

Youth Organizing for Educational CHANGE



By Anderson Williams, Deniece Ferguson and Nicole Yohalem

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“Why don’t they organize?”

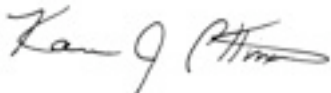
This was the question posed more than a decade ago by incredulous students in Brazil who shared stories of the efforts that they, their families and their communities undertook to support their educations. Living in a country where education is free – if youths can supply their own books, uniforms and transportation – they could not believe that in some U.S. cities, half of young people walk away from a truly free education. For these Brazilian students, rights and responsibilities were two sides of the same coin. They were shocked that American students, given the right to a good education, do not actively exercise and, if necessary, fight for that right.

“They often don’t know that they can,” was my answer. They think that their choice is to stay or to go, not to stay to create change. This is especially true in our most marginalized communities.

The seven profiles shared in this report are evidence that this thinking is changing. More specifically, they show what can happen when this thinking is actively challenged, and when adults intentionally create the expectation that young people have a responsibility to be not only informed educational consumers, but engaged change-makers.

Leaders know this is important; they just don’t know how to make it happen. The Forum has seen this repeatedly over the past two years, as we’ve helped selected communities work to ensure that all of their young people are ready for college, work and life. When our Ready by 21 Leadership Capacity Audit asks leaders to rate the importance of engaging young people, families and community members in solutions, they consistently say 4.5 out of 5. When the audit asks how well their communities do that, the answers average 2.5.

We know how to raise that score. As the momentum spreads for community leaders to organize for collective impact to improve youth outcomes, it is imperative that those leaders not only invite, but expect and support young people’s full participation as learners and leaders in expanding learning opportunities, both in school and out.



Karen Pitman, CEO, The Forum for Youth Investment

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Based on research done for the Community Center for Education Results, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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The Forum for Youth Investment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan action tank dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are ready by 21 – ready for college, work and life. Informed by rigorous research and practical experience, the Forum forges innovative ideas, strategies and partnerships to strengthen solutions for young people and those who care about them.

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Introduction

Youth-led efforts to create change in schools, school districts and education-related policies are increasing. Research suggests that youth organizing can have a positive impact on young people's skill development, sense of agency, and level of community involvement.² Combined with evidence of concrete changes in education policies and practices resulting from youth organizing, this suggests we should take seriously the role of students as active change agents in their own education, as well as in other policy arenas that affect their lives.

This report offers a glimpse into seven robust examples of this work. These cases reflect a range of models of youth organizing for education reform. Rather than describe particular campaigns or victories, we go behind the scenes to understand the structure and approach taken by each organization. While they share a common focus on youth organizing for education reform, each organization's particular approach, evolution over time and current structure is unique.

In developing these snapshots, we interviewed staff and some longstanding youth leaders at the following organizations:

- Californians for Justice, Oakland, Calif.
- Austin Voices for Education and Youth, Austin, Texas
- Southern Echo, Jackson, Miss.
- Oasis Center, Nashville, Tenn.
- Coleman Advocates, San Francisco, Calif.
- Youth United for Change, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE), Chicago, Ill.

By telling these stories we hope to make the idea of youth organizing for educational change more accessible. Groups that engage youth in other activities can learn something about the unique challenges of organizing. Adult-focused community organizing efforts or advocacy groups can learn about the power of involving youth. And youth organizers that have worked on other issues but have yet to tackle education head on can get inspired by the work of their peers.

Effective youth organizing is itself a learning process, as we hope these cases illustrate. Whether a particular effort achieved a major win, was looking to grow or was struggling to gain traction, each organization profiled here has continued to learn and adapt their work knowing that success can be fleeting and that organizational struggles are often an extension of the larger social struggle.

In this introduction we look across the seven cases and identify trends and lessons about purpose and approach, how the efforts evolved; the nature of each organization's relationships with schools; the education topics they have focused on and the types of supports that participating young people experience. The individual profiles that follow offer summaries of these impressive organizations and their work. We hope they inspire further reading and investigation.



² Shah, S. (2011). *Transformative Youth Leadership: Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing*. New York, NY: Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing.

Purpose and Focus

In its 2010 *Youth Organizing Field Scan*, the Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing (FCYO) noted that all effective youth organizing models emphasize three critical areas:

- Leadership Development: building leadership among those most affected by issues.
- Holistic Development: meeting the range of needs that young organizers bring.
- Campaign Development: skill building and political education.

The case studies discuss how each organization addresses these areas and describe the relative emphasis each organization places on these three important strands of the work. It is important to note

Youth-led participatory action research is at the heart of issue identification and campaign development for most of the organizations profiled here

that each of the organizations profiled provides support for leadership development and holistic development in the context of a social justice framework. In other words, effectively supporting young people involves helping them understand the systems of power and oppression that impact their lives directly. Leadership development pushes this level of analysis and empowers young people to take action; campaigns become the outlet for using their power toward systemic change. Taken together, these mutually reinforcing areas of focus push beyond resiliency and resistance and move young people toward collective identity and action. A consistent social justice and empowerment perspective in all interactions with youth is what links the three areas of focus together.

The emphasis placed on these different areas of development reflects to some extent each organization's primary purposes for pursuing youth organizing as a strategy. While some organizations frame their work as ultimately being about changing economic or social conditions and others talk about desired results in terms of youth empowerment, most are explicit in pointing to these as dual priorities (see Figure 1).

Leadership Development. These organizations are strikingly consistent in their approach to leadership development. First, leadership development happens in the context of concrete campaigns or issues the group is addressing. Contextualizing leadership development activities makes them instantly relevant and increases youth motivation to participate. All of the organizations also employ some type of youth-led research to engage youth, identify issues and understand problems. For some, this consists of small focus groups or local surveys; for others, research is an intensive campaign-building tool that includes partners and other collaborators in building their base and developing a deep understanding of the issues.

Finally, each organization has adult staff who facilitate or partner with youth on political education, offering a big picture context for young people's work on any specific issue. Those we talked with articulated how this big picture understanding of racial justice, cultural histories and the history of social justice movements, among other topics, has been critical. It has helped to sustain longer-term campaigns, create systemic change and build a commitment to civic engagement among participants. Southern Echo is unique in that beyond supporting its own youth organizers, a key part of its model is to provide formal leadership development and capacity building activities to other organizations across Mississippi.

Holistic Development. The organizations differ significantly in their approaches to holistic development, but not in their intention. Oasis Center in Nashville, with roots in crisis services and youth development, directly provides a range of supports to its youth organizers, from housing to counseling to college access. The citywide coalition VOYCE, on the other hand, relies heavily on its neighborhood councils across Chicago and positive relationships with local schools to ensure young people get the supports they need. At the state level, Californians for Justice faces unique challenges given its reach, but is no less committed to providing its young people with support. As it builds campaign networks, its adult organizers also work to build local relationships with trusted service providers to whom they can refer youth as needed.

