



NEPC REVIEW: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN COLLECTIVE IMPACT INITIATIVES: LESSONS FROM PROMISE NEIGHBORHOODS (URBAN INSTITUTE, DECEMBER 2020)



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Summary

Youth engagement allows young people to participate in decision-making processes about programs and policies that affect them. Drawing on data from the federal Promise Neighborhood initiative, the Urban Institute has published the report, *Youth Engagement in Collective Impact Initiatives: Lessons from Promise Neighborhoods*. The report examines what youth engagement initiatives look like within a broader ‘collective impact’ reform structure. It introduces a continuum of engagement focused on support, input, and leadership. It then provides examples of three Promise Neighborhood sites that fit the continuum, considering the strengths and challenges involved in creating youth empowerment initiatives. Yet while the report defines youth engagement as “the intentional, meaningful and sustained involvement of young people in actions to create positive social change,” the descriptions in the first phase of the continuum—mentoring, case management, service learning—are not examples of youth engaged in actions to create change. This mismatch appears to be because the examples given in the report are drawn from a convenience sample without an explanation of why they illuminate the framework. The strengths and challenges presented do align with previous research regarding the contexts that enable and constrain youth engagement, but the report fails to make these connections explicit. Overall, while championing youth engagement, the report misses an opportunity to influence future policy and practice.



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I. Introduction

A considerable body of research demonstrates how involving young people in decision-making processes offers young people opportunities to have their voices heard, as well as potentially improving the design, implementation and outcomes of social policies.¹ Within these contexts, the Urban Institute has published the report, *Youth Engagement in Collective Impact Initiatives: Lessons from Promise Neighborhoods*, authored by Jessica Shakesprere, Mica O'Brien, and Eona Harison.² This report draws upon data from the Urban Institute's role as a national technical assistance provider for the federally funded Promise Neighborhood initiative—a program focusing on 'collective impact' as a theory of change by incentivizing coordination across institutions. The report considers ways youth engagement can benefit the outcomes of young people while also enhancing the recruitment, retention, and implementation of collective impact practices.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report focuses on the value of including 'youth engagement' as a strategy in collective impact efforts. It cites the lack of access for young people of color, in particular, to the opportunities to collaborate within family- and youth-focused initiatives. The report builds upon the growing research indicating that youth engagement can improve implementation and sustainability of program efforts. Surprisingly, it does not reference the strong body of literature showing how youth engagement can lead to stronger academic, behavioral and socioemotional outcomes for the youth involved.³

The first half of the report develops a continuum to depict the scope of youth engagement activities in Promise Neighborhood sites. The first type is characterized as *support*, pointing to the training needed by youth to participate in the work. The second type is *input*, defined as adults listening to young people. The third type, *leadership*, is defined as youth decision making engaging young people in change processes. This category includes ‘youth-led groups,’ in which adult advocates provide supporting roles, and ‘youth- and adult-led initiatives,’ in which youth and adults work as equal partners.

The second half of the report looks at youth engagement examples in Promise Neighborhoods. It does not describe the rationale for selecting the three cases beyond geographic diversity and a shared commitment to youth engagement. Nor does it indicate what evidence was collected from these sites or how the data were analyzed.

The report ends with a discussion of the strengths and challenges of the youth engagement activities, taking each case in turn. The strengths section focused on the ability of students to take ownership of program activities and to give input into adult programs. It also emphasized the need to train adults to support youth engagement. The challenges section focused on issues of recruitment, retention and resources, plus shifting priorities in the global pandemic. The report also highlighted concerns of avoiding youth burnout and compensating young people for their work in the programs.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The paper is primarily conceptual, rather than empirical. It creates a youth engagement framework and locates examples from Promise Neighborhoods within that framework. The evidence provided from these sites consists of one table and one-paragraph textbox descriptions drawn from Urban Institute reports on Promise Neighborhood sites. The descriptions themselves were too thin for the reader to develop a full understanding of how these examples fleshed out the model.

The source of these data is also not described. It can be inferred from the citations that the Urban Institute is involved in an ongoing partnership with Promise Neighborhoods. However, the report provides no discussion of this work, nor does it offer information on what data were collected or how the descriptions were chosen as evidence.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

Overall, the report cites important literature from the field of youth engagement but includes only a handful of studies. The introduction is the section best supported with evidence from literature. It provides a strong rationale for youth engagement, including the rights of young people and the contributions that youth engagement can make to improving equity, as well as the quality and implementation of change efforts.

