

# Collective Leadership: An Emerging Approach to Community-Based Youth Work

## Introduction

In countless cities, local nonprofit organizations provide structured opportunities for youth to participate in meaningful social change. This type of youth leadership is place-based; young people grow and learn by addressing specific issues in the communities where they live, work, and play.

Although traditional notions of leadership development tend to emphasize individual action, a new way of thinking is emerging among private foundations, academic institutions, and nonprofit organizations; this alternative approach – collective leadership – takes place when residents come together and mobilize human, cultural, and technological resources in ways that improve their communities for the common wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

Collective leadership is inherently inclusive because it asks individuals to cross boundaries of all types – such as age, income, religion, and culture – as they commit to bidirectional learning, joint action, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability. When young people practice collective leadership, they engage in the types of activities that research has shown to support positive youth development: forging caring relationships with others, identifying with a larger group or effort, and assuming responsibility for real-world change.<sup>2</sup>

Despite current interest in collective leadership, there is very little research on how it is implemented and what it looks like in practice. This study investigates three community-based agencies that used a collective leadership approach to frame out-of-school programming for young people. The purpose of this research is to yield knowledge about how community-based agencies adopt and institutionalize collective leadership practices.

## Defining collective leadership

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation offers a clear conceptualization of collective leadership as a way to approach community change. According to this framework, collective leadership embodies several core principles; it is a relational approach where multiple individuals assume leadership roles within a group while the entire group provides leadership to the wider community, it is a fluid approach that evolves in response to specific situations and settings, and it is a transformational approach rooted in a commitment to social justice.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the process, there are five guiding practices that inform hands-on work: foster youth-adult partnerships, mobilize community assets, channel individual gifts, build teamwork, and engage in ongoing reflection. Taken together, these practices paint a picture of collective leadership in action.

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<sup>1</sup> The Collective Leadership Framework, 2007, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

<sup>2</sup> Eccles, J. and Gootman, J.A. (Eds.) (2002). Community Programs to Promote Youth Development. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

<sup>3</sup> The Collective Leadership Framework, 2007, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

### *Foster youth-adult partnership*

A youth-adult partnership is a reciprocal and equitable relationship between a young person and an adult that draws on the unique skills of each partner. This relationship is characterized by mutual teaching, learning, doing, and trust. Young people and adults come together in bi-directional relationships, working together to foster leadership skills within themselves and each other. They support each other, join in shared visioning, and their relationship adapts and evolves as they grow as individuals.

### *Mobilize community assets*

Each community possesses specific strengths and assets – including physical, cultural, or historical assets as well as financial or human resources. The collective leadership approach encourages youth and adults to identify and harness these strengths as part of a larger movement toward social change.

### *Unleash individual gifts*

Individual gifts are the assets and talents each person can contribute to social change. Collective leadership does more than display or exhibit individual gifts – it unleashes their full potential. In the context of collective leadership, individual gifts are channeled into a greater, collective purpose.

### *Build teamwork*

Teams that embrace the collective leadership approach focus on working together to achieve a common goal. In this style of teamwork, the entire group is accountable for the results of a joint effort as opposed to individual team members assuming responsibility for separate aspects of a goal.

