# "I worked for that": The Rewards (and Challenges) of Youth Program Implementation in Four New England CDCs

A paper submitted to Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies and NeighborWorks America

**Tom Skwierawski**

Edward M. Gramlich Fellowship in Community and Economic Development

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# "I worked for that": The Rewards (and Challenges) of Youth Program Implementation in Four New England CDCs

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by

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# I. Introduction

The 1989 adoption of the UN's Convention on the Rights of Children, which many see as a watershed moment in youth engagement, helped pave the way for stronger notions of youth rights and responsibilities. It established basic rights of children: a right to care and provision, protection, and political participation, among others (Chawla 2002). Soon thereafter, these rights were bolstered through a variety of other policies, at both the local (e.g., the "Growing up in Cities" Movement) and global (e.g., UNESCO's MOST) levels. These and other policies advocated for children to be seen as active and engaged individuals whose needs and opinions mattered (Granger 2002).

Scholars in the community development field likewise began to advocate for a shift in the way we view youth. In the past, it was conventional to view youth as mere "delinquents," problems waiting to be solved. Thus, community programming for youth primarily addressed issues such as drug abuse, gangs, or poor school performance. But this new movement sought to change this convention, and to no longer treat youths merely as "human subjects or service recipients" (Checkoway 2005). Instead, it started from the premise that youths could be "assets" to the community (Checkoway 2005). Proponents of this asset-oriented approach argued that instead of simply providing youth with services, community programs should seek to include youth in the community development process, whether in community organizing, advocacy, education, or other kinds of programs. Young people, on this view, have a unique voice capable of contributing valuable ideas to the larger community.

It wasn't merely about inclusion, however, as numerous studies have pointed to the instrumental value of these programs. This research looked at the benefits of this approach, both for youth and the community. Four major benefits for youth have been identified. One of the most common is leadership development: youth engagement programs have been shown to develop strong community leaders (Driskell 2002). A second benefit, and a concomitant of leadership development, is a heightened sense of both personal and political efficacy—a measure much studied by scholars of community psychology (Peterson et al. 2011). They argue that young people involved in community programs begin to grow more confident in their abilities to set and achieve educational, professional, and other per-sonal goals. Furthermore, they argue that certain types of youth engagement programs also develop a sense of political efficacy. Young people who participate in organizations that connect them with social movements, for example, become more likely to see political problems as solvable. Some argue that this sense of efficacy is further strengthened by engagement with like-minded adults and peers: young people who do so develop social capital that helps them to effectively navigate their world. From learning how to run a meeting to networking with local political and civic leaders, youth engagement programs provide myriad opportunities for the development of stronger social skills and connections. A fourth benefit, in contrast to these "soft" skills, comes from vocational programs that teach technical skills, directly preparing young people for the workforce (Halpern 2005).

The literature on the benefits of youth engagement for the community is similarly varied. First, a successful engagement approach can help, albeit indirectly, to solve the problems associated with "delinquent" youth. If implemented correctly, these programs create more active, engaged citizens who have a vested interest in their communities (Driskell 2002). Instead of dealing reactively with a problem (e.g., drug abuse), asset-oriented programs can empower youth to proactively channel their energies in more positive directions. Anyone who has worked with teens knows that this more proactive approach is often much more effective than the didacticism of the service-oriented approach.

There are other, more direct benefits that youth often provide to their communities. In the case of the nationwide YouthBuild program (Figure 1), for example, the benefits are quite tangible: provision of affordable housing, development of public art projects, and improvement of a community's physical environment in a variety of other ways (www.youthbuildboston.org). Scholars have also looked at how youth engagement can strengthen the community development organizations that undertake it: youth can help build an organization's capacity by conducting surveys or helping with community organizing, to name just a few approaches. Others have argued that youth engagement can have positive effects not just on the strength but also on the agenda of an organization: young people bring a unique voice to the table, approaching issues in fresh ways and perhaps more interested in solving long-term problems, such as global warming, that the adult world may otherwise neglect to address.

The development community has begun to recognize these benefits, as asset-oriented youth programs

Figure 1: Youth Build Boston teens, after a weatherization project

Figure 2: Youth interviewing for an "urban investigation" on the finance systems

have been implemented by a variety of public and private actors. The Growing Up In Cities project, originally an idea of Kevin Lynch, was reconceived to help include youth in the community planning process (Driskell, Bannerlee, and Chawla 2001). Kids around the world have become involved in government committees, and in some places, most notably Italy, entire countries have devoted resources to include children in the political process (Riggio 2002; Tonucci and Risotto 2001; Corsi 2002). The nonprofit sector has also increasingly adopted this asset-oriented approach. The Center for Urban Pedagogy in New York (Figure 2), for example, provides youth with ample opportunities for "urban investigations," both in and out of school, by which they study and advocate for issues within the community (www. welcometocup.org). Other groups work to help youth become leaders in their communities. YouthBuild, for example, provides GED training and job skills to coincide with a focus on affordable housing. Programs such as Chicago's After School Matters program aim to partner students with mentors in their particular fields of interest.

Although both public and nonprofit actors have begun to latch on to this new approach to youth as community assets, the approach is still fairly new. Although progress has been made in the past two decades, there is much work yet to be done (Camino 2005; Zeldin, Camino, and Mook 2005). Many organizations still hold old stereotypes of youth capabilities, and still tend to perceive young people primarily as problems rather than assets (Frank 2005). There is thus a rift between the optimistic goals of youth advocate and the work

happening on the ground. This dissonance between theory and practice, combined with the fairly new existence of the asset-oriented approach, has led to confusion and mixed results on the ground. As one scholar put it, there are "good intentions, but a lack of intentionality" in the efforts of community organizations to partner with young people (Camino 2005). These organizations are often stuck between old and new perceptions of youth, unsure how (or if) to engage youth in their programming.

This may explain why community development corporations (CDCs) have been hesitant to join the fold. Certainly, some CDCs have begun to do so. But this movement is still nascent, and exemplifies both the challenges and potential of youth programs. To begin with, there are many valid reasons that CDCs have not developed youth programs. For one, such programs often stand apart from the organizational priorities of these CDCs, which often focus on affordable housing issues or dedicate their community organizing capacities to adults. Additionally, many of these organizations would like to implement youth programs, but lack the requisite knowledge and capacity. Indeed, a variety of questions involving staffing, funding, and programming make implementation a profound challenge for these groups – so much so that one might argue that CDCs would do well to just keep focusing on their traditional lines of business.

Yet CDCs inhabit a special space in the community development field, and there are reasons to believe that this provides them with special advantages in conducting youth work. For one, as community advo-

cates, CDCs are in some ways inherently well prepared to work with youth. One of the most important requirements of effective programming for youth is that be grounded in their sociocultural conditions. CDCs have a deep understanding of these conditions: they are already in tune with the needs and desires of their communities and well connected with local leaders. Further, these groups often have a strong existing capacity for community engagement. The organizations in this study, for example, already include "Community Building and Organizing" departments. Of course, they are often focused on adults, but deliberate planning could alter this focus. Lastly, the place-based focus of CDCs often sets them aside from other organizations that tackle youth issues. As this research will show, one of the challenges of youth work is often to ground it in tangible outcomes, which is something that these organizations are already well versed in doing.

It is in within this context that this study was conceived. Its aim was to qualitatively study four New England CDCs. All four of these organizations are members of NeighborWorks America, one of the partners in this study. NeighborWorks America is a national quasi-public organization that delivers programs and services through a network of roughly 235 independent CDCs nationwide. Although the organizations – known as NeighborWorks Organizations (NWOs) – vary from place to place, some general similarities apply. Practically all of these groups are primarily focused on real estate development, in particular the development of affordable housing. But many of them also have other lines of business, geared towards community development more generally: homebuyer services, property management, leadership development, and community organizing. For NWOs, youth work is undertaken as an aspect of community organizing.

The following section will outline the groups studied. The next section then categorizes the main types of challenges faced by these four groups. Some solutions are then proposed to these organizational challenges, solutions that are then used as a framework to analyze each of these four CDCs in depth. Finally, the paper concludes with an analysis of the study's implications for the future of both theory and practice.

# II. Study Overview: Youth Engagement in New England CDCs: A Case Study

This study looked at four NeighborWorks Organizations (NWOs), whose names have been changed for this study: YouthArt, Coastal, Southside, and Inland. These organizations were chosen by NeighborWorks America, mainly because of their proximity to the study location (Boston, MA) and their past history engaging with youth populations. Although all of the NWOs studied worked with youths, they did so in a variety of ways – through performing arts, community organizing, and by providing tutoring and mentoring support. Since the aims of the groups studied were so broad, the study defines "youth engagement programs" broadly as programs aimed at adolescents and young adults (aged 12-18), and which promote positive interactions between youth and their communities.