The continuum section of the report is lacking a strong connection to a long tradition of literature of youth-engagement continuums (and related concepts of ‘child participation’ and ‘student voice’). The report reviewed three youth engagement continuums, including two of the most common referenced in the literature—Hart’s Ladder of Participation⁴ and Mitra’s Pyramid of Student Voice.⁵ The citations neglect recent contributions to framework development, with the most recent citation being 17 years old. Recent frameworks include the continuums of “Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, Empower,”⁶ “Voice, Influence, Choice, Working Together,”⁷ and “Listen, Collaborate, and Lead.”⁸

Given the number of existing frameworks and their well-established use in the field, the report did not explain the need for a new model or provide evidence for how the continuum was designed. The report only states,

Youth engagement continuum models illustrate these forms and degrees of youth participation. Although various typologies exist, youth engagement models generally include three categories of support: Support, input and leadership.⁹

This lack of justification limits the significance and contribution of this new framework and how it is distinct from previous continuums.

The second half of the report does not connect the Promise Neighborhood examples with other literature on collective impact or youth engagement. The report therefore does not discuss ways in which its findings are supported or refuted by other research. The lack of connections to other work is a missed opportunity to demonstrate the report’s contribution. For example, it could have shown a relationship to literature that has discussed strategies that support youth empowerment initiatives. For example, this previous literature has shown how youth engagement efforts benefit from: building trust among participants, training adults on partnering with youth, teaching youth about political power, and considering how meeting space is designed in partnership between youth and adults.¹⁰

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

The report begins by defining youth engagement as “the intentional, meaningful and sustained involvement of young people in actions to create positive social change.”¹¹ Using this definition, activities in which young people are not involved in the change process would not fit within a continuum of youth engagement. Yet, the descriptions in the first phase of the continuum—mentoring, case management, service learning—are not examples of youth engaged in actions to create change.

Instead, the first phase of the continuum provides examples of the types of skills and contexts that youth may need to participate in engagement activities. Indeed, the first stage is defined as “equipping young people with the tools to gain authority and agency.”¹² There is no denying the importance of attending to the supports that young people need to be successful. Yet by its own definition, it does not fit on a continuum of youth engagement. Instead of a framework of “what” the work looks like, it fits with a separate conversation

within the literature that speaks to “how” to support young people so that they can be effective partners in engagement work.¹³

The second category—input/youth voice—is the typical starting category of youth engagement continuums, which begin with concepts such as Listen, Voice, and Consult¹⁴ (see endnotes 6-8). The report includes ‘youth advisory boards’ within this category, describing their purpose as “keeping students on track to graduate”¹⁵ with a focus on games, scavenger hunts and schoolwide events. Since little description was given of these advisory boards providing input on decision-making processes, it is unclear if these boards fit with the definition of this type of youth engagement.

The final category—leadership—fits best with the report’s definition of youth empowerment. It focuses on youth as actors in change processes. This category delineates two types of youth engagement, youth-led spaces and youth- and adult-led initiatives. The report argues that both of these structures share the same goals “to return power and autonomy to young people by equipping them with tools to design and lead work.”¹⁶

The literature instead demonstrates fundamental ways in which these two structures are distinct. The two concepts therefore could benefit from further elaboration, and perhaps their own spaces on this report’s continuum. Specifically, *youth-led groups* are spaces in which young people are at the forefront, with adult advocates providing supporting roles. In the literature, some of the strongest models of youth-led change efforts consist of efforts to influence state-level policy.¹⁷ *Youth- and adult-led initiatives*, commonly called “youth-adult partnerships” in the literature, are designed to value the roles of youth and adults equally. Literature focuses on valuing the unique skills and contributions of each group member, rather than an expectation that team members would play the same roles.¹⁸ Examples of high-quality youth-adult partnerships include young people participating in school board decision processes¹⁹ and assisting with the implementation of state policy in local schools.²⁰

Experiences of Promise Neighborhoods

The lack of justification for why Promise Neighborhoods were chosen as the evidence for the report, plus the lack of explanation of the collection and analysis of the data about Promise Neighborhoods, renders it impossible to assess the rigor of the examples provided. Nonetheless, the claims made in the report do align with literature on the key supports that young people need to engage in decision making.²¹

The discussion of strengths in the report is supported by research showing that youth benefit from programs that deepen youth development outcomes, including agency and belonging.²² Fostering agency is at the heart of the claim made in the report of the value of students assuming ownership of program activities. The report also highlights the importance of creating structures of belonging, including valuing relationships built between young people and adults that can continue beyond graduation.

The final section of the report points to challenges. These struggles align with common concerns of change efforts—recruitment, retention, resources, and distractions. Literature also

supports the report's claim regarding the need to train adults to assume roles as advocates of young people²³ —a skillset often quite different from teaching or even mentoring.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

Instead of a formal set of findings and conclusions, the report provides examples of its continuum and some description of strengths and weaknesses. The final sections would have been stronger if the conceptual themes were identified across cases, rather than listed site by site. Plus, the lack of connection of these insights to other literature was a missed opportunity to demonstrate the validity of the claims and to emphasize their potential on impact policy design.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report draws attention to a range of ways that young people can be included in decision-making processes. It demonstrates the potential for youth engagement to strengthen the design, implementation, and outcomes of 'collective impact' strategies.

The framework at the heart of the report creates more confusion than clarity, however. Many of the examples included in the continuum would not be considered authentic partnership in other research on youth engagement. It combines the work of youth engagement with the contexts needed by youth to complete such work. It also does not explain how the framework was developed and why it was needed.

Problems in the second half of the report stem from the convenience sample used with insufficient detail to assess the validity of claims. The strengths and challenges presented in the second section do align with the sense of the field in terms of contexts that enable and constrain youth engagement. The report misses the opportunity to highlight its contribution, however, since it fails to make these connections to other literature focused on youth engagement or collective capacity.

Notes and References

- 1 See for example:

Gonzalez, T.E., Hernandez-Saca, D.I., & Artiles, A.J. (2017). In search of voice: Theory and methods in K-12 student voice research in the US, 1990–2010. *Educational Review*, 69(4), 451-473.

Head, B.W. (2011). Why not ask them? Mapping and promoting youth participation. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(4), 541-547.

Mitra, D. (2018). Student voice in secondary schools: The possibility for deeper change. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 56(5), 473-487.
- 2 Shakesprere, J., O'Brien, M., & Harrison, E. (2020). *Youth engagement in collective impact initiatives: Lessons from Promise Neighborhoods*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved January 15, 2021, from <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/youth-engagement-collective-impact-initiatives>
- 3 Literature demonstrating academic, behavioral and socioemotional outcomes of youth engagement include:

Conner, J., Zaino, K., & Scarola, E. (2013). "Very powerful voices" The influence of youth organizing on educational policy in Philadelphia. *Educational Policy*, 27(3), 560-588.

Mitra, D.L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development. *Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 651–688.
- 4 Hart, R.A. (2008). Stepping back from 'the ladder': Reflections on a model of participatory work with children. In A. Ried, B. Jensen, & V. Simovska (Eds.), *Participation and learning* (pp. 19-31). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- 5 Mitra, D. (2006). Increasing student voice and moving toward youth leadership. *The Prevention Research*, 13(1), 7-10.
- 6 International Association for Public Participation (2018) 'Public Participation Spectrum'. Retrieved January 17, 2021 from <http://iap2.org>
- 7 Anderson, D. L., & Graham, A.P. (2016). Improving student wellbeing: Having a say at school. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 27(3), 348-366.
- 8 Gonzalez, T., McCabe, K.M., & Castro, C.L.D. (2017). *EquityTool: An equity toolkit for inclusive schools: Centering youth voice in school change*. Indianapolis, IN: Great Lakes Equity Center.
- 9 Shakesprere, J., O'Brien, M., & Harrison, E. (2020). *Youth engagement in collective impact initiatives: Lessons from Promise Neighborhoods* (p. 3). Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved January 15, 2021 from <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/youth-engagement-collective-impact-initiatives>
- 10 Literature on contexts and conditions that influence youth engagement includes:

Holquist, S. (2019). *Student voice in education policy: Understanding student participation in state-level K-12 education policy making*. Dissertation. University of Minnesota.

Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 57-74.

