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OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

Building Transformative Youth Leadership:

Data on the Impacts of Youth
Organizing

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Grassroots youth organizing is alive and well, and it is changing communities, as well as the lives of young people who are leading campaigns for social justice. Involvement in organizing helps young people, most of whom are youth of color from low-income neighborhoods, develop deep connections to their community. It inspires them to take an active role in solving social problems, and builds their capacity and skills to lead movements for change now and in the future. “Building Transformative Youth Leadership,” eleventh in the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing’s (FCYO) Occasional Papers Series, shows how participation in organizing shapes young people’s development as civic and political actors in their community.

To date, much of what we know about the field of youth organizing and its impacts has been documented through qualitative research, such as case studies. While qualitative research illuminates the successes and challenges of particular organizations or individuals, there is a need for complementary data that captures the impact of youth organizing on a larger scale. The research presented in this report is the most comprehensive to date on the impacts of youth organizing and uses both qualitative and quantitative data from surveys, interviews, and field observations to understand the myriad ways in which young people are impacted by their involvement in youth organizing.

The youth who participated in this study belong to organizing groups in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and New York City. They are predominantly young people of color who live in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the nation and attend some of the most under-resourced schools in the country. They became involved in youth organizing for a variety of reasons, some as lofty and earnest as the desire to make a change in their community and others as mundane and instrumental as the desire to spend social time with friends. Yet all of the youth were ultimately impacted in fundamental and transformative ways.

KEY FINDINGS

This research sought to understand and document the experience of youth themselves and also to elicit critical perspectives from school and district administrators and adult staff at youth organizing groups. Based on an analysis of 124 survey responses from

youth, 88 interviews with youth, school and district administrators, and youth organizing staff, and observations of leadership development sessions and other organizing activities, we found that:

Youth organizing groups represent uniquely supportive organizational settings that provide a necessary and important opportunity structure for youth to become engaged in the civic and political life of their communities. Counter to popular conceptions of young people of color as politically apathetic, this study shows the ways in which youth organizing groups nurture leadership and organizing skills among young people. Youth organizing groups do so, in part, by attending to the lived cultural and political experiences of young people, while also providing safe and inviting spaces for youth.

Involvement in organizing helps young people feel a sense of agency in their lives – the belief that they have control over their actions and can make a difference in the world around them. In a society that all too often marginalizes the experiences and voices of youth of color and renders them powerless, young people's discovery of their own power helps to shift their sense of self, expectations for their futures, and their sense of possible roles they might play in the world. Upwards of 80% of students felt confident that they could research a problem in their community, create a plan to address the problem, and get other people to care about the problem.

Involvement in organizing helps young people develop a critical social analysis. Youth organizing groups did more than develop the competencies of young people. Through their involvement in organizing, young people began to understand the systemic nature of problems in their community and schools and the need for correspondingly systemic solutions. They also gained the organizing skills to address community problems through collective action.

Engagement in civic and political action exceeds that of students in a national sample. Youth involved in organizing plan to remain committed to activism for the long-term. More than 90% of young people in our survey expressed a desire to stay involved in activism and remain committed to long-term social change efforts.

Involvement in organizing increases young people's educational motivation and aspirations. Although there are significant disparities in educational outcomes for young people of color and low-income students, young people involved in youth organizing seemed to counter these trends. Eighty percent of students noted their grades improved and 60% reported that they took more challenging coursework due to their involvement in organizing. Eighty percent of youth reported plans to pursue a college education and close to half of the sample said they expected to obtain a graduate or professional degree beyond college.

MOVING FORWARD

This paper provides evidence of the strengths of youth organizing to build a cadre of leaders for communities and the social justice movement. The continued success of this work depends on the collective efforts of youth organizing practitioners, funders, school-based educators, researchers, and youth themselves. In the work ahead, it will be important to remain attentive to the challenges and difficulties of creating politically and culturally relevant environments that truly support young people of color. And while much of the power of youth organizing groups lies in groups' strong community roots and local history and conditions, there are now expanding opportunities to build a movement through regional and national networks, not only in taking action, but also in developing new leaders and supporting new organizations. In addition, as the field seeks to help young people sustain their commitment to activism beyond high school, deliberate, rather than ad-hoc, strategies to build an infrastructure for long-term engagement in the social justice movement are needed.

In the past decade, youth organizing groups across the country have made substantial progress in influencing social policies that have benefited the hardest to reach communities, and have often done so with limited resources and funding. In this paper, we examine three youth organizing groups, each located in low-income neighborhoods served by under-resourced public schools, and each operating with small budgets for their youth organizing efforts. As the data in this paper shows, youth organizing not only provides a mechanism for policy change, it also presents a unique and significant developmental space for low-income youth of color that addresses their needs, personal goals, and and commitment to social justice. Through greater and more strategic investments, there are opportunities to take the work of these three organizing groups to scale. Thus, this paper serves both to illustrate the positive impact organizing has had on individual youth, and to issue a call to action to resource youth organizing at the level it deserves. In concert with field-building efforts is the need for additional research in the field – to inform thoughtful and strategic program development and to build a knowledge base on the processes and outcomes of youth organizing.