

## Youth Empowerment

### The Contributions and Challenges of Youth-Led Research in a High-Poverty, Urban Community

Yolanda Anyon with Sandra Naughton

#### Introduction

Youth empowerment has become a popular way to create effective programs and policies for youth and to help them develop leadership skills, self-esteem, and positive attachments to their communities. Youth-empowerment strategies have special appeal in high-poverty, urban settings where young people feel marginalized and poorly served by society's institutions. Increasing their voices in decision making is especially effective in such environments.<sup>1</sup>

Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) is a participant-led research program intended to make young people's voices heard. For the past two years the John W. Gardner Center has collaborated in a YELL project with a high school in the Oakland, Calif. neighborhood of West Oakland. A community in transition, West Oakland has faced some of the lowest student test scores and highest levels of violence and unemployment in the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>2</sup>

#### Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning

Participants in YELL projects study issues that impact their own lives. They choose the topic of their research as well as the methods to study it. The YELL program is demanding. Among other requirements, it asks young people for a yearlong commitment. In weekly meetings

throughout that year, YELL introduces participants to ethnographic inquiry and prepares them to become knowledgeable and active decision makers. The information participants gather will inform youth advocates and policy-makers as they try to create better programs and opportunities for youth. After the first year of involvement with YELL, youth researchers continue to participate in the program as mentors. They recruit and support the incoming cohort of students, lead after-school sessions, and serve in other roles that mirror those of regular program staff members.

In the first year of the West Oakland YELL project, students focused their research on reforms needed at their school. They selected three techniques: surveys, documentary photography, and focus groups.<sup>3</sup> Their final products included a video and a written report, each integrating all three methods of inquiry. Throughout the year the students shared their research tools and, later, their findings, with a variety of audiences. The year culminated with a forum on education in West Oakland in which students, school staff, neighborhood residents, and district officials came together to talk about the YELL research and plan for the future. The following summer, eight of the first cohort of youth researchers were trained to be mentors for the next group. In the second year, 10 new participants and their mentors are building from the first year's work to explore stereotypes about West Oakland and determine how they influence student behavior.

*We're not physically yelling, but we're mentally and objectively yelling. You know? Yelling about issues. Yelling about what we want and what we need. We're yelling by doing surveys, yelling by interviewing, yelling by doing videos, holding meetings, doing presentations. That's how we're yelling. That's it!*<sup>4</sup>

This issue brief addresses the benefits and challenges of sponsoring a youth-led research project in a school where students and their friends, families, and teachers confront daily the demanding challenges posed by poverty and its attendant ills. It finds that a youth-empowerment framework has particular value in this context, but poses unique challenges to program design.

## Benefits to Youth, School, and Community

The rewards of a youth empowerment approach in high-poverty communities are significant. The YELL project gives young people resources unavailable elsewhere in their environment—the focused attention of adults, opportunities to travel, and the prospect of learning important skills such as report writing, working in teams, data analysis, and public speaking. Programs like YELL make a special contribution in West Oakland, where many students enter high school with little of the preparation necessary for academic success. For instance, the average ninth-grader entering this high school reads at the fourth-grade level. In the 2001–2002 school year, most students were below the national average in the state-mandated SAT-9 test, which determines the high school's ranking in the state.<sup>5</sup> The YELL program affords youth who may not succeed academically the opportunity to develop needed skills in a nontraditional learning environment.

*I'm learning more in here than, well, I want to say than I do in school in general, but than in some particular classes. Because I think that [politics and power] is what we need to learn about. I don't think that it's right because I barely started to really have insights on this and if we don't ever learn about it, then we won't ever think nothing of it.*

The participants in West Oakland increased their ability to manage their time, speak in public, present information, facilitate meetings, work in groups, resolve conflicts, and think critically. They also developed greater self-confidence and community awareness as well as a sense of civic responsibility and a stronger belief in their ability to make needed changes in their community. Several students said they had never reflected on what was happening in their neighborhoods and schools before, nor had they been introduced to a political framework that would help them make sense of the world around them.



YELL youth participants, Jenny, Monica and Cindy, attending the California for Justice Conference 2002.

*I think that [YELL] gives people better perspectives. We learned about racism and pollution and things like that, stuff that I didn't really know about. I learn about different types of research. I learned how to speak in front of large groups of people. Teamwork, undoubtedly. In YELL I learned how to stand up for what's right.*

Over time, the participants expressed a strong sense of ownership of the project, pride in their involvement, and responsibility for meeting goals. They developed relationships with the adult staff that they describe as supportive and unlike those they had with other adults in their community. YELL youth also reported that they have more of a voice in the program than they have at school.