**Methodology**
The study's primary method of data collection was through interviews, with both staff and youth in these organizations (Figure 3). In selecting staff members from each group, the study tried to include a least one member of the group's management, and one member solely focused on youth programming. This was easier with some groups than others, but in the end each group was represented by at least two members who were quite familiar with the youth programs. In total, ten adults were interviewed: four from Northside, two from Coastal, two from Southside, and two from Inland.

| NeighborWorks organization | Northside | Coastal | Inland | Southside |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Youth Interviewed | — | 4 | 5 | — |
| Adults Interviewed | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| *Special Notes* | Northside's main youth program was not in operaton during the summer months | | | Southside's main youth program was not in operation during the summer months |

Figure 3: Interviews by organization

The teens interviewed ranged in age from 12-18. In total, there were 9 youths interviewed: 4 at Coastal, and 5 at Inland. For youth under the age of 18, adult consent was obtained before proceeding with the interview. In all interviews (both staff and youth), a questionnaire was used. The language for the youth questionnaire was adjusted, but both addressed the same issues. However,

|  | **Northside** | **Coastal** | **Inland** | **Southside** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Youth Program** | YouthArt | YouthOrganize | YouthLearn | YouthLead |
| **Program Goals** | To help youths reach their potential through the performing arts. Each year it provides courses in five major fields: graphic design, dance, voice, video production, and music production.  These programs are also coupled with classes on college preparedness and leadership development. | To "provide environmental, economic, civic, and public-health education to [neighborhood redacted] youth while also providing them with year-round employment." It is an offshoot of AdultOrganize, their adult community building group. | To prepare students for college. The programs' academic components are paired with leadership development, service learning, and neighborhood beautification projects. | To "engage and develop youth in [neighborhood redacted] to strengthen their role in addressing community issues, while simultaneously addressing academics, raising self and group awareness, and increasing worldview and opportunities." |
| **Location** | Medium-sized city | Large metropolitan area | Small city | Large metropolitan area |
| **Youth reached** | Up to sixty-five 14 through 18-year-olds (school-year program), 12 to 14-year-olds (summer) | Eight to ten 14 through 18-year-olds | Twenty middle school students and roughly fifteen high school students | Ten to fifteen 10 through 14-year-olds |

**Figure 4: An Organizational Overview**

interviews were not restricted to the questionnaire's contents: these became a guide for more informal conversation, which veered off as necessary to address key issues.

The youth were discovered through a snowball sampling method: their names were given to the researcher by staff within the organization.  Although this was not the most scientific method of sampling, it was a necessary given the time constraints of a summer-long study.  Additionally, working with youth would have been difficult without the support of the organizational staff.  This method does raise questions, however, about the validity of the sample. For instance, it is possible that the youth were handpicked by the staff to support the program, or for other reasons were not representative of the broader population. While concerns over the small sample size may be valid, the candor shown by the youth in the interview seemed to dismiss the former as a cause for concern.

As the following section will illustrate, although these groups all work in the field of "youth engagement," they do so quite differently.  One might argue that it would have been more practical to look at organizations that shared a similar focus (e.g., performing arts) and analyze them accordingly.  Such an approach would have certain advantages, but so does the one taken in the pres-

ent study. The variety of youth engagement programs in the four NWOs studied seems to be representative of the diversity among NWOs and CDCs more generally (and NeighborWorks America staff perhaps provided the four groups chosen here partly for that reason).  Since the field of youth engagement is varied, the study should reflect that.  Further, their youth programming choices are not the only ways in which the four CDCs studied are diverse: their varying locations, turnover rates, and program histories represent a broad swath of youth engagement work in the area.

**Summary of Case Study Youth Programs**
*Northside*
Northside is located north of Boston, in a medium-sized city (75,000-100,000). The major youth program at Northside is known as YouthArt. It focuses on helping youths reach their potential through the performing arts. Each year it provides courses in five major fields: graphic design, dance, voice, video production, and music production.  These programs are also coupled with classes on college preparedness and leadership development.

YouthArt originally came out of a local nonprofit known PeaceCity. The founder, motivated by the shooting death of a close friend, created the program as an

alternative to the violence on the city's streets. In 2004, this nonprofit merged with Northside, which had youth programs of its own, mainly focused on building "young professionals" in the community through leadership development. The organization that has existed since, YouthArt, matches the goals of Northside with that of PeaceCity: through the performing arts, it challenges youth to become leaders in their communities.

The program can serve approximately sixty-five students at any given time, and operates both school-year and summer programs. Its main focus is youths aged 14-18, but its summer programs also reach younger students (aged 12-14). To become a part of the group, the youth must pay a $60 membership fee for each school year.

*Coastal*

Coastal is located within a major metropolitan area in New England. As the name implies, this CDC serves an area located near major waterways: both the Atlantic Ocean, and a major river. Coastal's main youth program is known as YouthOrganize. It is seen as "a way to provide environmental, economic, civic, and public-health education to [neighborhood redacted] youth while also providing them with year-round employment." It seeks to merge leadership development, community organizing, and personal development.

As this description suggests, Coastal's youth program grew out of its environmental justice and advocacy work. Due to the neighborhood's precarious position near the waterfront, and its influx of recent immigrants, it often deals with a variety of environmental justice concerns. Its resident organizing group, AdultOrganize, has been advocating with regard to these concerns, and YouthOrganize is an offshoot of this. Sara, a staff member at Coastal, explains how this happened:

> We have a significant youth population, and we really realized there was a need to dedicate some time and energy to building the capacity of young people as the future of the neighborhood … but also, very much, the present of the neighborhood.

YouthOrganize has been around for quite some time now. Although staff could not recall exactly how long, they were certain it had existed for over ten years. The program is open to all residents of the local neighborhood, and serves 8 to 10 youths per year, offering them paid positions with Coastal.

*Southside*

Southside is located within the same metropolitan area as Coastal. The main focus of Southside's youth work is the YouthLead program. Its goal is to "engage and develop youth in [neighborhood redacted] to strengthen their role in addressing community issues, while simultaneously addressing academics, raising self and group awareness, and increasing worldview and opportunities."

This program grew out of a day care program that was, as described by a staff member, little more than a "holding pen" for local youth. Around 2002, it slowly became YouthLead, a leadership development organization which aimed to involve kids in "engaging the community, community development, and community organizing." YouthLead later splintered into two separate subgroups, and remains so at present: Young Men and Young Women, gender-specific groups with the same goals as YouthLead. Their main focus is to serve as forums for discussing and resolving both personal and community-based issues. In its most recent phase, YouthLead incorporated elements of leadership development and business entrepreneurship, allowing the youth to market and sell T-shirts promoting positive messages for the community.

The YouthLead program is open to all neighborhood teenagers aged 10-14, serves ten to fifteen youth, and runs during the school year. In addition to YouthLead, Southside has recently received a grant to work on a summertime program called the "Leadership Project": a collaboration between various locally-based nonprofits focused on mentoring of young men of color. Although it is still a relatively recent project, for reasons to be elaborated upon later, it will be examined in conjunction with YouthLead.

*Inland*

Of the four CDCs in the study, Inland was located in the smallest city – with just under 50,000 residents. Inland's primary youth program is known as YouthLearn. Its main goal is college preparation, with special foci in middle school (mentoring) and high school (academic counseling). Although the program runs K-12, the focus of this study will be the middle school and high school programs. The programs' academic components are paired with leadership development, service learning, and neighborhood beautification projects.

Motivation for the program initially came from a State Housing Grant, to be used to create programs to "keep the kids off the streets," as one staff member put it. The organization was given a choice about how to spend

this money, and decided to focus its efforts on education. YouthLearn was established in 2004, and although it is open to all neighborhood residents, its primary focus is on those residents living in one of Inland's properties. The program is free of charge, and serves approximately twenty middle school and fifteen high school students. It has both school-year and summer programs.

*Framework for Evaluating Youth Initiatives*
A newcomer to youth engagement, looking to this as a primer for work in the field, could be forgiven for arriving at this point in the paper still unsure (and perhaps more confused) about what exactly "youth engagement" entails. Indeed, these cases are all entirely different, and using a single category to describe them may seem like a stretch. In truth, this is likely how leaders within many CDCs feel. They approach youth work hesitantly, if at all, unsure of the best ways to move forward. Yet in many ways, the similar successes and failures of the diverse programs studied here help to illuminate a field that is much more dynamic, adaptable, and approachable than community development practitioners may think. For this reason, the study wanted to analyze the process of youth engagement: instead of looking at which type of program is best, it aims to analyze the processes by which youth engagement programs are implemented successfully across a variety of program types. Normative judgments of youth programming types can perhaps be useful, but more evidence is needed to determine why (or if) certain types of programming are better than others for achieving different goals.

In the world of CDCs, whose main goal is not youth programming, an analysis of process is especially important. All stakeholders (funders, organizations, youth) need to experience the process of implementing youth programming as a success if they are to become further invested in such programs. Studies have shown that small successes in youth work can lead to larger ones later on (Warren, Mira, and Nikundiwe 2008). But in order for this to happen, a CDC needs to be able to tailor a solution to its organizational priorities and to the needs of its community. A study of how to implement youth programming successfully – regardless of programming type – can help organizations to make informed choices as to what the best fit may be. This paper argues that regardless of the type of programming offered, youth programs in CDCs need to address the interrelated concerns of clarity, quality, and capacity if they are to be implemented effectively.