Campaign Development. As mentioned previously, youth-led participatory action research is at the heart of issue identification and campaign development for most of the organizations profiled here. All of the organizations work with youth to identify issues (see Figure 1 for a list of education issues these organizations have focused on recently) and build campaigns while leveraging adult staff and partner support as advisors. Most of the organizations have experience with, school-level campaigns that ultimately link to district - and or state-level policy. Others started with a city or statewide focus and then worked their way back to school-level change.

Youth United for Change in Philadelphia, for example, started with individual school efforts and victories around problems like cleaner bathrooms, then leveraged these victories to address systemic issues. This also moved its work from single-year to multi-year campaigns, with its biggest victory to date taking eight years of dedicated work. Californians for Justice started as a statewide network and has used that platform to guide regional and local campaigns.

In terms of the focus of campaigns, common topics tackled by young organizers in recent years include school finance (5 of the organizations featured here), discipline policies (3), college access (3) and dropout prevention (2). A few have addressed topics more specific to teaching and learning, including small schools and assessment (see Figure 1 for more detail).

Figure 1

	Desired results for youth organizing	Education topics addressed
Californians for Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance educational justice • Improve social, economic and political conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education funding • College access • Pushout and dropout rates
Austin Voices for Education and Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth empowerment • Youth leadership development • Civic engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships between schools, community, families and students • Youth engagement in school and district-wide policy • Education funding
Southern Echo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy, sustainable, vibrant communities • Changes in policies and practices • Youth leadership development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education funding • Schoolhouse to jailhouse • Teacher pay
Oasis Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth empowerment • Influence and shape public education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College access • Student rights • School safety and youth violence
Coleman Advocates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth empowerment • Systemic change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College access through P-16 alignment • Improving assessment to address multiple learning styles • Education funding
Youth United for Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the quality of public education • Youth empowerment and leadership development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pushout and dropout rates • Small schools • Education funding • Zero tolerance policies
VOYCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education policy change at the school, city, state levels • Youth empowerment and skill development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer & student-staff relationships • Ending harsh discipline policies • Increasing college-going expectations and high-quality teaching and learning

Approach

Though their approaches differ, the constantly evolving nature of this work and of these models is a consistent theme across the organizations. Flexibility is critical in order to absorb and adapt to transitions in school leadership, manage uneven support across schools and communities, and address issues at the local, regional and state levels. The importance of partnerships was another consistent theme. In each organization, partnerships have been critical to build power, to support young people and to sustain campaigns.

Austin Voices, for example, focuses on building relationships with and capacity in parents and other adults in the community who have traditionally been excluded, in part due to language barriers. By focusing on this critical partnership, the organization has expanded its power and the power of its families to influence education issues.

When Southern Echo shifted to working on education policy (specifically school funding issues), it was the relationships it had built in the community and with the state legislature through its census and redistricting work that built local momentum and created access to power at the state level.

In each organization, partnerships have been critical to build power, to support young people and to sustain changes.

Californians for Justice (CFJ) works across the state through four regional offices. Different regions have different educational and political structures, different school reform histories, and different relationships with CFJ. To continue to build their work and power, CFJ works hard to understand this local landscape and adapt its strategies to be most effective in each region.

Oasis Center continues to create new partnerships and adapt old ones in light of having taken on youth organizing as a core strategy. People and even some partners are sometimes confused by or even opposed to its support of young people taking action on issues. So generating new partnerships for its youth organizing work, and being flexible with old partners have been critical to the organization's ability to build power to effect change.

VOYCE is a citywide coalition built upon the strength of local neighborhood councils and their relationships to schools. VOYCE helps to create a citywide policy agenda but builds its power through these local partnerships. The alignment of the local with the citywide work ensures that local youth experience gets translated to policy and that policy gets implemented in concrete ways in neighborhoods.

Coleman Advocates is intentional about identifying two types of partners and allies: strategic and tactical. Strategic partners are fully aligned with Coleman's work or with a given campaign. Tactical partners might simply have an interest in one particular campaign. This distinction clarifies the nature of each working relationship and keeps Coleman flexible with a broad audience for building its base of support.



Organizational Evolution

None of the organizations described here are structured in the same way or focused on the same issues as when they began this work. Each has adapted its work and its model over time and in different ways, from organizational to strategic to programmatic.

Austin Voices and Oasis Center have grown and adapted their work in part due to organizational mergers. Oasis Center added youth organizing to a broad portfolio of youth work by merging with a neighborhood-based youth organizing initiative, taking on the management of a statewide foster care advocacy council, and subsuming the youth-focused political education training component of a struggling nonprofit partner. Early in its development, Austin Voices joined forces with an emerging local education fund, thus adding a youth engagement focus to what might have been a more traditional education advocacy organization.

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At the strategic level, Coleman Advocates in San Francisco redirected its campaign development strategy from broad, unilateral campaigns that were staff-driven to more targeted and member-driven campaigns (after a significant campaign victory in 1991 that followed the latter model). This shift allowed Coleman Advocates to focus its campaigns specifically on issues facing African-American, Latino and Pacific Islander youth.

At the programmatic level, VOYCE launched its work with a year-long youth participatory action research project that helped young people in Chicago identify critical education issues and develop their policy agenda. As they moved forward, however, project leaders realized that the model that supported action research was not conducive to advancing local action. They adapted their work plan and meeting structure in order to engage local partners in supporting youth organizing around the VOYCE policy agenda.

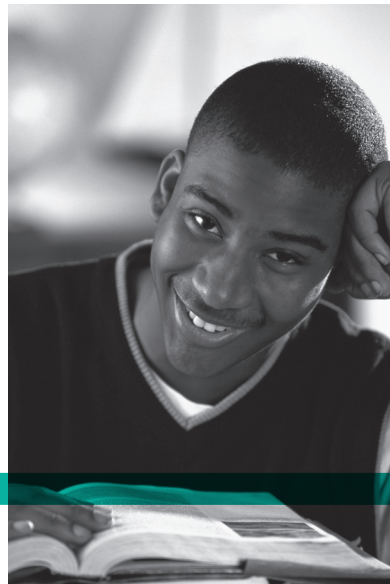
Relationships with Schools

Although all of these organizations emphasize the importance of community partnerships in building power and broadening coalitions, we have tried to specifically understand the nature of their relationships with schools, districts, administrators and other formal educational entities. Given that educational change is a goal for all of the organizations, they target this set of actors. As a result, relationships with schools and districts can be nuanced.

Two of the organizations, Austin Voices and Coleman Advocates, have formal relationships with schools. Austin Voices has established its youth-led research training as a for-credit Social Studies course in three high schools, and Coleman Advocates has memos of understanding (MOUs) with seven schools that support its Youth Making a Change program.