Youth in the YELL project also made a positive difference in the community around them—both at school and in the neighborhood. Although they faced challenges in effecting specific policy changes, they created a platform for long-term advocacy. Through presentations to and involvement in decision-making bodies, students also broke down adults' stereotypes of youth as disengaged troublemakers. These changed adult attitudes have led to greater youth voice in other important settings. For example, key school administrators at the school have begun to embrace their views as a significant element of the school reform process. After hearing a presentation from the YELL students, the high school's Leadership Team of teachers, administrators, and support staff created two youth seats to ensure student representation. Two YELL participants joined the board of directors planning a new health center at the school. YELL students helped represent the school at a statewide conference. And, in recognition of their additional responsibilities in the program, the principal agreed to provide youth mentors with academic credit in leadership. Similar changes occurred in the larger community where, for example, a YELL participant was elected to the board of the local neighborhood improvement initiative. In creating more opportunities for youth to contribute to policies that affect their lives, YELL participants laid the groundwork for effective integration of youth perspective into community decisions.

*I think 'helping the community' is more important [than other reasons for joining YELL]. Because I want to live to see 20. Because if it's like everything was deadened and it's like no people, then how am I going to survive?*

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## Challenges to Program Effectiveness and Stability

While the YELL program in West Oakland achieved important benefits for participants and their community, these outcomes were hard won. Inadequate resources in the school, household instability, and the contested terrain of an inner-city neighborhood posed ongoing threats to the program's operation and its ability to accomplish its goals. The environment penetrated every aspect of the project. Absenteeism, failing grades, student violence, and family mobility created challenges to the project's coherence and stability. Although some of these challenges apply to all youth development programs, the effects of poverty dramatically exacerbate them.

The project in West Oakland was the second YELL project developed by the Gardner Center; the first was created in Redwood City, a low-income community. It was understood at the outset that future projects would be modified to address community context, addressing factors such as level of diversity, the age of the participants, and their socioeconomic background. Still, the volatility of many of the West Oakland students' lives necessitated continual adjustment and reevaluation of the curriculum by program staff.

### Barriers to participation

Consistent participation was a particular problem. For example, only eight students in the first cohort of sixteen youth researchers met the expected yearlong commitment. Several left because the program was not what they had anticipated. But more troubling were the students forced to leave for reasons unrelated to the project, such as their arrest or their family's eviction. Barriers to full participation came from multiple areas of the youths' lives, from their school environment to their families' background.

*Community instability.* Students in West Oakland must navigate the many conditions associated with an economically depressed community. Gentrification, violence, crime, high unemployment, growing eviction rates, and increased exposure to health risks create instability for families and barriers to students' consistent participation. For example, one student who wanted to participate in YELL, was affected by both gentrification and the perceived threat of violence or crime. Her family moved to a neighboring city because they lost their apartment to new owners and could not afford rising rents in Oakland. She might have commuted to the after-school YELL program, but her parents were afraid of her taking the bus after dark. Even a youth staff member was affected. He was forced to leave the program at midyear because his family was homeless and forced to move in with a relative in another city.<sup>6</sup>

*Difficulty in connecting with families.* Just as parental involvement is essential to children's school success, it turned out to be critical to ongoing participation in the YELL program. West

Oakland families have diverse language needs and cultural norms that impede communication with others in their children's lives. Partly because program staff members were fluent in only two of the five languages that parents spoke, many parents did not understand the nature of the program. Some considered participation to be purely social or even contrary to success in school. As a result, they did not encourage their children's consistent involvement in the program and were not sensitive to schedule conflicts.

*Lack of academic engagement.* At the school where YELL is located, academic disengagement is the norm. Crises, from funding fallouts to racially motivated violence, are the order of the day at the school, and staff must focus most resources and energy on meeting basic student needs, leaving less support and fewer opportunities for motivated students. As a result of Oakland Unified School District's open enrollment policy, many youth in West Oakland elect to attend other high schools, and students are often at the school by default, not because they want to be. In YELL's survey of students and teachers, student behavior was named as the biggest problem at the school.<sup>7</sup> As one student said, "I don't like the attitudes of the students here, the negativity. They come to class, but they come to class to disrupt. They don't really let you get your education."

