Strengthening ★ Communities
Through Youth Participation

Lessons Learned from the ACT for Youth Initiative

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ABOUT ACT FOR YOUTH

Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth is a positive youth development initiative that helps communities create the conditions for young people to lead healthy and fulfilling lives. At the forefront of the initiative are 12 ACT for Youth communities that work to put positive youth development into practice in New York State. The ACT for Youth Center of Excellence (COE) supports these communities and provides positive youth development resources to youth-serving programs funded by the New York State Department of Health. The COE makes resources and publications widely available through its Web site (www.actforyouth.net), and sponsors the statewide ACT Youth Network (www.nysyouth.net). Led by Cornell University's Family Life Development Center (FLDC), the COE is a collaboration among FLDC, Cornell University Cooperative Extension of New York City, the New York State Center for School Safety, and the University of Rochester Medical Center's Division of Adolescent Health.

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INTRODUCTION

A Brief Overview of ACT for Youth

Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth is the New York State Department of Health's premier initiative designed around principles of positive youth development. ACT for Youth aims to help communities strengthen their capacity to be places where young people thrive. Rather than targeting certain types of youth for service or designing interventions to address specific problem behaviors, the purpose of ACT for Youth is to change the structure (policies, roles, resources) and culture (attitudes, norms, values) of communities to provide youth with the opportunities and supports that they need for positive development. It is expected that this asset-based approach will, over the long term, enhance the Department of Health's efforts to prevent or reduce negative outcomes for young people such as teen pregnancy, HIV infection, sexually transmitted infections, substance use, and violence.

The central strategy of ACT for Youth is the formation of cross-sector community coalitions. In 2006, 12 Collaborations for Community Change (CCCs) were awarded grants through a competitive funding process to develop and implement local strategies for promoting positive youth development among young people ages 10 to 19 years. The CCCs represent all regions of the state and are responsible for developing locally-driven plans of action around common goals. Four core outcomes, established by the Department of Health, orient the work of the CCCs:

- Increased developmental opportunities and supports for young people
- Increased youth engagement and youth voice
- Organizational changes reflecting positive youth development principles (e.g., a focus on positive outcomes, youth engagement and youth voice, connectedness)
- Community policy changes reflecting positive youth development principles (e.g., inclusiveness, youth-friendly policies, youth involvement in governance and policy development).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the driving force of the initiative are the cross-sector partnerships. These partnerships support young people by transforming the contexts in which they live, shifting the way young people are viewed and treated by adults, which ultimately fosters youth health and well being.

The initiative is supported by the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence, a partnership led by the Family Life Development Center (FLDC) at Cornell University. The Center of Excellence is a collaboration among several entities across the state: FLDC, the University of Rochester Medical Center/Division of Adolescent Medicine, the New York State Center for School Safety, and Cornell University Cooperative Extension of New York City. Collectively, these organizations provide technical assistance, evaluation, and training to support and extend the work of the CCCs. They also serve as a clearinghouse for best practices and resources for positive youth development (www.actforyouth.net).
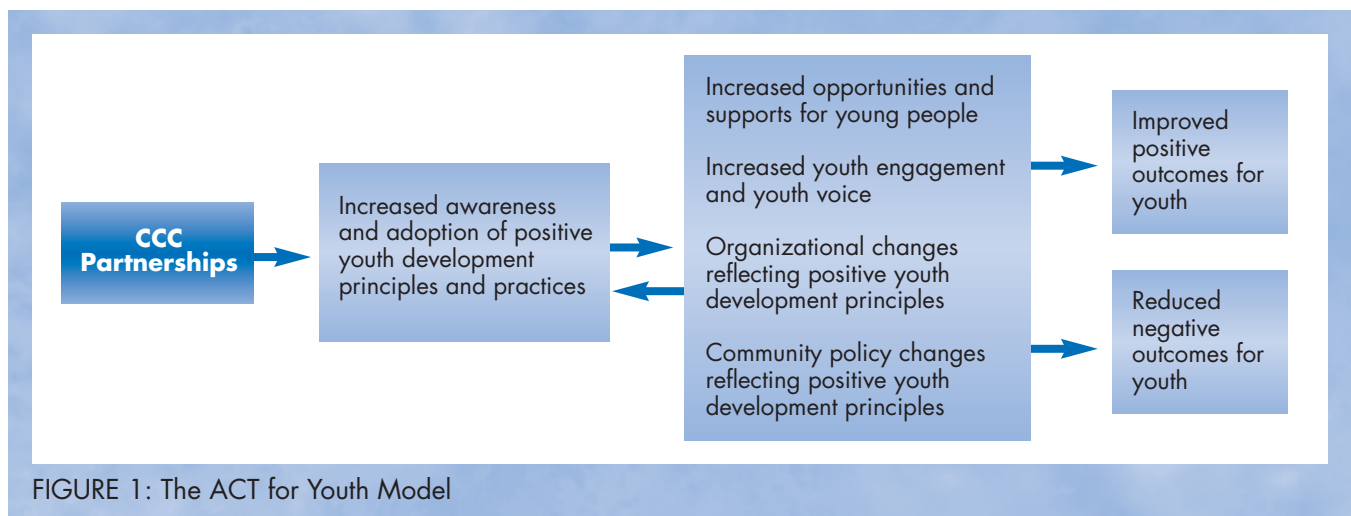

FIGURE 1: The ACT for Youth Model

A Brief Overview of Youth Engagement in Community

As noted, increased youth engagement and youth voice is one of the four expected outcomes of the ACT for Youth initiative. This outcome reflects the Department of Health's position that healthy communities are those that, in part, view young people as partners rather than clients, and involve them in positions where their contributions make a difference. These contributions can include consulting and shared leadership with adults as well as working collaboratively with adults to design and deliver programs and services.

Increased youth engagement is not only a goal, it is a key approach of the initiative. In order to achieve the four core outcomes, the Department of Health expects that young people

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will play significant roles in each CCC. In other words, the initiative is based on the assertion that youth engagement and youth voice are critical to the success of the CCCs. For this reason, the CCCs are expected to actively engage young people within community organizations, civic groups, schools, and other decision-making bodies.

The ACT for Youth initiative is grounded solidly in empirical research, conducted across the United States and in Europe, on youth engagement and youth-adult partnership. Five bodies of research are especially noteworthy:

1. *Youth engagement and voice are critical to youth development and healthy lifestyles.* There is consistently strong evidence that youth benefit when they actively contribute to their programs and communities. Not only do young people gain a stronger sense of agency (self-efficacy, better school performance, confidence), but they also garner a strong sense of belonging and connection to their communities (positive peer and adult relationships, social networks, social responsibility). Moreover, young people develop personal and civic competencies (leadership, problem solving, professional skills). Not surprisingly, therefore, youth who are civically engaged show lower levels of alcohol and drug use, later onset of sexual activity, lower pregnancy rates, and reduced levels of depression. These positive outcomes are most likely when youth form close relationships and instrumental partnerships with adults (Pancer & Pratt, 1999; Youniss & Hart, 2005).