For organizations like Californians for Justice and Oasis Center, relationships vary across schools and districts and for CFJ, across regions. Without formal partnerships, relationships are often formed at the individual level, or at least locally and typically with less formal ties. They operate without MOUs but in some cases have longstanding partnerships with particular schools where they have become part of the fabric of the school. In the absence of formal relationships, flexibility is even more critical. These organizations take opportunities where they can and are vulnerable to changes in school and district leadership.

For 21 years Youth United for Change has navigated a constantly changing education landscape and has adapted to a revolving door of leadership and reform strategies during this time. Its relationships vary across the organization's chapters, but, interestingly, the organization has become a constant presence in the Philadelphia education story. Having outlasted most leaders and change efforts, it has become a sustained institution – and with that has come credibility.



Californians for Justice

Californians for Justice (CFJ) is a statewide grassroots organization working for racial justice by building the power of youth, communities of color, immigrants, low-income families and LGBTQ communities. Led by students, CFJ strives to advance educational justice and improve social, economic and political conditions. Since 2001, CFJ has focused its efforts for racial justice on youth organizing and has committed to education as the critical system where these issues are played out.

Evolution of the Work

Californians for Justice initially worked with a variety of constituencies, including youth, on fighting statewide ballot initiatives that were unjust and promoted racial inequities. In these early campaigns, however, CFJ was challenged by the realization that it was always in reaction mode, fighting against policy actions in process rather than promoting a proactive policy agenda. This coupled with the acknowledgment of education as a key arena for racial justice, led CFJ to begin shifting its strategy in 2001. The focus on education enabled CFJ to engage students more deeply and moved youth organizing to the core of its work. The new education focus also fostered a clearer connection between local school-based work, regional work and statewide policy efforts; aligning them built a stronger voice for positive change.

With this shift, CFJ developed infrastructure to support youth involvement at the local, regional and statewide levels. In each of its four regions, CFJ supports school-based chapters, with 20-25 student leaders each. Local chapters meet weekly and are supported by a teacher in the school. They focus on leadership development, local action research and the development of school-site campaigns. Local chapter efforts are predominantly youth-led and receive “hands off” support from CFJ staff.

At the regional level, CFJ supports Core Leadership Teams that focus more on district-level campaigns. Supported by CFJ adult organizers, student representatives from all high schools in a region meet weekly. In addition to leadership development activities, these students identify issues, develop their research, design their campaigns, define their solutions and meet with district-level leadership to educate and build their base of allies and supporters. Regional campaigns have focused on college access, dropout and pushout rates, discipline policies and access to healthy foods in schools.

At the state level, CFJ and its youth organizers have increased their scope and impact through their work with the Campaign for Quality Education alliance. Through the 100% Prepared for College and Career Campaign, they have focused efforts on equitable funding and the overhaul of the school finance system. A Statewide Strategy Team of two youth representatives from each CFJ region focuses on learning the statewide landscape and the legislative process, and employing strategies to affect state policy.

In all of CFJ’s work, adult organizers support youth organizing efforts by helping develop strategies, supporting the building of networks, providing training and research support, and helping youths access power in the adult-led systems and political processes. At the state level, this support also includes a partnership with Public Advocates, which helps CFJ and its youth track policy, understand local implications of policy, and identify and access key legislators.

Budget and Reach

CFJ’s annual budget of approximately \$890,000 is funded by private foundations and individual grassroots donations. CFJ supports 12 local school-based chapters of 20-25 student leaders each. At the regional level, teams of 15-30 youth focus on district-level campaigns. Two youth representatives from each of these regional teams sit on a statewide strategy team.

Key Features of CFJ

- Statewide organization with four regions: Oakland, San Jose, Long Beach and Fresno.
- Supports and aligns local, regional and statewide youth organizing efforts and issues.
- Adult organizers support teams of youth in terms of training, strategy and access power in adult-led systems.
- Leverages key partnerships, particularly at the statewide level, to remain up to date and well-informed on policy issues.

Success Stories

One regional campaign victory now being implemented focuses on college access. Students successfully advocated for the passage of a school board resolution aligning their high school curriculum with the California public university entrance requirements. Now being implemented by grade level, this victory ensures that all students in the East Side Union High School District of San Jose benefit from a college preparatory curriculum.

Education Focus

1. Equitable school funding
2. College access
3. Pushout and dropout rates

At the state level, CFJ continues to organize for school finance reform. For several years, it has successfully gotten bills “to the governor’s desk” that have never made it that far previously. Despite their ultimate veto, these bills have helped keep the issues alive in the legislature and in the public consciousness. Through the consistent presence and power of students and parents in the capitol over many years, CFJ is now at the doorstep of getting a full school finance reform bill passed.

Learning from CFJ: Be flexible and be committed to youth

With its work spanning many communities, schools, districts, regions, and issues, CFJ knows that no one model or type of relationship will fit all. For example, in some schools CFJ is considered “an institution” and a positive force supporting quality education. In other schools, CFJ is perceived as combative and is not particularly welcome. Thus, its leaders have had to adjust their model, adapt their strategies and build relationships accordingly.

CFJ has also learned that even as its work grew more complex and policy-focused, it could still support genuine youth involvement. This meant creating the Statewide Strategy Team and engaging Public Advocates as a partner to help keep CFJ leaders informed and up to date on legislative developments. A core principle of CFJ is that the people affected by policies and social injustice—in this case, students—must drive the process of social change with their participation, power, ideas and vision. Thus the organization is committed to youth organizing even when it might seem more expedient to keep youth in the regional work but “let the adults take it from here” when it comes to state-level work.

For More Information

To learn more about Californians for Justice, see www.caljustice.org/

Core Supports

Leadership Development occurs at the local level via chapters located in schools, and at the regional and state levels with CFJ organizers supporting Core Leadership Teams and the Statewide Strategy Team.

Holistic Development. With their statewide scope, CFJ does have direct relationships with youth but relies heavily on local partners and referrals to ensure young people have access to a range of supports.

Campaign Development. Campaigns are built from local insights of young people, coordinated regionally by the Core Leadership Team, and supported by adult organizers. New campaigns are identified and developed as old ones come to fruition or need to be taken in a new direction.

Austin Voices

Established in 2002, Austin Voices for Education and Youth (Austin Voices) is an advocacy and intermediary organization that brings the voices of diverse Austin residents – in particular students and their families – into public discussion around education and youth issues. Austin Voices’ mission is to mobilize the community to strengthen schools and expand opportunities for youth. Austin Voices uses a multilevel approach to change that involves outreach and advocacy at the campus, district and citywide levels. Austin Voices is funded through local foundation, state and federal dollars.

Evolution of the Work

Austin Voices for Education and Youth was established via a merger in 2002 between Community IMPACT! Austin and Austin Voices for Public Education. Community IMPACT! Austin was organizing high school students around youth-identified education issues; Austin Voices for Public Education was just getting off the ground, with a focus on supporting parent engagement in school reform.