The school has historically suffered from high truancy, and some students seem to feel they are accomplishing something just by showing up. The YELL participants carried these habits into YELL. In its first year, YELL required participants to do homework assignments related to their community research project. When most of them failed to complete assignments at home, these students became frustrated by the punitive consequences that followed, while others lost their motivation. This resulted in increased absenteeism and decreased morale within the group that remained.

Poor class attendance and the weak grades that follow in school also have an impact on students' ability to participate in extracurricular activities. The parents of several YELL participants forbade involvement in YELL as punishment for unsatisfactory report cards. These students, who are already deeply pessimistic about their academic future, feel their participation in the program is a step forward on a new path. When their participation is taken away as a punishment, some have simply given up and become engulfed by life outside the school and the program.

*Violence.* Ongoing exposure to violence in the school and the community caused some students to feel unsafe staying after school for YELL meetings. When surveyed, only 16 percent of YELL participants said most people feel safe in the community, and just 40 percent of the entire student body said it was true that the school was safe. Several YELL participants have been involved in physical fights resulting in suspension or police action. For

example, one participant was physically threatened by a student outside the program and stabbed him in defense. Others have also been provoked into conflicts. Many of these students were not the aggressors, nor had they been directly involved in such situations in the past. However, conflicts are difficult to walk away from in an environment where demonstrating one's fighting skills can mean survival. These incidents contradict program ideals, cause youth to miss YELL sessions and suffer academically, and affect their attitudes toward school and the community.

**Money and competing responsibilities.** Because of their families' economic realities, many students are burdened with extra responsibilities and demands for their time after school. Some students need to care for siblings or elderly relatives. Others must help support family expenses. Although helping the community was among the most important reasons students gave for joining the project, equally important was the prospect of earning money and learning job skills. Almost half the students who left YELL in the first year did so because they needed to earn more money.

### **Barriers to implementing principles of youth empowerment**

The nature of youth empowerment faces two additional obstacles in communities like West Oakland. The first is concerned with transforming youth-adult power relationships and the second with turning young people's ideas into community-wide action.

**Transforming power relationships.** YELL program staff hoped to facilitate an independent-inquiry process led by the students themselves. Staff would create learning opportunities but would remain neutral as the participants decided on the project's direction. In the ideal scenario, the traditional role of youth as subordinate to adult would be reversed, or at least subsumed, by new power arrangements. But the youth-empowerment process proved more complex than a simple transfer of power from adult to youth. Habits and notions of power relationships between youth and adults are deeply ingrained, especially in high-poverty communities where young people believe they have little control over their own destiny. As one student explained:

*You know, nobody ever told [young people in West Oakland] that they could succeed. Nobody ever told them that they'll be somebody. So what's the point of me wanting to change? So if somebody was to come to me and say, 'Do you know you can succeed?' And I'm looking like 'What are you?!' Like my parents, they didn't finish high school. My grandparents, they didn't have any education. The people around me, like they're doing low stuff like working at corner stores or K-Mart or something like that. They have no real jobs of their own. Nobody I know owns a business. You know what I'm saying?*

Although staff outlined the roles the young participants were expected to take on in YELL, the students found them unfamiliar

*Many of those people that are getting killed are youth and it's just a shame because it's they could have so much of a better life but they don't realize it because of the life they have. And because of the environment that they are in. Because that's all they know.*

and often uncomfortable. For example, during the second meeting of the school year, the students were led through a process in which they would determine the ground rules for their participation and the consequences that should be applied when broken. At the end, one student said, "I think y'all should make the rules," deferring to the adults as the authorities on such matters.

**Transforming youth agenda into community change.** In order for the participants in YELL to make real changes in their communities, they must have an impact on systems controlled by adults. However, in neighborhoods like West Oakland, it is often not only youth who feel powerless, but adults as well. Schools and other social services are a part of bureaucracies where decision-making is centralized and power rests with those holding the purse, often far from the neighborhood. Understandably, it can be difficult for adults to share what little power they have. Although adults invited YELL participants to sit at the decision-making table, they were not ready for the young people to influence policy or practice in a substantive way. One student left his position on a local board because he did not feel that his voice was valued.

Additionally, the systems in the community were not always stable enough to respond to their demands. Even with good information about youth's needs and wants, adult allies in positions of power were not necessarily able to make meaningful changes. Particularly in neighborhoods with a long history of poverty, long-term funding is rarely secure, the turnover rate of adult leaders is high, and administrations often change from year to year. While youth voice can actually make the work of many adults easier, the long-term vision and planning it requires is not always supported by funding structures.