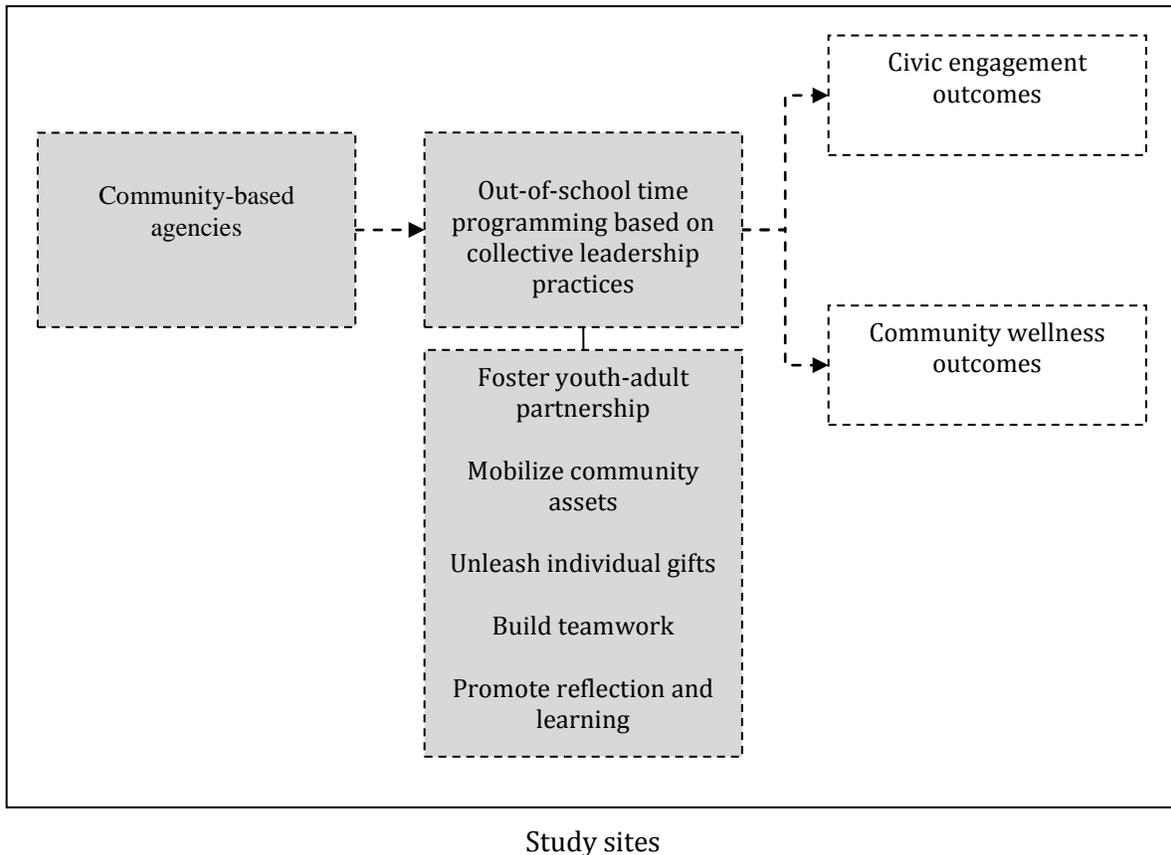
### *Promote reflection and learning*

Ongoing reflection and learning – on one’s thoughts, feelings, abilities, and experiences – is a defining element of collective leadership. Reflection does not just happen at the individual level; youth and adults reflect on and learn from their own work as well as each other’s contributions.

## Conceptual framework

The following diagram proposes a chain of relationships linking community-based agencies, collective leadership practices, and positive outcomes for youth and communities. This study focuses on the first part of the framework; it investigates the conditions that appear to help or hinder organizations as they design and implement out-of-school time programming that supports collective leadership.

**Figure 1 Conceptual Framework**



In September 2009, the Innovation Center, a national nonprofit organization, received a two-year grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service. As part of this agreement, the Innovation Center made subgrants to three organizations: Tohono O’odham Community Action (TOCA) in Sells, Arizona; Youth Development Training and Resource Center (YDTRC), an organization that supports the New Haven YMCA Center and other youth agencies in New Haven, Connecticut; and the Monterey Bay Aquarium (MBA) working in Watsonville, California. All three agencies demonstrated a strong history of supporting youth civic action and a willingness to build collective leadership into their out-of-school time programming. Innovation Center staff members provide customized technical assistance and training to each agency and manage the work across all three sites.

*Tohono O’odham Community Action*

In the Tohono O’odham Nation more than 60% of adults suffer from type II diabetes. Young people who work with TOCA are promoting health and wellness by revitalizing cultural traditions related to food and fitness, including planting community gardens, reintroducing traditional farming methods, organizing sports leagues focused on traditional athletics, and coordinating hiking trips to harvest native plants. During the first project year, TOCA hired eight local youth who provided leadership for project activities – including a successful pilot project that introduced

native foods into the local schools. These young people worked full-time during school breaks and part-time during the school year.

#### *New Haven YMCA Youth Center*

In New Haven, Connecticut, youth at the New Haven YMCA Youth Center are taking an active stance against violence in their community. In this project, youth are designing and leading community service projects to lower gun violence and bullying. Building on recently established relationships between local youth and law enforcement, these youth started by designing posters and postcards – targeted at their peers – that focus on the dangers of guns and how individuals can prevent gun violence. YMCA staff members recruited a team of ten young people by reaching out to parents, local schools, and youth who were already involved in other YMCA programs.