Although Austin Voices began as a youth organizing model fighting to prevent the closure of neighborhood schools, it has expanded to include ongoing work with three high schools. With this growth, Austin Voices has built strategic partnerships with a spectrum of stakeholders, including the school district, youth leadership programs and other community organizers to align efforts and to improve educational outcomes for students across the district. Austin Voices also maintains a family resource center; its efforts to develop parents as advocates complement and support its commitment to youth organizing.

Austin Voices supports teams of student leaders, called Youth Mobilizers, who work alongside adults in the schools and community. Teams consist of three to five students supported by adult staff at Austin Voices and school staff. In addition to basic leadership skill development and political education, youth are trained by adults and peers in concrete skills relevant to their work: data collection and analysis, group facilitation, and meeting, and event planning with community leaders.

When Austin Voices graduated its first Youth Mobilizers, it realized that those who wanted to stay engaged in the work and in the organization had little opportunity to do so. It also realized that these were the young people with the deepest understanding of and history with their work. As a result, Austin Voices created Youth Consultant positions that now serve critical roles in building capacity for youth engagement among the organization’s partners.

Because the district is largely Spanish-speaking, Youth Mobilizers play a critical role as translators and disseminators of information to adults less proficient in English. Austin Voices creates and disseminates bilingual fact sheets on community issues and voting information, and collaborates with a local bilingual community newspaper with a circulation of over 12,000. In this way, Youth Mobilizers play a critical role in bridging generations, building community connections and building a strong and intergenerational base of advocates and organizers.

Beyond advocating for and catalyzing youth and family voice in education, Austin Voices works with partners on direct organizing campaigns. For example, it partnered with PODER (People Organized in the Defense of Earth and her Resources) on the Young Scholars for Justice Campaign to address the displacement of families in East Austin caused by gentrification. Austin Voices and PODER youth surveyed affected communities to gather residents’ concerns, inform them about the educational implications of gentrification and organize them around the issue.

Key Features of Austin Voices

- Established via merger between Community Impact Austin (a student-led and -focused organization) and Austin Voices for Public Education (an adult-focused education foundation).
- Works in schools and has formal partnerships with the school district as a facilitator of youth and family voice in school issues.
- Employs youth-led action research to identify key issues, build partnerships with adults and communicate with decision makers.
- Operates a family resource center to provide holistic, intergenerational support to individuals and families.
- Youth serve as bilingual translators to support parent voice and engagement in education issues.

In addition to its education work, Austin Voices participates in other local campaigns that engage youth around environmental, economic and other social justice issues.

Budget and Reach

Austin Voices' annual budget for youth organizing is approximately \$150,000 and comes from a mix of state and philanthropic sources. With these resources, the organization engages a total of 150-200 youth annually. Youth Mobilizers or "Stand Up" student leaders, as they are sometimes called, are involved an average of 6-8 hours per week during the school year. During the summer, most student leaders remain engaged during July and August, including participation in a young leaders retreat. At any given time Austin Voices also employs several Youth Consultants (young adults who have graduated from high school) Austin Voices to support various projects.

Success Stories

Because of their close ties with the district and their role as a successful facilitator of youth and community voice via their "Community Conversations" model, Austin Voices achieved a significant win when the Austin school district agreed to include their Youth Mobilizer action research training as an advanced Social Studies credit in high schools. This course is offered during advisory periods and participating youth design, implement and analyze research projects related to their school environment.

Education Focus

1. Strengthening partnerships between schools, community, families and students.
2. Increasing youth engagement in school and district-wide policy.
3. Protecting investments in public education

Austin Voices also partners with direct action organizations such as the statewide coalition Save Texas Schools. This nonpartisan statewide volunteer coalition has brought together students, parents, business leaders, educators, citizens, community groups and faith organizations. Their collective goal is to educate state elected officials about the importance of maintaining funding for Texas public education (pre-K through college) in the context of the recession and beyond. The organizing efforts of Austin Voices and this coalition protected almost \$6 billion dollars in the education budget for this school year.

Learning from Austin Voices: Youth Engagement builds a stronger community voice

At the heart of Austin Voices for Education and Youth is a commitment to elevate student and parent voices that have been systematically left out of educational decision-making. Through its engagement of high school students as Youth Mobilizers, it has expanded the voice and influence of students in educational decision making and engaged families in building a stronger education community. Youth engagement builds the intergenerational connections necessary to mobilize marginalized communities. Austin Voices has leveraged the language skills and in-school experience of a younger generation to help bridge the language and communication gaps that previously kept its primarily Spanish-speaking families alienated and disengaged.

For More Information

To learn more about Austin Voices for Education and Youth, see www.austinvoices.org or contact Tim Eubanks, at teubanks@austinvoices.org.

Core Supports

Leadership Development. Austin Voices provides explicit training opportunities, including credit-bearing research methods; emphasizes intergenerational work and the engagement and leadership of adults by youth; and has expanded its leadership pipeline to include youth consultant positions.

Holistic Development is supported by Austin Voices' family resource center and positive relationships to supports in schools.

Campaign Development. Campaigns are built on youth-led action research and the identification and clarification of issues through "community conversations." They focus on school, district and statewide policy issues.

Southern Echo

Southern Echo is a leadership development, education and training organization working to develop effective, accountable grassroots leadership in the African-American communities in rural Mississippi and the surrounding region through comprehensive training and technical assistance programs. Southern Echo's underlying goal is to empower local communities through community organizing to hold the political, economic, educational, and environmental systems accountable to the needs and interests of the African-American community. This work is funded primarily through foundation support.

Evolution of the Work

Southern Echo began in 1989, and its education work emerged from a process that started the following year with a “listening tour” that included visits to 65 of Mississippi’s 85 counties. Southern Echo leaders wanted to hear directly from local communities, largely rural, about what people saw as their community problems and how they believed such problems could be remedied. What they found was surprising; Although Mississippi’s education system was the worst in the country at the time, not one community mentioned education as a critical issue. Their silence spoke loudly to Southern Echo.

With roots in organizing around juvenile justice issues and census and redistricting work, Southern Echo knew it needed to look deeper into this silence. It began a process of deeper “historical investigation” into the communities and the education system. It found a pervasive fear of speaking out on education issues that was driven in part by the reality that public education was the largest employer in most of these counties. People were scared they would lose access to jobs if they spoke out on the dismal reality of Mississippi education. Southern Echo knew that if it was going to make a dent in the “deficit model” of the state, it had to create change around public education.

Like all of Southern Echo’s work, the process of “historical investigation” was intergenerational. But the focus on education highlighted a generational difference: The young people did not have the same fears as their parents and elders around education. So if the work was going to move forward, youth leadership was the key. In their words, “Young people are less dependent upon the past, have the least fear of change, and the best potential for creating a broad vision of a fair and just society.”