### **Sharing What Works: Implications for Program Design in High-Poverty, Urban Settings**

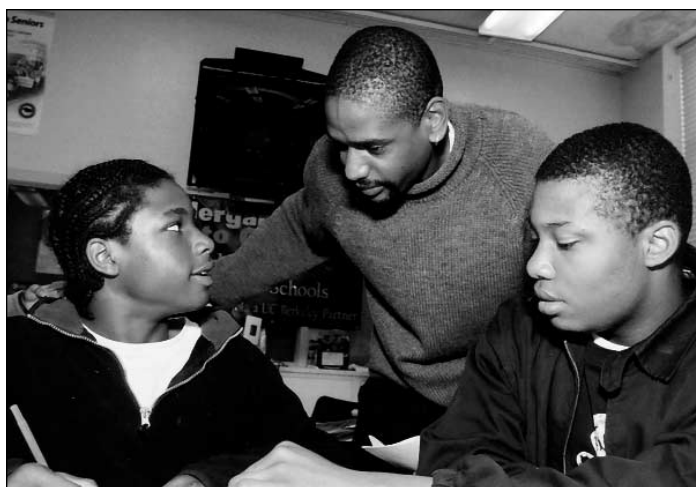
Our efforts in West Oakland showed the general principles of youth empowerment to be sound, but we learned that program implementation at scale needs constant adjustment according to context. We conclude that youth-led research programs in urban,

high-poverty settings are more likely to succeed if they incorporate the following elements: a youth-led design, stipends, academic support, a culturally diverse staff, adults trained to partner with youth, and, most importantly, flexibility on the part of funders and practitioners.

**Youth-led design.** In YELL, youth are the ultimate decision makers from the direction of their project to the ground rules that dictate their participation. Recognizing this, they have increased buy-in. We found that youth-led design is critical in a community like West Oakland, where academic disengagement is prevalent and similarities with a traditional classroom arrangement are to be avoided. Furthermore, given the participants' sense of powerlessness in other areas of their lives, the youth-led nature of a program can give a sense of control that has a unique draw in communities like this one. As the year went on, students in YELL learned to appreciate their ability to determine their own course. In fact, when we interviewed them about their experiences in the program, they often talked about how rarely they had the opportunity to participate in decision making outside YELL and how the experience gave them a greater sense of agency over other areas of their lives.

**Stipends.** Many youth development projects use stipends as rewards for participating and sticking with the program. With monthly stipends, students in need of a part-time wage-earning job can participate in YELL. Many of the students in YELL use at least part of their income to support their families or to pay for basic items such as clothing, school supplies, and bus fare. Most of the students who left the YELL project in its first year did so because they needed more money.

But YELL uses stipends as more than just incentives. Given the high unemployment rate in Oakland it is essential that youth have



*Adult facilitator was consulting YELL youth participants, Anthony and Jamaal, who were making a documentary.*

an opportunity to earn money through a job that builds their skills, provides career-oriented work experience and helps them get into college or work outside of the low-wage service industry.<sup>8</sup> Offering stipends demonstrates that working for community change is a viable career, not just an extracurricular endeavor. Paying youth for their time is part of that message. This is especially important in low-income communities of color where preparation for community leadership positions is limited. In students' reflections about their experience with YELL, several said they applied to the program because they needed a job but left with a new commitment to neighborhood improvement and social change.

Although stipends complicate the youth-empowerment process, they are useful tools to encourage and sustain youth involvement. We discovered some keys in successfully using stipends.

- Create ground rules regarding participation in the project.
- Determine how decisions about the direction of the project will be made.
- Clarify who will implement the consequences of violating ground rules.

If participants lead and gain ownership over the first two of these areas, adults can effectively support and discipline them without impeding the empowerment process.

**Academic support.** Finding that low grades and truancy limited participation, YELL staff initiated after-school study groups to help participants improve their grades and give them a fun, peer-advised environment to work on homework. Adult facilitators also met with them formally once a semester to talk about their progress at school, their teachers' feedback, and ways staff could be more supportive. Adult staff had follow-up conversations about these topics regularly. These efforts helped keep students in school and in the project.

