



Youth Engagement in Collective Impact Initiatives

Lessons from Promise Neighborhoods

Jessica Shakesprere, Mica O'Brien, and Eona Harrison

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Youth engagement can be a crucial strategy for increasing the success and sustainability of programs and initiatives aimed at improving the educational and developmental outcomes of children and families. Promise Neighborhoods—a federal grant program that funds collective impact initiatives to advance academic success and well-being among disadvantaged students—are implementing this work on the ground. This brief discusses the importance of expanding youth voice and agency in collective impact work, outlines a continuum of youth engagement strategies, highlights Promise Neighborhoods grantees that are providing a platform for young people to spur change, and presents promising practices for organizations to empower young people in their programs.

Youth Engagement for Inclusion and Improved Outcomes

Research on efforts to change long-term service systems such as health and social service delivery has found that success depends on whether stakeholders buy in to an initiative, become involved early, and remain involved (Buse, Mays, and Walt 2012). Program participants are the most salient stakeholders: to ensure their buy-in, they should be involved in program development, design, implementation, and evaluation. However, many organizations and service providers lack the systems and/or capacity to meaningfully include these voices, especially youth voices.

Background

Historically, family- and youth-focused initiatives and programming have failed to engage young people as collaborators in the programming process. Unfortunately, in many environments, young people are viewed only as recipients of services, without the ability to make valuable contributions. This attitude has led to programs in which adolescents participate but have few opportunities to represent their own interests (Raby 2007). This is particularly relevant to young people of color, whose limited access to resources historically has created additional barriers to power and privilege that their white counterparts do not face (Fulbright-Anderson et al. 2005). Programming efforts that aim to rectify equity issues often use a deficit-based model that focuses on identifying problems and closing achievement gaps. However, a strengths-based approach that values the knowledge, skills, and experiences that young people have can foster programs that promote inclusive youth development (Littenberg-Tobias and Cohen 2016).

More recently, programs and systems that serve families and young people are recognizing that they cannot effectively develop and implement programming without youth involvement. Young people have deep knowledge and understanding of their own experiences, communities, opportunities, and challenges. Sharing power and decisionmaking in program design and implementation with young people supports the creation and delivery of interventions that respond to their needs and interests. Furthermore, research on youth engagement projects has found that engaging young people in decisionmaking is an effective way to gain their commitment and create an inviting space that will attract more young people while contributing to their development (Students Commission of Canada 2018). Ultimately, this improves recruitment, retention, and sustainability of youth involvement and leads to robust programming overall.

Young people are the future leaders of their communities, so engaging them in meaningful ways is fundamental for sustaining community organizing, activism, and progress. They should be active agents in their own growth and development, rather than passive recipients of programs or services provided by others. Youth engagement models create an inclusive, intentional, mutually respectful partnership between and among young people and adults in a community. Power is redistributed and shared, contributions are valued, and young people's ideas, perspectives, skills, and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms, and organizations that affect their lives and communities (USAID 2012).