# III. Clarity, Capacity, and Quality: The Challenges Facing Youth Organizations

| | Clarity | Capacity | Quality |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Operationalized definition** | Having a clear vision for a program's goals and objectives | The ability to fufill the program's goals in an effective manner | The use of quality implementation methods for youth programs |
| **Common programming challenges** | •Unclear goals •Insufficient measurement of success •Disconnect between program and organizational goals | •Funding shortfalls •High staff turnover •Low organizational priority | •Youth enthusiasm gaps •Strained youth-adult relationships |

**Figure 5: Key Study Variables, Defined**

A CDC that can design a youth program of high quality, appropriate to its organizational capacity, and with clear goals aligned with organizational priorities, is likely to achieve high levels of success, no matter what the programming offered. This section defines each of these terms – clarity, capacity, and quality – and illustrates their importance by describing challenges faced in each area by the case study organizations.

**Clarity**
Within all of the groups studied, there seems to be a lack of clarity in the programs they've implemented. For one, as mentioned earlier, this has not been the main focus of these organizations. Since service delivery programs are only one of their lines of business, and with youth groups playing only a marginal role in this sector, it has simply not been a major concern of these organizations.

Problems of clarity are also borne of the success of youth engagement programs elsewhere. Since it has become more common across the world, countless studies have come out outlining the benefits of such work, and a buzz has been created around youth work. Indeed, Neighborworks America recently held a summit in Boston, gathering together NWO leaders to discuss youth engagement. Many of the summit's discussions centered on the benefits outlined in the introduction: the myriad ways youth engagement programs can the CDCs, the communities they inhabit, and even the teens themselves. While all of these benefits are enviable ones for any fledging youth program to seek, it is often difficult (if not impossible) to achieve them all at once. A program that sets its sights on workplace skills, for example, may find it hard to incorporate community organizing into their line of business. Likewise, a group that provides out of school enrichment activities may find it difficult to affect young people's senses of political ef-

ficacy. That is not to say that any of these outcomes are mutually exclusive — in fact, many would argue that the most effective programs are those that merge community and youth benefits — but the diverse array of achievable benefits can create a lack of focus. This is where the issue of clarity comes into the picture. For an organization to implement a successful program, they need to be clear about a few things: goals, organizational priorities, and measures of success. A few noteworthy examples from the case studies help underscore these points.

*Uncertain Goals*
Of the four groups studied, three were undergoing transitions in leadership: three (Coastal, Southside, Northside) with youth coordinators, and two of these (Southside, Northside) also with upper-level management. As one might guess, this caused major fissures over what exactly these youth programs were meant to accomplish.

Northside's YouthArt program is an interesting case in this regard. During the study, the entire CDC underwent a major restructuring. Yet even before this happened, there were disagreements as to the goals of YouthArt. It seemed that in many ways, the group was still divided along the lines that the merger of Northside and the original nonprofit sought to dissolve. As Roy, a member of staff leadership at Northside put it, Christina, the youth coordinator, "is more focused on, like, performing arts … and I'm more of a community organizer, so I'm really committed personally, professionally to that."

This debate, about whether the program should focus on solely on individual benefits, as opposed to integrating community benefits, has carried over to the new administration. The new staff, like Roy, seem dedicated to increasing the community-wide impact of YouthArt's programming; they advocate for more leadership development or college preparation classes, which would reach a larger audience. As leadership decides on program restructuring, this discussion will shape the future of YouthArt and, ultimately, its impact potential. If done properly, there is reason to believe the organization can build on its success in the performing arts, and add an exciting new element. Yet there is also some reason for genuine concern. One might wonder how the organization, which already spends a great deal on its youth programs, could afford to engage in these ostensibly costly new endeavors. It would likely entail a decrease in staffing and/or funding for the performing arts, the effects of which may be quite negative for YouthArt's traditional clientele. Additionally, while these new classes may be quite successful, it also seems like the group might be straying from where they have experienced success in the past.

*Unclear Outcome Measurement*
Another complication lies in the measurement of outcomes. Even if an organization is clear on the goals they would like to achieve, how will they know if they are reaching these goals?

Of the groups interviewed, one (Inland) was able to provide formal measurements of success. Perhaps, with a focus on education, their goals were more conducive to formal measures- attendance rates, grades, and high school graduation rates. To be fair, all groups provided informal measures of their success, some more clearly than others. Coastal, for instance, was able to provide numerous and varied examples of the tangible (and recent) benefits on both policy and the built environment, and the heightened levels of personal development among teens (social skills, career goals, etc.). The other groups did this as well, but it wasn't as clear or convincing- and one could argue, when quantitative measures are lacking, they need to be. Surely, measuring success is a difficult process, one that will be talked about in the next section. But there is ways in which any organization can do so skillfully. Without this, there is no way of knowing if even the clearest of goals are being achieved.

*Lack of Alignment with Broader Goals*
The organizations studied also faced challenges in clarifying how the goals of their youth programs were related to their broader and more central goals.

Southside, also undergoing a major restructuring, has some excellent ideas about future directions for its youth program. Mark, one of the newest members of staff leadership, addressed some of the changes he would like to see:

> We also have to think about expanding the program … we have the capacity to not just have, you know, eight to ten [youth participants], but have a strong fifteen or even twenty that are consistent … some of these "one-off" workshops you're giving them, we wanna have them be able to employ those tactics and do those workshops [on a more sustained basis]… I think that is the area where I think we have the greatest potential to expand, and really do some awesome stuff.

As one of the leaders who helped create the Leadership Project, he wants to see a larger, more sustained impact for the program. It is an admirable desire, and a necessary one, if Southside would like to have a sustained impact on the community's youth. But in talking with another staff member, who had been around quite a bit longer, one gets a sense of the difficulty of achieving these lofty goals: "Because, um, we have a challenge that, you know, we are not seen as a youth agency so it's very difficult … you know, our scale of work around youth is … very small." For this staff member, the small scale of the program was seen not as an opportunity for growth, but simply as a manifestation of Southside's priorities: youth engagement was marginal because it was a marginal goal of the organization. So the real challenge for Southside in the future is determining some realistic goals for what its youth work can achieve. That is not to say that the second staff member's more skeptical, conservative approach is the realistic one. The point is rather that if the youth program is to be successful, all staff members will need to arrive at a consensus about its goals and desired outcomes: only then can those outcomes be fully achieved.

**Capacity**
A lack of clarity about organizational priorities often goes hand in hand with the second major challenge faced by CDCs wishing to start youth programs: a lack of capacity to effectively implement such programming. In this study, capacity will be understood as the "*ability* of nonprofit institutions to fulfill their missions in an effective manner" (McPhee and Bare 2001, emphasis added). Even the best of intentions will go nowhere without sufficient capacity. The groups studied were challenged with issues of funding, staffing, and organizational willpower.

*Funding shortfalls*
Probably the most common factor that stymied capacity was funding. Researchers have lamented the lack of known, consistent sources of funding for youth programming (Driskell 2002), and in these groups it was no different. Every single staff member interviewed, and even some youth, mentioned funding constraints. Sara, a staff member at Coastal, described their funding situation as a "real patchwork," which they were constantly searching for ways to improve. This notion of funding as a "patchwork" was shared by all organizations, as they struggled to gather grants from disparate sources. The fragmented nature of funding for youth programs has two major consequences for these groups. First, it means

that fundraising constantly demands the staff's time and effort, which are already scarce resources for these organizations. Second, because many of the available grants are only temporary, it is difficult for these groups to sustain or expand even very successful programs. The Leadership Project, for example, is an excellent program, but one which is funded by a one-time grant from the Boston Foundation. While Southside would like to continue this programming into the future, a key concern will be how they plan on doing so without a steady funding source. Additionally, grants often come with strings attached, strings that may limit the type of programming offered.

Underlying all of these funding issues is the fact that CDCs attempting to implement youth programs are making a significant departure from their traditional lines of business. This may require them to develop new relationships with community stakeholders, or adapt old ones, to help fund their youth programming. Richard, a Southside staff member, illustrates how the expectations of CDC funders can make fundraising for youth programs difficult: "There's a drawback or a disadvantage to being successful in the housing development role because … funders want to fund our housing development work, right?" There are certainly worse problems to have, but if an organization is truly committed to their youth work, it will need to find ways to convince funders to support that work. This will be further discussed in the section four.

*Staffing turnover*
Another challenge to capacity is staffing. Certainly, proper staffing is integral to effective implementation. On the one hand, it is important to have staff that understand how to work with teens, how to relate to and respect them. This aspect of staffing, which will be elaborated upon later in the study, is not a challenge for any of these organizations; indeed, it seems to be one of their strongest points.

On the other hand, these high quality staff members are often quite transient – each group had high staff turnover. Of the organizations studied, all but Inland had experienced recent turnover in at least one of their youth coordinator positions. As mentioned earlier, two of the groups, (Southside and Northside), were also undergoing changes to management staff. In many ways, these changes put the organizations back at square one. New management staff members need time to create a new vision, and simply to become familiar with day-to-day operations. New youth coordinators have to

start from scratch in developing relationships with local youths, and need more time to develop a solid method of implementation. As Southside's Jason put it, "It's hard … to build a five-year plan, because a lot of times the individual might not be a youth specialist for five years."