Our experience supported other research suggesting that youth-development programs have a "cascade effect" on grades—that is, that positive relationships, improved work and study habits, and increased attendance resulting from after-school programs boost grades.<sup>9</sup> We also found that academic support was essential within the culture of disengagement that seemed to engulf the young people we served, no matter how motivated they were when they entered high school.<sup>10</sup> Focusing on improving academics as a stepping-stone to complete participation in YELL harnessed the cascade effect and kept them in the program.

**Culturally diverse staff and adult allies.** Positive relationships with adults is the most critical factor in successful youth development. But, when staff and youth have very different backgrounds, it can be difficult to develop and maintain close relationships. Suspicion of outsiders runs high in communities like West Oakland, and,



*The YELL project director was finalizing focus group questions with Tashika, a YELL youth researcher.*

although YELL staff was well acquainted with the social, political and economic factors impacting the community, it became clear that adult mentors who actually share the background of the participants are needed. Young people in West Oakland rarely see people like themselves in control of community change. Adults who share their background inspire optimism and motivate the participants to meet project-related goals. While these lessons hold true for any youth development program, they are even more pressing in communities where young people feel disconnected from, and hostile toward, the people and institutions that are meant to serve them.

Cultural diversity in program staff is also relevant when communicating with family members who do not speak English. In West Oakland, staff worked to overcome language barriers by translating critical materials for parents, but relationships beyond the basic transfer of information were prevented due to staff's lack of fluency. In culturally sensitive settings, reaching out to parents face-to-face increases adult trust in the program, which in turn translates into higher retention rates. This is even more important in low-income neighborhoods in transition, where many immigrant families do not feel welcome and are intimidated, or even fearful, of students and staff at their children's school.<sup>11</sup> In these situations, where parents are suspicious that school-related activities do not reflect their cultural values, program staff have to go the extra mile to connect to non-English speaking families.

**Cultivating adult cooperation.** In a youth project that follows a "pure" empowerment model, young people may be encouraged to consider only the points of view of their peers and fight for their cause strictly from the outside of institutions controlled by adults. However, in West Oakland we found that many of what the participants called our most significant accomplishments were facilitated by the relationships they developed with adults in power. For example, without the support of the principal, the students would

not have been able to distribute surveys to the whole school or, later, become a part of the Leadership Team. The young researchers recognized that in order for their data to be acted upon, there needed to be an audience for their information, a group of adults who would be willing to join them in using the YELL research to influence decision makers.

Still, not all of the adults who have been open to working collaboratively with YELL are aware of or committed to principles of youth development. We found that most adults need training in how to support youth voice in a meaningful way. The approach to community youth development cannot focus solely on building the skills of young people, it must also address the readiness of adults to embrace new leadership. For example, to address the need for adult allies in the school, a Gardner Center staff member has held youth development trainings for school staff during professional development days, Leadership Team meetings and their annual retreat. Although we did not find all of the support we had hoped for in making policy changes, the positive experiences we had with some school and community leaders taught us that effective youth-adult partnerships are possible, but they take a lot of work and time, mostly on the part of the adult staff.

Youth empowerment programs have to make careful choices about the most effective ways to approach adults in different positions of power. We found that the fact we worked directly with the youth was what allowed YELL staff to broker relationships that could lead to greater youth voice. As participants continued in a second year to tackle community and school concerns, the Gardner Center as a whole gained credibility as a community partner that can provide training to adults. The willingness of the Center to engage youth is appreciated by school and community members who recognize the consequences of failing and appreciate the necessary investments made to be effective. School staff and community leaders have told us that university partners too often step back when it is time to move from "showing up" to "doing." As they have observed our dedication to the youth and the neighborhood, and not just to our own organization, they have been more willing to hear our message of youth development and open doors for the involvement of young people.

**Flexibility.** The staff, structure and source of funding for youth empowerment programs must be flexible in order to address the challenges that arise when working in communities like West Oakland. Everyone involved must expect change in program design and even embrace that reality. In the YELL project, we had to adjust many aspects of our work the first year in order to be more successful the second. For example, we shifted from a research-based model to one that focused on advocacy. We put an even greater emphasis on project-based learning. We limited the number of take-home assignments participants were given and instead added one more meeting a week. We are recruiting tutors

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for the study groups and requiring some students to submit school attendance reports to staff. We are open to the possibility of accepting new students throughout the year. In general, we are building from what we learn are strengths. Like scientists, practitioners need time to understand the right mixture of program elements in a new context.

