![funders' collaborative on youth organizing]

TRANSFORMING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: A CASE FOR YOUTH ORGANIZING

By Dr. Kim Sabo Flores

INTRODUCTION

About the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO)

The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing brings funders and youth organizers together to ensure that young people have the resources, capacities, and infrastructure they need to organize for a more just and democratic society. Our goals include:

- **Move resources** to grassroots youth organizing groups on the forefront of social justice

- **Increase capacity** of youth organizing groups to build meaningful power and cultivate the strategic leadership and holistic development of young people

- **Connect youth organizing groups** across issues and geography to share tools and lessons, increase alignment, and sharpen strategies for building power

- **Organize funders** to learn from one another, align funding strategies, and expand resources for youth organizing

More information on FCYO and the many impacts of youth organizing can be found at www.fcyo.org.

The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) believes that the key to solving our most pressing social problems lies in supporting the leadership of young people who have been most impacted by inequity. Consequently, FCYO views youth organizing as a critical strategy to both support the holistic needs of young people and empower them to create meaningful systemic change. By providing grants to youth organizers, developing capacity building resources, organizing learning opportunities for funders, and supporting field research, FYCO works to create a strong, stable and interconnected field that supports

young people to play leading roles in advancing justice and equity for their communities. In an effort to contribute to a growing body of research about the impact of youth organizing on young organizers, FCYO commissioned a two-year study that explores the unique contribution organizing plays in a young person's development. This brief shares insights from nearly five hundred young people who participated in twelve youth organizing groups in ten states (see Box 1).

Findings highlight the multiple ways that youth organizing groups use, and qualitatively transform, best practices in research-based youth development to promote social emotional learning and critical consciousness among the youth of color who attend these programs. A remarkable discovery is that youth organizers experience significantly more of these best practices than youth who attend traditional after-school programs that use a positive youth development (PYD) approach to grow social and emotional learning (SEL). The result? Youth organizers show statistically significant growth in both social emotional learning and critical consciousness. This brief encourages

funders, practitioners, and policymakers who care about promoting healthy youth development to reflect on these findings and consider the integration of youth organizing as paramount for effectively engaging young people, especially young people of color and others who are most directly experiencing inequity.

PARTICIPATING YOUTH ORGANIZING GROUPS

- **100 Black Men of Chicago**
- **Abbott Leadership Institute**
- **Californians for Justice**
- **Chicago Scholars**
- **Empower Montana**
- **Khmer Girls in Action**
- **Main Youth Action Network - MYAN**
- **Rockaway Youth Task Force**
- **Rockaway Waterfront Alliance**
- **Trellis for Tomorrow**
- **Youth Empowered Solutions**
- **Youth On Board**

WHY STUDY THE IMPACT OF YOUTH ORGANIZING?

Historically, studies about youth organizing groups have examined their impact on their communities and the social and political structures that perpetuate inequity for young people. The narrative has been ideologically rooted in a position that youth are not "problems to be fixed" and that, to the extent that there is a "solution," it lies in transforming systems that limit youth's life trajectories and opportunities for positive civic engagement. However, it is hard to ignore the profound changes and growth that young organizers experience as they become critically conscious and evolve into powerful leaders and agents of change.

A growing body of empirical evidence underscores this impact, highlighting youth organizers' increased academic engagement, grades, and educational aspirations,[1] high rates of four-year degree attainment and civic participation,[2] development of positive racial and social identity, and commitment to future civic engagement, civic empowerment, and leadership.[3] In fact, Dr. Robert Ross, CEO of the California Endowment, calls youth organizing "a triple bottom line investment: you get an issue benefit, you get a community benefit, and you get a leadership development benefit for young people."[4]

While these studies lay a remarkable foundation for the field, making a strong case for the benefits of youth organizing, many unanswered questions remain. For example: because many studies have relied on youth organizers' reflections about their own growth after many years

1. Shah, S. (2011). Building Transformative Youth Leadership: Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing. New York, NY: Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.

2. Rogers, J. & Terriquez, V. (2013). Learning to Lead: The Impact of Youth Organizing and the Educational and Civic Trajectories of Low-Income Youth. Los Angeles, CA: Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.

3. Watts, R., Kirshner, B., Govan, R., & Fernandez, J. (2017). Powerful Youth, Powerful Communities: An International Study of Youth Organizing.

4. Shah, S., et al. (2018). Transforming Young People and Communities: New findings on the impact of youth organizing. The Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing.

of participation, it has been difficult to determine if those who join youth organizing groups are predisposed to leadership and whether they would have been likely to do well in school without their youth organizing experience. Are youth organizers more likely to succeed than young people who join more traditional after-school programs that use a PYD approach to promote SEL? In addition, due to the relatively small sample sizes of many qualitative studies about youth organizing, questions about generalization arise – do the youth organizers chosen for the study represent the total population?

These unanswered questions spurred the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) to commission a two-year study examining the impact of youth organizing on nearly five hundred youth participants in twelve youth organizing groups across eleven states. To add further depth to this growing field of research, the present study focuses on youth organizers' development of social and emotional learning and critical consciousness and their experience of the best practices in youth development shown to promote these capacities.