Youth and adults started by investigating the existing policy landscape. They found that the Mississippi Minimum Education Funding Act from 1955 was still guiding public education funding. Among other problems, the policy stated that anything greater than a third-grade education “ruined a good field hand.” Additional analysis of actual investment in education demonstrated a shocking range of per-pupil expenditures by county, from \$8,690 to \$688. This discrepancy was due to inequitable investment by the state and weak local tax bases in low-wealth counties.

To push this work, Southern Echo created the Mississippi Education Working Group, covering all 65 counties that were part of the original listening sessions, plus three more. It also helped organize a Delta Working Group to address the needs of that region. For both groups, young people recruited members and helped identify adult allies. This often included extended family members or other mentors who had supported the youths’ education. The youth also helped to identify adults (such as teachers) who would support their work and provide information, but might need to do so anonymously.

In addition to this policy work, Southern Echo has formal relationships the Mississippi Department of Education and with several schools and districts to provide conflict resolution training and data analysis - and to support turnaround efforts in low-performing districts.

Key Features of the Southern Echo Model

- Founded on an intergenerational model of organizing.
- Connects and builds capacity across the state in county-based and regional leadership teams to affect state policy.
- Leveraged a history of relationships and power around its census and redistricting work to access and impact state educational policy.
- Provides extensive training and strategic support across the state on organizing, leadership development, and organizational development.

Budget and Reach

With an annual budget of approximately \$750,000, Southern Echo engages roughly 150-200 youth per year, with youth remaining involved in the work for anywhere between one to four years. Most youth are engaged 10 or more hours per week.

Success Stories

Southern Echo has achieved several critical policy victories related to school funding which have, in turn, required it to remain vigilant on implementation over the subsequent years. In 1997, it successfully organized for the passage of the Mississippi Adequate Education Funding Program, which was enacted by the legislature over the governor's veto, and which set a "floor" for a minimum per pupil investment across the state (\$750 million of new investment over five years). This process included a rally of more than 1,000 young people at the state capitol. In 1998, Southern Echo successfully fought for new policy that increased teacher pay across the state, providing an additional \$568 million of new investment over five years.

Additionally, Southern Echo and its array of partners, including the Mississippi Economic Council, managed in 2007 to get the state to fully fund the education budget— for the first time ever. This successful streak lasted through three budgets, until 2009, when the failing economy took its toll. The precedent, however, has been set.

Education Focus

1. Education funding
2. Schoolhouse to jailhouse
3. Teacher pay

As part of their Schoolhouse to Jailhouse campaign, Southern Echo and its allies managed to close one juvenile detention center in the state in order to help stem the growing incarceration rates of youth. Through this work, they developed a coalition of more than 100 organizations that are in the process of implementing, over several years, the creation of 82 county-level support programs to help youth integrate back into their communities rather than go into juvenile detention.

Learning from Southern Echo: There are no shortcuts.

Southern Echo identified the need to focus on education out of a stark reality that communities were not talking about education, even while Mississippi was the lowest performing state in the country. Its work first required overcoming fear and building awareness out of an internalized and systemic "deficit model" that had blamed youth and families for educational failure. Organizers helped communities see their existing assets, then supported them in increasing their skills and broadening perspectives. Ultimately, they had to mobilize rural communities across the state that had never been mobilized before. For systemic change to happen, it has to be more than a campaign. Southern Echo's work is about dismantling old social paradigms and mindsets, and building new ones in their place.

For More Information

To learn more about Southern Echo, www.southernecho.org.

Core Supports

Leadership Development. In addition to development that happens via campaigns and "historical investigation," Southern Echo offers multiple training opportunities each year on organizing, leadership development and organizational development.

Holistic Development. Southern Echo has counselors on staff and works with partner organizations to provide support and necessary referrals.

Campaign Development. Campaigns are built from deep historical analysis and intergenerational community building, and target systemic changes related to investments in education across the state.

Oasis Center

Oasis Center is a comprehensive youth agency in Nashville, Tenn., that provides more than 20 unique program offerings and opportunities for young people facing some of life's most difficult challenges. Those offerings include street outreach and residential services for homeless young people, youth and family counseling, leadership development, advocacy and organizing. With a mission to help youth grow, thrive and create positive change in their own lives and in the community, Oasis Center believes in the power of youth as agents of change. Oasis Center was also an instrumental partner in the creation of the Youth Opportunity Center, a facility that houses nine organizations that all work with young people.

Evolution of the Work

Oasis Center began in 1970 as a drop-in center for youth. During its 40 years of work, it has remained on the cutting edge of youth development work, which in the 1990s expanded to include leadership development and advocacy, and in the 2000s grew to include youth organizing. Oasis is funded through state and federal support, private foundations, and the local United Way.

Youth organizing was added to its spectrum of work in 2005 through a merger with Community IMPACT! Nashville, a grassroots, neighborhood-based youth organizing initiative. The organizing model spurred an evolution in Oasis Center's youth leadership and engagement work and helped deepen the organization's commitment to political education and analysis.

At about the same time as the merger, Oasis Center became the coordinator for the Tennessee Youth Advisory Council (TYAC), which focused on policy advocacy around foster care and child welfare issues by young people who were in, or had aged out, of the system. TYAC brought to Oasis a model of advocacy and training of legislators and other stakeholders that aligned quality practice with effective policymaking.

In 2010, Oasis Center merged with Building Bridges, whose mission is to fight bias, bigotry and racism. With an award-winning curriculum and long track record of work in schools and in the community, Building Bridges has helped institutionalize the political education that was introduced to Oasis through the Community IMPACT! merger.

Oasis Center's education work launched with a 14-month, youth-led research process that began with youth asking why they were not being supported to go to college. While the project started with a neighborhood focus, it soon became clear that college access was a citywide issue. What seemed unique to a couple of neighborhood schools was actually a consistent equity gap across all comprehensive high schools. Twelve youth met daily after school, held an intensive eight-week summer session and were supported by one adult organizer during their research process.

As a result of this work, another Oasis Center program that focused on youth-led philanthropy became interested and engaged in education equity issues citywide. This 22 member council met every two weeks and reflected the geographic and socio-economic diversity of Nashville. They also took on an action research project that ultimately highlighted the far-reaching inequities between public comprehensive schools and public magnet schools.

In 2008, these two youth-led, education-focused efforts came together and the groups merged into one called Youth Mobilizers, who come from nine schools and meet 30 hours monthly during the school year. This group has built on the previous work on educational equity and college access, and created a Student Bill of Rights and Responsibilities with additional youth and community input.

Though Oasis Center has no formal relationship with the school district in its education work, it has numerous relationships with teachers and principals and staff who support the work.