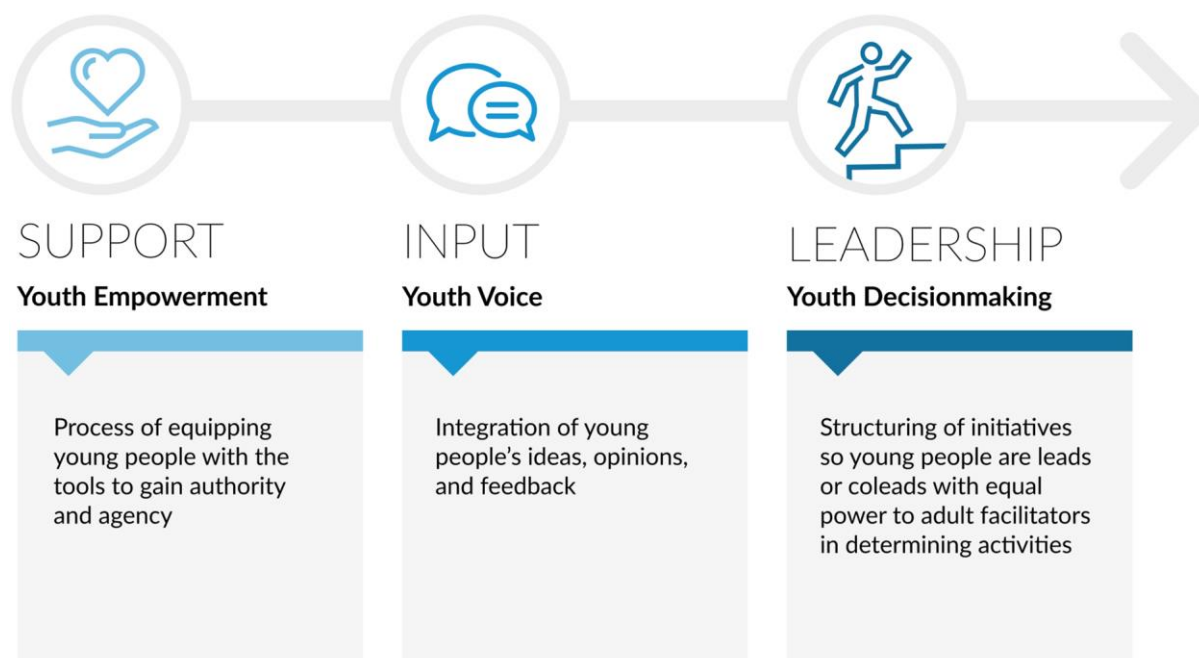
Importantly, young people are not homogenous, and stakeholders must work to lift up diverse voices. Youth engagement should be valued in a range of contexts. Furthermore, single-lens solutions to community challenges may fail to address a critical gap; a diversity of voices in programming design and implementation will help identify and address a broader range of needs.

Models and Strategies

Youth engagement is the intentional, meaningful, and sustained involvement of young people in actions to create positive social change, and it can be conducted in various ways. Initiatives range from basic

consultation with young people to youth-led strategies (Mitra 2006; Nemoy and Miles 2018). Youth engagement continuum models illustrate these forms and the degrees of youth participation. Although various typologies exist (Hart 1992; Lee and Zimmerman 1999; Mitra 2003), youth engagement models generally include three categories: support, input, and leadership (figure 1).

FIGURE 1
Youth Engagement Continuum



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Source: Urban Institute, drawn from Roger A. Hart, *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship* (Florence, ITA: UNICEF, 1992); Linda E. Lee and Maxine Zimmerman, "A New Vision for Student Voice," *Education Canada* 39, no. 2 (1999): 34–35; Dana L. Mitra, "Student Voice in School Reform: Reframing Student-Teacher Relationships," *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des Sciences de l'Éducation de McGill* 38, no. 2 (2003): 289–304.

Several strategies exist for applying each level of youth engagement. These can be paired together to provide greater support to young people and increase the likelihood of a program's or initiative's success.

SUPPORT (YOUTH EMPOWERMENT)

The following capacity-building activities provide young people with tools and opportunities to build the skills needed to provide input on and/or lead initiatives.

- **Mentorship** connects young people with supportive adults or older youths to ensure that they have the tools and supports necessary to succeed and achieve their goals. The mentor cultivates a positive relationship with the young person to guide and support them, often focusing on academics and career preparation.

- **Youth and young adult leadership development** offers young people school- or community-based opportunities to build leadership skills, pursue strategies to help youths and families, and/or research an issue in depth. Effective youth leadership programs, fellowships, or institutes build on youth development principles and emphasize the areas of development and program components that engage and support youth leadership.
- **Case management** is a collective impact strategy to advance academic results, deepen relationships with community members, and foster engagement and coordination across neighborhoods. In various Promise Neighborhoods, case managers are staff members—for example, in-school coordinators help manage the delivery of services and interventions to students and their families (box 1). Case managers have different roles and responsibilities in different contexts; Promise Neighborhoods case managers primarily support academic outcomes for students while advancing results across the cradle-to-career pipeline (O'Brien and Gillespie 2020).
- **Community-based service learning** is a powerful avenue for youth participation that involves identifying, planning, and implementing projects that meet a community need. Through hands-on, experiential learning, young people build their capacity, develop skills, and increase their knowledge while applying these to real-world situations. Successful projects are tied to learning objectives and several areas of study. This expands the impact that projects have on learning and gives students a deeper understanding of how different subjects are related.

