



JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER  
for Youth and Their Communities

**youth**

# developments

*Issues and Analyses in Youth Policy*

**A MODEL FOR FOSTERING  
YOUTH LEADERSHIP:  
THE YOUTH ENGAGED IN  
LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING  
PROGRAM (YELL)**

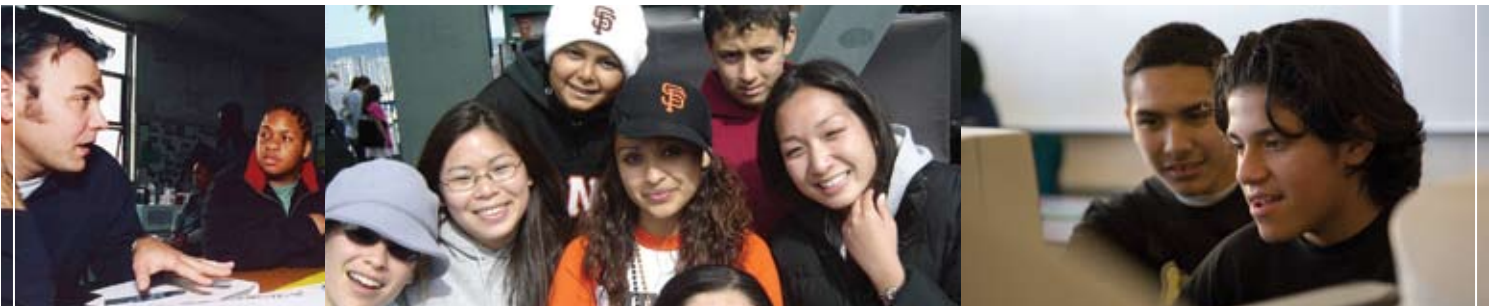
By Karen Strobel and Ingrid Nelson



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**YOUTH LEADERSHIP IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED** as a positive, desired youth development outcome. Despite its popularity and the proliferation of leadership programs across the country, practice seems to be outpacing research and theory. This issue of *Youth Developments* takes a close look at one youth leadership program, Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL), offering a look at youth leadership development that is informed by six years of research and practice. These efforts identify three skill sets as a foundation for authentic youth leadership: (1) communication, (2) analytic thinking, and (3) positive involvement in the community. With YELL as the model, we describe ways to foster competence in each of the three areas. In addition, we offer examples of the range of skills that youth leaders can develop within one program.

This analysis of the YELL program draws on observations, interviews and surveys as well as documents written by YELL directors such as their program updates, annual reports funding proposals and foundation reports.



## YOUTH ENGAGED IN LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING (YELL)

Created in the fall of 2000, YELL was launched as the inaugural project of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC). Based at Kennedy Middle School in Redwood City, California and at McClymonds Educational Complex in West Oakland, California, YELL has evolved into a unique youth development program providing young people with training and experiences in leadership and civic action.

In YELL, cohorts of 15 to 20 participants ages 12-18 are trained to use research techniques to study an issue of concern to them and to use their findings to formulate policy recommendations and action plans. They share their findings and recommendations through formal presentations to relevant stakeholders including school faculty, city council members and journalists. Youth also lead workshops and trainings for other young leaders and adult practitioners.

Over the past six years, YELL participants have taken on a wide range of topics affecting young people in their schools and communities. YELL campaigns have targeted issues such as improving the community for youth, providing bus passes and transportation for students, combating bullying at school, gang issues, the dress code, school safety and negative stereotypes.

YELL started as a small program serving about 20 students in Redwood City and West Oakland. By the 2005/06 school year, Redwood City YELL was serving 65 students per year and West Oakland YELL had 100 students.