2. *Youth engagement and voice are critical to community health.* The positive influences of youth engagement, moreover, can extend beyond the benefits to individual youth. An emerging body of research suggests that the culture, structure, and programming of youth organizations and schools may be strengthened when youth and adults work together as partners. For example, research indicates that adults are motivated and

inspired by the experience of working with youth in collective decision making and action. When organizations change their policies and programs to accommodate meaningful youth participation, adults report improvements in the quality of their organizations. There is also evidence that youth engagement helps adults gain more accurate and less stereotypical impressions of youth, and makes adults more likely to engage youth in the future. Youth engagement impacts community agendas by raising public awareness of youth issues and concerns. And finally, youth engagement has been found to impact public policies and practices in ways that enhance the quality of life for youth, their schools, and communities (Ginwright 2005; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & Camino, 2008).

3. *Despite the benefits of youth engagement and voice, the notion that youth and adults can work together remains an innovative idea in the United States.* Youth-adult partnership is an idea that runs counter to many of our cultural expectations about who youth are and what they should be doing with their out-of-school time. This idea challenges adults, nonprofit organizations, schools, and public institutions regarding their traditional roles in the socialization of young people. Consequently, the United States has

Youth are not typically viewed as citizens who wish to contribute to their communities.

relatively few structures or institutions designed to promote partnerships among youth and adults. Youth roles are limited to those of student, athlete, consumer, and style-setter. Youth are not typically viewed as citizens who wish to contribute to their communities (Zeldin, Larson, & Camino, 2005).

4. *Because youth engagement is an innovative idea, and because societal structures have not yet been widely created to support youth-adult partnership, it is challenging to design and implement community-wide strategies.* Camino (2005) concludes from her study of community-based organizations that "youth-adult partnerships are not for the faint of heart." She stresses that, while the approach represents a high impact strategy, it requires intentionality and vigilance to implement with quality. An evaluation of the Carnegie Corporation's Schools for a New Society Initiative reached a similar conclusion. Joselowsky (2007) reports that "Despite the fact that youth engagement was seen as an important element of the initiative,

developing successful and sustainable youth engagement initiatives was one of the most difficult pieces of work to operationalize in the seven sites." In both studies, fundamental barriers included a lack of shared understanding and purpose for youth engagement, a lack of skills to implement the practice, and a lack of shared ownership for youth participation by the adults. Effective youth participation arises only when it has an "urgency stamp" and is deemed a high priority by initiative and organizational leaders.

5. *Across the country, public and nonprofit managers are demonstrating that the barriers to youth-adult partnership can be overcome and that the practice can be successfully implemented with high quality.* There are clear and widespread indications that the status quo is changing, and may be changing rapidly. Youth-focused organizations – public, municipal, and nonprofit – are taking the lead, and have created a broad range of opportunities for youth to engage in advocacy, in social entrepreneurship, and in organizational and community decision making. Youth and adults are partnering to address challenges in the public schools, in land use planning processes, and in a range of social and environmental justice issues (Kirby, Lanyon, & Cronin, 2003; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2007).

The next step for researchers is clear: to identify the principles and strategies that cross-cut effective practices in youth-adult partnership. It is this perspective that elevates ACT for Youth not only as a critical initiative for youth development in New York State, but also as a place for national learning on how best to implement effective youth engagement and voice.

Purpose and Methodology of the Research

It is impressive that ACT for Youth has elevated youth engagement as one of its core initiative outcomes and primary strategies. There are few states that have taken on this challenge. The purpose of the present research is to explore how the ACT for Youth communities are responding to the challenges of youth engagement. The aim of this report is to present key lessons learned from the 12 ACT sites, with a focus on identifying the benefits that emerge from youth engagement. In this research, we do not focus on the developmental benefits to individual youth or adults. There is already

a broad body of research, as noted above, that indicates the power of youth engagement in promoting positive youth development and adult competence. Instead, our focus is on identifying the types of community-level outcomes that are beginning to emerge from the demonstration sites. In keeping with the overall aims of the ACT for Youth initiative, we seek to understand how the CCCs are using youth engagement to progress toward the four core outcome areas of the initiative. In addition, the report identifies some of the key strategies through which ACT for Youth is producing such outcomes.

A broad body of research indicates the power of youth engagement in promoting positive youth development and adult competence.

In designing the research methodology, we were cognizant that, foremost, youth participation is difficult to implement with quality, and secondly, that the CCCs had been in operation for less than two years. Hence, we used an "exemplar methodology." Rather than focusing or evaluating all of the youth engagement efforts within a given site, our focus was on identifying the one or two efforts that best represented the site's ability to initiate and support the approach. In focusing on the exemplars within the ACT communities, our hope is that this report will encourage dialogue within and across the ACT for Youth communities about "what works." Time and again, the research literature and the wisdom of expert practitioners inform us that dissemination of innovative practice requires documentation of best practice, but even more importantly, time to reflect and discuss the lessons learned.

To study the exemplars within each site, the research team first examined existing data sources collected by the ACT coordinators within each site. These data, collected quarterly, provided an overview of the activities and outcomes of the sites by the four outcome areas. Our team focused on documentation regarding youth engagement and voice. We then sought an individual interview with each of the CCC coordinators. We asked each coordinator to identify one or two successes that they had had in the area of youth engagement, and then proceeded to conduct an interview around those successes. We then asked the coordinators to identify a community partner who could also speak to the successes. Through interviews with these partners, we gained additional perspective. Overall, we interviewed 11 of the 12 coordinators. We interviewed partners in 10 of the 12 sites.

The majority of the interviews were conducted by two researchers and were tape recorded. To analyze the data, summaries of each interview were written. The tapes were used to fill out the summaries and to confirm quotes. The full research team (four members) met to identify common themes in exemplars across the twelve sites. ✦

FINDINGS

Analysis reveals that ACT for Youth is producing four types of community outcomes:

FINDING 1: ACT for Youth is raising awareness of the importance of youth engagement and youth voice. It is sparking the creation of a wide variety of cross-sector community collaboratives, which are translating this awareness into a shared vision and into shared action.

FINDING 2: Through ACT for Youth, the Collaborations for Community Change (CCC) are modeling youth engagement and demonstrating effective practices. Through these efforts, youth participation is not only visible, but becoming a community-wide expectation. The voices of youth are being reflected in local policy and programmatic agendas.

FINDING 3: As youth participation becomes more normative and visible within communities, ACT for Youth is supporting organizations as they create new opportunities that engage youth in contributing to community health.

FINDING 4: ACT for Youth is building the capacity of adults – community leaders, practitioners, and citizens – to work in true partnership with local youth. By providing training, technical assistance, and logistical support, the CCCs are helping communities become adept at involving youth in community planning and implementation of initiatives.

ACT for Youth is Building Community Awareness of Youth Engagement Through Coalition Visioning and Collaborative Action

Within each site, the CCCs have been successfully established. The CCCs have, in turn, helped facilitate and support a wide range of smaller, action-oriented community coalitions and partnerships. Consequently, an increasing number of leaders and organizations from the public and nonprofit sectors, as well as youth and adult residents, are coming together around issues of positive youth development. These collaborations are actively raising community awareness about the importance of youth engagement and youth voice to positive youth development and to healthy communities. The collaborations are creating shared agendas through which local stakeholders are taking affirmative steps to move from vision to effective implementation.

Community collaborations (also known as community coalitions and partnerships) have increased in popularity as an approach to social problem solving over the past decade. Collaboration has become an essential requirement for government and foundation support. This does not imply that creating collaborations is easy. On the contrary, there are significant challenges which are well documented in the research literature. Foremost, collaborations require people and organizations to have a dual commitment – to the collaboration and to their own organizations. Collaborations often require members to put their own organizational interests on the "back burner" in order to act with unanimity. Resolving these inherent conflicts is tough enough. At the same time, it is important to stress that members of community collaborations are not only building bridges, they are also expected to provide valuable service and support to their communities, often with limited time and resources.

Given this context, it is impressive that the CCCs have made substantial progress over the past two years in terms of building community capacity for positive youth development. As highlighted below and throughout this report, the CCCs are successfully bringing diverse stakeholders and organizations together around youth development. In some cases, they are reinvigorating existing coalitions. In other cases, they are creating new alliances. In all cases, the CCCs are taking on significant and influential roles – roles that any one single organization could not do by itself – in order to promote youth engagement within communities. Specifically, the CCCs are sponsoring and facilitating community-wide training, offering consultation to organizations, providing information on best practices, and modeling good practice.

In WASHINGTON/WARREN, the bi-county ACT for Youth collaboration faces resource and transportation challenges. Consequently, organizations tend to be somewhat isolated by county, having to focus on meeting their own local priorities. Given these challenges, the CCC (led by the Washington County Economic Opportunity Council and key partners in Warren County) is focusing its efforts on the fundamental task of creating new networks to address youth issues. Equally important, it is seeking to deepen existing coalitions by providing a forum for deliberation, training on youth participation, and space for information sharing and reflection. To spark cohesion, new insight, and awareness, the CCC has sponsored multiple assets-mapping projects with youth that illustrate the possibilities for youth engagement throughout the community.

Efforts such as these are leading to tangible benefits. The collaborating organizations are building community by showing their commitment to work with each other and with young people. Members report that they receive personal and professional support for their participation. Together, the collaborative members are raising awareness of youth participation as a key aspect of positive youth development. They are encouraging more organizations and volunteers to consider and to adopt strategies of youth engagement. Perhaps most importantly, the CCCs are helping to create shared agendas and community alliances that will allow youth engagement to become stronger over time.

CASE EXAMPLE: Dutchess County

ACCORDING TO NAIMA GLOVER, Weed and Seed Coordinator for the City of Poughkeepsie, ACT for Youth is effectively challenging organizations not only to work independently, but also to look at how they can collaborate to provide opportunities and supports for all youth in the city. Ms. Glover indicates that the CCC meetings provide valuable opportunities for diverse sectors – government agencies, schools, nonprofit organizations – to interact, raise issues, and develop common agendas around youth issues. She notes:

"Without ACT for Youth, and without having that central body to try and organize things and get people together – and just get them starting to think along the same lines – we wouldn't be seeing the increased activity that we've been seeing, in terms of just trying to get more kids involved in programs, or getting more youth councils up and running."

CCC Coordinator Karmen Cockerham, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Dutchess County, provides the logistical support and technical assistance to help the diverse stakeholders create a shared agenda and bring it to action. One key role is to help build a common language and awareness of youth engagement. Ms. Cockerham has also organized trainings and strategic planning for the collaborating organizations. One critical success was that the organizations agreed on the goals and crafted a strategy creating a countywide infrastructure that promotes youth leadership and development. Ms. Cockerham, in her role as CCC Coordinator, also participates as an active member on a number of other of community coalitions and activities. Not only has this fostered the collaborative relationships and trust needed to recruit new organizations into the CCC, it also extends the reach of ACT by infusing youth engagement values into existing programs and initiatives.

Several new partnership structures for youth have emerged as a result of the ACT for Youth initiative. ACT collaborated with several neighborhood organizations on a community mapping project, where youth-adult teams conducted and analyzed interviews with community leaders and businesses to determine gaps in youth services. Since the youth mappers identified a need for youth leadership programs, the CCC worked with the YMCA and Stissing Mountain High School to develop the Pine Plains Young Leaders Club. This group involves youth from all across the county in discussion and action around youth concerns, and also serves as a "sounding board" for the CCC to obtain input on youth issues.

CASE EXAMPLE: Nassau County

UNITED WAY OF LONG ISLAND has also been looking for ways to strengthen collaborations among youth-serving organizations. According to Kristine Donnelly-Schoen, United Way's DREAMS for Youth Scholarship Program has focused its youth awards in three areas: academics, enrichment, and community service. To help make all award decisions, United Way operates a youth philanthropy advisory board. The community service grants range from $500 to $5,000. However, relatively few organizations were applying for the community service grants. In addition, United Way believes that organizations could strengthen their own independent efforts and increase efficiency and effectiveness by engaging in collaborative efforts.

To address these challenges, United Way joined forces with ACT for Youth, led by the Nassau County Youth Board. First, the community service grants were integrated as part of a larger grant process operated by the Youth Board. ACT for Youth provided assistance to agencies in conceptualizing and completing their applications and helped take on the responsibility of promoting the grant resource among youth agencies. This assistance includes training on youth leadership and community action to help the applicants refine and strengthen their proposed strategies. Ms. Donnelly-Schoen observed that ACT for Youth has been an excellent resource to United Way. The CCC's involvement helped increase the quantity and quality of United Way community service grant applications; additionally, ACT for Youth trainings have raised awareness and encouraged organizations to come together around the common goal of youth participation and the application of youth voice.

"I don't say this lightly, but the training was a huge success. There was ample participation, and multiple agencies stated how much they appreciated the training. During the sessions, there was healthy dialogue, and relationships were built informally. ACT has absolutely increased the willingness on the part of agencies to work together toward a common cause and to collaborate as part of this process. That is critical. ACT for Youth has been able to get agencies excited about their common goals and to strive toward achieving positive outcomes in the community."

CASE EXAMPLE: Orange County

IN 2006, the community advisory board for the Wallkill police department identified disruptive behavior by youth as a major problem. Neither youth nor adults were feeling respected or understood by each other. The advisory board determined that this general sense of isolation and lack of connection to community, along with a lack of positive, structured opportunities for youth, were the major sources of the problem. They formed a Police-Youth Coalition to address the issue.

As a volunteer-driven group managed by community residents, the Police-Youth Coalition brought on ACT for Youth (led by the Orange County Youth Bureau) as a core collaborator. They have found ACT's technical assistance to be a critical ingredient in their own success. For example, while there was much enthusiasm for engaging youth as partners with adults, the coalition was not sure where to start. Many had not been formally exposed to the idea of "assets" or "positive youth development" prior to participation in ACT trainings. Through training, mentoring, and coaching, Orange County's CCC coordinator has helped these adults – many of whom were already skilled in intervening with youth in crisis situations – to develop the attitudes and abilities to collaborate with young people in day to day situations of community planning.

The CCC coordinator has also trained youth and adult members of the Police-Youth Coalition in facilitation practices, and in developing strategies that maximize the participation of all members. The town of Wallkill Police Chief, Robert C. Hertman, who views youth participation as being very much in line with the community policing model, describes how participating in positive activities with youth partners has enhanced the practice of police officers:

"When officers respond to an incident, they can build upon the past experience they have from when they were involved in these social events or sporting events. They build upon that, and they develop a better relationship – a more open relationship – with youth. And so when they have to respond to a more serious event – a police-type incident – there is already a rapport that has been established with many of the youth in the community. We feel it helps us to perform better law enforcement in the community."

This success has led the Town of Wallkill to work with ACT for Youth to develop an independent "discipline board" as a youth-adult partnership. Originally established as a way to deal with youth who broke the rules of Police-Youth Coalition events, the board is now being used to help mediate a number of problems, from minor legal infractions to poor performance in school. Ms. Monaghan sees this as a promising foundation for mobilizing other institutions in town to take a positive youth development approach to working with young people.

Youth Engagement Is Becoming a Community Expectation with the Voices of Youth Reflected in Public Agendas

Through ACT for Youth, communities are modeling youth engagement to local leaders and organizations, and are demonstrating the benefits of involving young people in all aspects of community life. They are demonstrating effective practices and experimenting with new strategies. Consequently, youth participation is beginning to become a community-wide expectation. The voices and concerns of youth are being reflected in the civic and youth development priorities of localities.

Sixty years ago, Hollingshead (1949) observed that United States policy tends to "segregate children from the real world that adults know and function in. By trying to keep the maturing child ignorant of this world of conflict and contradictions, adults think they are keeping him pure." It is fair to conclude that this analysis holds today. To reduce youth isolation from community, it is critical that local stakeholders work with policymakers to create a solid public awareness that youth can, and should, be engaged in community improvement with adults. Policymakers are, of course, confronted with competing agendas. Until a diverse array of constituency groups endorse youth engagement as critical to their interests, it is unlikely that significant public support will emerge to build sustained policy support.

The CCCs in each county are doing this important work. They are putting forth youth engagement as a public idea, as a vision of what is possible and desirable, as a fundamental step toward garnering broad-based support for youth participation. Almost all of the CCCs are working on two levels. They are building multi-sectoral alliances of organizations to demonstrate the ways that youth can effectively contribute to their communities. At the same time, the CCCs are helping young people bring their concerns directly to policymakers and community leaders.

Changing expectations is a long term proposition. It can't happen without modeling. People need to see and experience youth in new ways, and this is precisely what ACT for Youth is doing. As illustrated in the following case examples, the CCCs are elevating youth participation as a key strategy for youth development and community health. Through these efforts an increasing number of organizations and individuals are beginning to experiment and to change their practice.

In almost all of the counties, youth and their adult partners have worked to increase the community-wide expectation that young people participate in local affairs. These initiatives most often begin with large convenings. In ERIE COUNTY, where the lead agency is Erie 1 BOCES, the CCC sponsored the First Annual Youth Summit, which was attended by close to 75 different agencies. Young people took on leadership roles in designing the summit, leading focus groups, and facilitating team building exercises. Following on goals established at the summit, youth and adult partners advocated for the establishment of an Erie County Youth Commission and a Youth Congress. These youth and adult partners were successful in getting financial support from CCC partner Erie County Youth Services to train a team of youth to assume these leadership roles.

Another strategy used by most of the counties is to identify and elevate youth concerns and priorities through the use of surveys. Under the leadership of Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County, the CCC in JEFFERSON COUNTY partnered with the Center for Community Studies at Jefferson Community College to gather youth input on civic engagement. After the survey was completed and analyzed, youth and their adult partners presented the findings to about 30 organizations and agencies. Many community members were surprised to find out that a high number of young people were already volunteering in their communities and that many wanted to deepen their involvement to include participation in community governance and decision making.

CASE EXAMPLE: Dutchess County

IN DUTCHESS COUNTY, the CCC is engaged in a large initiative to raise awareness of youth as community resources, communicating vital information and modeling youth participation in very visible ways for the entire community. For example, the CCC has produced public service announcements promoting aspects of youth engagement and youth voice and is offering Advancing Youth Development trainings to complement and reinforce the announcements. The CCC has also engaged in a community mapping project, where youth-adult teams interviewed business and community leaders to identify gaps in youth services and opportunities in the county. To further raise awareness of youth issues, the CCC is producing a documentary of their findings. City of Poughkeepsie Weed and Seed Coordinator Naima Glover described how the CCC has helped to create slow, but steady, change in how community organizations and public agencies view young people:

"ACT for Youth is doing more to bring the awareness up about doing more youth strength-based programs. They're doing public service announcements, and they're participating in a large youth fest that we're having in May. Everyone is coming together to spread the word about these things now, and trying to get more kids involved…. The idea is catching on, everyone is talking about assets…There is sort of a change going on where we're trying to get more youth input into the programs. ACT for Youth is really bringing that to the forefront in terms of teaching agencies and pushing the idea that youth have valuable things to say, that they should be consulted, that they should be brought on board."

CASE EXAMPLE: Nassau County

ACT FOR YOUTH in Nassau County is using innovative strategies both to raise awareness about youth engagement and, at the same time, to motivate organizations to bring youth concerns into their own agendas. The CCC is seeking to garner, in a systematic way, the voices and opinions of a broad cross-section of Nassau's youth. Toward those ends, youth and adult members of the CCC facilitated 21 focus groups with almost 200 youth at organizations around the county. By conducting the ACT focus groups within settings where youth are already engaged – schools, youth programs, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, juvenile justice facilities – ACT was able to gather input from a wide variety of young people. This outreach strategy ensured that the ACT for Youth Agenda reflects the priorities, interests, and concerns of a cross-section of youth in Nassau County.

CASE EXAMPLE: Oswego County

THE CITY OF FULTON long had active youth participation in community development through the work of the Fulton Community Task Force. This initiative, expanded by ACT for Youth and its lead agency Oswego County Opportunities, has resulted in a formal Youth Coalition that regularly plans well-attended community-wide service and leadership training activities. However, it was not until recently that civic leaders started to recognize the Youth Coalition as a forum for getting youth input and consultation on policy matters.

One such leader is Barry Ostrander, director of Oswego Parks and Recreation, who was first exposed to members of the Youth Coalition during the planning of a tree lighting event. Impressed with the participation of youth, Mr. Ostrander then approached the coalition for assistance in developing a new skate park, because "you need the input of the target audience." Without the resources to put together and support his own youth advisory team, he is very pleased that ACT for Youth had a Youth Coalition in place for him to consult as a sounding board:

"What youth are going to come to the city for meetings? And I'm not always able to go to youth. So these types of organizations are useful. ACT is the conduit. It can be an extension of me. My department is tiny. [ACT] gives access to youth that we didn't have before."

To strengthen the youth consultation component of ACT for Youth, the CCC has hired young adult "Peer Specialists" to conduct outreach and provide training to community stakeholders. Other civic leaders are starting to take notice and seek out the input of the Youth Coalition, particularly since the CCC moved the coalition staff into a school building. The move raised awareness of the coalition among students and school staff, with positive results:

- The principal is referring students to the Youth Coalition to increase the scope of service activities.
- The food services division holds taste testing sessions with the Youth Coalition every two months to help ensure tasty and nutritious menus.
- A local committee responsible for organizing activities to promote National Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month worked with the Youth Coalition to develop an awareness event and a teen pregnancy prevention poster.
- The Tobacco Free Network is also using the youth as consultants in their campaign to change tobacco advertising to young people.

Organizations Are Beginning to Create New Opportunities for Youth Engagement

As youth engagement becomes more normative and visible within communities, organizations are challenged to respond. Consequently, organizations are beginning to create new opportunities for youth to contribute to their communities. Youth are participating in diverse ways, from doing research and gaining input from peers and adult residents to changing the ways that organizations plan and conduct their core programming.

Youth engagement has emerged as an international issue of social justice. Sparked by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – which states that all youth have the right to be heard on matters affecting their lives, including policy matters, and to have their views taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity – community stakeholders are beginning to create a variety of opportunities for youth to get involved. Such stakeholders recognize that youth engagement not only promotes positive youth development but also contributes favorably to democratic processes and policy formation.

The ACT for Youth sites serve as rallying points for youth engagement in New York State. Thus far

Youth engagement not only promotes positive youth development but also contributes favorably to democratic processes and policy formation.

attention has primarily centered on engaging youth in the governance and decision-making processes of local government, schools, and nonprofit organizations. Within these settings, youth are involved in activities such as conducting needs assessments and reporting on findings to local officials, facilitating trainings and workshops, and engaging in philanthropic activities. Through these actions, youth-adult partnerships are demonstrating how to translate the vision of youth engagement into quality practice.

Spurred by opportunities to engage in shared research and shared learning, organizations are beginning to integrate youth engagement into their own work. As noted earlier, for example, NASSAU COUNTY ACT for Youth sponsored a range of focus groups throughout the county. By asking youth for their input, and training youth to facilitate the focus groups, the CCC demonstrated the value of youth voice and effectively modeled youth-adult partnership to community organizations. Many organizations have taken significant action in response to the issues raised by their youth members. In the case of one alternative school, the ACT focus group prompted the creation of a youth government panel at the school to advise administrators on policy issues. The school is now also taking measures to evaluate the degree to which the school environment is youth-friendly.

CASE EXAMPLE: Madison County

THE EARLVILLE OPERA House is located 40 miles away from the Madison County Youth Bureau, where the Madison County ACT for Youth CCC is headquartered. While the Opera House offers youth programming, they do not necessarily identify as a youth organization nor are they a member of the CCC. However, because the Youth Bureau mandates that funded organizations participate in youth development training, Patti Lockwood-Blais, the director, was exposed to the mission and principles of ACT. She was eager to attend the training, because her board had identified a need to do a better job of reaching out to youth.

Ms. Lockwood-Blais indicated that one of the most effective aspects of the ACT training was the use of youth-adult training teams. This approach demonstrated the value of youth-adult partnership in action. Having youth present at the training also provided this busy executive director with an informal opportunity to interact with, and learn from, young people:

"I cornered the two youth at the training to get their opinion about the Youth Singers and Songwriters Showcase. It was my first opportunity to ask a sixteen-year-old their opinion on a program I was developing."

According to Ms. Lockwood-Blais, the ACT for Youth training provided her with the inspiration she needed to figure out how to make their Youth Singers and Songwriters Showcase a youth-friendly and youth-driven event. Since participating in the ACT training, Ms. Lockwood-Blais has started to implement a number of new youth engagement strategies. To inform planning for the showcase, the Opera House is facilitating focus groups in area high schools to get youth input on this and other programs. She intends to pull together a team of motivated youth to help plan and volunteer at the event. Ms. Lockwood-Blais is also working to educate her board about the value of youth voice, with the aim of expanding youth engagement within the organization. In brief, she is hoping to instill in the board the "ah-ha" moment that she experienced through her work with ACT for Youth:

"This [training] has helped us solve problems we knew we had, but didn't know how to go about fixing….I've always liked kids and enjoyed them, but now I see them as more valuable. They want to help, and they really do care."

CASE EXAMPLE: Seneca County

AS THE LEAD AGENCY in Seneca County's ACT for Youth collaborative, the United Way aims to be a model for the community on issues of youth-adult partnership. Staff also seek to demonstrate strategies for creating and strengthening connections with schools. Toward that end, the CCC is "gently guiding" others and showing them that youth are capable of contributing.

One of the most visible actions taken by the United Way was to increase the number of youth on their board of directors from two to eight. There are 21 adults on the board, so previously youth were "almost like tokens." Now the youth constitute more of a critical mass, and their collective voice is more likely to be heard. Further, the youth were chosen to ensure that the local schools were equally represented. In this way, the United Way board gains input from youth who are able to speak to the specific issues facing their own schools and communities. The issue is not simply one of representation. In order to ensure quality, the CCC coordinator meets with the youth before each board meeting to share information and to prepare the young people. This emphasis on youth-adult partnership allows the board to fully profit from the young people's experience and ideas. One participant noted that they are now "walking the talk instead of talking the talk."

This success has led ACT for Youth to attempt to create a countywide Youth Council. To launch the effort, members of the council are the youth who sit on the United Way board, and they are attempting to recruit youth from each of the four school districts. There are ongoing discussions about whether the school districts will support this initiative because it is seen by some as possibly conflicting with other school structures. But progress is being made. One school official noted that her stance used to be: "I'm an educator. I do school. You people do youth development." Because of her experience on the CCC, she is now more open to community-school connections.

It is noteworthy, also, that the students are not waiting to take action. The "informal" Youth Council planned and organized a "Cardboard Village" to increase county awareness of homelessness. The young people believe that visible actions such as this will help build better policy in Seneca County, in addition to calling attention to the need for youth engagement in community health. Young people who participated in a CCC-supported internship program with the local office of Work Force Development are also taking visible collaborative action. These youth created and designed a Youth Resource Guide which they are distributing throughout the county.

CASE EXAMPLE: Monroe County

THE MONROE COUNTY Youth Bureau, lead agency for ACT for Youth in Monroe County, was excited to host the 2007 Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth conference, an annual conference of the Search Institute. However, during the planning process they were dismayed to learn that Search Institute representatives expected them to engage only two young people as conference hosts. Given that this CCC places a high priority on offering youth multiple options for engagement, they informed the Search Institute that such a limited model of youth participation was "not doable."

Instead, the CCC engaged 11 youth as emcees who wrote scripts, hosted sessions, and introduced guest speakers, setting the tone for this conference of 1,800 people. Additional youth designed and staffed a Youth Center, open 17 hours a day to provide a space at the conference where youth could connect with each other. Rochester youth also facilitated "Stepping Up to Solutions" sessions at the conference. These sessions introduced youth and adults to a step-by-step process of planning community service projects, and included a youth-created handbook for participants to take home. Young people were also recruited and trained to document the conference activities through photos, which they then transformed into a slideshow shown at the closing of the event.

The unprecedented level of youth participation in the Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth conference resulted in two key ripple effects. First, the Search Institute was so impressed by the quality of youth engagement that it may increase the level of youth-adult partnership in future conferences. And on a local level, hosting the conference helped the CCC reach out to new community partners by demonstrating the value of youth-adult partnership. The CCC had been seeking, for example, to collaborate with the Rochester organization Neighbors Building Neighborhood. Seeing young people in action at the conference led Neighbors Building Neighborhood to brainstorm ways that youth could serve as resources within their own organization, and to work with the CCC to receive training on youth engagement practices.

ACT for Youth Is Helping to Create Strong Youth-Adult Partnerships

ACT for Youth is building the capacity of adult leaders, practitioners, and residents to work in true partnership with young people. Rather than simply expecting youth to participate as community builders, adults are beginning to insist on youth involvement in the planning of initiatives and their implementation.

As we conducted this research, we noticed that many stakeholders spoke about youth-adult partnership as being a key aspect of youth engagement. This shift in language is consistent with an explicit shift in conceptualization of best practice. Across the country, it is recognized that youth engagement cannot reach its potential unless adult partners are fully involved. Specifically, youth cannot be effective agents of their own positive development if they do not have the support of caring adults who challenge them to reach high expectations.

A focus on partnership sets a high standard. Promoting community health is not about youth leading the charge, nor is it about youth having the correct experience. Community change is hard enough. To expect any group – youth or adults – to do it alone makes little sense. The phrase "youth-adult partnership" reminds us that both youth *and* adults are critical to community health.

All of the CCCs are working hard to convey this sensibility, to help community stakeholders broaden the focus from youth engagement to youth-adult partnership. Ms. Glover, a key member of the **Dutchess County** ACT for Youth states this position clearly: "It doesn't have so much to do with the kids themselves, but it has more to do with the adults' approach to the child, and changing just how people are thinking about kids."

Training is the major strategy used by ACT for Youth to help community stakeholders make this shift. Through innovative means, the CCCs are involving diverse youth and adults in partnership-oriented training.

While training represents the most common way of orienting communities toward youth-adult partnership, ACT for Youth is also building

In MADISON COUNTY, ACT for Youth has trained three high school and three middle students to co-facilitate with adults the Advancing Youth Development training. The training is being delivered to 10 youth-serving agencies throughout the county. This approach has helped model the ways that youth-adult partnerships can enhance community programming.

On STATEN ISLAND, ACT for Youth is working to create opportunities for adults to learn about and engage in partnership with youth. Based in the Jewish Community Center of Staten Island, the CCC is providing technical assistance and coaching to after-school program staff to integrate strategies of youth-adult partnership into activities with a public health orientation. In addition the CCC is training youth-adult teams at four member organizations to use Youth Adult Leaders for Program Excellence, a resource kit for organizational assessment and change. As youth and adults partner on this ongoing project, it is expected that the adults will learn new strategies through which they can work collaboratively with young people.

community capacity for youth-adult partnership through innovative practice. As illustrated in the following case examples, ACT for Youth is offering an array of youth-adult partnership opportunities within communities. Equally important, CCCs are working with agencies and coalitions to integrate the trainings into community action and new programming.

CASE EXAMPLE: Monroe County

ACT for Youth in Monroe County is actively preparing the next generation of adult leaders to partner with youth. Rochester AmeriCorp members are supervising local middle and high school youth in a broad range of community improvement projects. In order to further build the skills of the AmeriCorp members, ACT for Youth was brought on to provide training on youth engagement values and practices. Thirty-eight members participated in the training. The training provided both opportunities to learn and opportunities for networking among these committed young adult leaders.

Youth Voice/One Vision (YVOV) is the primary vehicle for youth participation in policy decision making in Rochester, advising both county and city officials. Marie Watkins, professor and director of the Center for Service Learning at Nazareth College, has long been a supporter of YVOV. Over the past four years, for example, Ms. Watkins has required her students to engage in monthly service projects with YVOV youth. Ms. Watkins established this requirement in part because she believed that it was necessary for the college students to have firsthand experience working as partners with

young people. The CCC has assisted Ms. Watkins in providing coaching to help the college students act as resources for the high school youth. In addition to monthly service projects, the collaboration has helped the Center for Service Learning to involve the YVOV in new projects such as planning a youth summit and co-facilitating a workshop. As Professor Watkins explained, "this program began as an academic initiative, it has evolved into a partnership, and hopefully, ACT for Youth will help to institutionalize it."

CASE EXAMPLE: Orange County

ACT for Youth coordinators take on coaching and mentoring roles, in addition to being involved in formal training. Police-Youth Coalition Coordinator Veronica Glueck, for example, described the CCC as a "good support system" and says that "a lot of what we do we got off the ACT for Youth initiative." Ms. Glueck describes the support of the CCC in this manner:

"Colleen Monaghan, the coordinator, is kind of like our mentor in terms of getting the youth engaged, because she is big on youth

participation and letting the youth voice their opinions in the community. We go to her if we have any questions and she opens up all the ACT for Youth trainings to us. She is like our liaison to the Youth Bureau."

The Police-Youth Coalition is an active member of the CCC, which has promoted them as a model for other communities. The group is helping another Orange County town to establish its own police-youth coalition. Ms. Glueck noted that "it helps to see a bigger organization" such as ACT for Youth validate and

support their local work. Ms. Monaghan seeks to build on these relationships to help the town of Wallkill better support youth. She says that the benefits of youth engagement have been felt beyond law enforcement. Town members have indicated to her that the development of the Police-Youth Coalition has "changed the entire culture of the community"; an editorial in the local paper also suggested that this was the case.

CASE EXAMPLE: Queens Borough

Queens ACT for Youth has worked hard to find the right balance of adult and youth participation in CCC decision making and action. As a result of ongoing training, experience, and reflection, there are now several structures that facilitate quality youth and adult engagement. For example, the CCC has three key committees where youth are equal players alongside adults: the Intergenerational Events Committee, Resource Guide Committee, and Community Service Committee. Each of these committees reinforces the value of youth engagement by modeling youth-adult partnership to the larger community.

The Queens CCC Coordinator, Angelika Peacock, stresses that quality is as important as the number of youth-adult partnerships. Hence she has implemented a number of strategies to prepare youth and adults for partnership. First, the CCC provides extensive training to the partnerships. Youth, for example, go through training on topics such as communicating with adults. Youth and adults are brought together for shared learning using the "Zen of Groups" and "commitment circles" models. Additionally, the CCC makes a special effort to level the playing field in terms of the content of decision making. For example, when confronting complex or controversial issues, each committee engages in an information-gathering process. The CCC provides guest speakers, reports, fact sheets, and statistics to inform all committee members about multiple perspectives on an issue. This strategy ensures that youth and adult committee members have access to comparable information in making a decision or vote.

Queens ACT for Youth, which is led by the Child Center of New York, also ensures quality implementation by pairing youth with specific adult partners, usually one from their same home organization or neighborhood. Ms. Peacock takes adult preparation seriously: adults must be trained and involved in the CCC for several meetings before they are paired with a youth partner. Mentoring in this relationship goes both ways. While adults are required to bring two to three youth from their organization to CCC meetings, the young people are responsible for making sure that the adults show up at meetings and carry out their commitments. This personal connection and commitment to individual young people has strengthened adult engagement in the CCC.

ACT for Youth has also enacted an innovative recruitment method aimed at bringing committed adult partners to the table. Specifically, Ms. Peacock asked the young people to invite adults who were important to them to come to the meetings. This brought a wider range of adult professionals to the table, including a branch manager for a local library and the director of a peace organization. These adults wound up being very committed to the ACT coalition, ultimately taking leadership roles in the coalition. For example, the librarian is co-leading with her youth partner the development of a youth resource guide for Queens and is funding the publication. The peace organization director is now co-chair of the service committee and organized a very successful intergenerational Martin Luther King Day service and arts event.

Because young people themselves identified the adults who they felt would make good partners, this coalition was able to enhance quality participation while engaging a more diverse group of professionals – not just youth workers – into the process as advocates and models of youth-adult partnership.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMMENDATIONS

FINDING 1: ACT for Youth is raising awareness of the importance of youth engagement and voice. It is sparking the creation of a wide variety of cross-sector community collaboratives, which are translating this awareness into a shared vision and into shared action.

FINDING 2: Through ACT for Youth, the CCCs are modeling youth engagement and demonstrating effective practices. Through these efforts, youth participation is not only visible, but becoming a community-wide expectation. The voices of youth are being reflected in local policy and programmatic agendas.

FINDING 3: As youth participation becomes more normative and visible within communities, ACT for Youth is supporting organizations as they create new opportunities to engage youth in contributing to community health.

FINDING 4: ACT for Youth is building the capacity of adults – community leaders, practitioners, and citizens – to work in true partnership with local youth. By providing training, technical assistance, and logistic support, the CCCs are helping communities become adept at involving youth in community planning and implementation of initiatives.

ACT for Youth is becoming a highly valued initiative within the counties where the initiative is active. Using the framework of positive youth development, the CCCs are helping localities broaden their approach from one of prevention to one that also includes a strong focus on youth participation.

ACT for Youth is Positively Impacting Community

Communication is the lifeblood of any community, and it is clear that the CCCs are promoting healthy discourse throughout their localities. Through its own collaborative structure and its active support for other organizational coalitions and alliances, the CCCs are raising awareness of youth participation. They are fostering collective expectations for youth engagement, and creating agendas for achieving meaningful youth participation. Moreover, they are changing the frame of discourse. Rather than focusing solely on youth participation per se, the CCCs are bringing the idea of youth-adult partnership to the fore. The goal is not only to foster young people's participation in youth issues, it is to foster active partnerships between youth and adults for the benefit of the whole community.

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Research has shown that many collaborations never get beyond the information exchange or planning phases of their work. This frustrates members, and more importantly, limits the collaboration's ability to effect meaningful change. The CCCs, in contrast, have been successful in balancing coalition building with activities geared at positively impacting organizations and communities. These changes, occurring incrementally over time, have created new opportunities and supports for youth. In some cases, the changes are beginning to be institutionalized through policies and programs; the hope is that they will become more widespread and infused throughout the community. New benefits are also beginning to accrue as CCC members become more familiar with each other. CCC members are developing joint projects, increasing cross referrals, establishing new systems of organizational support, and looking for ways to generate shared funds.

The Role of the ACT for Youth Coordinators

Nationally, experience in the field indicates that unstaffed collaboratives are less able to produce as many results as staffed collaboratives. Finding resources for staff positions doesn't guarantee success, but it certainly helps. This is certainly the experience of ACT for Youth. Promoting new ideas such as positive youth development and youth-adult partnership are labor-intensive tasks, especially when the goal is to disseminate these ideas across whole communities. Labor becomes even more important when it is considered that the aim of ACT for Youth is not only to promote and disseminate new ideas, but also to assist a wide variety of organizations in implementing new practices. Quite simply, none of this can be accomplished without a skilled coordinator.

The ACT for Youth coordinators, in close collaboration with their key organizational partners and volunteers – youth and adult – are playing key roles in helping the CCCs move toward the goal of greater youth participation in their communities. Throughout the key partner interviews, many of the CCC coordinators were held in high regard. Words like "connector," "glue," "networker," and "facilitator" were most often used to describe these coordinators.

In the main, CCC coordinators are doing three things really well, and these three things are exactly what the research literature says should be done to promote innovative change: (1) coordinators are focusing stakeholder attention on the vision and purpose of youth engagement; (2) they are helping community stakeholders translate the vision into

Promoting new ideas such as positive youth development and youth-adult partnership are labor-intensive tasks, especially when the goal is to disseminate these ideas across whole communities.

quality practice; and (3) they are building a sense of shared ownership for youth participation among stakeholders.

The model in Figure 2 outlines a set of promising practices to disseminate and implement youth-adult partnerships with quality. These strategies have been gleaned from our previous research in different parts of the country and with different audiences. Applying the ACT CCCs to this model, we can see that at their best, the CCC coordinators are doing many, many things right.

▶ **Building a common vision and purpose for youth-adult partnership:** the coordinators are successfully recruiting "champions" who are willing and able to advocate for CCC efforts. Further, the coordinators are getting actively involved in professional networks to further raise awareness of youth-adult partnership. And, finally, the coordinators are connecting with the self-interest of stakeholders. They are helping the community to see that it is not only youth who benefit from youth-adult partnership but that the community as a whole does as well.

▶ **Helping stakeholders translate a vision of youth-adult partnership into quality practice:** the coordinators are effectively providing access to practical information and program models through training and consultation. They are coaching youth and adults through direct experience, and equally important, helping the partnerships reflect on such experience. Strategic planning – formal and informal – is a cornerstone of the coordinator's efforts.