BOX 1

Case Management: Chula Vista Promise Neighborhood and San Diego Promise Neighborhood

The Chula Vista and San Diego Promise Neighborhoods in California use academic case managers, or “academic advocates,” to support middle and high school students inside and outside the classroom. Advocates provide one-on-one and group mentoring to a cohort of students experiencing academic, behavioral, and/or other challenges. Advocates meet with students’ families on a regular basis and provide referrals for additional services when needed. Perhaps most importantly, advocates remain with the same cohort of students from 7th to 12th grade, serving as a consistent resource and support system. Since 2012, the Promise Neighborhoods have served more than 150 students through the academic advocate model.

Sources: Annual progress reports from Chula Vista Promise Neighborhood and San Diego Promise Neighborhood; Mica O’Brien and Sarah Gillespie, “[Advancing Results through Case Managers: A Promise Neighborhoods Case Study](#)” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2020).

INPUT (YOUTH VOICE)

In this youth engagement category, young people provide insight, advice, and opinions on a policy issue or program development. Youth voice can be incorporated once or throughout an initiative; however,

including it from the beginning is preferable when determining which results are important to young people and how best to achieve them. The following are some methods for bringing in youth voice.

- **Youth feedback** is the most common form of youth voice (Mitra 2004). Youth-serving programs and staff often use interviews and focus groups to gather information and to begin to understand young people's perspectives on issues. Often, adult facilitators collect feedback from young people in one-on-one sessions or in small groups of five to seven people. This strategy can provide space for the unpacking of ideas and opinions through dialogue and serves as a source and means of understanding data.
- **Youth advisory boards or committees** are another avenue for young people to learn and take on the roles and responsibilities of leadership. These groups give young people an opportunity to work together to support high-quality youth programs, youth organizations, and youth policy. They are typically long term (at least 12 months) and made up of young people who are members of the community, program participants, or service recipients (box 2). Members begin by sharing their experiences of belonging and participating in these settings and together imagine how they can be improved.

BOX 2

Youth Advisory Group: Deer Creek Promise Neighborhood

Each year, Deer Creek Promise Neighborhood in Mississippi invites high school students to participate in a youth council that involves development of leadership skills and postsecondary preparation programming. The youth council, which generally consists of students on track to graduate from high school and go to college, meets once a month after school. Students take part in interactive activities such as games and scavenger hunts, as well as larger school- and community-wide events. The youth council is a supportive environment for students as they progress through high school, with the goal of fostering opportunities for young people to advocate for themselves and their community.

Source: Annual progress reports from Deer Creek Promise Neighborhood.

LEADERSHIP (YOUTH DECISIONMAKING)

Organizations with a strong commitment to youth engagement may recruit young people to sit on boards of directors. Specific strategies to make this a success include preparing the other board members and providing training and support for the youth members. The following are some methods for bringing in youth decisionmaking.

- **Youth- and adult-led initiatives** seek to establish young people and adults as equal partners in building and leading campaigns and organizations. Young people and adults develop a common agenda, without distinguishing youth concerns from adult concerns. Instead, young people and adults share the power and authority to plan, mobilize, and educate based on defined roles, responsibilities, and skills.

- » Another way for adults to share leadership, particularly when a young person or a group of youths do not yet have the leadership experience to handle an event on their own, is to assume the role of facilitator.
- **Youth- and student-led groups** establish young people as the main spokespeople, while adults provide administrative support. Young people are trained and supported to conduct outreach and coordinate projects with their peers. Youth-led organizations or initiatives make a point to defer to the vision and authority of young people.

Regardless of where an initiative's activities fall along the continuum, the goals of youth engagement remain the same: to return power and autonomy to young people by equipping them with tools to design and lead work. The continuum provides a helpful lens through which to assess and categorize engagement efforts, as well as to monitor progress toward goals. Adults must think through the needs and capacity of their initiatives before engaging young people. Combining some of the previously mentioned activities to support young people and preparing adult members to effectively work with young people are necessary for successful youth engagement.

Youth Engagement in Promise Neighborhoods

Collective impact initiatives aim to align partners, stakeholders, services, and systems around a common mission to advance a social good. The term “collective impact” has come in recent years to refer to joint efforts and activities, managed by a “backbone agency,” that coordinate processes and practices to produce equitable outcomes. Place-based work usually incorporates collective impact strategies to more effectively serve communities, with the hope of creating lasting change for residents. Take schools as an example. The issues that some schools must confront are intertwined with other challenges in communities related to concentrated poverty, such as long-standing disparities in housing, employment, and health. Although schools are crucial for young people's economic opportunities, they alone cannot address the challenges students face. A place-based collective impact approach can help develop strategies and community-led solutions to address the range of challenges that affect outcomes for children and young people in their communities.

Promise Neighborhoods are a strong example of such work. Promise Neighborhood grantees—which include nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher education, and Indian tribes—create a continuum of place-based solutions that span from early childhood to college and career. Promise Neighborhoods seek to close achievement gaps and promote family and community wellness by developing shared systems of measurement and implementing effective interventions informed by rigorous data collection.

Young people are among the primary stakeholders in education-oriented collective impact initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods and have unique insights into the challenges and barriers that young people face in their communities. Collective impact initiatives can incorporate youth voice to address the needs and circumstances of various target populations. Promise Neighborhoods grantees and like-minded cross-sector initiatives have had success engaging children and young people in

kindergarten through grade 12, college students, recent college graduates, and young adults pursuing employment. Youth engagement may be used to address school climate and attendance concerns in elementary and middle schools, as well as sexual health, college preparedness, and leadership development among older youths. Because engagement activities are inherently responsive to the youth population they involve, they can be adapted and applied to many contexts.

Nearly all Promise Neighborhood grantees are incorporating youth engagement practices and strategies into their work to some degree. Although grantees’ approaches differ and fall along different stages of the youth engagement continuum, youth input and involvement are central to the missions of most grantees. In this section, we highlight the youth engagement efforts of three grantees—Knox Promise Neighborhood in Kentucky, the Supporting Transitions and Educational Promise Southeast Alaska (STEPS AK) Promise Neighborhood, and West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhood—and discuss their motivations for pursuing this work, methods for building trust and partnership with young people, programmatic strategies, and overall strengths and challenges. As table 1 shows, the three grantees are diverse in the geographic regions and communities they serve yet share a commitment to providing meaningful opportunities for youth engagement.

TABLE 1
Overview of Featured Promise Neighborhoods

| Promise Neighborhood | Overview | Youth engagement strategies |
|---|---|---|
| Berea College Knox Promise Neighborhood <i>Knox County, Kentucky</i> | School and regional leadership teams aim to address school climate concerns, foster relationships within and across schools, and encourage youth investment in community. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Youth empowerment (leadership development and community-based service learning) |
| West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhood <i>Philadelphia</i> | A collaborative approach across a strong network of partners and facilitators has led to youth- and adult-driven programs that support positive youth development, youth employment, and safety within schools and the broader community. Programs prioritize relationship building and youth leadership to meet youth, family, and community needs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Youth voice (feedback on programs) ▪ Youth decisionmaking (youth- and adult-led initiatives) |
| Supporting Transitions and Educational Promise Southeast Alaska Promise Neighborhood <i>Southeast Alaska</i> | Priorities are youth engagement and leadership development, which is largely spearheaded by partner organizations. Youth engagement work coalesces around three goals: (1) to improve school climate and the experience of marginalized students, (2) to expand youth capacity through training, and (3) to celebrate cultural difference and foster empowerment. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Youth empowerment (leadership development) ▪ Youth decisionmaking (youth-led initiatives) |

Sources: Promise Neighborhoods grantees’ annual progress reports and discussions with Promise Neighborhoods staff.

Motivations for Pursuing Youth Engagement

The Knox, STEPS AK, and West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhoods see youth engagement as essential for successful programming and improved results.

Knox Promise Neighborhood has identified youth engagement as a vehicle for fostering connections between young people and their communities. Community service is central to Knox's youth engagement work. The Promise Neighborhood creates opportunities for students to engage with the larger community, with the goal of encouraging young people to remain in or return to the community after high school and college.

STEPS AK asserts a direct connection between youth engagement and results like positive school climate, academic success, and high school graduation. Its leadership seeks to foster long-term educational success by investing in youth engagement activities that improve students' and families' experiences with and perceptions of school.

With the help of youth development partners, West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhood aims to upend traditional relationships between adults and young people, actively asking youths to share their thoughts and opinions on programming. The Promise Neighborhood partners with skilled facilitators and program designers who have demonstrated interest and expertise in implementing a youth-driven framework.

Building Trust with Young People

Across the three grantees, building trust with young people is a lengthy process that often requires adult staff members to be transparent about their experiences. Building trust also requires consistently showing up and meeting young people where they are. In Alaska, the Promise Neighborhood and its partners build trust with young people by first creating safe spaces. Youth participants set ground rules and are given the freedom to share their personal stories and experiences in creative ways. Knox Promise leaders invest time and resources for students to get to know one another on a deeper level, hosting mission and vision workshops and an overnight retreat. In Philadelphia, a facilitator works on the ground to understand young people's needs. This involves listening to youths without judgment and creating standards and mechanisms for accountability between young people and adults. By fostering open dialogue, the grantee and its partners set expectations and address challenges in real time.

Strategies

Grantees' goals and capacity largely determine which youth engagement strategies they use.

All schools within the Knox Promise Neighborhood footprint have student-led leadership teams that focus on school-specific needs and concerns. Students that are usually not involved in school activities are selected or encouraged to apply for the leadership team. In the past, teams have worked to reduce barriers to attendance and develop initiatives to welcome new students. On the regional level, students from nearby high schools meet outside school hours to identify and carry out community

service projects. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, students organized and held a community health fair that featured local vendors and educational booths.

Across STEPS AK's footprint, youth engagement activities take place both inside and outside schools. In Sitka, a small group of high school students meet after school as part of the Sitka Youth Leadership Committee, one of the Promise Neighborhood's flagship youth engagement programs. Committee members participate in trainings to serve as peer educators and develop media campaigns on issues they care about. In Juneau, young people have helped train school district staff members by recording videos that encourage adults to think about the needs, supports, and policies that affect youth well-being in their schools. These trainings provide both young people and adults with stronger skills for engaging with one another. Meanwhile, in some rural communities, youth engagement activities are more conducive to school environments, and student leaders and adult partners may focus on improving school climate. As the backbone organization, the Association of Alaska School Boards is also providing opportunities for young people to attend statewide conferences, as well as trainings for adults working with youths.

In West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhood, a model to center young people as collaborative leaders and decisionmakers in the community drives youth engagement. Young people can apply to be a part of the Safety Captain Initiative or the Play Captain Initiative—workforce development programs that provide teenagers with necessary “first job” experience and coaching from a caring adult. Through the [Safety Captain Initiative](#), young people engage in workshops and field trips, with the goal of applying a project-based learning approach to answering two key questions: What makes a neighborhood friendly to young people? And what makes a neighborhood safe for children and youths? The [Play Captain Initiative](#) partners with a Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Department program called Playstreets, which blocks off streets to create safe play spaces for children and young people. Both safety captains and play captains are employed by the Promise Neighborhood and its partner, Fab Youth Philly, and are compensated for their time. In 2018, the Promise Neighborhood and Fab Youth Philly began to connect a handful of students to after-school jobs at two child care centers.

Strengths

Knox Promise Neighborhood's youth engagement model encourages interplay between youth and community engagement. Students are tasked with conceiving, designing, and implementing one or more community service projects, bolstering both their leadership potential and their understanding of community needs. The student leadership team model has proved effective in fostering strong connections between the Promise Neighborhood and older students, who are interested in staying involved after graduation. More specifically, the strengths of Knox Promise Neighborhoods' youth engagement efforts include the following:

- **Students take ownership of program activities and engage with the broader community.** Before the pandemic, the leadership team organized and hosted a health fair that provided free wellness checks, dental work, and screenings for community residents. Students contacted vendors to participate in the event, managed logistics, and led activities.

- **Students stay connected after they graduate.** Many students who graduated from high school in 2020 expressed interest in staying engaged with the regional leadership team. The virtual platform will enable these students to remain involved in youth engagement activities, join regular meetings, and mentor younger students.

The strength of STEPS AK's youth engagement efforts lies in its commitment to preparing adults to effectively work with young people. While partner organizations often lead trainings for young people and facilitate student-to-student capacity building, the Association of Alaska School Boards offers technical assistance for adults who work with and on behalf of youths. And even though several of STEPS AK's youth engagement partners tend to work with small numbers of students, the potential impact of the work extends far beyond those who participate. The strengths of STEPS AK's youth engagement efforts include the following:

- **Adults receive training to engage with young people.** STEPS AK hosts strategic planning sessions with school board members to create opportunities for meaningful youth engagement and involvement in decisionmaking.
- **The impact can extend beyond participating students.** The Sitka Youth Leadership Committee, which involves 8 to 13 students a year, conducts annual social media campaigns to increase awareness about healthy relationships. In 2019, statewide media picked up and shared campaign materials with more than 350,000 Alaska residents. Committee participants also host workshops and events where students and community members can share what they are learning.

West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhood's success is built on authentic youth-adult relationships in schools and the community. Strong adult facilitators and partners connect with young people and families to understand needs and establish youth-driven training programs. Through leadership initiatives, young people work with adults and other youths to conduct research on community, safety, and health and wellness, as well as to promote youth development. Partners emphasize the importance of celebrating young people for their contributions and impact. The strengths of West Philadelphia's youth engagement efforts include the following:

- **Relationships are built between young people and adults.** By making connections with young people and prioritizing needs such as employment and professional development, strong facilitators create and sustain meaningful relationships with youths. Training and compensating young people for their skills, knowledge, and experience have been crucial to recognizing their value.
- **Youth and adult programs incorporate youth input.** Young people are consulted on various programming efforts to ensure youth needs are being met and their perspectives are considered. This includes providing input on who would be a suitable candidate for a position that serves young people and meeting with adult coordinators on issues such as food security, safety, and homelessness.

Challenges

Promise Neighborhoods grantees and partners understand and are working to address ongoing challenges to youth engagement activities. From recruiting eligible young people to keeping participants engaged in both fun and meaningful ways, youth engagement strategies face numerous obstacles that require creative solutions. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced more challenges and is forcing grantees to reevaluate their approaches to in-person service delivery. Youth engagement activities—which generally depend on in-person relationship building—have been hit particularly hard. Challenges across the three Promise Neighborhoods highlighted in this section and others have included the following:

- **Recruiting and retaining participants.** The restructured power dynamic offered by youth engagement activities can be unfamiliar to young people—partners shared that youths are not often asked for their opinions and thoughts—and that can make building trust with them difficult.

Where young people are recruited and engaged can also present a barrier. West Philadelphia worked to connect with young people; however, it struggled to recruit teens for its programs because the framework was similar to that of school. Some teens may have negative associations with school and not want to interact with the education system beyond their classes.

These obstacles are opportunities for shifting the relationship among young people, adults, and schools. Doing so requires persistence and innovation but can have a powerful impact on all involved. Knox, STEPS AK, and West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhoods have worked with past participants to help advertise their youth engagement opportunities. This gives members of earlier cohorts the opportunity to share their experiences, and these young people may know of better outlets and strategies for reaching their peers. Some grantees started their youth engagement by getting buy-in from school administrators. This partnership led to a better understanding of students' involvement in school and to advertising for grantees' youth engagement opportunities by trusted teachers, who helped identify potential participants.

- **Prioritizing resources.** Youth engagement strategies require dedicated staff members, materials and meeting space, and funds for travel, trainings, and events. For organizations and initiatives with limited funding and capacity, staff must prioritize youth engagement projects and investments. STEPS AK's leadership notes that urban and rural areas across southeastern Alaska have varying amounts of resources for youth engagement: rural communities are often more constrained than larger urban communities. Nevertheless, Promise Neighborhoods grantees are finding ways to incorporate youth engagement practices into programs and data collection activities, as well as partnering with external organizations to support the work. When making decisions about resource allocation, Promise Neighborhoods grantees should consider a healthy balance between hiring adult staff members and investing in young people to lead the work themselves.

- **Keeping it fun and worthwhile.** Young people come to youth-centered programs with a range of backgrounds and experiences. For those dealing with difficult circumstances at home or school, regularly tackling heavy topics in a group setting may be overwhelming and uncomfortable. Promise Neighborhoods grantees have found ways to incorporate fun activities and trust-building exercises into their youth development and leadership programs to ensure that participants are comfortable. Knox Promise Neighborhood, for example, takes members of their youth leadership teams to a ropes course at the beginning of the school year. For a population that may be facing hardships, fun activities can help avoid burnout.