*Other Organizational Priorities*
The last challenge concerns not capacity building per se, but rather how a group decides to allocate its existing capacity. The CDCs studied seemed hesitant to devote organizational capacity to youth programs because, as Richard of Southside put it, "while the organization values the work we do with young people … there is also a range of other organizational priorities that determine, you know, we're not going to pursue that fund for our youth work, we are going to pursue it for something else." Prioritization affects more than funding, however. Coastal, for example, is staffed by a variety of experts in the field of community development and sustainability. Yet those adults devote this knowledge to YouthOrganize projects only sparingly. As Adonay, a teen in the program, noted, "they have their own, you know, schedules and assignments," and so their energies are focused elsewhere. Certainly adult staff members are quite busy with a variety of projects, but it seems as though a lack of collaboration among age groups leaves a lot of available capacity on the table.

**Quality**
Whereas the first two concepts deal primarily with the structure of the youth programming, this last deals with its implementation. Providing quality programming is a difficult task. Regardless of the type of program, there were two common areas of concern. First, the groups studied faced challenges in gaining and maintaining the interest of youths. Second, there appeared to be a divide between the youth and adults in some programs.

*An Enthusiasm Gap*
Three of the four groups reported problems, at one point or another, in getting youth interested in the work they were doing. From a young person's perspective, some of this work was simply boring. Adonay at YouthOrganize, for example, was less than enthusiastic about some of their "community organizing" work: "for example, we have this … um … campaign that is ethanol [i.e., protesting the passage of an ethanol-carrying train through the neighborhood] … which is a very boring and adult campaign." While he enjoyed much of the work Youth-

Organize was doing, this was a sore spot for him and the other youths interviewed.

The same went for many of the young people at YouthLearn. Donald put it quite bluntly: "Some of the programs are not so fun or interesting." Some variation of this statement was made by all of the youth in the program. Speaking with Chris, I was able to get a bit more detail as to why this was the case. While he appreciated the academic content, and felt that it was beneficial for his development, he didn't like how certain programs were carried out: "I know we have to do some reading … but it's not fun. At least make it fun or, like, after that do fun activities about the book, instead of just sitting and reading."

The adult staff were concerned about the lack of enthusiasm in the youth community, more broadly speaking, that made recruitment to their programs a challenge. They brought up, for one, economic concerns of the local youth. As these organizations work in fairly impoverished areas, youth often need to work after school, to provide money for their families to save for college. Southside once tried to provide a stipend for participating in their programs, but as Mark quipped, "a $200 stipend? It's not appealing to a young person. … That's, like, not even what their phones cost, right?!" Consequently, Southside felt it could not compete with the "[monetary] incentives for older teens not be involved," and ceased offering stipends. Sara, who provides an hourly stipend for YouthOrganize youth, similarly related stories of young people who had to drop out to focus on a better-paying job.

Staff recognized that the enthusiasm gap was not solely a matter of economics, however. Many young people simply weren't interested in the programs these groups were providing. According to Northside's Roy:

> It's performing arts and visual arts and college prep. It's, you know, like other organizations – like Boston Kids Club – they have more sports, they have that kinds of stuff. We are very specific, I guess, so not every kid would come here... it makes it not appealing to everyone.

Staff at Inland echoed similar concerns, suggesting that sports and other extracurricular programs often demand the attention of many community youths.

*Strained Adult-Youth Relationships*
One of the greatest strengths of all of these organizations, and something that will be elaborated upon later,

lies in the positive relationships between youth and the adult youth coordinators who work with them. Nonetheless, there were also a number of examples of disconnection or strain between youth and the non-youth workers in these CDCs.

In many cases, youth did not feel like they had a voice in programming choices. Chris, who earlier mentioned his boredom with certain classes, was actually picked to be a youth representative on the planning committee responsible for the upcoming curriculum that he later found boring. In theory, including youth in the planning of a program is a great way to incorporate their ideas. But after talking with Chris, it was clear that there is still work to do. He talked about how he and his other youth colleague were present at the curriculum meeting, but actually had very little input. When they arrived at the meeting, they felt as though the adults had already had curriculum plans ironed out, more or less. Furthermore, as young adolescents, they felt a bit intimidated by the environment of an adult meeting: "When we got there, we didn't know what they were saying … so I was just like, 'Yeah … what … yes,' 'cause I didn't know what they were talking about." Within this context, Chris's boredom seems justified: if the curriculum wasn't adapted with the needs and interests of him or his peers in mind, this should be rather unsurprising.

Other groups had similar issues, most notably the young people at Coastal. The past year's program was seen, by all accounts, as a success. The youth helped to create a youth garden, educated the community on their recycling initiative, and were involved in some of AdultOrganize's larger-scale campaigns. But both staff and youth interviewed revealed a concern with the level of adult-youth collaboration. Mercedez, a youth member, felt that "they [i.e., adults] don't really take us seriously, like, we are just like this side project they have to, like, feel like they are doing something good for the environment." All of the youth interviewed echoed this concern, and felt alienated from the rest of the Coastal staff. Samantha, one of the Coastal staff members, had a theory about why this was happening: "So I don't know if a lot of that has to do with [the adult staff's] fear of like, 'If we let the youth … be a part of it, what happens if they say it wrong?'" This theory could likely apply to Chris's situation at Inland, as well. This is not to suggest that Chris should have been leading the meeting – or in the case of Coastal, that the adult staff should shape their schedules according to the needs of the youth in the organization. But an appropriate balance is needed, and without one the quality of youth programming suffers.

# IV. Putting All the Pieces Together: A Plan for Action

For the purposes of analysis, the three concepts of clarity, capacity, and quality were treated distinctly; in practice, of course, they are interrelated in complex ways. You cannot have quality programming without a clear vision, and vice versa. Youth engagement that satisfies these three criteria requires careful planning, vigilant oversight, and thoughtful reflection. This section suggests a sequence of important steps to consider when implementing youth engagement programs. Although these steps relate specifically to CDCs, they could certainly be generalizable to other organizations as well. Each of these steps is supported with successful examples from the four groups analyzed, and includes questions organizations should ask to help guide them through the planning process. Although the preceding sections have, for purposes of analysis, emphasized the struggles of these organizations, they all have shown many successes in practice. It is just a matter of putting all of the variables together effectively and, no matter how successful a program, continuously reflecting on how it can be improved. This is no small feat.

**Step One: Define Organizational Objectives**
*What are your goals?*
To answer this question, staff first need to look at the mission of the organization as a whole. Aligning youth engagement's goals with organizational missions serves a few purposes. It helps boost clarity so, as one of the youth said earlier, their work isn't simply seen as a "side project." When adults and youth are on the same page, they are better able to achieve their goals, and to do so collaboratively. Matching the goals with the mission also has the effect of boosting the capacity of the programming. Coastal's program, in the words of Sara, is just "one piece of our broader work to create strong sustainable neighborhoods." Since there is this integration with its larger mission, Coastal can easily tap into existing resources to help YouthOrganize function effectively. A great example comes from a past program in which YouthOrganize worked on water quality testing in the adjacent river. Since Coastal is already part of a broad coalition concerned with the river, obtaining the technical expertise to conduct these tests was actually quite simple: they just contacted one of their affiliate organizations, who was more than willing to lend a hand to the

cause.

Another such case was YouthArt. Near the end of the study, new staff were hired, and agreed to be interviewed. It was clear that they are keenly aware of the importance of having goals aligned with the mission of the larger group:

> Looking at our network organizing approach, it's really about creating a place where residents come together, they work with one another, they use each other's support, and understand the benefit of and the power of, you know … community change. But also using, learning the skills and tools to bring change for themselves. The two go hand in hand in our view of community development. What we are trying to do here is help the kids know the skills they have, motivate and empower them – but also connect that energy to each other, and to their community, and see how … this ecosystem works.

Having established that their youth programming will be broadly connected to their mission, it is then important to set both short- and long-term goals for the program. This process entails two important considerations. First, the group needs to consider what outcomes it would like to achieve. Would it like programming that achieves individual or community outcomes, or some mixture of both? As a community development organization, it is likely in the interests of these organizations to seek outcomes that benefit both parties.

Second, staff need to consider how to measure the achievement of their goals over time. The main goal of Inland's YouthLearn, for instance, is college preparation. Their main measures of success correlate directly to this goal: high school graduation rates and college acceptance rates for the older youths, and school grades and attendance rates for the younger ones. Certainly, Inland's goals lend themselves to quantitative measures with relative ease, and such measurement will be more challenging for other groups with different goals. For this reason, the issue of measurement will be elaborated upon later on in this section.

*What programming will help you achieve those goals?*
Far too often, not just in youth work but elsewhere, plans are created through program-based rather than goal-based planning. An action is decided upon simply for its own sake, rather than questioning how it fits within the broader scope of an organization's mission. For example, an organization may decide it would like to engage with the local youth population. After seeing another community group's mentoring program, they decide they would like to emulate it, with only fleeting consideration of how it may fit into their group's existing mission. Instead, an organization should use its existing goals as a guide to planning its youth programs. Coastal, for instance, sees its program as part of a larger environmental advocacy network, and its youth engagement works directly towards that goal. Their projects throughout the years attest to this: from water-quality testing and the promotion of multi-modal transportation, to waste-disposal education and community gardening, their youth programming has been guided by their organizational goals. Consequently, they have been able to utilize their existing capacity and create a common culture. Regardless of the challenges in youth-adult relations they currently face, over the years this goal-based planning has motivated the organization's entire membership to support its work with youth.