#### *Monterey Bay Aquarium*

In Watsonville, California, local high school students are working with the Monterey Bay Aquarium to lead conservation and restoration efforts to protect local wetlands. This past year, Aquarium staff supported a team of five youth who designed and implemented projects linking science education to community environmental issues. These young people were all alumni of Watsonville Area Teens Conserving Habitats (WATCH), the Aquarium's year-long program for Pajaro Valley High School students. WATCH participants learn first-hand about the Pajaro River watershed and earn community service hours and academic credit as they design and complete conservation projects. This effort to engage WATCH alumni built on the momentum and passion that students experienced during their involvement in WATCH.

### Data collection and analysis

We collected data between March and July of 2010; with the exception of telephone interviews with 4 youth in CA and 2 adults in CT, all data collection activities occurred as part of a two-day visit to each site. In keeping with the tenets of collective leadership, we combined traditional methods of qualitative data collection, such as focus groups and interviews, with more participatory methodologies that allowed youth and adults from selected sites to contribute to the research process (see Table 1). The photovoice activity, for example, asked participants to select visual images that captured their community's strengths and concerns. This activity was intended to recognize and honor the value of participants' subjective experience and facilitate critical and analytical discussion of social conditions and their root causes. The most significant change activity was a guided exercise to help team members identify their core beliefs and surface stories that represent these beliefs.

**Table 1 Summary of data sources by site**

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>TOCA</b>	<b>MBA</b>	<b>YMCA</b>
Youth focus group	1 focus group	1 focus group	1 focus group
Youth interviews	-	4 interviewees	-
Adult focus group	-	1 focus group	1 focus group
Adult interviews	3 interviewees	-	4 interviewees
Most significant change	6 youth	4 youth	-
Photovoice	-	4 youth, 1 adult	-

The conceptual framework for this study depicts a set of ideas about collective leadership. Our central analytic task was to look for evidence that supported or challenged this proposed chain of relationships. Given the timeframe for this study, we focused on the first part of the framework which suggests that community-based programs can embed collective leadership practices into their out-of-school programming. After data collection concluded in the summer of 2010, we analyzed interview data, focus group data, and documentation from photovoice and most significant change activities to determine whether there was a logical chain of evidence suggesting specific conditions under which community-based agencies might facilitate collective leadership. These findings and related implications for out-of-school time programs are detailed in the following section.

### Supports for collective leadership

#### *Sharing power with youth*

Adults frequently occupy positions of power and authority in the institutions that serve youth. As a result, young people are often excluded from formal decision-making processes and even well-meaning adults may overlook or minimize their leadership potential. The organizations in this study were unique in this regard because, in each case, the broader organizational culture systematically reinforced youth voice; adult staff members were *expected* to let young people take the lead on service-learning projects. As a result, agencies created an environment where adults viewed youth as leaders and assumed their full partnership from the very beginning of the project. For example, adult staff allowed young people to take ownership of the project. As one YMCA staff member reflected, “We sat down with the youth and said, ‘What are your interests? What would you like to get out of this project?’ And with those questions, everybody came to the realization that this is where they really belonged...that they’re part of the project.”<sup>4</sup> This sense of ownership prompted young people to think and act as full partners in the work. Youth at MBA, for example, consistently highlighted photographs of team members playing leadership roles in the wider community. Their analysis of these scenes revealed their sense of themselves as leaders with the ability to engage others in community change. One participant effectively summarized this

<sup>4</sup> This quote and all that follow are taken from interviews, focus groups, photovoice, or most significant change data from youth leaders and adult staff who participated in this research project.

perspective: “Although we are young adults, we *do* have the ability to teach others about subjects we are passionate or knowledgeable about.”

### *Modeling youth-adult partnership*

In addition to supporting youth-adult partnership within their own organizations, staff members also modeled this way of working for other adults in the community. Their willingness to advocate for youth-adult partnership and their insistence on involving youth as full partners set an example for their peers and colleagues. For example, district leaders in the Tohono O’odham community initially questioned the authority of three youth who approached them for permission to hold a camp in the district. As one young person who attended this meeting recalled, “At the meeting they asked us [youth], “Well, where’s your boss? Everyone has a boss.”” This young person went on to explain the difference between the district leaders’ view of young people and the way youth are treated by adult staff at TOCA: “Our bosses at TOCA respected us to be able to go to this meeting [on our own] and do what we needed to do. They knew we were responsible.” By encouraging young people to speak on behalf of the organization, TOCA is creating opportunities for adults in the community to see youth in a different way – as capable leaders and partners.