Youth engagement activities should also be worthwhile for participants, whose time is often split among school, responsibilities at home, and social activities. In addition to imparting technical skills and knowledge through programming, Promise Neighborhoods grantees should consider paying young people for their time and/or providing other meaningful incentives. In West Philadelphia, the Promise Neighborhood and Fab Youth Philly pay young people for their work as play and safety captains, and this creates a more even playing field for youths and adults. In Alaska, the Association of Alaska School Boards flies young people to Anchorage and Juneau to participate in annual statewide youth conferences that foster peer learning and networking.

- **Maintaining youth engagement work during a pandemic.** COVID-19 has forced public schools across the country to move online. Because Promise Neighborhoods' youth engagement work often happens in schools, the shift to virtual learning has complicated their activities. Many Promise Neighborhoods grantees are starting to provide virtual programming, coordinating with staff members and teachers to create opportunities for young people to engage during and after school. Yet, in rural and urban communities alike, not all families have access to stable internet. Promise Neighborhoods grantees are connecting with new and old partners to identify technology needs and to offer mental and emotional health supports for students during the pandemic.

The pandemic has changed all aspects of young people's lives and introduced new needs and priorities. Promise Neighborhoods grantees should be flexible and responsive in the face of new challenges. This may amount to more than transitioning in-person activities to an online setting: grantees should use this opportunity to rethink and recraft programming to ensure maximum relevance for participants. Young people should be asked to identify pressing needs and provide meaningful input on youth engagement during the pandemic. West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhood has taken steps to reorient their approach by offering hybrid (partially in-person, partially virtual) programming. When students said they were having difficulty concentrating on their classes and schoolwork at home, the Promise Neighborhood mobilized to provide them with noise-canceling headphones. Small but responsive moves can go a long way toward supporting students in the short term and developing trusting relationships in the long term.

Lessons Learned

Over the past two decades, researchers and practitioners have identified youth engagement as a practical means for improving service delivery and effectiveness, fostering inclusion and empowerment among traditionally marginalized groups, and creating sustainable leadership pipelines. As community-based organizations with unique on-the-ground insights, collective impact initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods are well-positioned to spearhead this work.

Many Promise Neighborhood grantees—including those featured in this brief—are pursuing youth empowerment strategies such as mentorship, leadership development, and community-based service learning programs. By soliciting youth input and feedback, grantees are taking steps to democratize the program design and implementation process and improve participants' experiences. Several are taking steps to reorient traditional power dynamics through paid positions and capacity building for young people and trainings for adults. However, strategies that promote youth voice and decisionmaking are a work in progress among most grantees.

Promise Neighborhoods' youth engagement strategies can be both time- and resource-intensive. They require an initiative-wide belief in the importance of youth-directed engagement, prioritization of resources, a commitment to sharing power and creating a receptive environment, and creativity in connecting with young people. Such initiatives have been challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is forcing Promise Neighborhoods grantees to rethink all aspects of their work. As grantees transition to providing remote supports and services, redesigned youth engagement activities may prove central to connecting with—and fostering an equitable recovery among—our nation's hardest-hit communities.

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About the Authors

Jessica Shakesprere is a research analyst in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute. She applies quantitative and qualitative methods, focusing on employment equity, place-based economic mobility, and public housing service delivery to support low-income families and marginalized youth. Shakesprere's previous research and organizing experience includes trauma-informed community building and behavioral insights to mobilize social change. Shakesprere holds a BS in biology and a BA in political science from the Ohio State University, where she graduated with honors and research distinction.

Mica O'Brien is a research assistant in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Her research interests include public housing, safety net programs, and social and economic mobility. Before joining Urban, O'Brien worked on a cross-sector initiative for the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities, a nonprofit membership organization that represents large public housing authorities from across the country. O'Brien holds a BA in history and American studies from Princeton University.

Eona Harrison is a research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. She is a trained family demographer whose mixed-methods work examines women's strategies for achieving their reproductive goals. Her work incorporates an equity and sociocultural lens to investigate pathways that lead to racial differences in maternal health, infant/child outcomes, and general health. Harrison is also a leader in Urban's growing portfolio of community engaged methods work. She is the principal investigator for the East Baltimore Research project, which is a community-based participatory research effort funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. She is also the project manager for Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety, a community-based program that educates and trains youth and adults in sexual health and safety.

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500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

www.urban.org

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