**Step Two: Understand Your Group's Capacity**
Developing strong goals is one thing, but actually having the ability to achieve them is another matter. A group needs to match desired programming, scale, and outcomes with its available capacity: What funding is provided for youth engagement work? How many staff are available to support these programs? Does the organization have the collective willpower to carry out these programs, or are these goals mere lip service? Before implementing any type of youth work, these questions must be asked. If it turns out that, for one reason or another, capacity is lacking, leadership should either adjust their goals, or work to improve their capacity.

*What should be the program's scale?*
This is a key question. Naturally, these groups would like to work with as many kids as possible. But as already noted, youth programs often inhabit marginal positions within these CDCs as it is. Therefore, it is necessary to make some difficult choices, and be realistic about a program's scale.

Coastal's program seems quite clear about its aims regarding scale. According to Sara:

> We strive for depth rather than breadth. We really try to serve a small number of young people very effectively. So, you know, while some programs are trying to serve large numbers of young people, our group is typically like eight to ten or so.

Some people would argue that if a youth program works with only eight to ten young people, it is not worth having in the first place. But that argument is misguided. For one, working with eight to ten youths successfully is far better than working with twenty to thirty kids just adequately, or than interacting superficially with forty to fifty. Additionally, as mentioned at the outset, many of these organizations do not aim to "serve" youths in the traditional sense. These youths are aiding Coastal in working towards its larger organizational goals, and in so doing they are bettering their community. If an organization can accomplish their goals, and do so with a larger number of young people, so much the better. But a group needs to be realistic about the scale of its programming.

*How can capacity be increased?*
Downsizing does not have to be the only option, of course – groups can build capacity in a variety of ways. The most conventional approach would be to focus and intensify funding efforts. This is easier said than done, of course, and CDC staff members are well acquainted with the challenges of fundraising. It is worth mentioning here, however, because youth engagement is a different type of work than the traditional business-lines of CDCs. Therefore, funding these programs may require staff to seek out new sources of funding. It also will require an organization to prove to funders that its youth work is effective and worthwhile, something which will be explained in the next section.

In the meantime, this analysis will proceed on the assumption that funding is limited, and organizations must also seek to increase capacity through other means. One way to do so is to collaborate meaningfully with other community organizations. They can help fill gaps in both funding and staffing, and provide local youths with an opportunity to become involved with both organizations. The word "meaningfully" here should be emphasized. Collaboration is not a panacea in itself, but must fit the circumstances and goals of the organization.

Southside has been working for years to stem the violence that plagues its area neighborhoods. In doing so, they have collaborated with other area organizations, some on their own initiative, others at the behest of NeighborWorks America, its national affiliate. Richard at Southside mentioned that this latter sort of collaboration created some difficulty: "the umbrella of violence or antiviolence work at the ground level looks different to each of [our organizations] … so you can only expect

people to bend themselves so much." In the end, it doesn't appear as though any of the groups involved had "bent themselves" much at all. "Collaboration" between the groups remains nominal, and little has been achieved thus far.

By contrast, another case, in which the group was able to choose a more meaningful collaboration, was a resounding success. The Leadership Project came about because of a $50,000 award from the Boston Foundation. It was an extremely competitive grant process – of the seventy-two applicants, only two received funding. The Leadership Project received funding precisely because the collaborations therein were meaningful. Aimed at mentoring young, "black and brown" men in the community, the Leadership Project approached this goal from a variety of angles. One local organization, for example, helped the youth start a collective mentorship program, guided by the principles of Kwanzaa. Another provided technical skills for the youth to make films about their neighborhood. In addition to these groups, religious groups and the local Police Department also stepped in to assist. While the next goal may be for Southside to sustain a similar program in the long term, not just a summer project, it is certainly a step in the right direction, and a great example of how to use collaboration to fill capacity that a group may lack.

Another way to enhance capacity is by finding innovative ways to attract quality staff committed to the program. One interesting model that has been adopted by both Northside and Inland is the staff-in-residence program. With this model, the organization leases out some of their property to staff, who work for the program in exchange for reduced or free rent. Inland, for example, recently finished their youth center, a beautifully renovated mill building, which includes housing for staff above the youth center itself. The staff-in-residence work at the center for sixteen hours per week, and in exchange receive free rent. This effort has attracted a variety of highly qualified individuals, ranging from certified teachers to talented local artists.

Now, it is certainly true that this rent is not "free" to the organization. But many CDCs are cash-poor but asset-rich, and a staff-in-residence program allows them to leverage assets while conserving cash. Furthermore, such an arrangement creates a stronger bond between youth and staff, as Rachel at Inland explains:

> They see that the teachers are there for them more than just travelling into their neighborhood for a couple of hours a week. So definitely there is more

trust, more understanding.  So definitely we've been able to build stronger relationships.

There is also reason to believe that staff-in-residence programs can create not only stronger relationships, but longer-lasting ones as well. Inland's youth center is brand new, and Northside's staff-in-residence program is currently undergoing major changes, so only time will tell, but all signs point to positive impacts on both organizational capacity and the youths themselves.

Finally, institutionalizing a youth program may help to unlock latent capacities within a CDC.  The youth programs and their goals should be clear not only to youths and those working directly with them, but also to other CDC staff members, to the group's funders, and to any interested onlooker.  Such clarity will not only build cohesion and willpower in an organization, but will help in questions of staffing.  No matter what measures a leader takes to ensure low turnover rates among staff, there will be factors largely outside of the organization's control – especially in the case of youth coordinator positions, which may be low-pay, high-stress, and temporary in nature given how they are funded.  Mark, from Southside, acknowledged this problem, but offered "institutionalizing everything" as a proactive approach to this issue, "so it's not so much about the individual [staff person], but… it's a program you can plug into."  Institutionalizing programming is a great way to proactively address staff turnover issues, while creating a common culture around the goals of the organization.

**Step Three: Develop a Strategy to Reach Your Goals**
Once equipped with a specific set of goals and a strong awareness of its capabilities, an organization needs to develop a comprehensive strategy for action.  This strategy should articulate best practices that will maximize the quality of youth engagement, and incorporate a process by which groups can measure their success over time.

*How can the quality of programming be increased?*
Part of the challenge lies in the diversity of the youth engagement field.  With so many different kinds of youth engagement, it can be hard to focus on what works for a specific type.  While programming for performing arts, for example, may present different challenges than a leadership development program, there are certain universal best practices that can be applied to all youth programs. These practices emerge from a variety of fields in youth work, ranging from education and community participation to psychology.  First, adults must

give youth ownership of projects, finding equilibrium between adult and youth input.  Additionally, the programming itself must appeal to what Frank (2006) calls "youthful styles of learning": it must be relevant, novel, and provide adequate choice for youth members.

*What's the "healthy equilibrium" between youth and adults?*
One of the best ways to ensure quality is to provide youth a voice in day-to-day operations (Frank 2006).  There is a natural tendency for adults working with younger generations to feel like they, the adults, should be in the driver's seat in the decision-making process.  But while that may be the traditional relationship between adult and youth, it is not necessarily the most effective one.  If kids feel as though their thoughts and actions are not valued, they tend to tune out and lose interest in a project (Figure Six).   Scholars advocate instead finding a "healthy equilibrium" between youth and adult input (Larsen, Walker, and Pearce 2005).   The best youth programs, they argue, give kids the power to make decisions, but ensure both that they do so in close collaboration with adults and that their decisions have a meaningful impact on the community at large  (Driskell 2002).

The chart below, borrowed from David Driskell's book on youth engagement, characterizes the balancing act groups must play.  On the one end, a program that puts little power in the hands of youth risks becoming "decoration": young people are involved, but not in any real way.  Conversely, if youth have power to make decisions, but there is little collaboration with others, a program can become "tokenism," with little or no effect on the larger community.  The goal, of course, is to find a healthy balance between the two poles, and so that youth participate in "shared decisions": programs that achieve this have a great effect on both the youth and community.