Key Features of the Oasis Model

- Provides a broad range of youth services and opportunities within the organization and through the Youth Opportunity Center partnerships.
- Has a long history in the community of providing innovative and progressive youth leadership programming, with a relatively new focus on organizing.
- Established its youth organizing and political education work through mergers with smaller youth initiatives.
- Advocacy and organizing efforts are driven by youth-led research and youth-facilitated community conversations.

Budget and Reach

The annual budget for youth organizing work at Oasis Center is approximately \$205,000. Approximately 37 youth are engaged annually as Youth Mobilizers, and they remain engaged anywhere from nine months to two years, depending on whether they start in their sophomore year or later. On average, these youth participate roughly 30 hours per month during the school year and 80 hours per month (20 hours/week) during the summer.

Education Focus

1. College access
2. Student rights
3. School safety and youth violence

Success Stories

As a result of youth-led research and subsequent advocacy and organizing – which highlighted dramatic gaps in access to college counseling and preparation for youth in different high schools – in 2009 Oasis Center opened the Oasis College Connection, Nashville’s only college resource center for first-generation, low-wealth youth. College Connection has increased connections and relationships with public schools and has created opportunities for cross-training and advocacy around student-centered college access efforts. Youth continue to be a critical driver of this work through peer-to-peer recruitment for the center. In three years of operation, Oasis College Connection has helped more than 300 students enroll in college and draw down more than \$3.25 million in financial aid, scholarships, and grants.

Additionally, young people have generated a Student Bill of Rights and Responsibilities. Despite numerous setbacks and leadership changes in the district, youth have kept the Student Bill of Rights and Responsibilities alive and have garnered the support of several school board members, the teacher’s union, and the Mayor’s Child and Youth Master Plan.

Learning from Oasis: Know Who You Are and Leverage It

For years, Oasis Center worked toward achieving positive change for young people but struggled to understand how it fit into the world of youth organizing. After more than 40 years as a citywide organization, Oasis Center could hardly call itself grassroots in the Nashville community. Yet, as an organization that has become synonymous with youth in the city, it has a reputation and a longevity that has created institutional credibility and power to support youth-led change in a unique way. The various mergers represent an unorthodox pathway, but have been effective at capitalizing on the strengths of grassroots efforts while leveraging the stability and citywide reputation Oasis Center has built over four decades.

For More Information

To learn more about Oasis Center, see www.oasiscenter.org and contact Deniece Ferguson, Director of Youth Action, at dferguson@oasiscenter.org.

Core Supports

Leadership Development occurs in the context of action research, and includes a focus on specific workforce readiness skills.

Holistic Development. A range of services including housing, counseling, and college access support are provided directly by Oasis Center and other partners within the Youth Opportunity Center.

Campaign Development. Campaigns are built from action research and collective youth experiences. Campaigns intentionally involve community-wide coalitions with primarily adult-led organizations and systems.

Coleman Advocates

Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth is a 35- year-old policy-focused organization with deep community roots within the unified school district of San Francisco. It focuses on organizing working class people of color and their allies for better educational outcomes, including increasing graduation rates for African-American, Latino and Pacific Islander students, who represent a minority in the overall student body. Funding is provided by local and national foundations, member fees, individual donors and public-private partnerships. Their membership base fluctuates between 500 and 600 youth and parents, with an extended supportive base of over 1,000.

Evolution of the Work

Coleman's history of child and community advocacy shifted to include targeting systemic change in 1991 after a successful campaign which created The Children's Fund, the first set-aside fund in the country that provides money in the city budget specifically for re-granting to local nonprofits. Coleman Advocates, however, has not been a recipient of these funds since its inception nor has it received other government funding. Following this successful campaign, Coleman also experienced a leadership change and shifted its approach to campaign development.

When its executive director left Coleman to become the first leader of the Children's Fund. Coleman's staff and its members began to focus on generating systemic change rather than just adding value to the current system. Under new leadership, there were significant structural and strategic changes in Coleman's work. For example, the role of adult staff shifted from being the drivers of campaigns to supporting and training Coleman's members to define and implement member-driven campaigns where only members vote. Additionally, Coleman no longer launched unilateral campaigns focused on all youth and their families, but began specifically targeting African-American, Latino and Pacific Islander youth and families. During this process, the organization created new youth and adult member positions on its board, reduced its campaign budgets, and increased its communication with members as they monitored and tracked developments in the educational system.

Since this shift, Coleman has continued to model youth organizing through its Youth Making a Change (YMAC) program, which engages 60 to 100 youth annually across three elementary schools and four high schools. YMAC youth work to understand the educational landscape and system, identify their board of education leaders and what they stand for, and develop policy campaigns. The targeted schools reflect Coleman's base-building demographics and exemplify school-level partnerships that impact district-level policies. Coleman has a memorandum of understanding with the school district that has fostered these school-level partnerships. Recruitment happens directly at the schools through English Language Advisory Committees, surveys, focus groups, referrals from school staff and annual cultural events like "Bring It to the Stage," where youth members use popular culture (i.e., spoken word, dance, short films) to educate their peers about their collective experiences. Coleman also hosts parent workshops at all of the schools, through which parents can join, Parents Making a Change, which serves as the parent organizing arm of their work.

In keeping with the policy focus to align PK-16 school objectives, Coleman has partnered with community college allies and created Students Making a Change (SMAC), which focuses on organizing college-level students for political power. Since one - third of San Francisco Unified School District graduates attend community college, SMAC is a critical connection and base of young people for Coleman's P-16 work.

Coleman Advocates participates in two larger organizing coalitions: Campaign for Quality Education and the Alliance for Educational Justice. Coleman staffers also served on the steering committee for Bridge to Success San Francisco, a Gates Foundation initiative that has challenged the school district to double the number of graduates going to college.

Key Features of Coleman Advocates

- Focuses on implementing policy campaigns that improve the educational outcomes of targeted youth.
- Strengths lie in community organizing with working class people of color (students and parents).
- Commitment to making the school system, its budget and its processes transparent to constituents and the larger community.
- Serves as a clearinghouse of information for the city to make systems transparent.

Budget and Reach

Approximately \$500,000 of Coleman's annual budget goes toward its organizing work. The organization engages approximately 60 youth and 60 parents annually. Some youth stay involved for one year, though many are engaged for five years or more. Coleman leaders dedicate an average of five hours per week to organizing.

Success Stories

In 2010, Coleman Advocates won the initial tier of its first multi-year policy campaign when the San Francisco Unified School District unanimously voted for the A-G Equity Plan. That plan made college prep curriculum a graduation requirement for all students. In addition, the campaign identified an outcome goal of 60 percent graduation rates for African-American, Latino and Pacific Islander students, whose graduation rates have declined since a reduction in graduation requirements in 1998.

Education Focus

1. College access through P-16 alignment
2. Improved assessments to address multiple learning styles
3. Equitable funding

Coleman's youth and parents have fought and won additional campaigns, including creating Wellness Centers in all high schools, increasing violence prevention services as an alternative to police in schools, and increasing access to technology and to summer school to keep students on pace for graduation.

