efforts.

These constituents’ understanding of and support for this work will help sustain it for the long haul, and will create greater community cohesion among youth and adults while fostering engagement with the strategies that most powerfully support the positive development and contribution of young people to the city.

The Endowments could help build awareness and elevate the experiences, needs and leadership of youth by supporting activities such as community-based conferences, participatory research that powerfully engages young people, and/or annual symposia of youth engagement practitioners, researchers and funders.

**Develop a shared vision for youth engagement in the region.** This study found that there is a clear need to develop a shared vision for youth advocacy and organizing in the region—that is, a shared articulation of what currently exists and what is desired for youth leadership development and the long-term role of youth in community building and educational improvement.

Developing a shared definition of quality will help organizations, groups and practitioners better define when and how to support one another to strengthen approaches and strategies. In this report, we have suggested frames that could be used to assist in this process: the *youth engagement continuum* and the *cultural responsiveness lens*. We recommend that any visioning processes familiarize participants with these frames as a necessary launching pad for any calibration discussions around quality.

**Strengthen youth engagement and organizing intermediaries.** Intermediaries play a critical role in the health and connectivity of a field. Intermediaries are organizations that gather resources from one segment of the field (e.g., foundations and research organizations) and distribute those resources to community organizations for projects designed to build community capacity.<sup>22</sup>

There is a need for statewide or regional youth engagement intermediaries that offer support, training and collaborative opportunities for individuals, organizations and networks. These intermediaries could provide learning and training opportunities that share best practices, as well as facilitate the development of leadership pathways and pipelines. A community organizing intermediary with a keen focus and expertise in *youth organizing* would bring valuable connections nationally, share valuable best practices, support the development of organizational leaders, and link network/field leaders.

A combination of youth engagement and education-specific intermediaries will likely be essential given the different expertise each of these fields requires.

**Build collaborative capacity and strengthen networks.** Groups indicated the need for assistance in reducing fragmentation in the field and building the capacity of organizations to strategically partner with, learn from and leverage one another toward shared goals. The capacities of collective visioning, strategy development and resource sharing are among those the Endowments could support. These visioning processes and identification of core strategies will provide the groundwork to strengthen existing relationships and foster new collaborations as needed.

As a next step, the Endowments could identify and strengthen existing local and statewide networks, as well as plan for the development of new ones. This would also help to unify practitioners and organizations in the field and support the long-term capacity of the region to advocate for more equitable youth development and education outcomes.

These efforts can build upon the significant and growing organizing capacity in the state, particularly in Philadelphia. Building infrastructure in the Pittsburgh area could draw on resources from Philadelphia and bolster a statewide network of deep youth engagement by linking with groups such as the Philadelphia Student Union and Youth United for Change.

Movement Strategy Center's experience in the field nationally reveals that moving an educational equity agenda in a state or region requires:

- >> Building capacity in urban centers (e.g., Philadelphia, Pittsburgh).
- >> Linking urban centers statewide.
- >> Linking urban and rural centers.
- >> Linking Pennsylvania to national youth organizing networks.

Strategies to pursue this recommendation include:

- >> Developing a communications strategy and community engagement strategy based on findings in this report.
- >> Resourcing formal vision and strategy sessions to define shared goals across organizations, while creating long-term, complementary plans to meet those goals.

<sup>22</sup>D. Chavis, P. Florin and M. Felix, "Nurturing Grassroots Initiatives for Community Development: The Role of Enabling System," in *Community and Social Administration: Advances, Trends and Emerging Principles* (Binghamton, NY: Hawthorn Press, 1992).

- >> Supporting a practitioner-led, comprehensive field analysis as part of this visioning process to identify where existing organizations fit on the youth engagement continuum, the relative strength of their work and their relationships to one another.
- >> Assessing what change models and approaches are needed to bring about the goals and outcomes defined in the visioning process.
- >> Creating a capacity-building program to help groups improve their existing work and/or develop newly identified models that achieve the goals and outcomes defined in the visioning process.
- >> Identifying intermediary organizations—local or statewide—best positioned to provide longer-term training and support to build a shared language and understanding of youth advocacy and youth organizing in the region.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4: Develop a Coordinated Strategy and Cross-Sector Approach to Address Youth Needs with Education at the Center**

Because the Endowments' Education Program mission seeks to ensure that African American students and students living in poverty have full access to high-quality educational experiences and given the limited number of youth organizing efforts currently functioning in the region, a strategy that recognizes and builds on the existing capacity of the region will be essential.