To return to a staff member's earlier point, there are elements of fear and uncertainty involved in handing over the reins of decision-making to youth.  Yet as difficult as this may be, there is much to be gained when adults relinquish some measure of control.  Doing so may create the risk of failure – but what is life if it is not about learning from failure?  The case of Chris, the youth member of Inland's curriculum committee, is an excellent example of this.  Although, according to the categories on the chart, his participation at the first meeting would count as "manipulation," that may change.  After experiencing the consequence of staying silent at the meeting – a boring curriculum – he and his

**Shared Decisions**
- all members of community have equal say
- no matter who initiates, group sees full value of collaboration

**Children in Charge**
- youth-intiated activity
- youth make decisions and determine outcomes
- youth/adult interaction is low

**Consultation**
- adults ask youth for their opinion
- decision-making power relies on weight given to youth opinions

*Non-Participation*

**Tokenism**
- appearance of decision-making power, none really exists

**Social Mobilization**
- youth carry out a program determined by adults
- youth have little say in decisions

**Decoration**
- Children used to promote a cause but have little idea what that cause is

**Manipulation and Deception**
- adults use kids for their own ends, without informing them what they are doing, or why

*Power to make decisions and effect change*

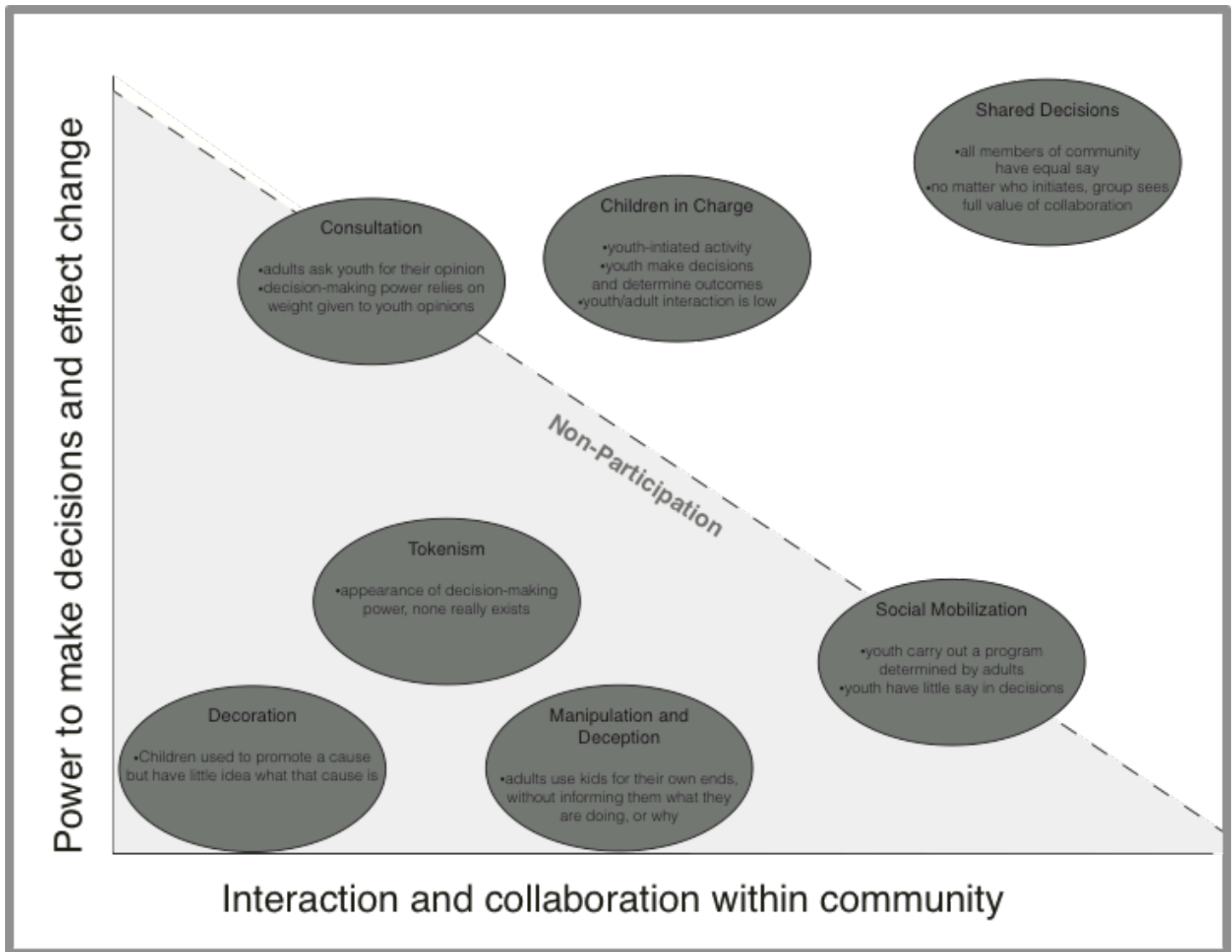*Interaction and collaboration within community*

**Figure Six: According to Driskell (2002), successful youth engagement requires a collaborative mix between youth and the community.**

friend vowed to make the next meeting different: "Me and my friend even talked about it. We said that, we were going to, like, change things … now I know not to be shy, and to speak up." As long as adult members at Inland are open to entertaining his ideas, this may lead to a transformative learning experience, and will also improve the quality of programming. There is a tendency with which youth workers to try to insulate young people fromexperiencing failure. But failures are inevitable, and youth workers are better served by learning to navigate such challenges than by being sheltered from them.

Additionally, handing over control to youth gives them ownership over their work. In the case of Coastal, although youth members were not as interested in certain adult-driven campaigns, they became very passionate about the waste-disposal advocacy campaign, a project they voted on as a group. What's interesting to note here is that the campaign was not actually their

idea – it was first suggested by Samantha, the youth cordinator. Yet it came from group discussions, and the voting process ratified the project as a common goal. It is no surprise, then, that none of the youth interviewed seemed anything less than enthusiastic about the project.

Sara of Coastal was very cognizant of the challenges their organization faced in creating the needed balance in this relationship:

Sometimes I think we've erred too much on … they're just sort of coming along on everything we [at AdultOrganize] are doing, and they sort of feel like they're not doing anything. And then, maybe where we are erring right now, is really giving them the space to develop their own… and maybe it's something where over a couple years … you build up the capacity of individual crew members, and they … feel more confidence to go out and start building those relationships with the adults in the community

group, in a more real way.

That is the ideal Coastal and other organizations should be working towards. If the youth do their work in isolation, it defeats the purpose of including them in the CDC's work in the first place.

*What steps can be taken to motivate and interest youth?* Providing youth with ownership will not, in and of itself, ensure that they will be engaged in a project. The programming itself must also appeal to their interests. There are a few key ways to ensure that a program will motivate and engage youth. One is to make the program relevant to them. This may happen in a few different ways. One strategy is to be attuned to youth culture. This could take the form of incorporating "teen culture" more generally: technology, popular culture, or other areas of interest. But it also means understanding the specific teen groups you are working with. Each of the four youth populations engaged by the organizations studied were different from the others; consequently, programs should be tailored so as to mesh with their differing cultural values. Northside does a great job of this with YouthArt. Roy explained that in its programming and staffing choices, Northside "would rather have someone who is more… urban, more, someone who has an urban approach to teaching … Almost like street, rather than someone who came from like a famous dance studio."

Another way to make programs relevant is to make group successes tangible (Halpern 2005). Youth sometimes have a difficult time advocating for abstract ideas, at least in the absence of any tangible evidence of progress. This, in part, accounted for the aforementioned divide between youth and adults at Coastal. During the last year, the main organizing focus for the adult group had been a campaign against an ethanol-carrying train that planned on entering the neighborhood. The staff tried to involve young people in the project, but they were not interested. Adonay, again, viewed it as a "very boring and adult" campaign, and one in which he didn't see much change on the ground. They sent postcards to the governor, gave speeches at local meetings, and worked to build community support, but they saw no change on the issue. All the youth interviewed expressed a desire to improve the neighborhood's environment, but all failed to see to how their organizing work around the ethanol train had any tangible effect.

The opposite could be said of their community garden. As a side project, the youth at Coastal have spent the last few years building a garden in a local neighborhood, and in the past year finally allocated plots to the community. All of the youth interviewed expressed enthusiasm about the project, and it was a tremendous point of pride for them. Adonay expressed the sentiments shared by the group more generally:

> For example in 2005, when I was in middle school, there was this garden by the school. It was a vacant lot, it was empty, there was a bunch of trash in it. Now it's a beautiful garden that we have created. … It feels good, because the garden is by my house, so it looks good … my mom one time noticed, "Oh look at the garden," and I said, "I worked for that.' And she's not involved with what I do. But she noticed without me saying it, so that was good.

Adonay's words attest to the tremendous passion and care these youths had for their local community. Their lack of interest in the ethanol campaign simply reflected the fact that they could not see any change coming of it. More often than not, experiences like these are the first experiences young people have in community development. Involving youth in something like the ethanol campaign may work when, as Sara suggested, they become more seasoned in the process. But in the early stages of engagement, it is always best to pick a project with results that young people can point to and say, *I worked for that.*

Another way to engage youth is to provide them with a variety of choices. For some programs, this might entail letting kids choose what community organizing projects they want to work on. In the case of YouthArt, which uses this strategy quite effectively, youth participants get to choose which performing arts classes they would like to take part in, as Roy explains:

> Teachers, after each class session ends … make a pitch to the students, saying, "This is what I'm going to teach this year"… and the students gravitate, they go towards which class they are going to take. So it's based on demand.

In other organizations, where the programming itself may be more firmly in place, adults should provide youth with a variety of roles to play – the planner, the writer, the speaker, and so forth. Giving kids options reduces the risk of alienation, as they will be more likely to find their niche in a project. It also further strengthens their sense of ownership, as they're more likely to engage in a role if it is one of their own choosing.