EXHIBIT 1: Characteristics of YELL Participants, 2000-2006

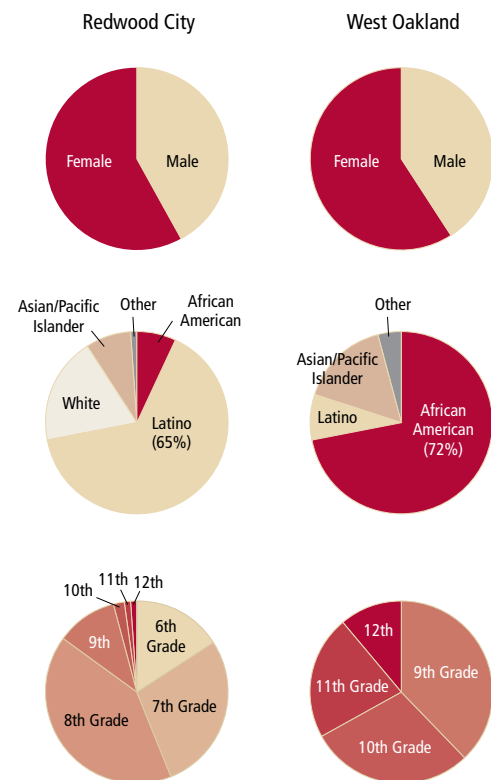


Exhibit 1 shows the characteristics of youth participants in Redwood City and West Oakland. The two sites served students with ethnicities that represent their broader communities — Redwood City included mostly Latino students (65%); West Oakland served mostly African American students (72%). At Kennedy Middle School in Redwood City, YELL served primarily middle school students, while youth from each cohort remained involved throughout their high school years as well. At McClymonds in West Oakland, YELL focused more on high school students.



#### A STORY OF ONE YOUNG LEADER...

At thirteen years old, **Amalia** had faced the death of her mother, and was living on the edges of poverty and gang involvement. She was disinterested in school and had little academic or personal ambition.

Referred by a school staff member, Amalia joined Redwood City's YELL program in her eighth grade year. In YELL, Amalia learned social science research methods, and applied what she learned to find out about the needs of youth in her community. The work that Amalia and her fellow students did was presented to the City Council and the School Board. Their findings and recommendations contributed to the development of a family center at their school, served to expand school-based services for youth, challenged agency leaders to think about how to strengthen these same systems at other schools, and led the City Manager to include Amalia and other YELL students in a series of community dialogues with over 100 adults from different parts of the city.

Throughout high school, Amalia served as a mentor to new YELL participants — helping to facilitate YELL sessions, supporting younger students, leading retreats, and advising staff on program design and expansion. Amalia's work with YELL also improved the program for other youth, and pushed staff to improve and expand their work.

In addition to her work with YELL, Amalia went on to volunteer as an elementary school reading tutor, to present workshops at national conferences focused on Youth Development, and co-founded "Latinas en Acción," a support group for young Latinas. By the time Amalia graduated from high school, she had received a prestigious Leadership Award, including a \$5,000 college scholarship honoring high school seniors with "extraordinary histories of selfless volunteer activism." Amalia is now an active student at a nearby state college.

Reflecting back, Amalia describes YELL as "life changing": having provided her with leadership skills, adult support, and learning experiences that would allow her to share her perspectives on community issues, pursue her education, support younger youth to make healthy decisions, and develop positive social relationships.

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*Amalia describes YELL as "life changing": having provided her with leadership skills, adult support, and learning experiences*

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## YELL Fosters Communication Skills by Valuing Young People’s Ideas and Opinions

Communication is one of the necessary competencies for any leader, particularly youth leaders. YELL promotes communication skills through activities in which participants are encouraged to serve as formal facilitators, to work collaboratively with adults and peers, and to present analyses and recommendations in public forums. In helping youth prepare for these roles, staff in both communities encouraged participants to speak their minds. Additionally, staff tried to avoid telling the participants exactly what to do, instead offering support while still positioning the youth as leaders. Youth in both communities consistently commented on the dynamic between youth and adults as a distinguishing feature of the YELL context. Often participants contrasted adults in YELL to teachers at their