The current state of the Pittsburgh region points to the possibility of a larger initiative aimed at strengthening and coordinating all of the youth work in the city and moving all groups along the youth engagement continuum. This work could engage other programs in the Endowments as well as peer funders who have an investment in the youth engagement continuum and a desire to seed a more unified, aligned strategy supporting youth in all dimensions of their lives (education, health, workforce, mental health, juvenile justice, etc.).<sup>23</sup>

Though the Endowments' investment is intended to focus on the Pittsburgh region, a long-term change strategy will require linking local efforts to statewide work for deeper and more sustained impact, as well as for continued learning. Such an agenda will require partnership with other regional funders. The Endowments or its partners might *consider building or strengthening statewide intermediaries or partners* that can link higher-capacity regions to regions with greater need or emerging approaches.

In addition, there are questions to consider about how this work could or should relate to the Endowments' Children, Youth & Families and Arts & Culture programs. The youth engagement continuum and the cultural responsiveness lens could be used as tools for a discussion on how these programs leverage one another's efforts on various parts of the continuum, various approaches to youth leadership development, and how quality work is identified and assessed.

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<sup>23</sup> For ways that funders are approaching field building through networks see: *Monitor Institute and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: A Funder's Guide* (Washington: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 2011).

## KEY PRINCIPLES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

**A**s The Heinz Endowments moves toward implementing some of these recommendations, we share these key principles that will build momentum, sustainability and stakeholder investment in the success of this process. The following were noted by participants as key focus areas for the Endowments' capacity-building strategy in the region:

- >> **Bring youth to the table.** To ensure youth are engaged in appropriate and authentic ways, develop a team of youth and adults to help lead and support this process. This critical step incorporates the voice of young people at the origin and puts into place a shared decision-making structure.<sup>24</sup>
- >> **Tap local talent.** Groups were emphatic about the need to identify local expertise that can be leveraged to build the capacity of the region, appropriately balanced with outside expertise when needed to build out a new area and/or to provide additional exemplars and models of work from other regions.
- >> **Tailor strategies to contexts.** Because of demographic, historical, economic and other factors, different segments of the community will need different youth engagement approaches appropriate to their contexts. Organizations and groups that are grounded in communities should tailor appropriate strategies to the cultural, racial/ethnic and socio-economic context of their constituents.
- >> **Ensure that groups are adequately resourced for long-term work.** Given the nature of capacity- and infrastructure-building for a region, groups were concerned about funders' frequent direction changes and how this affects organizations' ability to strengthen their work over time. In order to succeed, groups need the time and resources to envision new goals and outcomes for their work, build relationships, develop capacity and build upon successes.
- >> **Build capacity to deeply listen to and partner with youth.** While this point may seem obvious, participants indicated that many practitioners in the region are not skilled or knowledgeable about how to partner with youth. The ability to truly listen and partner with youth from diverse communities is critical for the Endowments' effort to build this field.
- >> **Support authentic collaboration.** Ensure youth engagement practitioners play a leading role in collaborations and receive support for reflection and evaluation of their work. This is essential so that real impediments to deep and honest collaboration are identified and skillfully addressed to promote shared investment in joint work for the long haul.
- >> **Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) should be a learning partner.** Participants were clear that PPS should be one of the entities engaged as a learning partner, along with other groups working with youth in the region. Such partnerships will help support the notion of a network collaborating to strengthen youth leadership development and capacity building throughout the region.

<sup>24</sup>Partnership values for creating a culture in which youth and adults work effectively include: Youth and adults are expected to learn from one another; organizations explicitly address issues of trust, power and authority; group processes foster "safe space" for respectful dialogue and problem solving; and organizational goals and actions are clearly rooted in the "lived experience" of youth. See: Zeldin, Petrokubi and Camino, *Youth-Adult Partnerships in Public Action: Principles, Organizational Culture and Outcomes* (Washington: The Forum for Youth Investment, 2008).

- >> **Develop strategies specific to out-of-school youth, extremely marginalized youth and other youth who face challenging life circumstances (e.g., homelessness, gang involvement).** Respondents noted that there is a large population of young people—particularly those who have been most affected or disaffected by education systems—who are missed by most youth programs. As this region-building effort unfolds, partners will need to expand existing strategies and identify new ones to effectively engage these youth along the full youth engagement continuum. Participants felt strongly that even so-called “troubled” youth are powerfully analytical and reflective about their lives and community conditions, and are often the very youth who are most ready for youth advocacy and organizing programs. Experience shows us that such programs can inspire their return to formal education systems and their long-term sense of agency and civic engagement in their communities.

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## THE ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY IN FIELD BUILDING

**T**here are several strategies that the Endowments could consider to determine how best to leverage its own investments, as well as how it might catalyze additional investments from its peers to build the field of youth advocacy and organizing in the region.

### Elements of a Strong Youth Engagement Field

Based on its national work and research, the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing developed a set of elements that are in place in regions where powerful youth engagement strategies exist. Our discussion above touched on many of the elements specific to the Pittsburgh area’s youth organizing readiness and noted opportunities for the Endowments to support infrastructure development. Those elements include:

- >> Support for youth engagement and the use of the continuum among youth groups, funders and the broader community.
- >> Strong relationships among youth engagement organizations.
- >> Shared analysis of the problems facing young people and a commitment to constituency building.
- >> Intergenerational alliances and connections with community-based organizations.
- >> Connections with supporting organizations, including researchers, academics and youth-serving organizations along the continuum.
- >> Connections to the state and national youth and community organizing field.
- >> Longer-term general funding support.
- >> Strong individual leaders and a pipeline to support their development.
- >> Organizations with a clear vision, theory of change, and process for recruiting, nurturing and growing youth leaders.
- >> Access to high-quality, ongoing training opportunities.



In addition to the above, we have found in our work at the Movement Strategy Center several key areas that would build long-term sustainability and infrastructure for powerful, ongoing youth engagement work along the continuum:

- >> **Guarantee public and private funding for youth engagement along the continuum.** Leveraging public and private dollars for youth engagement activities along the continuum will go a long way toward promoting the capacity of organizations to develop their programs over time, continue learning and growing, and build a youth leadership pipeline.
- >> **Institutionalize comprehensive models of youth leadership.** Create a body that institutionalizes high levels of youth leadership in the city or region. Such an entity would provide a powerful forum for youth voice to affect the region's policymaking on an ongoing basis, serve as a knowledgeable body through which to vet region-wide strategies, and offer a vehicle to continue visioning for the future.

Such an entity may already exist in the Pittsburgh area. The task at this point would be to determine how equity-driven it is (i.e., degree of authentic representation of youth; amount of meaningful youth roles in visioning, planning and evaluating efforts; and extent of culturally responsive pedagogy). For example, one entity that functions in a comprehensive, equity-based way is the San Francisco Youth Empowerment Fund (YEF). A project of the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and Their Families, the YEF is part of the city's larger commitment to provide local youth with opportunities for leadership, employment and development. The Youth Empowerment Fund Advisory Board is comprised of 12 to 15 youth ages 14–20 from throughout San Francisco and provides leadership and oversight to the YEF. They partner with the San Francisco Youth Commission to ensure that youth voices are incorporated at every decision-making level.<sup>25</sup>

- >> **Create quality and accountability through youth-led planning and evaluation.** Authentic youth involvement in planning and evaluation of youth programming is essential to leadership development for youth and ensures that programming is actually responsive to youth in its conceptualization and implementation. Too often diverse youth's perspectives on the concept/vision, design, implementation and evaluation are omitted from planning processes. A youth organizing strategy will correct this tendency in the field.

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<sup>25</sup>See: [www.yefsf.org](http://www.yefsf.org) or [www.dcyf.org](http://www.dcyf.org) (Last accessed May 15, 2012)

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## CONCLUSION

*“Each time we find ourselves at a crossroads, paralyzed by worn debates and stale thinking, the old ways of doing things, a new generation rises up and shows the way forward. As Robert Kennedy once told a crowd of students in South Africa, ‘It is a revolutionary world that we live in, and thus it is young people who must take the lead.’ [This is] because young people are unburdened by the biases and prejudices of the past.”*

—President Barack Obama, Town Hall Meeting, Strasbourg, France, April 3, 2009

**A**lthough young people have led many of the great social movements of history, many adults still doubt that young people can lead change efforts in their schools and communities. The research is clear: Youth organizing can have a tremendous impact on individuals, schools, communities and beyond.

In this document, we shared our findings and recommendations for field building in youth advocacy and organizing in Pittsburgh. The Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing and the Movement Strategy Center analyzed both research and qualitative responses from local stakeholders to develop a set of specific grant-making strategies through which the Endowments could advance a change agenda for the region.

As we noted at the beginning of this report, youth organizing has the power to catalyze deep change in education systems by engaging the youth most affected by systemic inequality. Authentic youth organizing galvanizes youth from all backgrounds, educational experiences and achievement levels, and leads to lasting, positive effects on schools and school systems.

The Pittsburgh region is primed for a youth engagement strategy that strengthens the ecosystem of youth advocacy and organizing, develops a pipeline of young leaders, and creates real and lasting equity in schools. There is readiness and eagerness from the field, and The Heinz Endowments is seen as a tremendous and valued leader. Given the growth of the youth organizing field over the past two decades, the Endowments can also benefit from the experience and lessons of practitioners, funders and young leaders both statewide and nationally. The possibilities for strengthening the education system, and the Pittsburgh community overall, are palpable.

We commend the Endowments for its continuing innovative and courageous stance on equity and justice, for its belief in young people, and for advancing this important work.

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## INTERVIEW LIST

- A+ Schools, **Carey Harris**, Executive Director
- A+ Schools, **Mayada Mansour**, Program Director
- Advocates for African American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, **Tamanika Howze**, Community and Youth Advocate
- Carlow University, Youth Media Advocacy Project, **Jennifer Snyder-Duch, PhD**, Professor
- Carlow University, Youth Media Advocacy Project, **James Kelly, Ph.D.**, Professor
- Community Empowerment Association, **Rashad Byrdsong**, Executive Director
- Consortium for Public Education, **Stephen Seliy**, Associate Executive Director
- Coro Center for Civic Leadership, **Michael Sider-Rose, Ph.D.**, Director, Youth Leadership Programs and Customized Leadership Development
- Education Law Center, **Nancy A. Hubley, Esq.**, Managing Attorney, Pittsburgh Director
- Evans Moore**, Organizing Consultant
- Falk Foundation, **Kerry O'Donnell**, President
- Good Schools Pennsylvania, **Mary Jo Needham-Lincoln**, Western Pennsylvania Regional Organizer
- Grable Foundation, **Gregg Behr, Esq.**, Executive Director
- Greater Pittsburgh Student Voices, **Heather Harr**, Director
- Hear Me Project, Carnegie Mellon University, **Heide Waldbaum**, Project Director
- Hill District Education Council, **Reverend Johnnie Monroe**, Council Co-Chair
- Homewood Children's Village, **Derrick Lopez, Esq.**, President and CEO
- Institute of Politics, University of Pittsburgh, **Mo Coleman**, Professor and Director Emeritus
- KidsVoice, **Scott Hollander**, Executive Director
- Kingsley Association, **Fred Brown**, Associate Director
- MGR Foundation, **Phil Koch**, Executive Director
- One Hood, **Jasiri X**, Co-Founder
- One Vision One Life, **Richard Garland**, Executive Director
- Philadelphia Student Union, **Nijmie Dzurinko**, Executive Director
- Pittsburgh United, **Barney Oursler**, Executive Director
- The Buhl Foundation, **Frederick W. Thieman, Esq.**, President
- The Heinz Endowments, **Justin D. Laing**, Program Officer, Arts & Culture
- The Heinz Endowments, **Margaret M. Petruska**, Senior Program Director, Children, Youth & Families
- The Heinz Endowments, **Wayne A. Jones**, Program Officer, Children, Youth & Families
- The Pittsburgh Foundation, **Jeanne Pearlman, Ph.D.**, Senior Vice President for Program and Policy
- The Pittsburgh Promise, **Saleem Ghubril**, Executive Director
- Three Rivers Community Foundation, **Nick J. Palazzetti, Ph.D.**, Executive Director
- United Way of Allegheny County, **Bob Nelkin**, President and Chief Executive Officer
- University of Pittsburgh Community Organizing and Social Administration Program, **Tracy Soska, MSW, LSW**, Chair of the Community Organization and Social Administration Program and Director of Continuing Education
- University of Pittsburgh Learning Research and Development Center, **William Bickel, Ph.D.**, Professor and Senior Scientist
- University of Pittsburgh Learning Research and Development Center, **Jennifer Iriti, Ph.D.**, Research Associate and Co-Director of Evaluation for Learning Group
- William Penn Foundation, **Candace Bell, Ph.D.**, Children, Youth and Families Program Officer
- Women and Girls Foundation, **Heather Arnet**, Chief Executive Officer

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