*How should success be measured?*
For anyone working with youth, the best practices listed above should not come as a surprise. Knowing the key to quality programming is one thing, but successful implementation is another, which is why measuring outcomes is so important. Measurement should not only identify challenges, but also illuminate successes. Indeed, the real power of quality measurement is that it can become a galvanizing force for youth efforts. Just as Adonay was able to point to the garden, youth and workers alike should be able to point to measures of growth and say, *we did that*. For the group itself, measurement can build the willpower and motivation to continue pursuing youth work. It can also help build fundraising efforts, and thus alleviate a common concern for all of these organizations. As Richard of Southside mentioned, funders fund their housing work because it's successful. The question is, how do these groups show that their youth work is successful?

There are really two ways a group can measure their success. One way is by more traditional quantitative measures. Inland's youth work does a great job of this. When asked how Inland knew its youth programs were successful, Rachel could deliver the results on cue: classroom improvement, high school graduation rates, college acceptance rates, and program attendance rates.

Yet quantitative measures don't necessarily tell the story for every group. Take YouthArt, for instance. A program based on performance arts isn't exactly conducive to quantitative measures. But in such a case, an organization can measure success qualitatively. For example, by using what some researchers have called "hero stories," the group can build a repertoire of real stories that demonstrate their successes (Zeldin, Camino, and Mook 2005). A great example of one such story comes from Northside. Roy told me the story of a young girl who, before becoming part of YouthArt, was very shy and self-conscious about her personal appearance:

> Then all of a sudden she is in YouthArt and you see her like, flourish, and start talking more and being like, finding friends, and feeling like she fits into a group. I remember one day there was an open house and she started singing, and she got like stuck in the middle and it sounded like she forgot some of the lyrics. And then all of a sudden everyone, you know, started going like this [stomping] and [yelling] "you can do it'"… then she picked it up and sort of like, found the strength, sort of like the strength of the group, you know? And I was like, "that, that's

what makes a difference." You know, because that kid feels like she has a network of support, she has friends, a place where she can look forward to having a good time after school. That makes a big difference.

These hero stories are often emotionally resonant, and serve as great motivators for both funders and group members alike. The real challenge with stories like this is to keep them connected to the group's mission, and to keep them fresh. If the same stories are recycled year in and year out, their power can wane. Additionally, hero stories are likely not enough to constitute an effective measurement of success: one should also rely on more traditional forms of qualitative measurement, such as participant surveys, or purposeful observations of program implementation.

The type of measurement decided upon does not really matter. Successful forms of measurements can be, depending on the context, either quantitative or qualitative. What does matter is that the measurements reflect an outcome directly tied to the group's goals. In the case of Inland, for example, their main goal is college preparation – so it would naturally follow that their measurables all speak to this goal. For YouthArt, a "hero story" like the one above speaks directly to their main goal of youth empowerment. Ultimately, measurement should help organizations to both motivate and reflect, and inappropriate forms of measurement would only interfere both aims.

**Step Four: Initiate an Ongoing Process of Reflection**
*How can groups continuously improve effectiveness?*
To have a successful program, it is not enough to consider these questions at the outset of the planning process. The concerns of clarity, capacity, and quality need to be considered holistically, and reflected upon throughout a program's implementation. Even effective groups need to occasionally take a step back, and figure out how to improve. To this end, the following section includes detailed evaluations of each of these four case study groups, offering suggestions about how to improve their effectiveness.

# V. Reflecting on Effectiveness: Evaluating the Clarity, Capacity, and Quality of these Four Organizations

## Northside: YouthArt

*Successes*

YouthArt holds a special place within the local community. It is a unique program, and unlike conventional youth programs at CDCs. Its programming choices are strong, and it provides kids with a great deal of ownership over their work. The staff are knowledgeable, qualified, and work to make projects relevant to the youth. Furthermore, the facilities are quite impressive, and well equipped to suit the needs of the program.

There is some concern within Northside that YouthArt lacks relevance to the larger goals of the organization. This happenstance collaboration with a local nonprofit, which hasis now taken on a life of its own, is indicative of the type of work CDCs need to do to engage and motivate young people. Northside found a partner organization already dedicated to and in tune with the interests of the communities' youth, and built an enduring partnership. The resulting program is a one that motivates and empowers youth, and has a lasting impact on the community.

*Challenges*

At the moment, YouthArt is undergoing staff changes. Both before and during this restructuring, there have been internal debates about where this organization should be headed. The central issue in these debates seems to center upon the program's lack of impact on the larger community. Indeed, if YouthArt remains solely a personal development program for involved youths, concerns about relevance to Northside's larger goals are valid.

But there is a danger that responding to these concerns in the wrong way could hamper the effectiveness and uniqueness of the program itself. For example, there has been a push to step outside of the performing arts realm, and provide classes in college preparation and leadership development for a broader set of youth. These efforts, which take the form of day- or weekend-long sessions, reach a larger audience than the traditional activities of YouthArt. But to some extent, they also stray from the strong existing networks that YouthArt has in place, draining capacity that could be used to make YouthArt more successful. Furthermore, there are

questions as to how successful a day- or weekend-long seminar can really be, and its impact potential seems rather low.

*Recommendations*

The main recommendation for Northside with regard to its YouthArt program would be not to lose focus on what it does well: their performing arts work. To be sure, its place in a CDC may seem a bit unorthodox, but it is an excellent way to engage Lawrence's youth population. The goal of increase the program's scale, both by increasing the number of youth involved and providing additional services, are certainly admirable. But small, "one-off" programs in isolation seem to have less impact than enduring, sustained youth work, and increasing the range of programming poses challenges to the group's capacity. There is no question that college preparation, leadership development, and the like would meet substantial needs in this community. The question, however, concerns whether Northside is well equipped to address these needs. It seems as though it is not, and that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Nor does this mean that YouthArt needs to abandon its desire to produce community leaders, or to prepare youth for college. But one could argue that it is in the best interests of the organization to integrate these goals within the existing framework of Northside. A college-bound leader doesn't simply need to know how to fill out an application, or write a college essay – such skills are best seen as endpoints of what should be a sustained process of empowering young people. YouthArt already does this, but perhaps it should be incumbent on youth coordinators to make a stronger push for college and career-readiness. This could be integrated into the classes more formally, but could also take place informally – an instructor helping a young person on an assignment, or giving them advice about future paths. Regardless of how it happens, efforts to work with youths in the existing program will have, on average, stronger and longer-lasting (albeit perhaps smaller-scale) impact than one-time classes for the entire community.

The same could be said about the desire of Northside to create community leaders. One might argue that leadership development classes do not in themselves produce leaders. A community leader is someone who feels compelled and empowered to drive change in the community, and there is no reason to think leaders at YouthArt couldn't use the platform of performing arts to do just that. Staff could think of a variety of ways to develop a social consciousness in their programming,

and a sense of community responsibility. The video production group, for example, could make a documentary focused on some aspect of their community they would like to see changed. Projects like this might awaken a desire among young people to undertake further community action. Even if they do not, however, they will create an artistic voice that can give artistic expression to the concerns of local youth, and may motivate others to address those concerns, thus increasing the program's scale of impact as Northside desires. At the moment, however, part of the program's allure is its ability to provide a creative outlet for local youth. If staff takes too much of a lead role, the programming risks becoming too didactic and thereby losing its appeal. But this is a risk worth taking, and the organization should figure out ways to strike a healthy balance between youth and community development.

## Coastal: YouthOrganize

*Successes*

Of the four groups in the study, Coastal's program seems to most clearly fit into the traditional "youth engagement" mold of community development work. YouthOrganize's work is well aligned with the goals of the CDC at large, and serves as an exemplary model of its type. Its strong ties to Coastal's mission have helped it maintain a strong structure, building on the knowledge and skills already possessed by that the organization and its community affiliates. An excellent youth coordinator heads it up, and management staff are well versed in the best practices of youth engagement. The group's small numbers have engendered in it a strong family atmosphere.

It is no surprise, then, that there is a strong collective pride in the program's success, to which its track record attests. Although some people may criticize the small number of youth engaged in the program, the scale of the group's work is actually far larger than the size of the organization implies. Their organizing work has led to impressive changes, both in citywide policy and the built environment. They spearheaded a movement, for example, to change restrictive bicycle regulations for the subway line connecting their neighborhood to the central city. In their neighborhood, they have helped build a community garden, and have worked to educate young people on proper waste-disposal techniques. Looking around the neighborhood, one sees myriad examples YouthOrganize's positive and lasting impact.

Dovetailing with these tangible achievements is the strong sense of empowerment felt by the youth members, all of whom will either attend college in the fall, or plan on doing so after high school. This is not to say, of course, that college is the lone measure of youth empowerment, or even an accurate one. But it does speak to the high aspirations of these youth, who have learned a diverse and useful set of skills while working with YouthOrganize. All of the youths seemed motivated by their experiences: they may not all pursue careers in community development, but they seem to have gained a heightened sense of community responsibility as a result of the program.

*Challenges*

That is not to say the group is without its challenges. The largest challenge, by far, lies in building stronger relationships between youths and adults, both in the organization and the community. The organization is well aware of this challenge, has often struggled with it. In response to feelings among staff that youth were becoming disengaged with the adult work at Coastal, the decision was made to give youth more ownership in their programming. They chose, as their main focus, a project dealing with waste disposal. For the rest of the year, they carried out the program successfully, but with little collaboration with adults. Consequently, the project seemed to relegate YouthOrganize to "kids' work": increased autonomy for young people has come at the price of weaker integration with the organization as a whole. The lack of cross-generational partnership leaves much unrealized potential on the table, potential that could improve the program's outcomes for both youth and the community.