## A Final Note

We have learned that the designation “low-income” youth doesn’t make important distinctions between degree and kind of poverty, which we’ve found to matter in both the benefits of a program like YELL and the challenges we faced in implementing it. It is not possible to simply move a program from a low-income setting to a high-poverty neighborhood like West Oakland. Factors specific to the community must be weighed into the program design and evaluation measures. Both must take into account the particular challenges that arise when working with youth who live in concentrated poverty and endure high mobility rates, limited educational experiences, detachment from community institutions, regular encounters with violence, and unique family needs. We’ve found that an effective process for both project development and assessment in communities like West Oakland is only possible when the indicators for a program’s success are long-term and are based on youth-development outcomes instead of short-term, narrow measures such as test scores or numbers of youth served.

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this paper, we define empowerment to mean: *The processes in which youth develop the skills, confidence and power to make decisions within a youth development project and the community within which the project is situated. This progression also involves securing access to relevant sets of instruction, tools and resources with the support of adult allies.* A key principle in youth empowerment projects is to encourage youth voice—involving youth in the decisions that affect them—and to be youth centered, that is, adults working in these projects must build on the skills, talents, strengths and interests of youth throughout the entire group process. Other models of youth empowerment programs include Youth Together, SOUL, Youth on Board and the Youth Force Coalition.

<sup>2</sup>In 1990, more than 60% of children living in five of the nine census tracts representing the community were living in poverty, with an average of 30% or more in other census tracts. In December 1999, about 23.5% of West Oakland residents were participating in either CalWORKs or Medi-Cal only. This compares to about 9.4% county-wide. According to Alameda County Public Health data, for adults aged 25 to 44, the two leading causes of death were AIDS and homicide, and homicide (39%) was the leading cause of death for men in the community. The high school where YELL is based mirrors the concentrated poverty and segregation of the community. Out of the 775 students that attend, 47% receive free lunch, the highest percentage in the district. According to District records, 87.8% of the youth live in families that participate in the CalWORKs program. 80% of the student body is African-American, 8% Asian, 11% Latino and 1% White. The high school in West Oakland has a rank of 1 out of 10 on the 2001 Academic Performance Index (API), based on SAT-9 test scores (1 being the lowest ranking).

<sup>3</sup>The Community Youth Researchers surveyed over 400 students, 50 staff members and almost 100 community members, practically meeting the targets they had laid out for themselves. They held two focus groups around issues of school reform, with groups of 6-10 students in each. With this information they produced a documentary movie about school safety and cleanliness, and a report addressing the main problems at the school.

<sup>4</sup>This quote and those that follow are from interviews with West Oakland YELL Participants, conducted by the Gardner Center’s researchers. The quotes have been edited for readability.

<sup>5</sup>Based on the California Standards Test, only 4 percent of the student body is proficient in English language arts. In SAT-9 testing, 87 percent of the students are below the national average in math, and 95 percent are below the national average in reading. Students at this school had lower scores than any other school in the district. California Dept. of Education, 2002.

<sup>6</sup>The mobility rate of students at this school is three times the state average. California Dept. of Education.

<sup>7</sup>24 percent of students and 39 percent of staff named student behavior as the biggest problem. The second largest problem named by students was drugs on campus, and staff said hall walking and “ditching.”

<sup>8</sup>In 1999, approximately 5.5 percent of Oakland residents age 16 or older were unemployed and looking for work. This is compared to 3.4 percent in Alameda County as a whole. California Department of Finance.

<sup>9</sup>The Forum for Youth Investment (2002). *Policy Commentary #1: Out-of-School Research Meets After-School Policy*. Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment. Available online at [www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/comment/ostpc1.pdf](http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/comment/ostpc1.pdf)

<sup>10</sup>The four-year dropout rate is 46.2 percent. Oakland Unified School District. Almost half of the adults in the community have not graduated from high school and only 8 percent have gone to college. Census Data, 2000.

<sup>11</sup>For example, according to 2000 census data, the West Oakland Latino population grew 85 percent from 1990 to 2000 to 3,098. These changing demographics have caused tension between longtime African-American residents and immigrant families.

For more information about the Gardner Center or the YELL Project, please visit our website at <http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu>

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The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities was founded upon the values, principles and vision of John Gardner—a strong belief in society’s potential and in the potential of individuals as well as institutions; a commitment to renewal; and the optimism to think in possibilities, rather than obstacles.

*John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities  
520 Galvez Mall, 4th Floor  
Stanford, CA 94305-3084*

*Tel: 650.723.1137*

*Fax: 650.736.2296*

*<http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu>*