Photo Credit: Lucia Sandoval

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Originally conceptualized by educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, critical consciousness describes how "oppressed or marginalized people learn to critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them." According to Dr. Matt Diemer, critical consciousness is made up of three key constructs: social, political participation, personal action, and confidence to mobilize. Different from traditional youth development models' emphases on developing individual assets, critical consciousness instead links ecological supports to positive outcomes. Critical consciousness is associated with a host of desirable individual-level outcomes among youth hailing from oppressed or marginalized communities, including enhanced mental health, improved academic achievement and engagement, and increased political participation. [5]

A number of studies affirm that youth organizing helps develop youth organizers' critical consciousness.[6] Youth organizing groups engage young people who experience marginalization and inequity, supporting them to critically assess and rewrite their own narratives through a social, political, and historical lens. Often led by young people themselves, these groups provide training in community organizing and advocacy and assist young people in employing these skills to create meaningful institutional and social change in their communities – practices shown to promote critical consciousness.

Photo Credit: Lucia Sandoval

5 Diemer, M (et al.) (June 2014).

6 Diemer, M (et al.) (June 2014). Youth and Society: Development and Validation of Critical Consciousness Scales.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Youth organizing groups also provide supportive environments for young people to explore their unique identities and interests, develop meaningful relationships with adults and peers, manage group and personal goals, and practice critical life skills – all practices shown to increase social and emotional learning.

There is growing evidence showing that social and emotional qualities rival academic or technical skills in their ability to predict employment and earnings, among other outcomes. [7]

In the face of current societal, economic, environmental, and social challenges, the demand for these nonacademic skills has increased over the past 20 years[8] as they are seen as more critical than ever before.

As such, schools are increasingly urged to pay more attention to equipping students with soft skills such as a positive identity, social skills, self-management, academic self-efficacy, and a sense of contribution – often referred to as social and emotional learning or "21st Century Skills."[9]

Photo Credit: Las Fotos Project

7 Kautz, T., et.a.. (2014). Fostering and Measuring Skills: Improving Cognitive and Non- Cognitive Skills to Promote Lifetime Success. NBER Working Paper No. 20749.

8 Balcar, J 2014). Soft Skills and Their Wage Returns: Overview of empirical literature

9 CASEL (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects.

Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.[10]

10 CASEL http://casel.org/

ABOUT THE STUDY

This study leveraged rigorously validated measures of social and emotional learning (SEL) and critical consciousness (CC) deployed through the online platform Hello Insight. This tool measures six well-researched SEL capacities shown to predict academic success, career and college readiness, civic engagement, and long-term thriving:

- Positive Identity
- Contribution
- Academic Self-Efficacy
- Social Skills
- Social Capital
- Self-Management[11]

CC is measured in three key capacity areas: Confidence to Mobilize, Sociopolitical Participation, and Advocating for Change. To contextualize these findings, the tool also examines the quality of youth experiences using a scale that assesses youths' exposure to five key positive youth development practices previously associated with SEL: Prioritizing Youth, Interest Exploration, Goal Management, Peer-to-Peer Engagement, and Youth/Adult Partnership.
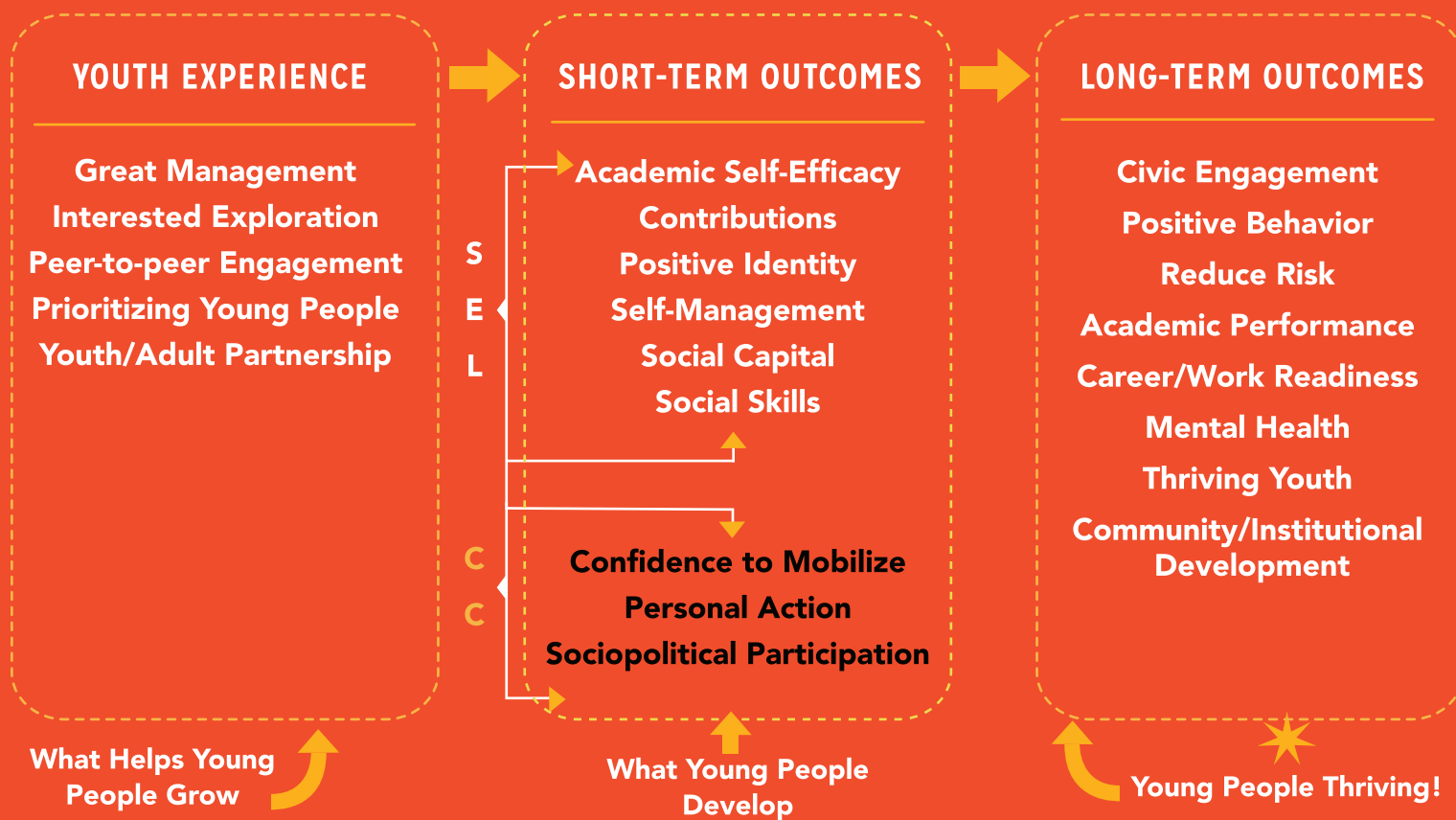
A Theory of Change (TOC) was developed to articulate how key SEL and CC outcomes promote positive gains in academics, college and career readiness, mental health, and civic engagement over time (see Figure 1), illustrating that these are strong proxy measures for the long-term outcomes listed in the third box. The TOC also highlights the key evidence-based youth development