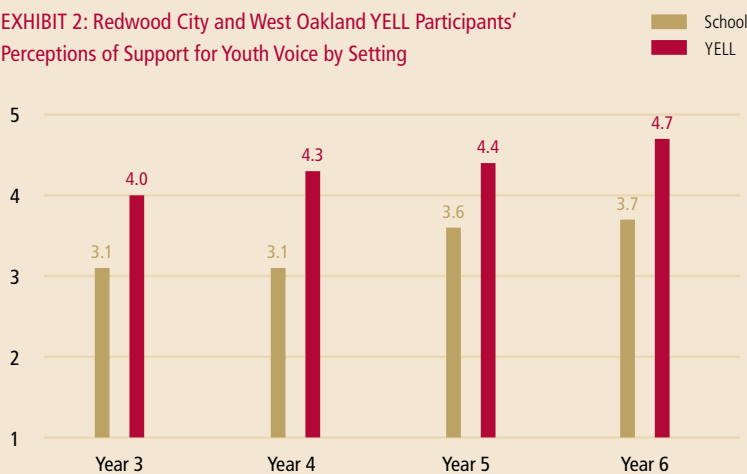
school and used terms such as “mentor,” “partner,” “friend,” and “family member” to describe their relationships. As one Redwood City youth explained, adults respected youth’s ownership of the work:

*She gives us a lot of feedback. If she thinks that it’s not a great idea she won’t come straight out and say “that’s not a good idea, change it.” She gives you simple answers — like, “what do you think would make this better?”...that helps us because we find our mistakes for ourselves.*

Our survey data show that YELL is consistently rated as a place where young people’s opinions matter, their views are respected and they have choices. This notion of YELL as a program that supports “youth voice” is best illustrated when contrasted with participants’ answers to questions about support for youth voice in their school classrooms. Exhibit 2 contrasts participants’ strong sense of support for voice and autonomy in YELL with their sense of support for their own voice in school.

At the same time, youth also reflected on their improved communication skills. Ninety percent of participating youth across both communities credited YELL with their newfound comfort in sharing ideas, voicing opinions, and speaking comfortably in large groups.

**EXHIBIT 2: Redwood City and West Oakland YELL Participants’ Perceptions of Support for Youth Voice by Setting**



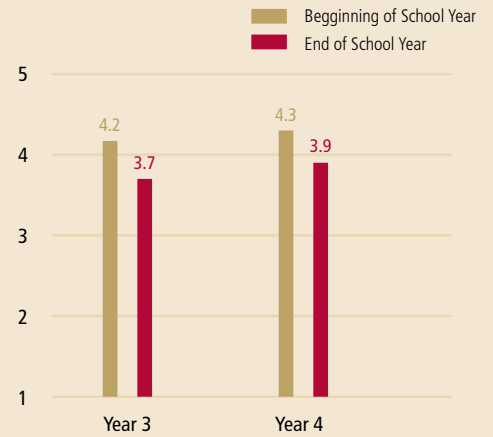
Survey Questions Asking: “Does the Setting Offer Support for Youth Voice?” (5 is highest level of agreement)

## YELL Promotes Analytic Thinking Through a Research-Based Approach to Social Change

In YELL, participants are asked to identify problems in their schools and communities and to analyze the root causes of those issues. YELL participants learn how to conduct interviews, take field notes, develop surveys, create video documentaries and analyze their data. Even after just one year practicing these skills, YELL participants gain a more sophisticated understanding of the problems facing their communities. For example, youth who once thought that gang violence was caused by “youth who wanted to be bad,” learned to think analytically about the role of family support, school experiences, economic conditions, and the media. By developing data collection tools and analyzing their survey and interview data, YELL participants developed the capacity to understand the complex interactions between individual actions and social conditions.



**EXHIBIT 3: Redwood City and West Oakland YELL Participants' Confidence in Their Ability to Effect Change**



Survey Questions Asking: “Do Youth Believe They Can Effect Change?”  
 (5 is highest level of agreement)

Youth also began to think more analytically about their own role in the social change process. They developed more sophisticated and realistic ideas about what they could personally accomplish. When they first joined YELL, participants in both Redwood City and West Oakland possessed an inflated estimation of their ability to effect change in their communities. As seen in Exhibit 3, over the course of one year of participation, youth felt less confident in this regard. Importantly, this drop in confidence was a reflection of participants’ more realistic notions of the social change process. As we learned through our interviews with the youth, they enthusiastically maintained their commitment to the program and to the process of improving their communities. Through YELL, young people learned that social change takes time and it is difficult to see the effects of their work in their communities. However, they also began to see the benefits of collective action — that voices are more powerful as a group. YELL participants also learned to use research evidence as a valuable tool to communicate about social issues.