Learning from Coleman Advocates:

Don't stop with policy change

Coleman Advocates knows that winning a policy victory like the A-G Equity Plan is a significant victory and is critical to creating systemic change. It also knows, however, that the implementation and oversight of this plan is really where the change happens or does not. So the years of advocacy for policy change begets more years of implementation oversight, which is why Coleman representatives co-chair the Implementation Taskforce for A-G Equity Plan.

For More Information

To learn more about Coleman Advocates' youth organizing efforts, see www.colemanadvocates.org/ymac/ and contact Pecolia Manigo, Education Justice Campaign Organizer, at pmanigo@colemanadvocates.org.

Core Supports

Leadership Development occurs via the Youth Making a Change and Students Making a Change models, with the goal of broadening understanding of the education system and developing campaigns on specific issues.

Holistic Development. Case management services are referred out, usually at school sites. Students are referred to academic services within their schools.

Campaign Development. Coleman leverages strategic and tactical allies to help build multi-year campaigns that are identified and led by members. Campaign development can take up to two years.

Youth United for Change

Youth United for Change (YUC) is a democratic organization made up of young people acting on their own behalf to improve the quality of public education and to hold school officials and government accountable to meet the educational needs of Philadelphia public school students. For 21 years, YUC has brought together diverse groups of young people to identify common concerns and to act collectively to ensure that all young people have access to an education that prepares them for success at a four-year university, for a living wage job and for active participation in civic life.

Evolution of the Work

Youth United for Change began as a project of Woodrock, which served as its parent organization as it began drug prevention work seeded by the Just Say No Campaign of the 1980's. Over time, conversations with the young people began to deepen and the challenges of Philadelphia public schools became unavoidable. In 1990, a New York City group called Youth Force facilitated a retreat, at which point the young people from Philadelphia came up with the name Youth United for Change and began organizing on educational issues. By 1996 Youth United for Change was an independent nonprofit organization.

YUC's early organizing work achieved some significant, small-scale victories around building-level issues like cleaner bathrooms, advocating for a new school counselor and getting heating units repaired in schools. In time, however, YUC knew it needed to focus on more systemic issues and whole school reforms. With its smaller successes, YUC built significant power to make this transition to system-level work. It was recognized and acknowledged by schools and other adult groups around the city for its youth organizing, and was able to capitalize on the growing field of youth organizing, which made for a more conducive environment for its work.

YUC supports six chapters of youth organizers around the city that meet weekly either in their schools or in YUC offices. Each chapter has adult staff assigned to support the young people, help them identify campaigns and develop leadership skills to carry out campaigns effectively. Chapter leadership teams average about 20 youth, who are recruited through membership drives held in the lunch room at the beginning of each school year. This process also includes a series of orientation meetings for those who may be interested. Once members sign up, they get further oriented and trained in organizing work and the specifics of YUC before moving to a weekly meeting schedule. YUC's overall database includes about 2,000 members.

Each YUC chapter works on its own issues, although overlap is considerable and interdependence is critical when they mobilize. Relationships between chapters are supported through two cross-chapter retreats, social events and political education trainings on Saturdays. Because of these connections, YUC can mobilize large numbers of students when a campaign requires action and can count on some level of shared understanding of their work. Additionally, when it is time to mobilize across chapters, adult staff supports explicit training around the impending action and issue.

Relationships with schools and the means through which YUC garners access to schools vary. In some cases, teachers or principals have invited the organization in, while in other cases the district leadership has played that role. YUC has also leveraged the "open campus" law in Philadelphia, which requires that if one community organization is allowed in the school, then all others must have equal access. The critical point is that after more than 20 years, YUC has outlasted most school- and district level leaders. YUC has helped provide continuity and consistency in the Philadelphia public school reform conversation. It is with YUC that longer-standing educators and community advocates hold their institutional memory around education reform.

Key Features of the YUC Model

- Initially a drug prevention initiative within a youth service organization that began organizing youth and became its own entity.
- Has significant visibility and institutional memory in the community after more than 20 years of sustained youth organizing work.
- Model includes four school-based chapters, one citywide chapter for youth attending non YUC schools, and one chapter for youth who have dropped out or been pushed out.
- Leverages chapter membership in order to mobilize a large number of youth for citywide campaigns.

Budget and Reach

YUC is funded primarily by a mix of private foundations. Their current annual budget is \$704,000. In an average year, 125 youth are engaged roughly four hours a week as chapter leaders. Most of these youth remain engaged over a period of four years.

Success Stories

After eight years of “small schools work,” YUC successfully organized for the adaptation of the small schools model within an existing high school and the building of an entirely new school as four small schools within one building. This was both a significant capital campaign victory (realized in the investment in the new school) and an educational campaign victory (through the adoption of the small schools model). YUC also worked to ensure that local contractors were used in construction of the new school and that the school was LEAD Platinum certified, making it the only school building in the state with that environmental certification.

More recently, the district announced plans to close 13 schools for over-age and under-credited young people, replacing the schools with regional centers and significantly lowering their per-pupil funding. YUC successfully moved these schools from budget casualties to investment priorities, and the funding has been restored.

Learning from YUC: Real change takes time

When YUC moved from short-term campaigns to long-term, systemic change around small schools and pushout issues, members feared that longer term work would significantly damage their ability to keep young people engaged. The reality, ultimately, was just the opposite. The multi-year campaigns have kept generations of young people connected, have actually increased retention, and have strengthened the network of alumni who stay involved in the work. YUC knows that building this type of continuity of leadership over time is critical to achieving lasting change.

For More Information

To learn more about Youth United for Change, see www.youthunitedforchange.com/ and contact Andi Perez, Executive Director, at andi@yucyouth.org.

Education Focus

1. Pushout and dropout prevention
2. Small schools
3. Public investment in education
4. Zero tolerance policies

Core Supports

Leadership Development occurs in the context of campaigns and is defined at the local chapter level. Additional training is offered through cross-chapter retreats and weekend political education trainings.

Holistic Development. YUC does not formally provide additional services to youth but relies on a network of support for referrals.

Campaign Development. Campaigns are built by various chapters, then linked across chapters. YUC utilizes youth participatory action research and has successfully leveraged youth-led research to strengthen campaign positions.

VOYCE

Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) is a youth organizing collaborative for education justice led by students of color from seven community organizations and nine high schools throughout Chicago. Since its formation in 2007, VOYCE has been using youth-driven research and organizing to advance district-level policies to increase graduation rates.

Evolution of the Work

Initially supported by funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Communities for Public Education Reform, VOYCE was created to establish a citywide youth organizing presence around education policy issues in Chicago.

From its inception, VOYCE was a collaboration built upon the history, experience and current organizing of community organizations from around the city. While all of these groups had adult-led organizing efforts, many had existing intergenerational and youth organizing models as well. Partner organizations had already achieved significant victories in education (such as construction of new schools to relieve overcrowding and in-state tuition for undocumented youth) prior to their involvement with VOYCE.

In addition to these neighborhood organizations, VOYCE has formal partnerships with nine Chicago public high schools. When launched, VOYCE began with a team of youth who both represented their partner high schools and were connected to and supported by a local neighborhood organization. This team of youth, supported by VOYCE staff, initiated a year-long, youth-led participatory action research project to deepen their understanding of why so many of their peers were dropping out of school. The youth met multiple times per week at locations throughout the city. In addition to developing analytical and communication skills, this process created deep relationships among young people from some of the city's most racially segregated neighborhoods, fostering a deep understanding of the city-wide policies and issues that were affecting many of Chicago's low-income communities of color. This work was supported by adult organizers, a research consultant and a youth development consultant.

In 2008, armed with a year's worth of new data, youth began to clarify and narrow their issues and develop policy recommendations. This process was iterative and included the input of organizers and other adult representatives of the neighborhood organizations via a series of back-and-forth drafts and meetings. Ultimately, the young people concluded: "In order to increase graduation rates, [Chicago Public Schools] must build a foundation for student success through district-level policies and school-level practices that: foster trusting and supportive relationships with peers and school staff, establish the sense of purpose that comes from high expectations and academic engagement, and ensure emotional and physical safety."

As the students built and promoted their recommendations and started to organize around these issues, VOYCE realized that its model of convening youth with such frequency as a centralized work team created barriers for the next phase of their work. Access and transportation were always challenges. And, as VOYCE moved to organize and to advance the policy recommendations that youth had developed, it needed to build a strong local base of support. However, there was simply not capacity to do this while having citywide meetings that could take up as much as 15 hours a week. So they adapted their work plan so that the collaborative member organizations could spend more time organizing locally with youth around VOYCE's policy agenda. This reduced the frequency of citywide meetings and focused the work specifically on district-wide policy changes.

With this shift, 40 youths began meeting less frequently as VOYCE (about once per month depending on the nature and timetable of the issues), and other young people were able to get more deeply connected and supported in their specific neighborhood organizations and schools. Part of this support includes VOYCE Leadership Teams in each of the partner high schools, supported both by young people and their neighborhood organizations. These larger VOYCE Leadership Teams in each school expand the VOYCE base and become the youth that the 40 VOYCE leaders mobilize for actions.

Key Features of the VOYCE Model

- Created to ensure the voice of students in citywide education policy issues.
- Built on and continues to leverage the strength of neighborhood-based organizing efforts.
- Youth lead extensive participatory action research projects as a way to build skills, deepen knowledge, and develop a citywide policy platform.
- Built on a foundation of partnerships with neighborhood groups and high schools.

Budget and Reach

VOYCE's current annual budget is just over \$645,000 which comes from a mix of philanthropic sources and includes significant pass-through to member organizations. Across the calendar year, approximately 50 core youth are engaged approximately 8 – 15 hours, attending citywide meetings, planning VOYCE's work and strategy, and representing the organization. Most of these youth joined VOYCE in their freshman or sophomore years and stay engaged through the end of high school. An additional 150 youth are engaged weekly at school-based VOYCE Leadership Team meetings, anywhere from 4 to 10 hours per week.

Approximately 15 older youth (ages 17-20) act as organizers-in-training and use their experience to support the core youth and leadership team, working approximately 10-20 hours per week.

Education Focus

1. Strengthen social-emotional supports to foster strong peer and student-staff relationships, particularly in freshman year.
2. Ensure emotional and physical safety by ending harsh discipline policies.
3. Increase student engagement with college-going expectations and high-quality teaching and learning experiences.

Success Stories

As part of its effort to increase social and emotional support systems for students, VOYCE leveraged its youth-led research and reports and received funding from then-Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan to create a pilot program at eight partner high schools to target supports for freshmen. Despite multiple changes in leadership in the Chicago Public Schools, the pilot launched in the 2009-10 school year. Through this pilot, VOYCE has engaged over 700 freshmen and 250 older peer mentors in peer mentoring, youth-led retreats and personalized graduation planning, and successfully impacted student attitudes, relationships and attendance rates. VOYCE is currently working with public school senior officials to scale up the initiative throughout the city.

Additionally, to increase student voice on issues of teaching and learning, VOYCE established student-teacher roundtables at seven partner high schools. Inspired in part by national site visits, in which 20 youth, eight educators and eight adult organizers visited 13 successful high schools around the country, the roundtables are piloting a series of innovative practices aimed at impacting school- and district-level teaching and learning policy, such as youth-driven classroom observations and curriculum design.

Learning from VOYCE: Build Strong, Sustainable Partnerships

VOYCE started strong in 2007 with a powerful year-long youth research project that helped generate early buy-in from Chicago Public Schools (CPS). During this early work, it focused on creating broad partnerships in schools, in neighborhoods and with other supportive stakeholders. These early relationships enabled VOYCE to push for the \$200,000 pilot program even as leadership at CPS rotated and the commitment waned. For example, a partnership built with Dr. Charles Payne at the University of Chicago during the research process yielded significant returns in 2011: Dr. Payne was appointed interim chief education officer at CPS and worked as an ally to involve VOYCE in CPS's strategic planning process. As VOYCE puts it, "You can't go wrong if you start with building partnerships, but be prepared to shift strategies when needed." To generate these partnerships and build an effective, sustainable coalition, VOYCE emphasizes setting clear short and long-term goals, collectively developing strategies, and creating clear citywide and local work plans.

Core Supports

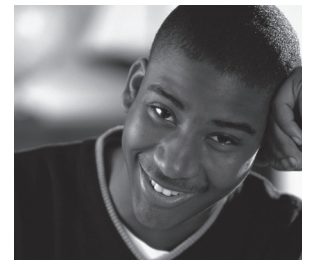
Leadership Development occurs in the context of action research, advocacy and organizing work. Skills are developed in relation to the particular strategy at hand. Formal skill-based trainings and retreats focused on leadership development occur throughout the year.

Holistic Development. VOYCE does not provide holistic support to youth directly, but young people receive support at the neighborhood level and through close school and community partnerships.

Campaign Development. Campaigns are built from a core of youth-led action research, political education and community analysis, are supported by the organizing efforts of neighborhood partners. Campaigns target Chicago Public School policy.

For More Information

To learn more about VOYCE, see www.voyceproject.org and contact Emma Tai, Coordinator, at emma@voyceproject.org.



Youth Organizing for Educational CHANGE

Related Readings

Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change

www.forumfyi.org/node/60

Youth Adult Partnerships in Public Action

www.forumfyi.org/node/581

Youth Engagement in Educational Change: Working Definition and Self Assessment

www.forumfyi.org/node/121

Creating “Good” Schools: Observation and Discussion Tool

www.forumfyi.org/node/123