Photo Credit: Las Fotos Project

11 Algorithm (2018). Psychometric Properties of Hello Insight's Social and Emotional Learning Tools: Technical paper.

RESEARCH BASED THEORY OF CHANGE

YOUTH EXPERIENCE

**Great Management
Interested Exploration
Peer-to-peer Engagement
Prioritizing Young People
Youth/Adult Partnership**

What Helps Young
People Grow

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

S
E
L

**Academic Self-Efficacy
Contributions
Positive Identity
Self-Management
Social Capital
Social Skills**

C
C

**Confidence to Mobilize
Personal Action
Sociopolitical Participation**

What Young People
Develop

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

**Civic Engagement
Positive Behavior
Reduce Risk
Academic Performance
Career/Work Readiness
Mental Health
Thriving Youth
Community/Institutional
Development**

Young People Thriving!

practices measured in this study. Between January 2018 and September 2019, almost two thousand (n=1,788) youth participants in twelve youth organizing groups completed a survey at the start of the work (the "pre-survey") and 802 completed a second survey at the end of a calendar year (the "post-survey"). Of these youth, 482 completed both pre and post-surveys, representing a convenience sample with a + or -5% error and 95% confidence.

The sample of 482 youth organizers were, on average, 15.9 years old,

predominantly female-identified (69.8%), and predominantly youth of color (Black (28.9%), Asian American (25.1%), Latino/a (17.0%), White (16.1%), and Multiracial (9.8%)). The analysis examined growth in SEL and CC and compared it with a matched set of more than 15,000 young people with similar attributes and demographics who participated in more traditional after-school programs that use a positive youth development framework to promote the growth of social and emotional skills in youth and were tracked using the same set of measures.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Youth Organizers Have More High-Quality Research-Based Experiences Than Their Peers

Youth organizing is fundamentally relational, placing young people's personal stories and interests at the center of the work by truly prioritizing and valuing the experiences of all individuals, especially low-income youth of color.

Relationships are a critical aspect of strong youth development work, one that predicts high outcome growth in social and emotional learning and one that is far too often out of reach for traditional out-of-school-time programs with over-scheduled programming.[12] In addition, youth organizing groups engage adult allies from diverse social identities and pay careful attention to creating an affirming social climate that is inclusive and non-hierarchical.

They create a unique organizational culture that is described as a web of supportive relationships that foster a sense of belonging.[13]

Compared with youth in more traditional after-school programs, youth organizers report having significantly more research-based PYD experiences shown to predict growth in social emotional learning and critical consciousness. In fact, they go above and beyond more traditional youth development programs in every area.

For example, they are more likely to have high quality relationships with adults who place their interests and experiences at the center of the work (e.g., Prioritizing Youth β= .15, p < .01) (see Figure 2). Youth organizers are also more likely to learn about people from different backgrounds, work with other young people to solve problems, and

12 Pekel, K. (2015). Don't Forget the Families: The missing piece in America's effort to help children succeed. Search Institute; Flores (2017). The In Between Times: Building strong youth adult relationships in an era of overscheduling.