## YELL Creates Multiple Opportunities for Positive Community Involvement

**T**hrough YELL, young people are afforded opportunities to become involved in multiple communities: their own YELL cohort, the program as a whole that includes other grades, their schools, their neighborhoods, and in the city or county more broadly. Upon completion of their first year in the program, youth transition from their role as YELL researchers to become YELL mentors. As mentors, youth facilitate discussions, offer insights based on their experiences in the program, and help support the new cohort of researchers. Mentors also help the program staff to build a cohesive group culture in which leadership is distributed and collective efforts take center stage. YELL researchers and mentors have the option of becoming YELL ambassadors by participating on panels or helping to plan and lead workshops at local and national conferences. As mentors and ambassadors, youth serve as resources, sharing their expertise and knowledge with other students and adults.

YELL's program structure allows participants to identify with their own preferred approach to community involvement, which we describe as: advocate, activist and educator. An advocate is distinguished by his or her commitment to a particular issue such as school safety or equity in education. An activist is more interested in engaging in a range of change efforts with the goal of contributing to positive reform. An educator focuses on empowering others to make a change or feel that they could make a difference. Youth either align themselves with one approach throughout the course of their participation in YELL or try out different approaches as they develop within the program. YELL staff respected and promoted each of these community involvement approaches, recognizing that for youth to gain a powerful voice, they must be able to speak about social change in ways that matter most to them.



### APPROACHES TO POSITIVE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

#### Advocate (dedicated to a specific cause)

*"[I'm in] a group on campus where all the different diversity groups come together and have meetings...and... We just want to make people more aware [of multicultural issues]."*

#### Activist (dedicated to the process of making changes)

*"I think we could bring in more issues to concentrate on so that we could find a way to resolve the issues... like once a week find a new issue to resolve, to figure out what we can do to help resolve this issue, or like every day bring up a new issue."*

#### Educator (dedicated to youth empowerment)

*"I like the whole idea of taking someone under your wing and then teaching them your skills and helping them reach their goal."*



In both communities, YELL provided a forum to increase awareness about the importance of youth input in school and community decision making. Because of YELL, new opportunities for youth leadership were created in both the school and community. For example, in Redwood City, YELL participants joined the Climate Committee and Leadership Team at their school, attended meetings with City Council members and participated in the city's Teen Advisory Board. In West Oakland, youth also joined the Leadership Team at their school, created a Youth Leadership Council, led professional development workshops for the school's faculty, served on the board planning the school's new health center and participated in the district's all city council.

## Lessons Learned about Fostering Youth Leadership



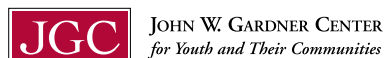
Understanding and promoting leadership development requires skill building within three core areas: (1) communication skills, (2) analytic thinking, and (3) positive involvement in the community. However, alone, none of these skills or competencies should be equated with leadership. For example, social action alone is not sufficient if the youth's capacity for analysis is missing or if his or her skills of communication and respectful social interaction are lacking. Strong communication skills require knowledge of issues. Yet, being analytical can lead to frustration unless youth have outlets to discuss and debate as well as opportunities to work towards addressing those issues. It is important for both researchers and practitioners to be aware of the interplay between communication and interpersonal skills, analytic thinking and positive com-

munity involvement. Our experience suggests that these core leadership skills should not be developed or applied in isolation of one another.

The YELL program serves as a model of the meaningful ways in which young people from diverse backgrounds can contribute to their youth organizations, schools and communities. To replicate this model and extend its reach, more opportunities for youth leadership are necessary. Specifically, across all settings in which youth participate, youth should be viewed as having valid ideas and as valuable stakeholders who have the potential to maintain a long-term commitment. By embedding more opportunities for meaningful youth involvement within the community, more youth will have the chance to develop their leadership potential, while the community as a whole will become better equipped to address the needs of its youth. ■

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For more information about the YELL program and its curriculum please visit the John W. Gardner Center website at <http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/>



JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER  
*for Youth and Their Communities*

505 Lasuen Mall, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-3083

Tel: (650) 723-1137 E-mail: [gardnercenter@lista.stanford.edu](mailto:gardnercenter@lista.stanford.edu) Website: <http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu>