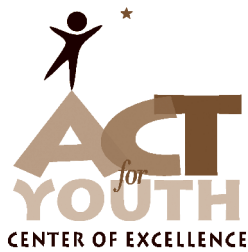Lessons Learned From
ACT for YOUTH:
The First Five Years

ACT for Youth Center of Excellence

About ACT for Youth

In the late 1990s, the New York State Department of Health began a critical examination of its youth-serving programs and the approaches they exemplified in communities across the state. Drawing on lessons learned from categorical risk-reduction approaches, the Department considered new ways to foster optimum health and well-being for New York State youth. Two principal themes emerged:

• The most effective youth-serving programs take a positive approach to youth, promoting strengths and potential rather than focusing primarily on risky behaviors.

• In order to reach all youth and achieve long-term change, there must be an extensive shift in consciousness at all levels of government and in all community sectors; a transformation in the way adults view and interact with youth.

Building on these principles, the Department of Health collaborated with Partners for Children, a public and private sector alliance, to design and launch a new youth development initiative. Through eleven community partnerships supported by two Centers of Excellence, Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth seeks to infuse the youth development approach into communities across New York State. The success of initial efforts motivated renewed commitment, and a second five-year round began in July 2006.

About This Report

This report describes how ACT for Youth unfolded over the first five years, capturing individual experiences and identifying common themes and lessons learned across the community partnerships. It is intended to be of value to communities interested in implementing similar efforts, and to contribute to the knowledge base regarding best practices in youth development. Material from this report is drawn from Findings from ACT for Youth: 2000 – 2006, a publication of the ACT for Youth Centers of Excellence.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the New York State Department of Health for their vision, leadership, and support of this innovative initiative, recognizing that our children and youth are truly New York's greatest resource.

Lessons Learned from
ACT FOR YOUTH:

The First Five Years

ACT for Youth Center of Excellence

ACT for Youth

The health of our youth mirrors and directly impacts the health of our country.

Today's youth are tomorrow's workforce, parents, and leaders.

The future of youth is shaped by the opportunities we create for them today.

IN 2000, THE NEW YORK STATE DEPART-MENT OF HEALTH launched an innovative and ambitious youth development initiative. Called Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth, the initiative seeks fundamental changes in the ways communities connect with children and adolescents. ACT for Youth supports young people by transforming the contexts in which they live, fostering health and well-being through community-level collaboration and a profound shift in the way young people are viewed by adults.

Findings drawn from the first five years of the ACT for Youth initiative endorse the promise of the youth development movement, and offer a new framework for creating long-term, systemic change.

ACT for Youth supports young people by transforming the contexts in which they live.

Community Partnerships and Centers of Excellence

In the first iteration of the initiative, the Department of Health selected eleven grantees to form cross-sector community development partnerships (CDP) for youth development. The CDPs included the Bronx, Brooklyn, Yonkers, the Capital District (Albany, Rensselaer, and Schenectady counties), and Columbia, Greene, Onondaga, Otsego, Cattaraugus, Jefferson, and Erie counties. Each CDP started with a lead agency selected to launch the part-nership, and with the support of a full-time coordinator. The work of the eleven CDPs focused on the achievement of five outcomes:

1. *Build and maintain the community development partnership:* reach out to different sectors of the community, improve communication and collaboration among partners, and involve all CDP partners in decision making.

2. *Increase services, opportunities, and supports for young people:* open new opportunities for young people in family, school, and community contexts; initiate or strengthen support services; and create or enhance activities promoting positive youth outcomes.

3. *Increase youth engagement:* offer new opportunities for young people to contribute to their community, including community service, advocacy, and leadership.

4. *Create organizational change:* work with community organizations to promote changes that reflect youth development principles, including changes in organizational structures, philosophy, tools, and physical environments.

5. *Instill community policy change:* establish policy changes that incorporate youth development principles in community institutions such as schools and local government.

To support this large-scale initiative, two Centers of Excellence provided training, technical assistance, and evaluation support. In the Downstate region, the Center of Excellence was administered by the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center. The Upstate region was led by a collaboration among Cornell University's Family Life Development Center, the University of Rochester Division of Adolescent Medicine, and the New York State Center for School Safety.

Evaluation

The five-year evaluation plan sought to determine whether and how CDPs achieved ACT outcomes, and to illuminate changes in the ways communities worked together to serve and include youth. The Centers of Excellence staff designed a set of standardized tools and collected data from the partnerships to track the initiative as it unfolded in each CDP (process monitoring), determine the extent to which the CDPs were organized as intended (process evaluation), and determine if cross-sector, community-wide adoption of youth development principles was accomplished (outcome monitoring).

The evaluation utilized multiple data sources, methods, and analytical strategies to address central questions associated with each of the five outcome areas. Data collection tools and approaches included quantitative and qualitative methods, and gathered information from a broad number of key stakeholders and constituents. Data sources included: CDP Quarterly Reports, CDP Annual Reports, Upstate Needs Assessments, CDP Partnership Surveys, CDP Case Studies, Youth Focus Groups, and an Exemplar Study.[1]

By using multiple data collection tools and methods and diversifying the respondent base, evaluators documented patterns and identified trends emerging across the CDPs, including progress in each outcome area and lessons for future efforts.

[1] *Further information about these studies is available from the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence, act4youth@cornell.edu.*

What Is Positive Youth Development?

For ACT, positive youth development is not a program but a philosophy that guides communities in the way they organize programs, opportunities, and supports so that young people can develop to their full potential. Communities that adopt a youth development approach emphasize:

- **Positive youth outcomes:** rather than focusing solely on reducing negative outcomes, communities prepare their young people for adulthood by helping them build the competencies and values they need to become healthy and productive adults.

- **Youth Voice:** youth are active and equitable partners in youth development initiatives.

- **Strategies to involve all youth,** not just "high-risk" or "gifted" youth.

- **Community involvement:** all sectors have a role to play in making the community a great place to grow up.

- **Collaboration:** community organizations and institutions, youth, and parents work together toward common goals – and sometimes are required to work in new ways.

- **Long-term commitment:** communities provide the ongoing, developmentally appropriate support young people need over the first 20 years of their lives.
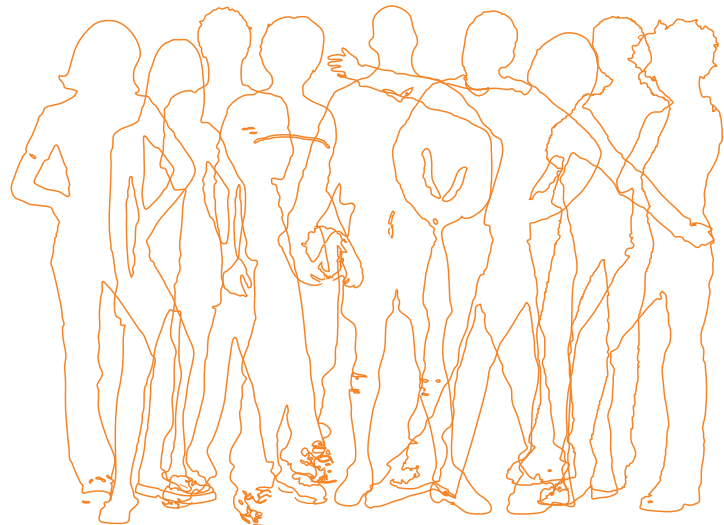
Findings and Recommendations

Collaboration means willingness and ability to…

- Trust!

- Set past conflict or competition aside for the collective mission.

- Resolve turf issues.

- Share time and other resources.

- Actively facilitate access to key stakeholders and networks.

Outcome One: Build and Maintain the Community Development Partnership (CDP)

Developing and maintaining partnerships within each ACT site over the course of the initiative was a central objective. To do this, CDPs needed to identify, recruit, and involve key stakeholder agencies and individuals from across their communities. Community partnerships are dynamic and often difficult to sustain over time. Because of this, crafting a mission, establishing core objectives, and keeping up momentum became critical tasks for CDP leaders. CDPs also needed to identify and leverage community resources while simultaneously working around community limitations.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

To create and sustain their partnerships, the most successful CDPs implemented these practices:

1. *Build on existing collaborations.* Partnerships that grow out of existing coalitions have a head start. Begin by integrating youth development principles into the existing partnership's mission and vision, developing a sense of group ownership before community work starts in earnest.

2. *Draw a diverse array of youth-serving* organizations into the partnership from a very early stage in the initiative. Success in this area leads to new training opportunities, shared resources, improved service delivery, and collaborative funding opportunities.

3. *Seek cross-sector involvement.* Building a capable, collaborative partnership depends in part on participation from many different community sectors. CDPs learned that it takes new and different ways to engage non-traditional partners such as parents, faith communities, businesses, and informal community groups. Community political figures such as the town supervisor, county executive, or county legislators are particularly valuable allies in spearheading organizational and community policy changes regarding youth.

4. *Engage youth as core partners.* Youth involvement at the partnership level emerged as one of the biggest challenges for most ACT for Youth sites. Young people were seen as active program participants, but not as CDP members. However, youth involvement did evolve over time. Initial goals to recruit young people directly to boards grew into efforts to engage young people in decision-making roles on a variety of levels (see outcome three).

5. ***Develop early, strong, and cohesive relationships.*** ACT partnerships that collaborated well from the beginning typically continued to function effectively throughout the initiative, while those with little early detectible partnership development did not tend to grow in later years. CDPs bound together only by contractual agreements did not work together effectively. Contractual partners did not as a rule develop the commitment or motivation to pursue partnership goals; instead of freely sharing information and resources they limited themselves to delivering the contracted service. In successful CDPs, partners were perceived as equals and both contributed to and received benefits from the collaboration. Continuity and consistency of members within the partnership also contributed to success.

6. ***Create a clear internal structure together.*** Once a partnership comes together, group expectations, structures, and processes should be developed. Clearly defining roles, responsibilities, and expectations from the start is instrumental to success, and effective communication is essential. Conflict should be expected, acknowledged, and dealt with swiftly and effectively.

Clearly define roles, responsibilities, and expectations from the start.

7. ***Develop a cohesive community-level model.*** Partnerships that are able to collectively endorse and use a cohesive community-level youth development framework and language, such as the Search Institute or Communities That Care models, are more likely to achieve their objectives.

8. ***Support and strengthen the leadership of the partnership.*** Strong, effective lead agencies and partnership coordinators benefit all objectives, particularly community policy change (outcome five).

   • *Lead with a well-positioned, respected,*

experienced agency. When the lead agency lacked the credibility, interest, or leadership skills to manage the initiative, the initiative faltered. Partnerships benefit from lead agencies with a track record of successful strategic planning, organizational development, and collaboration, as well as the ability to leverage resources.

   • *Engage high-level community leaders in the earliest stages of planning and implementation.* Community leaders bring organizations and community groups into the youth development initiative, and are able to advocate for its mission effectively.

   • *Identify and support a consistent, effective, experienced coordinator.* Stable, enthusiastic, and charismatic leaders are difficult to come by, but are those best suited for the role. ACT coordinators were most effective when they were able to share a clear vision of youth development, had a history of mutually satisfying relationships with youth, relied on existing networks and coalitions in the community, and possessed strong group facilitation skills.

9. ***Define, refine, and continue to revisit the partnership's vision.*** CDPs that identified and reflected on their vision and mission, taking steps to ensure that their activities reflected this purpose, were more likely to succeed. Each partnership defined and infused youth development within the community in their own way, but it was essential that there be an internally consistent vision that members endorsed and conveyed to the larger community. Shared vision held the partnership together – and was cited by participants as an important benefit.

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The Greene County ACT for Youth CDP was structured using four interrelated work commit-

SOS Framework:

- Services are actions done *for* young people to meet basic health and instructional needs, and to provide stability.

- Opportunities are actions done *by* young people in their family, at school, and in the community to explore and experience new roles, skills, and responsibilities.

- Supports are activities done *with* young people to facilitate access to relationships and resources that are essential in creating a positive climate for development.

tees. The Executive Steering Committee, which was the lead decision-making body, included members from the Department of Social Services, Sheriff's Department, Public Health/Family Planning, and the local community college. The remaining three committees included the Operations and Quality Assurance committees and the Resource Task Force. This foundation enabled the partnership to remain strong even when key actors moved on.

The CDP also depended on the active engagement of diverse member agencies. At most partnership meetings, one could find county agency leaders, program coordinators, police officers, school administrators, clergy, and Elk Lodge members sitting around a table discussing their experiences with the partnership, sharing success stories, and strategizing for the future. This CDP's genuine commitment to community-wide partnership, coupled with a commitment to increasing services, opportunities, and supports for youth, made it particularly effective.

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Outcome Two: Increase Services, Opportunities, and Supports (SOS)

The SOS framework pioneered by Karen Pittman offers a matrix through which an optimal environment for youth can be nurtured. According to Pittman, pathways to fulfillment are created when young people receive basic services, engage in challenging and rewarding opportunities, and collaborate with adults to create and connect to the supports (relationships and resources) they need to grow.

Many ACT for Youth communities concentrated early efforts on this goal, perhaps because providing services and programs is familiar territory. CDPs were expected to couple their efforts on this outcome with their efforts to increase youth engagement. In general, activities here benefited all other outcomes in that they helped:

- Bring partners to the table by establishing common interests (outcome one).

- Lay the foundation for increased youth engagement (outcome three).

- Promote organizational changes to incorporate a youth development approach (outcome four).

- Open the door to community policy change (outcome five).

CDPs used direct and indirect approaches to achieve success. Direct strategies and activities included creation or enhancement of programs for and by youth, as well as outreach to more diverse audiences. Those using the direct approach anticipated that success at the ground level would filter up into organizations and impact community attitudes.