13 Shah, S., et al. (2018). Transforming Young People and Communities: New findings on the impact of youth organizing. The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.

Organizing provides a vehicle through which young people can understand their life experiences within a broader social, historical, and political context, while developing skills that equip them with conviction and agency to change the structural forces that contribute to their individual circumstances (Shah, S. et. al. 2018).
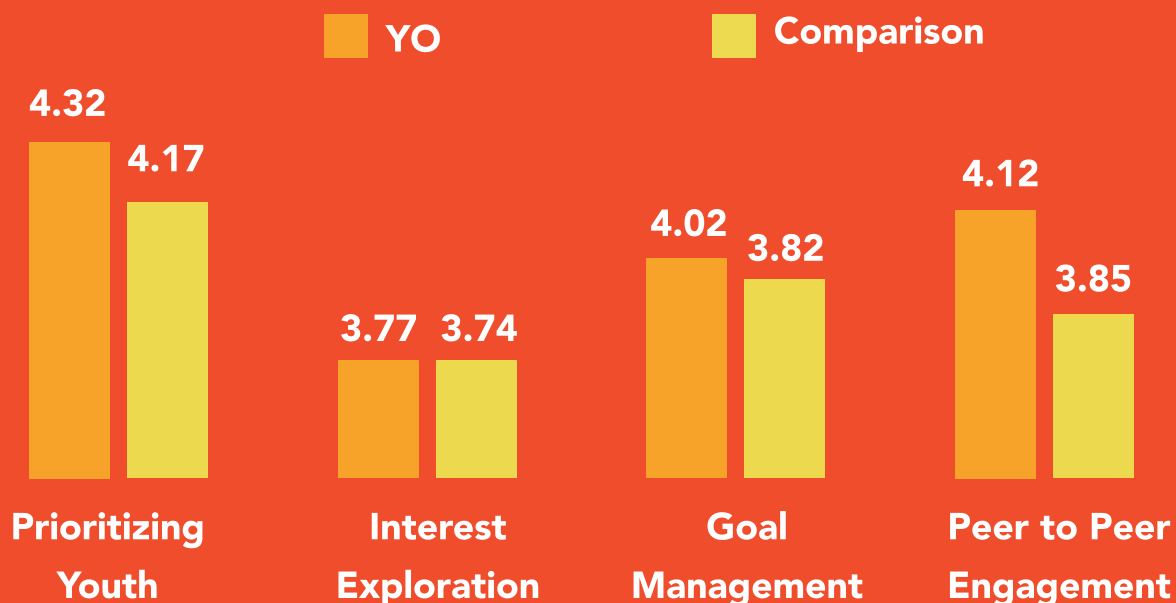
feel part of a group or a team (Peer to Peer Development β= .27, p < .001) than peers from more traditional programs (see Figure 2).

Each campaign and/or action requires that young people develop a plan, reflect on challenges and successes, and adjust goals to meet the ever-changing political realities of highly complex systems.

Therefore, it is not surprising that youth organizers experience more opportunities to set and manage goals than do peers in more traditional programs (e.g., Goal Management β = .20, p < 0.01) that do not always have opportunities to develop and work on self-directed projects (see Figure 2).

Through organizing work, young people are also supported to explore and understand their own unique identities, cultures, and experiences. This type of interest and identity exploration is fundamental to the development of campaigns that are rooted in young people's lived experiences and focus on an area of change that deeply impacts their lives (Interest Exploration β = .03, p < .001) (see Figure 2). In youth organizing groups, this PYD experience is not merely a way to help young people identify their passions, it also encourages them to explore the systems and structures that shape passions, interests, career paths, and identities.

FIGURE 2: YOUTH ORGANIZERS' EXPERIENCES COMPARED TO PEER GROUP

YO   Comparison

Prioritizing Youth: 4.32, 4.17
Interest Exploration: 3.77, 3.74
Goal Management: 4.02, 3.82
Peer to Peer Engagement: 4.12, 3.85

For young people who feel disconnected from school or society at large, the relevance of campaigns to their everyday lives offers a powerful mechanism to feel connected and affirmed (Shah, S. et al. 2018)

The following table illustrates how young people experience positive youth development in youth organizing. In each best practice area, youth organizers act and are related to as equal creators of the work. Adults act as allies and supporters of the projects, campaigns, and actions, allowing young people to take the lead.

TABLE 1: POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN YOUTH ORGANIZING: A STEP FURTHER

Positive Youth Development Practice	Implementation Within Youth Organizing
DEVELOPING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUTH • Adults take time to get to know youth, understanding their experiences, interests, and backgrounds • Adults see and relate to youth as capable – setting high expectations and providing support to succeed • Adults support youth to make choices and engage in decision-making	**YOUTH/ADULT PARTNERSHIP** • Adults take time to get to know youth, understanding their experiences and interests – these stories are the building blocks for developing critical consciousness and supporting youth to develop campaigns, actions, and research that is based on their own lives and experiences. • Adults see and relate to youth as capable – setting high expectations and providing support to succeed. Youth are encouraged to take on increasing responsibility as they step into leadership roles • Adults support youth to make choices about the projects they will conduct and engage in decision-making about the programs and organizations. Youth organizing groups are often youth-led.
PEER TO PEER ENGAGEMENT • Youth work on group projects • Youth work together on teams	**WORKING TOGETHER ON CAMPAIGNS, ACTIONS AND PROJECTS** • Planning, designing, and implementing campaigns, actions, and projects in a group • Peer outreach • Peer-led workshops and trainings
INTEREST EXPLORATION • Opportunities for youth to engage in activities that help them explore their interests and passions • Opportunities for youth take risks and try new things • Opportunities for youth to engage in activities that are of interest to them	**INTEREST EXPLORATION** • All campaigns, actions and projects are developed based on the interests and experiences of the young people • Youth take action because they are affected by specific issues and want to contribute and make changes
GOAL MANAGEMENT • Youth set personal and/or project goals • Youth create strategies to achieve personal or project goals • Youth learn to navigate challenges and shift strategies when necessary	**RUNNING AND NAVIGATING A CAMPAIGN, ACTION, OR PROJECT** • Youth set personal and/or project goals • Youth create strategies to achieve personal or project goals • Youth learn to navigate challenges and shift strategies when necessary

YOUTH ORGANIZERS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING CAPACITIES

The study's pre-test demonstrated no statistically meaningful difference between youth organizers and their peers in more traditional programming in the areas of: Positive Identity, Contribution, Academic Self Efficacy, Social Skills, and Self-Management.[14]

However, youth entering youth organizing groups scored significantly lower than youth in more traditional programming in regard to Social Capital (β =-.13, p < .05), illustrating that youth organizers had fewer networks of adults helping them pursue their educational futures and/or supported their interests.

This data begins to shed light on the question "Are youth organizers predisposed to do well in school and become leaders in their communities?" Data suggests that is not the case, as a lower SEL score is correlated with less academic success, long-term civic engagement, and career readiness. As such, youth organizers begin their work as organizers with fewer resources to support their social emotional development and educational futures.

Photo Credit: Lucia Sandoval

14 Note: results were weighted by age, ethnicity, and gender.

Youth organizing groups generally do not "cream" the best students. Rather, they intentionally recruit a range of students, including those who may not be performing well academically (Shah et al. 2018).

YOUTH ORGANIZERS SHOW STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT GROWTH IN SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Youth participants in the twelve youth organizing groups demonstrated statistically significant gains in social and emotional learning between the pre and post-test in all six capacities and in overall SEL[15] (p < .01) (Figure 3). However, these gains were similar to their peers in more traditional after-school programs. Youth organizers made the greatest gains in Positive Identity and Self Management (β =-.28, p < .01), followed by Contribution and overall SEL (β =-.23, p < .01) and Self-Efficacy (β =-.22, p < .01).

Photo Credit: Lucia Sandoval

---

15 Overall SEL is composite score of all SEL capacities taken together in a single model and provides insight about youth organizers' total SEL development.

- **Positive Identity** is a young person's internal sense of self-worth and self-efficacy and is correlated with long-term confidence and reduced behavioral problems.[16]

- **Self Management** is a young person's ability to regulate their emotions and behavior, take positive risks, and persist through life's challenges. Self-management correlates with longer-term outcomes such as higher grade-point averages and standardized test scores, fewer suspensions and expulsions, and improved social development.[17]

- **Contribution** is a young person's positive engagement with and desire to support and give back to family, community, and society. Increases in contribution are key to developing an individual's positive purpose and impacts positive societal movement. Contribution has been correlated with higher grade point averages and standardized test scores, fewer suspensions and expulsions, and improved social development.[18]

- **Academic Self Efficacy** is a young person's motivation and perceived mastery over school performance (i.e., academic success). It is a general belief in their potential to attain academic success and lends itself to higher grade point averages and standardized test scores, fewer suspensions and expulsions, and longer-term gains in skills to identify, attain, and maintain a career. [19]

- **Overall SEL** is a composite score of all SEL capacities taken together in a single model and provides insight about youth organizers' development in SEL overall. When this set of measures was developed, it was statistically validated to assure that it was measuring key concepts found in the research— as noted it effectively

16 (McLaughlin, M.W 1993). Embedded Identities: Enabling balance in urban context. In S.B. Heath and M.W. McLaughlin (Eds). Identity and inner city youth. NY NY, Teacher's College Press.

17 Aldao, A., Nolen-Hoeksema, S., and Schweizer, S. (2010). Emotion-regulation strategies across psychopathology: a meta-analytic review. Clin. Psychol. Rev. 30, 217–237. doi: 10.1016/j.cpr.2009.11.004

18 Lerner, R.M. et. al, 2005). Understanding Developmental Regulation in Adolescence: The use of selection optimization, and compensation model. Human Development, 44. 29-50.