▶ **Building a sense of shared ownership among community stakeholders:** the coordinators are working to align policies, structures, and monies to support youth-adult partnership. They are encouraging stakeholders to establish clear roles and responsibilities not only for youth but for adults as well. And finally, the coordinators are good story-tellers. They are able to build ownership among diverse persons by highlighting the outcomes and excitement that partnerships bring to youth development initiatives.
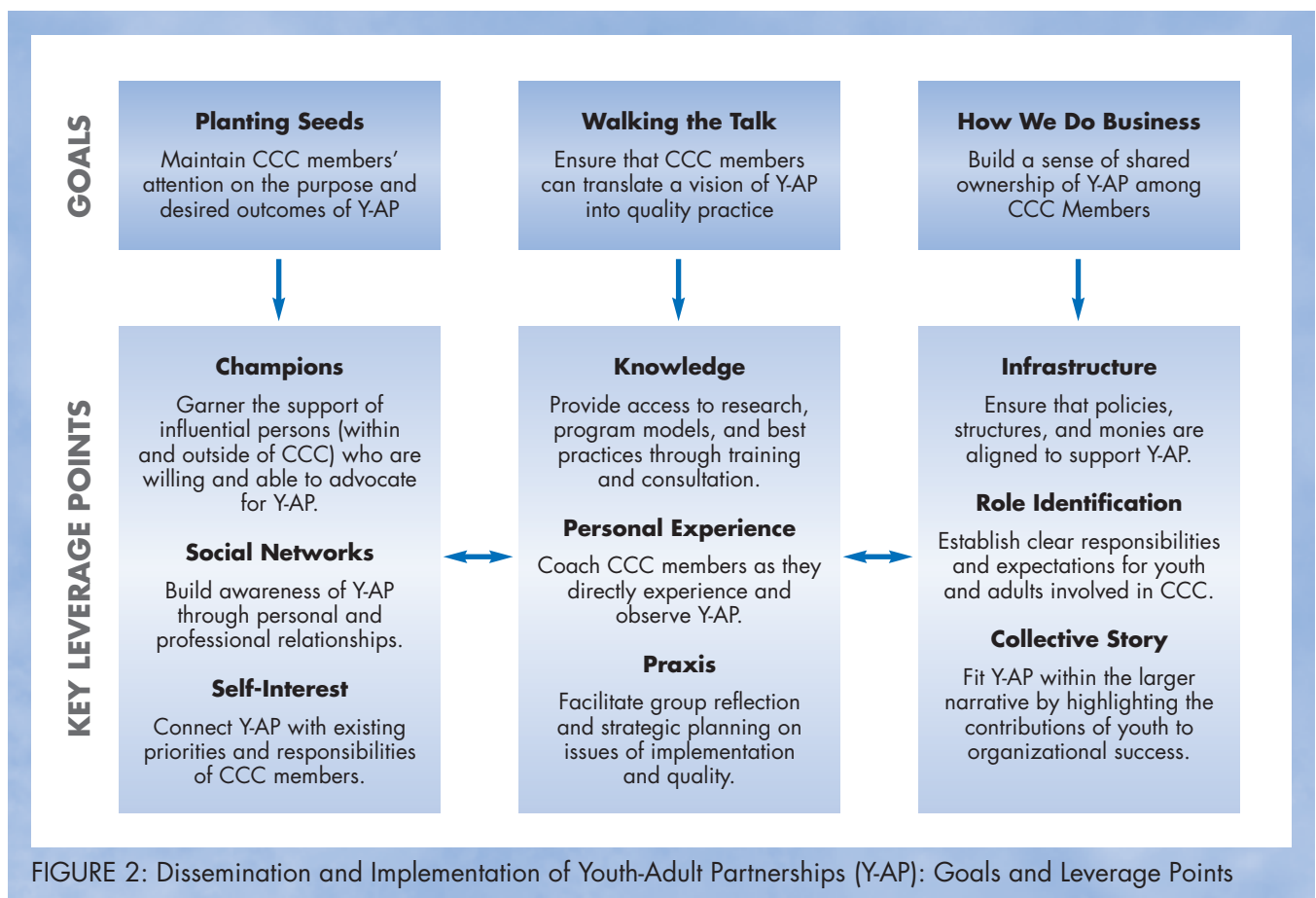

FIGURE 2: Dissemination and Implementation of Youth-Adult Partnerships (Y-AP): Goals and Leverage Points

Recommendations

The policy context in the United States is slowly changing to offer greater opportunities for the enactment of developmentally-oriented youth policies, and with this shift there have been increasing calls to support youth participation in community decision making and action. Youth participation is most definitely becoming a public idea: it is an idea that is becoming understood and endorsed in the public and nonprofit sectors of society, as well as in settings of public education.

The stakeholders in New York's ACT for Youth initiative have done a wonderful job demonstrating key strategies and positive outcomes of youth participation. Some local sites have struggled more than others, but this is to be expected. The shift from being an "innovative best practice" to a "normative strong practice" is always uneven and always slow. The challenge is to sustain the movement toward making youth participation a public idea. Sinclair (2004) puts it this way:

"The challenge for the next decade will be to learn how to move beyond one-off or isolated consultations to a position where children's participation is firmly embedded with organizational cultures and structures for decision-making."

Most certainly, New York's ACT for Youth initiative has helped create a solid foundation for sustained, high quality youth participation in the future. But, again, it is important not to romanticize the status quo. More work is necessary to ensure that youth participation becomes a normative activity in communities. The most pressing question is this: how do we ensure that youth participation does not become the latest "flavor of the month"? Framed more affirmatively: *how can ACT for Youth sustain the momentum for youth participation that has arisen across New York?* By looking at the exemplars, we gain some insight into what the ACT for Youth communities should be focusing on in the future. These include the following next actions:

▶ **Raise Awareness.** Whenever possible, strive to keep key stakeholders focused on the purposes and expected benefits of youth-adult partnerships. Use the CCC as a forum to discuss the benefits of these partnerships and to identify ways they can be integrated into priorities of CCC members' organizations. Spread the word regarding the value of youth-adult partnerships by promoting them visibly in the community and recognizing the value of youth voice.

▶ **Recruit Champions.** Identify and recruit influential community members to support and advocate for youth-adult partnerships in public forums and in key strategic planning events.

▶ **Train and Coach.** Continue to provide training to develop understanding of the purpose and benefits of youth-adult partnerships. To build the skills that will enhance partnership quality, provide training in best practices for both youth and adults.

▶ **Focus on Institutionalization and Sustainability.** There are countless ways of engaging youth in community decision making and action. The task is to be intentional by focusing efforts on those strategies that can be sustained over time and those that serve as catalysts for further action to support youth participation over the long term.

▶ **Reflect.** Youth-adult partnership becomes normative in communities when key stakeholders continuously move between idea and action, between talk and practice. Collective reflection and planning is the fundamental element of quality practice. ACT for Youth has many resources for reflection and action planning that should be utilized to their maximum extent.

Collective reflection and planning is the fundamental element of quality practice.

It is important to emphasize that these five strategies need to be continued as priorities at all levels of the ACT for Youth initiative. The CCCs are ultimately responsible for implementation, but, of course, they cannot do it alone. At the state level, for example, it will be important for the Department of Health (DOH) and the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence (COE) not only to raise awareness of youth participation internally, but equally important, among public officials and other state agencies and departments. Further, it will be essential for the Department of Health and the Center of Excellence to

visibly offer legitimization for the practice by offering recognition and reward for those sites that most effectively implement youth-adult partnership.

The benefits of youth participation to youth, adults, and communities are undeniable. It is impressive how the ACT for Youth sites are striving to achieve these benefits. The ongoing task for the DOH and the COE is to continue to fine-tune and focus their efforts to support the sites. With the Department of Health and the Center of Excellence continuously striving to provide legitimization and technical support to the sites, there is little doubt that the ACT for Youth CCCs will be able to create and institutionalize the conditions that allow effective youth-adult partnerships over the long term. ✦

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