Indirect strategies and activities sought to affect service delivery and program infrastructure on a broad scale. Rather than address services, opportunities, and supports directly through programming, indirect efforts focused on identifying underutilized community resources such as informal community groups, businesses, and faith communities, and on providing youth development education. By educating service providers and the larger community about positive youth development, these CDPs aimed to create opportunities and supports through enduring systemic and environmental change.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

The diverse efforts of CDPs to increase services, opportunities, and supports for youth in their communities yielded important lessons that can be instructive for future youth development initiatives:

1. *Redefined terms like services, opportunities, and supports need to be taught, reinforced, and adopted early on.* Virtually every CDP operationalized these terms in

different ways. For the purposes of measurement and uniformity, early efforts to build a collective working definition is critical. Community education is vital; only educated stakeholders who clearly understand youth development principles can drive the effort toward long-term systemic change.

2. ***Strong youth-adult partnerships are an essential mechanism for opportunities and supports.*** Programs and services are more innovative, authentic, and engaging when they are planned collaboratively with youth rather than by adults alone.

3. ***Youth development programming must be tailored to specific local contexts.*** ACT for Youth communities reflect New York State's urban, rural, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. Having a diverse and representative partnership able to tailor activities to local needs was critical to success.

4. ***Unrestricted funds are an asset.*** A key element that is unique to ACT for Youth, and proved to be a useful and exciting aid to the work of CDPs, was that ACT for Youth funds were not restricted to specific high-risk segments of the youth population. This gave CDPs the freedom to bring diverse groups of young people together, avoiding the stigma that often accompanies participation in programs targeted to high-risk youth.

5. ***Direct and indirect approaches leave different legacies in the CDP communities.*** While all CDPs used a mixture of direct and indirect methods, the majority of CDPs concentrated their efforts on direct approaches that had a more immediate impact on the lives of youth in their communities. Those efforts often helped CDPs gain momentum and attract positive attention early on, which became useful when more diverse strategies were employed. The CDPs that emphasized indirect approaches took longer to build and demonstrate results. However, by the fourth year of the initiative, those CDPs that had put their efforts toward the indirect goals of influencing service delivery and infrastructure demonstrated marked stability and influence across their communities.

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Kan Cobra, a Brooklyn CDP partner agency offering martial arts training, opened savings accounts for all youth participants. The program director instituted this policy to help kids think about the way they spend their money and to stress the importance of saving and investment. One partner commented, "It's so important for these kids to begin to focus on their future. Often you'll hear them say that they don't think they are going to be around in 10 years." Each month, the program director deposits ten percent of the revenue she receives from each participant's fees into his or her savings account. Young people learn to manage their own finances through the support of adult leaders. Participants have used the money to attend tournaments and field trips.

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■ Outcome Three: Increase Youth Engagement

Youth engagement, voice, participation, and empowerment are terms used, often interchangeably, to point to fundamental principles of the positive youth development movement: that young people should be active agents in their own developmental process, and that youth should be viewed as resources and assets to be nurtured, not problems to be fixed.

ACT communities also found that meaningful youth engagement is fulfilling. When young people experience being heard and taken seriously, they feel empowered to believe in themselves.

Increasing youth engagement at the community level is a challenging venture, and CDPs

Youth Engagement happens when...

- Organizations make a commitment to youth participation, creating meaningful opportunities and supportive structures.

- Activities and services provided for youth are universally accessible.

- Adults recognize and respond to the logistics, location, environment, and time challenges youth engagement entails.

- Adult staff are genuinely excited about working with youth.

- Youth and adults are prepared to work together.

- Youth lead; adults provide guidance and support.

- Appropriate structures are in place for recruiting, preparing, and retaining youth.

Forms of Youth Engagement

Rather than making youth representation on a board of directors the first or only step toward youth engagement, consider a range of opportunities for young people to exert influence:

- **Initiative partners:** Youth serve as recognized and valued partners in the CDP.

- **Community board and committees:** Youth serve as members of boards and committees for community institutions or agencies.

- **Advisory councils:** Youth operate or serve on advisory bodies responsible for providing input into project or agency governance.

- **Philanthropy:** Youth make funding decisions.

- **Program development and planning:** Youth research, plan, and develop programs, events, and other projects.

- **Evaluation:** Youth conduct research used for quality improvement.

- **Education, public policy, and advocacy:** Youth work to inform and advocate for system and social change.

- **Service learning:** Youth learn and grow by contributing to the community.

found this objective demanding, especially in the early stages of the initiative. Many communities struggled not only to create new roles for young people, but also to sustain that involvement over time. Barriers such as transportation, coordinating adult and youth schedules, and overall preparedness (for youth, adults, and organizations) were only a few of the difficulties faced.

But ACT communities also found that meaningful youth engagement is fulfilling. When young people experience being heard and taken seriously, they feel empowered to believe in themselves, gaining a sense of new possibility. Many youth acquired specific skills in writing, public speaking, decision making, and collaboration. Several reported that the experience would better prepare them for college and potentially influence their career decisions. Youth participants consistently cited four main benefits of meaningful youth engagement:

- Acquisition of leadership skills.

- Opportunities to voice their opinions and ideas.

- Exposure to diverse individuals, ideas, and perspectives.

- An enhanced sense of personal power.

The experience can be equally fulfilling for adults. Young people offer energy, new ways of thinking, insights, ideas, and enthusiasm. As one ACT for Youth coordinator wrote:

I think the thing that I will take away from my experience in working with this group in particular is the enthusiasm of young people. Their wisdom. Because in some ways they're more perceptive than adults could ever be. And also just the memory of watching this group grow and mature, and having had the opportunity to be a part of their lives. I'm not suggesting that [our program] is a huge part, but it's neat to watch the group grow and evolve and see them take on new responsibilities and new challenges and come up with amazing ideas and insights.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

Each CDP approached the task of increasing youth engagement in a creative way. However, certain lessons can be drawn from their collective experience:

1. *Offer a variety of opportunities for meaningful youth engagement.* In the SOS trilogy of services, opportunities, and supports previously described, opportunities are vehicles for youth engagement; youth are active players rather than passive recipients of information or services. Opportunities offer youth the chance to practice and expand on what they know through meaningful work, service, or advanced learning. Young people will choose levels of involvement that match their skills, interests, and situations, moving into different roles as their abilities evolve.

2. *Make activities and services for youth universally accessible.* Targeting to specific "at-risk" or "high-risk" groups leads to stigma and decreased youth engagement. One CDP used language of universal, non-targeted services for all activities, services, and programs run by ACT for Youth. They attributed their success in youth engagement directly to the fact that no one would be turned away, no labels were attached to participation, and programs were not offered as part of a service package; rather, they were framed as an exciting set of opportunities for young people to get involved in the community.

3. *Recognize that logistics, location, environment, and time will always play a key role in establishing youth voice.* Adults need to be flexible in order to accommodate young people who wish to attend meetings. Meetings should be held at times that allow young people to participate. One CDP held meetings at school so that students active in the ACT for Youth advisory group in that district were able to attend.

4. *The right staff will make a critical difference.* Youth recognize when adults are being forced to take part in an activity. Energetic, passionate, and committed staff who are genuinely excited about working with youth are essential to success.

5. *Youth and adults need preparation for youth engagement.* Orientation, training, and ongoing support are necessary for all participants. Establishing a high degree of structure (for example, providing a manual with responsibilities and expectations outlined for both youth and adult partners) also facilitates success. Adults need to be oriented and trained to work with youth and to overcome preconceived notions they might have about young people. Team building and mechanisms for reflection will strengthen authentic youth-adult partnership.

It's youth voice, it's not like youth-slash-adults. We make the decisions and we get to decide what goes on. . . . We choose. It's really the youth speaking. It makes us feel more responsible, to know that we're actually, like, the voice for the whole youth.
—ACT for Youth participant

6. *Youth lead; adults provide guidance and support.* If youth have more say in the direction and operational maintenance of programs and activities, they will engage more deeply over a longer period of time. Adults who act as mentors facilitate youth leadership most effectively.

7. *Offer youth opportunities for upward mobility in an organization (for example, from participant to intern to staff).* Increasing levels of responsibility provide rewarding opportunities to serve while also furthering personal and leadership development. Youth who move through an organization in this way may also serve as role models and mentors for those with less experience.

8. *Celebrate the accomplishments of young people.* It is important to take the time to recognize young people for achieving their goals and for their involvement in the community. Highlighting youth accomplishments through media stories and award ceremonies broadcasts the message that young people are valuable contributors and community resources.

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In the Erie County CDP, several partners began new practices for involving youth as a result of the ACT for Youth Initiative. Four organizations engaged youth on their boards for the first time, the Erie County Youth Board now encourages youth to become voting members, and the Board of Education made a commitment to give youth a role at both the building and district level.
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Outcome Four: Create Organizational Change

ACT for Youth challenged community partnerships to intentionally integrate youth development theory into their organizations' normal way of doing business, requiring changes in organizational structures, philosophy, tools, and physical environments. This was one of the most difficult undertakings that CDPs confronted over the course of the initiative. Results emerged gradually, with measurable strides demonstrated by the fourth and fifth years.

Typically, CDPs sought to fulfill this goal through activities in several discrete areas: developing a common language across and within CDP member agencies, providing opportunities to engage staff in the initiative, establishing mechanisms for incorporating youth voice into organizational functioning, and conducting organizational assessment and action planning.

Organizational Change happens when organizations…

- Agree upon and consistently use a common youth development language.

- Assess current practices, policies, and assumptions regarding youth.

- Articulate a clear vision and strategy for change, and share these ideas with all stakeholders.

- Build the necessary formal and informal infrastructure to support the infusion of youth development principles within the organization.

- Advocate for change in partner organizations.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

Despite the demanding nature of this outcome, CDPs made evident progress toward incorporating youth development principles into their organizational systems. Several lessons can be drawn from their experience:

1. *Identify at the outset of the initiative that change at the organizational level is an intended outcome – and clarify what that change will look like.* The emphasis an individual CDP put on this objective was often determined during the initial planning stages. For some, institutional change was the primary objective of their involvement in ACT for Youth. The most sustainable CDPs focused on changing organizational assumptions, behaviors, and systems from an early point in the intiative.

2. *Build and use a common youth development language.* Although youth development frameworks share certain core components, such as youth voice and community change, there is little consistency in the way community groups talk about youth development. One of the first tasks for communities is to define youth development principles and delineate best practices for partner agencies.

3. *Provide a deep level of training and technical assistance both internally and externally.* To create and sustain organizational change, the day-to-day assumptions, behaviors, and processes that keep agencies running must alter. Many CDP members realized early on that encouraging (or in one case mandating) all in-house agency staff to be involved in youth development training increased the likelihood that organizational change would occur successfully. The ACT for Youth Centers of Excellence provided rich training and resources to the CDPs, and many CDPs in turn effected change across the wider community through youth development training. Many CDPs offered tailored trainings in youth voice and youth decision making to local school districts, government agen-

cies, and nonprofits. CDP members routinely commented that services and training provided through the ACT for Youth initiative helped participants see youth in a positive light, encouraging many providers to consider adopting similar goals for organizational change.

4. *Create an environment of commitment and trust.* Change is difficult for most people and cannot be successfully accomplished in an environment of confusion or mistrust. It is important for leaders to encourage clear, open, and ongoing dialogue about the purpose and impact of organizational changes, as well as new expectations of staff.

5. *Assess and adjust.* By providing comprehensive feedback about successes and challenges, formal self-reflection processes lead to practical improvements. The ACT Centers of Excellence provided CDPs with a variety of self-assessment tools for reviewing attitudes about youth and for discovering how successfully youth development principles were incorporated into practice at organizational, partnership, and community levels.

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As a result of their participation in the ACT for Youth partnership, the Jefferson County Office of Probation has made considerable changes to the way that correction officers approach their interactions with youth. The department no longer designs enforcement plans, but rather works one-on-one with young people, family courts, and parents to design treatment plans that address the individual assets and needs of each young person. The asset language has also been incorporated in the Youth Assessment Screening Instrument (YASI) that the Office of Probation uses to design individual treatment plans for youth offenders.

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As a supervisor with the Probation Family Court Unit, I felt that my officers needed to see the positive things that kids can do because we are rou-

tinely exposed and have to address the negative issues. I wanted to be able to counteract the negative language that seems to creep into our day-to-day work with these kids.
—ACT for Youth participant

Outcome Five: Instill Community Policy Change

The biggest change in our community is to even consider giving youth a voice.
—ACT for Youth participant

One of the most distinguishing features of the ACT for Youth model is its focus on policy change at the community level. More than any other youth development initiative put forth in the past few years, ACT for Youth aimed to effect positive outcomes for youth by instituting policy changes reflecting youth development principles in schools and local government agencies. The ACT for Youth partnerships often served as the catalyst for community change, advancing new attitudes about youth, providing training, and influencing schools and government—all of which are necessary precursors to broad, community-level change.

Fifteen to twenty years are typically required to institutionalize community change.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

The innovative work produced under the umbrella of this ambitious outcome yielded important lessons to inform future initiatives:

1. *Five years is a challenging time frame for CDPs to develop exemplary, sustainable policy change within their communities.* At the outset of the ACT for Youth initiative, CDPs reported that an understanding of youth development was present in their communities, but few had the structures

in place to move a youth development agenda forward within schools, local government, or even their own organizations. CDPs moved quite quickly to use their newly formed collaborations to enact a number of community policy changes. However, as one ACT participant put it, for most CDPs "the simple act of creating and sustaining a community-wide collaboration of partners that was focused on implementing youth development principles and practice was in itself the most profound community policy change." Establishing durable community-level change in attitudes and practices requires a long-term commitment of resources; research suggests that fifteen to twenty years are typically required to institutionalize community change.

2. *CDPs benefit from having a clear definition of community policy change and benchmarks in place for achieving that change.* Clearly defined, achievable steps that are established from the outset of the initiative help CDPs understand and plan for success in this outcome area.

3. *Capture information about community policy change through standardized data collection systems.* Ideally, a set of standardized data tools that include a mix of quantitative and qualitative information should be employed across each initiative site. High quality longitudinal data collection provides important information for future planning, and demonstrates the initiative's impact to funders and stakeholders.

4. *Promote the visibility of the youth development initiative.* Even the best leadership is not enough to accomplish the broad reach needed to bring about wide-scale community change. Success is more likely when high visibility is achieved through extensive outreach to nontraditional partners, including the media, and the youth development philosophy is endorsed by core community leaders.

5. *Involve schools and educators.* For many partnerships, success in creating community-level policy change came as a result of forming sustainable and trusting partnerships with local school districts. Districts offer opportunities for collecting information about youth assets, providing youth development training for educators, and creating connections between community members and the youth development initiative.

6. *Involve youth.* Without an active and vocal cadre of youth, sound community policy change will not occur. The active involvement of young people at all levels of the initiative is essential to maintain momentum and relevance.

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The Erie County ACT for Youth initiative embraced the Search Institute's asset framework. Initially, the CDP set out to educate the youth service and education communities about the developmental asset philosophy, using strategies from large-scale trainings to one-on-one outreach. Key government and school officials were instrumental in promoting the goal of transforming Erie County into an asset-building community.

The next step was to involve the larger community in asset building. The partnership decided to use the Search survey, which provides a snapshot of how young people are doing in the community, as a mobilization tool. The partnership was able to enlist all school districts in the county to conduct the survey, reaching 50,000 eighth- and eleventh-grade students. Using a town meeting format, youth and adult teams presented the survey findings to school and community groups. As a result of this effort, new relationships have formed across community sectors, and concrete action plans have been developed and implemented.

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A Foundation for Long-Term Change

FIVE YEARS OF THE ACT FOR YOUTH INITIATIVE delivered a number of promising results for communities across New York State. The findings discussed throughout this report indicate that the ACT for Youth initiative made significant progress in building community capacity through cross-sector partnerships, and increased community attention on adolescent developmental needs and capacities. The infrastructure laid in many of the ACT for Youth communities during the first five years provides the basis for creating long-term changes in organizational and community-level policy and practice. Many of these changes altered the way key individuals and institutions regard and treat young people.

In sum, the ACT for Youth initiative achieved significant accomplishments:

- *Cross-agency and cross-sector partnerships did stimulate and promote community change.* The new and improved cross-sector community partnerships in place represent systems working together, many for the first time. These partnerships were the essential vehicle driving youth development practices and principles at the community level.

- *All communities strengthened and created services, opportunities, and supports that enable youth to transition to adulthood with increased competencies, confidence, and positive experiences.*

- *There was substantial progress on increasing authentic youth engagement efforts beyond token inclusion of young people.*

- *New relationships and positive strategies began to emerge with non-traditional partners such as schools, law enforcement, parents, and business.* Hard to reach constituencies such as education and justice have begun to come to the table to understand how environmental contexts affect positive youth development. There is still much room for improvement in engaging these constituencies, as well as involving parents and youth; however, ACT for Youth has begun to find common ground with these key stakeholder groups.

Will the ACT for Youth initiative succeed in reducing risk behavior and increasing positive outcomes for youth in ACT communities? Ultimately, answers to this question remain unclear. Not only is it very difficult to measurably alter community social, political, and economic topographies; accurately capturing the nature and extent of change is something not all scholars agree can be accurately accomplished. Nevertheless, although research on the long-term impact of

Many of these changes altered the way key individuals and institutions regard and treat young people.