19 Afterschool Alliance (2014). Taking a Deeper Dive Into Afterschool: Positive outcomes and promising practices. http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/deeper_dive_into_afterschool.pdf

measured six SEL capacities. These six capacities also work well together to measure overall SEL as a single facet. Statistically significant growth in overall SEL provides a strong indication that youth organizers are growing both within and across all areas.

Other areas of significant growth included social skills (β =-.15, p < .01) and social capital (β =-.16, p < .01).

- Social Skills is a young person's ability to take others' perspectives into account and develop a sense of caring and empathy. Social skills support positive social interactions and promote positive, reciprocal interactions between youth and their environment. [20]
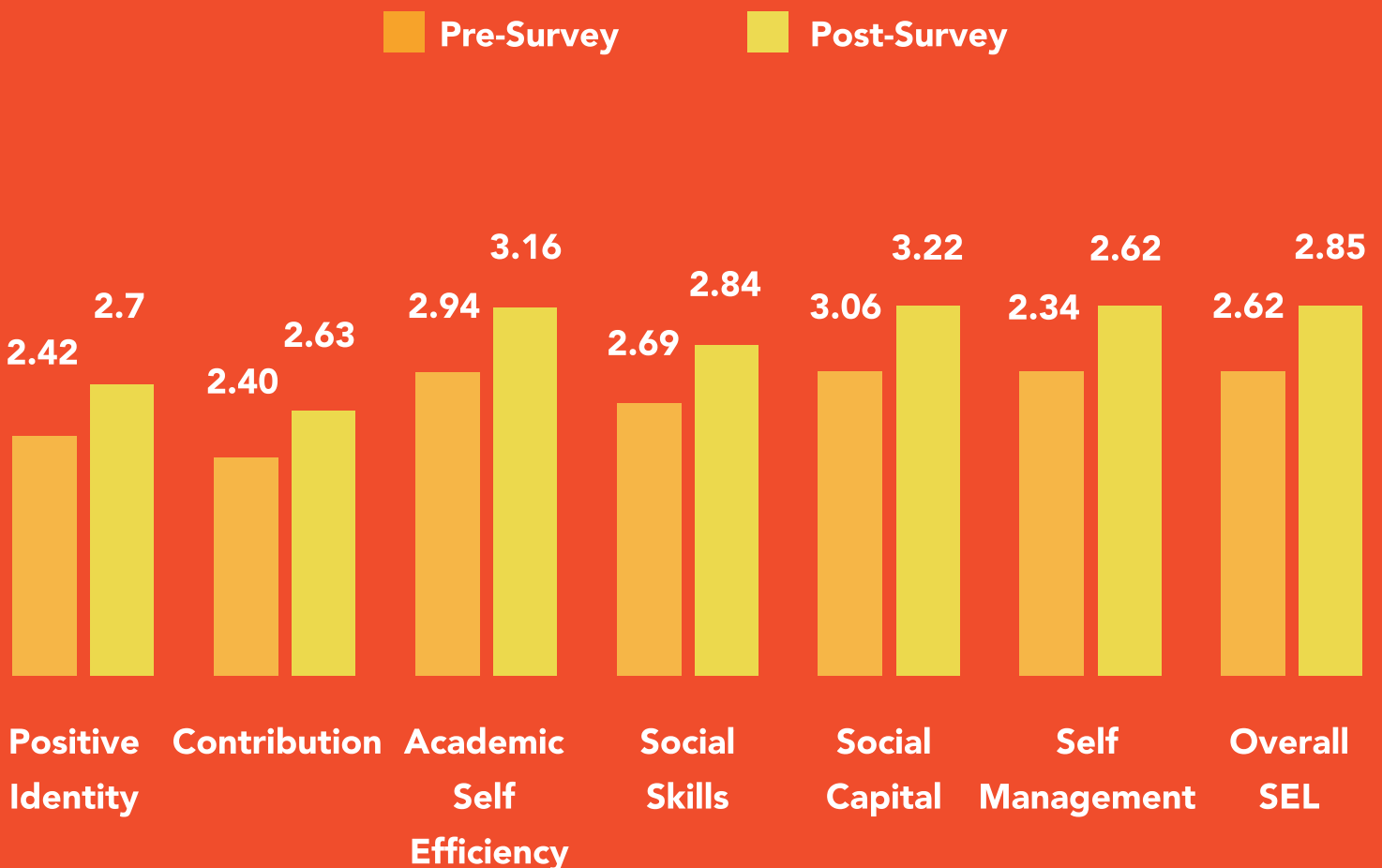

Photo Credit: Las Fotos Project

20 Payton, J. W., et.al. (Dec. 2008). The Positive Impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten Through Eighth Grade Students. The Collaborative For Academic Social and Emotional Learning.

• Social Capital is the number of adults in a young person's life who expect them to succeed, help them with schoolwork, and can be counted on for help. Social capital is considered important for building a youth's support network and sense of belonging within their environment as well as extremely important for long-term academic success and job readiness. [21]

21Benson, P.L.. (2008). Sparks: How parents can help ignited the hidden strengths of teenagers. Jossey Base. CA

FIGURE 3: YOUTH ORGANIZERS SEL DEVELOPMENT GROUP

Pre-Survey   Post-Survey

Category	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
Positive Identity	2.42	2.7
Contribution	2.40	2.63
Academic Self Efficiency	2.94	3.16
Social Skills	2.69	2.84
Social Capital	3.06	3.22
Self Management	2.34	2.62
Overall SEL	2.62	2.85

YOUTH ORGANIZERS DEVELOP A SIGNIFICANTLY GREATER SENSE OF CONTRIBUTION THAN PEERS

When compared to a matched set of peers in more traditional programs, youth organizers made significantly greater gains in contribution – one aspect of SEL that has been noted by many psychologists as a higher order of development emerging out of a solid foundation in non-cognitive skills or SEL[22] (see Figure 4).

Contribution is defined as active participation and leadership in a variety of settings. It is fundamentally about a young person's ability to make a difference – a core aspect of youth organizing. The development of contribution is not only a predictor of other types of social and emotional development for young people, it also drives change. As young people contribute to the world around them, they ignite development – both their own and society's. This type of sociopolitical and cultural activity is understood by many social cultural psychologists to be at the heart of human development.[23]

As Shirley Brice Heath (2000) points out, young people live their lives in

22 Lerner, R.M. et. al, 2005). Understanding Developmental Regulation in Adolescence: The use of selection optimization, and compensation model. Human Development, 44. 29-50.

23 Brice Heath, S. (2001). Three's Not a Crowd: Plans, roles and focus in the arts. Educational Researcher, 30(7), 10-17. Retrieved February 21, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/3594410. Dweck, C. (2008). Mindset and Math/Science Achievement. The Opportunity Equation. Institute for Advanced Study.Flores, K. S. (2007). Youth participatory evaluation: Strategies for engaging young people (Vol. 14). John Wiley & Sons.

CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER
CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER
CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER
CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER
CHANGE MAKER CHANGE MAKER CHANGE

Photo Credit: Las Fotos Project

institutions that insist they "behave" and perform the roles ascribed to them. There are few environments in which they can "act outside the constraints of the expected role of student or the structure of curricular and extra-curricular requirements."[24]

This is especially true for low-income youth of color too often labeled and stereotyped as innately non-compliant and, as a result, in need of greater control.

_____
24 Brice Heath, S. (2001). Three's Not a Crowd: Plans, roles and focus in the arts. Educational Researcher, 30(7), 10-17. Retrieved February 21, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/3594410.

It is only through the creation of new environments, policies, and social structures that young people and society can grow. As Shah, et al. note: "In the face of negative messages from society, youth organizing helps young people from marginalized communities develop positive social identities and discover their own sense of power" (2018).

FIGURE 4: YOUTH ORGANIZERS' GROWTH IN CONTRIBUTION COMPARED TO PEER GROUP

Pre   Post

4.32   4.17

4.02   4.12

YO

Comparison
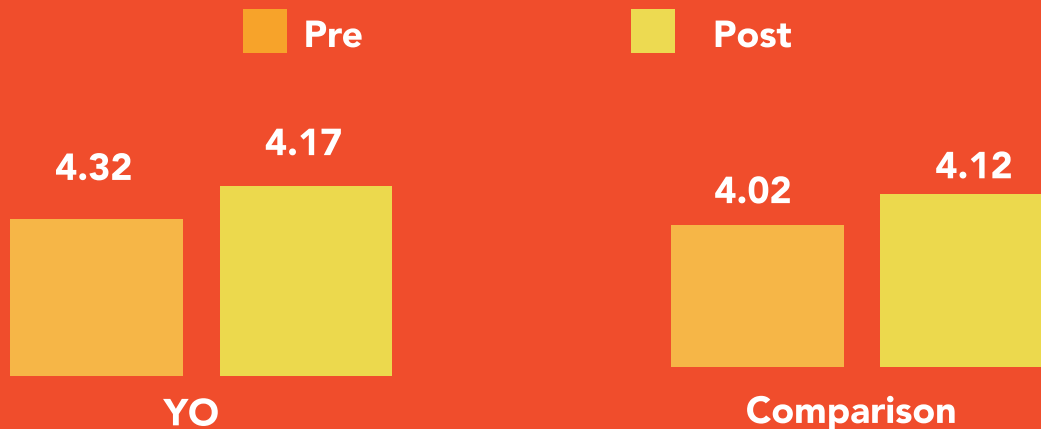
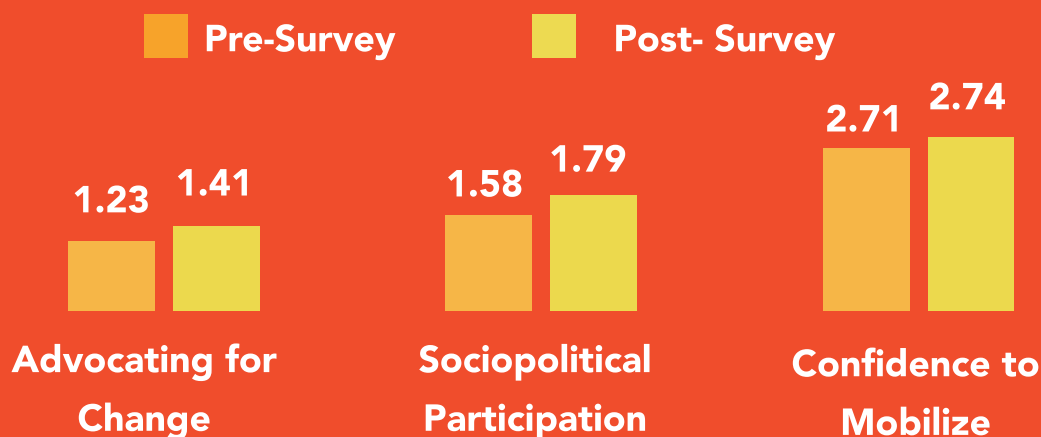# YOUTH ORGANIZERS MADE SIGNIFICANT GAINS IN CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