Mayes, E. (2017). Reconceptualizing the presence of students on school governance councils: The a/effects of spatial positioning. *Policy Futures in Education, Online First*, 1-17. Retrieved March 10, 2021, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1478210317739468>

Zeldin, S., Petrokubi, J., & MacNeil, C. (2008). Youth-adult partnerships in decision making: Disseminating and implementing an innovative idea into established organizations and communities. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(3-4), 262-277.
- 11 Shakesprere, J., O'Brien, M., & Harrison, E. (2020). *Youth engagement in collective impact initiatives: Les-*

- sons from *Promise Neighborhoods* (p.2). Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved January 15, 2021 from <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/youth-engagement-collective-impact-initiatives>
- 12 Shakesprere, J., O'Brien, M., & Harrison, E. (2020). *Youth engagement in collective impact initiatives: Lessons from Promise Neighborhoods* (p.3). Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved January 15, 2021 from <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/youth-engagement-collective-impact-initiatives>
 - 13 Literature on the youth developmental outcomes of young engagement initiatives includes:

Benson, R.L. (2003). Developmental assets and asset-building community: Conceptual and empirical foundations. In R.M. Lerner & P.L. Benson (Eds.), *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Implications for research, policy and practice*. New York, NY: Kluwer Academic.

Camino, L. (2005). Pitfalls and promising practices of youth-adult partnerships: An evaluator's reflections. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 75-85.

Kirshner, B., Hipolito-Delgado, C., & Zion, S. (2015). Sociopolitical development in educational systems: From margins to center. *The Urban Review*, 47(5), 803-808.

Mitra, D., & Serriere, S. (2012). Student voice in elementary-school reform: Examining youth development in fifth graders. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49, 743-774. Retrieved March 10, 2021, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0002831212443079>

Toshalis, E., & Nakkula, M J. (2012). *Motivation, engagement, and student voice: The students at the center series*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future. Retrieved on January 16, 2021, from https://www.howyouthlearn.org/pdf/Motivation%20Engagement%20Student%20Voice_o.pdf
 - 14 Anderson, D.L., & Graham, A.P. (2016). Improving student wellbeing: Having a say at school. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 27(3), 348-366.

International Association for Public Participation (2018). 'Public Participation Spectrum'. Retrieved January 17, 2021, from <http://iap2.org>

Gonzalez, T., McCabe, K.M., & Castro, C.L.D. (2017). *Equity tool: An equity toolkit for inclusive schools: Centering youth voice in school change*. Indianapolis, IN: Great Lakes Equity Center.
 - 15 Shakesprere, J., O'Brien, M., & Harrison, E. (2020). *Youth engagement in collective impact initiatives: Lessons from Promise Neighborhoods* (p. 5). Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved January 15, 2021, from <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/youth-engagement-collective-impact-initiatives>
 - 16 Shakesprere, J., O'Brien, M., & Harrison, E. (2020). *Youth engagement in collective impact initiatives: Lessons from Promise Neighborhoods* (p. 6). Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved January 15, 2021, from <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/youth-engagement-collective-impact-initiatives>
 - 17 Samantha Holquist compares the work of the Pritchard Committee and Oregon Student Voice:

Holquist, S. (2019). *Student voice in education policy: Understanding student participation in state-level K-12 education policy making*. University of Minnesota.
 - 18 Literature speaks a sense of shared ownership of a youth-adult partnership in which young people can experiment with a variety of roles:

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Zeldin, S., Camino, L., Calvert, M., & Ivey, D. (2002). *Youth-adult partnerships and positive youth development: Some lessons learned from research and practice in Wisconsin*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Extension.
 - 19 Sazama, J. Young, K. (2006). *15 Points: Successfully involving youth in decision making*. Summerville, MA: Youth on Board. Retrieved on January 17, 2021, from <https://www.youthonboard.org/publications/15-points-successfully-involving-young-people>

- 20 Cook-Sather, A. & Beattie, H. (2018). Strengthening student voice work through “linking across the lines”: A story in snapshots. *International Journal of Student Voice*, 3(2). Retrieved on January 16, 2021, from <https://www.upforlearning.org/resource-center/publications/>
- 21 Elder, M. (2018). *Youth-adult partnership resource kit: Tools and inspiration for organizations and communities*. The Ford Family Foundation. Retrieved on January 16, 2021, from <https://www.tfff.org/sites/default/files/Youth%20Adult%20Partnership%20Resource%20Kit.pdf>
- 22 Mitra, D.L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing “student voice” in schools lead to gains in youth development. *Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 651–688.
- 23 Literature on training adults need for partnering with youth includes:
Petrokubi, J., & Janssen, C. (2017). *Creating inclusive and effective environments for young people: Exploring youth voice and youth-adult partnership*. Portland, OR: Education Northwest, Institute for Youth Success.