



Developing Youth Power



Youth organizing can spark political change. It can also help young people develop skills and connections that can help them succeed in college, in careers, and in life.

The findings of a [new study](#) of leaders from 32 youth organizing groups draw upon research evidence and grassroots experience to suggest ways that organizing groups can further help young people thrive. The study focuses on California, which is home to an impressively high portion of active U.S. youth organizing groups identified by a [2020 scan](#) of the field. California has a long history of youth organizing and philanthropic support for social justice movements.

The new study's authors are NEPC associate director [Michelle Renée Valladares](#), [Danielle Aguilar](#), [Vandna Sinha](#), NEPC Fellow [Ben Kirshner](#), and [Kate Baca](#), all of the University of Colorado Boulder. They identified and fleshed out the following evidence-based best practices for youth organizing groups:

- Promoting autonomy and decision-making
- Cultivating relationships and belonging
- Scaffolding the development of skills and competencies
- Facilitating civic engagement

As explained by CU Boulder doctoral candidate Danielle Aguilar, who served as a lead au-

thor and research assistant on this project, the organizing groups “intentionally creat[ed] new ways of seeing the world and living together. They don’t just think about things like critical consciousness and healing justice; they are inventing new ways of doing it within their organizations.” She adds that these organizations have a great deal to teach others seeking to transform their workplaces in these “challenging, post-pandemic” times.

Here are some takeaways that youth organizers, young people, and philanthropists throughout the nation may find useful to consider:

- **Align with and expand upon positive youth development:** Positive youth development is the idea that opportunities to practice a variety of life skills in an assortment of settings with supportive adults can lead to better outcomes for young people. The leaders who participated in the study described multiple ways they helped create these opportunities through traditional pathways, such as teaching public speaking, and by more cutting-edge approaches like encouraging youth to speak with elected officials about their views, even when it might create political blowback.
- **Nurture a leadership pipeline:** In addition to helping young people develop skills key to college and career success, organizing groups can provide post-high school opportunities such as scholarships, mentoring, and, for those who are interested, pathways to paid positions within organizing. Philanthropists should consider investing in the development of these pipelines in order to sustain youth groups and communities.
- **Learn from fellow youth organizing groups:** The challenges youth face span multiple longstanding, entrenched, and complex systems including education, housing, transportation and food. Organizers need to draw upon a wide range of strategies if they want to create change. When youth groups and funders interact, they can learn from one another, even if they focus on different areas of change.
- **Use insider and outsider strategies:** When youth push for systemic change from the outside in, they can anger insiders like school administrators or politicians who are safeguarding the status quo. At times, this is generally important and necessary, even if it has unwanted consequences, such as losing access to meeting spaces on a school campus. However, it can also be possible to simultaneously work from the inside out, cooperating with and even educating those who work within the system in an effort to find any common ground that exists.
- **Help youth address current challenges:** As COVID-related funding expires, the needs it addressed have not disappeared. Young people continue to experience a growing mental health crisis that predated the pandemic. Racism, xenophobia, transphobia, and homophobia abound. Philanthropists and government should invest in protecting vulnerable communities from these challenges.
- **Address inefficiencies and inequities in funding for youth organizing:** Youth organizers sometimes find themselves confronting the dilemma of sticking to their missions versus changing to accommodate inflexible funding requirements. In addition, bias built into philanthropic funding (e.g., the need to fill out lengthy and complex grant forms) can end up favoring larger, more established organizations that

may not be led by, and may not authentically serve, minoritized populations. Funders should themselves attempt to diversify to develop a greater level of sensitivity to these issues. In the meantime, they should work to build relationships with a broad spectrum of organizations serving youth. They should consider ways they might make their models more equitable and flexible by helping organizations build the capacity to attract funds or by making their own requirements more accommodating. Finally, because of the need for funding to increase across the board, too many organizations are competing for too small a piece of the pie.

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NEPC Resources on Community Organizing and Engagement

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