community initiatives such as ACT for Youth is mixed, there is a small but growing body of research that provides compelling evidence that when communities nurture youth through supportive relationships with adults and peers, engage youth in challenging activities and learning experiences, and develop meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership, communities can expect to see dramatic improvements in developmental outcomes in late adolescence and early adulthood.
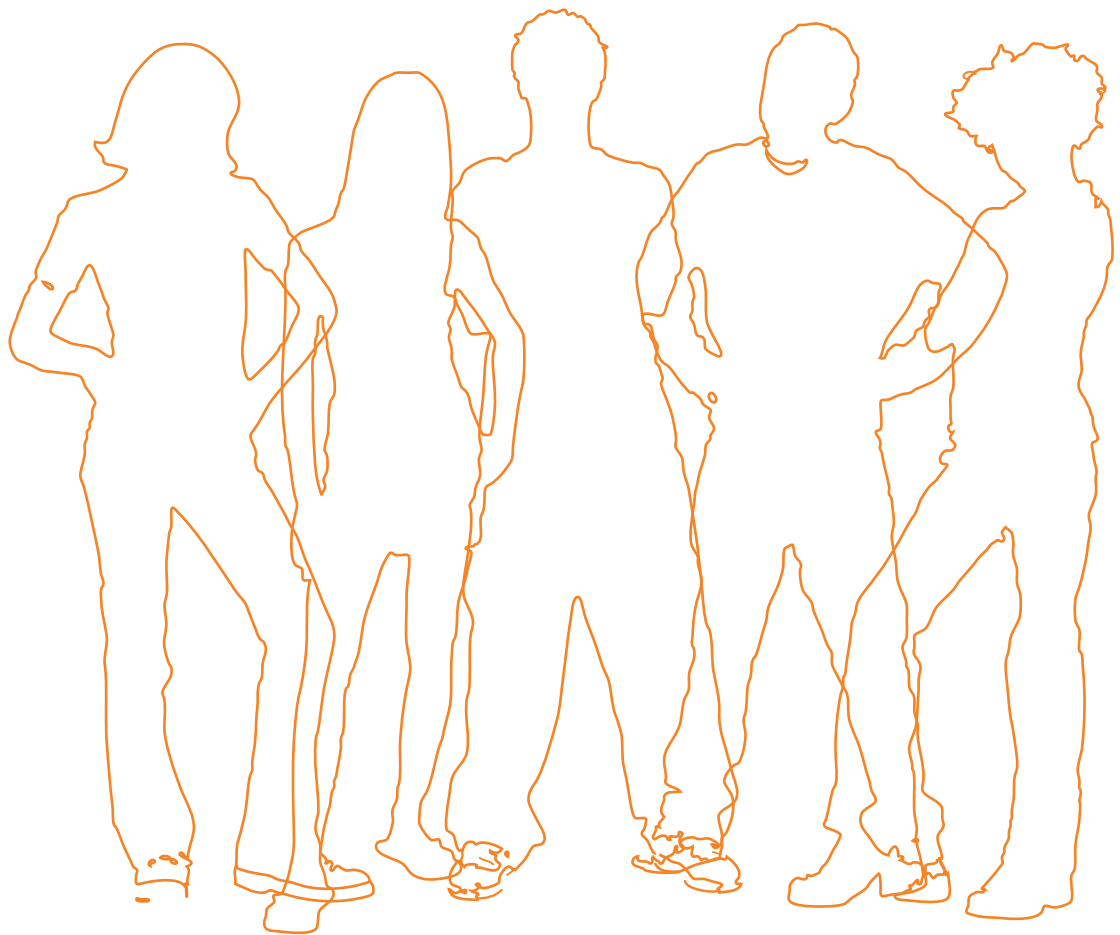
Beyond The First Five Years

THE SUCCESS OF THE FIRST ROUND of ACT for Youth partnerships led the New York State Department of Health to fund ACT II. For this second round, Collaborations for Community Change were funded in twelve communities, including continuation of two of the original CDPs. ACT sites are supported by one Center of Excellence, a partnership among Cornell University's Family Life Development Center, Cornell University Cooperative Extension of New York City, the University of Rochester Medical Center's Division of Adolescent Medicine, and the New York State Center for School Safety. The Center of Excellence also provides technical assistance to selected adolescent health programs funded by the New York State Department of Health.

Resources for Further Study

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT POSITIVE youth development and the ACT for Youth initiative, see:

- ACT for Youth Center of Excellence web site
  http://www.actforyouth.net/

- Journal of Public Health Management and Practice Supplement: Improving Public Health Through Youth Development
  Journal of Public Health Management and Practice, 2006, November(Suppl)
  http://www.health.state.ny.us/community/youth/development/journal_supplement.htm
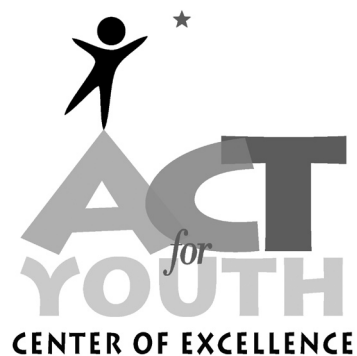
ACT for Youth Center of Excellence
Family Life Development Center
Cornell University, Beebe Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853
607.255.7736
act4youth@cornell.edu
www.actforyouth.net