An analysis of pre and post-matched data showed that youth organizers made statistically significant gains in Sociopolitical Participation (β =.26, p < .001) and Advocating for Change (β =.22, p < .001) (Figure 5).[25] In other words, youth organizers engaged in

more civil rights marches, campaigns, and demonstrations (Sociopolitical Participation) and wrote more letters or publications about social issues, contacted public officials, and signed petitions than they did prior to their organizing experience (Advocating for Change). However, there was no change in youth organizers' Confidence to Mobilize if and when an issue arose at school.

25 Youth organizers' pre and post-survey growth in critical consciousness was not compared to a peer group, as young people in more traditional programming did not have explicit training or support to achive these outcomes. Therefore, programs in the control group did not administer this set of questions.

FIGURE 5: YOUTH ORGANIZERS' GROWTH IN CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS GROUP

Pre-Survey   Post- Survey

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
Advocating for Change	1.23	1.41
Sociopolitical Participation	1.58	1.79
Confidence to Mobilize	2.71	2.74

FINAL REFLECTIONS

This study provides strong evidence that youth organizing groups use and improve upon high quality, research-based practices that not only drive significant growth in SEL outcomes, but also foster sociopolitical participation and advocacy.

In fact, youth organizers experience significantly more of these practices than their peers in more traditional programs, suggesting that youth organizing groups provide uniquely fertile ground for positive youth development practices to take root and grow.

A number of studies point to the organizational culture of youth organizing groups as a key factor in catalyzing positive outcomes for young people of color and low-income youth.[26] Rod Watts and his colleagues (2017) described the specific elements of such an organizational culture:

_____

26 Rogers, J. & Terriquez , V.(2013). Learning to Lead; The impact of youth organizing on the educational and civic trajectories of low-income youth. UCLA IDEA. Watts, R., Kirshner, B., Govan, R., & Fernandez, J. (2017). Powerful Youth, Powerful Communities: An International Study of Youth Organizing

- **Positive and affirming relationships that encourage engagement and recognize young people's dignity and humanity.** Youth organizing groups use relational practices that affirm the dignity and humanity of young people. Groups place explicit attention on power differentials based on age and address them by creating a set of practices and norms that privilege youth voice. These norms tend to contrast with the more hierarchical relationships that exist between adults and youth in school settings.

- **Relevance to everyday struggles and aspirations.** For young people who feel disconnected from school or society at large, the relevance of campaigns to their everyday lives offers a powerful mechanism to feel connected and affirmed.

The combination of community engagement and individual development goes beyond traditional youth development programs to enable a powerful and transformative experience that is particularly well-suited for young people living in low-income communities and communities of color (Shah, S. et al. 2018).

- **Accelerated opportunities for leadership.** In youth organizing, young people are often promoted quickly into leadership roles, receiving guidance and support along the way. They speak in public and take on roles within the organization — facilitating meetings, planning events and recruiting new members.

- **A learning process that includes cycles of preparation, rehearsal, performance, and feedback from peers and supportive adults.** Preparation focuses on group discussions, trainings and workshops, skits, reading circles and artistic expression, followed by opportunities to practice or rehearse. In the performance phase, young people share their policy proposals with public audiences such as school boards or community members. Feedback and reflection through debriefs helps young people process and reflect upon their experience.

Some of these elements are aligned with the research-based best practices outlined in this study. However, they go beyond traditional approaches to youth development because they pay specific attention to culture, race, gender, age, and class, as well as the larger community and political context.

Youth organizing groups address power differentials and ageism directly, assuring that young people have opportunities to authentically amplify their voices. Adults in youth organizing groups are considered "allies" and relate to young people as leaders, rather than leaders in development.

They engage them in meaningful work and continue to help them stretch and grow into new roles, taking on greater and greater responsibility.

There is no doubt that youth organizing promotes the healthy development of young people and there is much that more traditional after-school programs can learn from their culture and use of effective practices to promote social emotional learning and critical consciousness.

We hope that this study inspires funders, practitioners and policymakers to consider how youth organizing practices might be utilized more broadly to engage

young people who are disengaged, supporting them to shape and reshape systems that keep them at the margins. Because it is through this type of transformational activity that individual and societal development is made possible.

Photo Credit: Lucia Sandoval