### *Targeted asset mapping*

The collective leadership framework assumes that each community possesses unique strengths. At TOCA and MBA, specific organizational priorities prompted youth leaders and adult staff to hone in on certain types of community assets. For example, due to TOCA’s focus on cultural revitalization, youth leaders who participated in this research frequently referenced *Himdag* –the desert people’s way – as a resource for their work: “It’s everything – the connections, relationships, language, songs, history, stories, the land, and the values.” Similarly, MBA’s emphasis on environmental conservation led youth in this study to consistently identify physical assets, such as wetlands, as an important and defining feature of their community. By tying out-of-school time programming directly to their mission, both agencies encouraged youth leaders to tap into a broader organizational knowledge and appreciation of local community resources.

### *Scaffolding youth involvement*

Staff members at all three sites built strong relationships with youth leaders. However, these relationships – marked by trust and respect – did not necessarily translate into structured attempts to identify individual gifts. Instead, staff members allowed youth to gravitate toward familiar or comfortable roles and then introduced opportunities to build new skills and competencies. Staff members freely acknowledged that the process of identifying and unleashing individual gifts is time intensive. Furthermore, while they are committed to providing targeted supports and opportunities for young people, they are equally committed to the long-term mission and vision of their organizations. Over time, they face the daunting task of building program models that maximize the strengths and interests of successive groups of young people while advancing a long-term community change agenda.

### *Building relationships*

For all three sites, strong interpersonal relationships among team members facilitated teamwork. Young people at MBA, for example, had worked together on another yearlong project; this familiarity allowed them to communicate honestly and hold each other accountable when they came together to form the alumni committee. As one student pointed out: “We know each other

better [this year] so we're able to be a bit more candid...we don't have to beat around the bush or worry about being polite." As a brand new team, the YMCA made time for youth and adults to get to know each other at the very beginning of the project. Initial sessions included activities, such as ice-breakers, that were specifically intended to forge connections among team members. These experiences helped to break down some of the stereotypes that group members had of each other. "I don't like policemen," one young person flatly stated, "So I was scared when he walked in. Now it's better – because I know that policemen are safe and they don't want to do anything bad to you." Simultaneously, the process of watching young people grapple with gun safety issues led this policeman to express greater respect and appreciation for youth leadership.

### *Systematic learning*

The agencies in this study did not necessarily define learning in terms of acquiring content knowledge; they all focused on building the concrete knowledge and tangible skills that youth needed to design, implement, and assess their projects. The most commonly mentioned learning areas included community history and culture, community mapping, visioning, planning, public speaking, and group facilitation. Young people typically acquired new knowledge or skills on an "as needed" basis based on the demands of the project. We found that adult program leaders could benefit from practical tools, such as a simple worksheet or checklist, to help them be more intentional about working toward relevant and appropriate learning objectives. Another important next step for the agencies in this study is to measure the impact of out-of-school programming in the context of their larger work. For example, each agency might develop a simple logic model that links its out-of-school programming to a set of intended outcomes. This exercise is important because it prompts the organization to articulate the potential benefits of collective leadership activities. Then, adult staff can work with youth leaders to select appropriate indicators and gather data that feeds into a larger, ongoing assessment of agency work.

### Conclusion

Collective leadership is an emerging approach to community-based youth work; it represents a dynamic process that focuses diverse communities of people – both youth and adults – around a set of pressing issues in an effort to build broad-based participation and knowledge for constructive change. This study illuminates a set of practices that can potentially influence other agencies where young people are engaged as agents of community change.

**Figure 2 Summary of collective leadership supports**

<b>Collective leadership practices</b>	<b>Collective leadership supports</b>
Foster youth-adult partnership	Build a culture of power sharing among staff members; Model youth-adult partnership for others in the community
Mobilize community assets	Map community assets in the context of a specific topic or issue; Leverage organizational knowledge of community resources
Unleash individual gifts	Encourage young people to apply existing skills; Create opportunities for youth to try new roles that are less comfortable or familiar
Build teamwork	Set aside time for relationship building at the beginning of the project; Allow team members to get to know each other as individuals
Promote reflection and learning	Define individual learning goals at the beginning of the project; Link project work to systems for organizational reflection and learning