*Recommendations*

Building strong cross-generational collaborations begins with creating strong relationships. Often times, those relationships begin as simple forms of respect and acknowledgement. In interviewing the teens, there was a sense that except for the two youth coordinators, adults in the organization were indifferent to their work. One young person mentioned that all they wanted was some validation from adults, perhaps a "Great Job!" or simply an indication of even passing interest in their efforts. There have been times, in the past, where the adult staff have collaborated nicely with the youth, as Sara mentioned earlier. So it is perhaps unfair to characterize adults as unwilling to work with the youth. It is hard to collaborate when adults and youth are working on entirely different projects. Simply put, the organiza-

tion needs to find a useful niche for the youth in its adult organizing work, one that makes young people feel valued and respected. At the moment, while members of YouthOrganize have a strong sense of ownership over their own projects, youth presence in adult projects seems to take the form of tokenism, only superficially validating the group's sense of being interested in youth engagement.

It is easy to say that a certain type of project does not appeal to youth, and much harder to consider that this lack of appeal may stem from their alienation in the decision-making process. Coastal should try to make youth members feel less alienated from the organization by better integrating them into its decision-making processes. Young people in the organization should be seen as assets to adult organizing: they can bring diverse and often unacknowledged perspectives to the community development process. Any highly functioning workplace recognizes the diverse skills and knowledge of its employees, and adapts its workflows accordingly. Yet, in youth engagement, "adaptation" sometimes becomes a euphemism for marginalization, as youth are relegated to peripheral and unimportant tasks. Though youth work differently from adults in ways that are important to take account of, they can still work effectively in community organizing. If the organization can work on incorporating, to paraphrase Frank (2006), youthful styles of working into its organizing, both adults and youth will benefit.

**Southside: YouthLead/The Leadership Project**
*Successes*
Since their creation, YouthLead and Southside's other youth-oriented programs have been designed to build on the CDC's adult community organizing work. Southside has thus been able to take advantage of its existing organizational structures. In the past, the group's youth program engaged successfully in advocacy organizing, such as a program that focused the local transit authority's attention on safety problems within the city bus system. More recently, YouthLead has facilitated entrepreneurship among its members, who have designed and produced a clothing line to spread positive messages to the community.

Although Southside recently underwent some major staffing changes, it has a bright future. Management staff said during interviews that they were committed to doubling their efforts in engaging local youth populations, and the recent work of the Leadership Project seems to validate these claims. The Leadership

Project, a summer-long mentoring project, was established through a competitive grant from the a local foundation, and paved the way for collaborative efforts with other community organizations in the area. It remains to be seen whether these efforts will result in long-term, sustained impact, but there is certainly cause for optimism.

*Challenges*
While there is reason to imagine a bright future ahead for Southside's youth work, making that future a reality requires that the organization critically reflect on some factors that have inhibited the growth of their youth work. For one, the organizational priorities are simply not yet in place for effective youth work to happen. Southside is seen much more as an affordable housing developer than as a youth organizing group; as a result, funders and staff members seem to view their youth work as marginal. Southside also lacks the capacity necessary to sustain a lasting effect on youth.

Even among staff members committed to youth engagement, there is little clarity about the program's goals. This is in large part due to organizational restructuring. Staff that formerly worked with youth now work in different capacities. Those presently working with youth are new to the job, and one important position had yet to be filled when this study was concluded. Discussions with staff members made it clear that the youth program's goals have shifted over time. The Leadership Project is a step in the right direction, but it is also one of many programs at Southside. Furthermore, much of Southside's youth programming capacity is tied up in one-time workshops, weekly discussion groups, or administrative tasks. In general, Southside youth programming effort seems too diffuse: instead of implementing one or two programs effectively, it is struggling to do too many at once.

*Recommendations*
The first recommendation would be for leaders in the organization to meet and decide upon a clear set of goals for Southside's youth work. Once those goals are defined, the organization should dedicate its capacity to one or two programs that can best accomplish them. Building on their work at the Leadership Project, they should utilize existing networks to strengthen collaboration with other community actors.

Second, they should determine ways to measure their success. Staff made it clear that, at the moment, Southside is perceived primarily as a housing organiza-

tion, and that its work with youth is thus perceived as marginal. The only way to change this mindset is to show the community, and the organization itself, that it is involved in more than just housing. By carefully defining its programming goals, and then measuring their success, the group can show that their youth work is not only meaningful, but also effective. Ultimately, the organization's approach to youth engagement needs to be focused and sustained over time. Furthermore, it should expand its programming to be open to all youth, regardless of gender. The Leadership Project is a fantastic idea, and if they wanted to extend such a project beyond a mere summer-time endeavor, they would likely achieve high levels of effectiveness. Yet it would only do so for half of its youth population, as there is no Leadership Project for young women to go along with it.

**Inland: YouthLearn**
*Successes*
Walking into one of Inland's youth facilities, one is struck indelibly by the sense of community. This is exemplified by their staff-in-residence program, where staff live above the facilities in which they teach. But all staff, not only those living on-site, seem to have a strong commitment to the neighborhood, and the youth involved seem to have built strong friendships with their peers.

Inland has a great deal of capacity to work with. Its facilities are top-notch, as exemplified by the new youth center, a former mill building that has been renovated into a state-of-the-art youth center. The program is well staffed with committed employees. Its leadership has a keen understanding of best practices in youth engagement, and works to stay up to date with new methods and ideas. Inland's youth program has thus been very successful. Just as importantly, the group has measured its successes: staff have meticulously collected data on college acceptance, classroom grade improvements, and graduation rates.

*Challenges*
Yet for all its successes, Inland also seemed to have difficulties keeping youth interested, especially at the high school level. This is a common problem, of course, for anyone involved in education, but it can become even more when an after-school program is felt to prolong the boredom of regular classes. These concerns shouldn't be written off, as there are ways the organization can ensure that its youths are more engaged in their programs.

After the school day, students often seek a change of pace. Just as adults need a break after work, young people appreciate after-school activities that differ from those experienced during the school day. In providing a more traditional after-school program, Inland misses out on a valuable opportunity to integrate that program with their larger organizational goals. Their youth program is successful on its own terms, but at present, its benefits seem relatively isolated from the CDC's broader mission of community service.

*Recommendations*
The recommendations for Inland are quite similar to those for Northside: the organization should continue to devote capacity to what works (in this case, academically-oriented programs), but work to gear these programs towards more community-oriented activities. Such activities will be a departure from ordinary classroom learning, and will thus be more engaging for young participants.

For example, kids could read a book about a widespread neighborhood problem. They could then discuss instances of this problem in their own community, and design an approach to alleviate or solve it. A teacher could even help students to implement the approach they design. Such activities are what schoolteachers would like to do if they had adequate time, flexibility, and student-to-teacher ratios. Comparatively speaking, Inland is fortunate to have all of these things. Though their programs are focused on academics, students do not have to feel like they are in a classroom. Programs geared to older teens might even abandon a "curriculum" in the traditional sense. In fact, the scale of Inland's program for older teens, which serves ten to fifteen students, is ideal for a community-organizing group similar to YouthOrganize. If planned correctly, community-based projects could help the youth academically while also empowering them to change themselves and their community – an important experience as they move into adulthood. Lessons from project-based activities can supplement what the youth are learning in school, diversifying their knowledge and skillsets.

# VI. Conclusion

| Important Steps | Key Questions | Action Items |
|---|---|---|
| **Step One:** Define organizational objectives | What are your goals? | •Align goals with broader mission<br>•Implement short and long-term goals<br>•Develop effective measurement of goals |
| | What kind of programming will achieve these goals? | •Implement mission-based, not program-based, planning |
| **Step Two:** Understand the group's capacity | What should be the program's scale? | •Find the "sweet spot" between desired impact and existing capacity<br>•Focus on quality, not quantity |
| | How can capacity be increased? | •Intensify and guide funding<br>•Create meaningful collaborations<br>•Develop staff retention strategies<br>•Institutionalize programming |
| **Step Three:** Develop a strategy to reach your goals | How can quality programming be increased? | •Apply best practices related to youth work |
| | What is the "healthy equilibrium" between youth and adult input? | •Give youth the power to make decisions, but to do so in close collaboration with adult workers<br>•Avoid "decoration" or "tokenism" |
| | What steps can be taken to motivate and interest youth? | •Understand the needs and interests of local youth<br>•Make successes tangible<br>•Provide choice |
| | How should success be measured? | •Adopt quantitative measures (e.g. graduation rates, attendance)<br>•Adopt qualitative measures (e.g. "hero stories", detailed observations) |
| **Step Four:** Initiate an ongoing process of reflection | How can groups continuously improve effectiveness? | •Consider the challenges of clarity, capacity, and quality holistically<br>•Provide frequent opportunities for critical reflection |

**Figure Seven: As CDCs begin to develop youth programs, it would be wise to implement a comprehensive plan for action, such as the one above**

These experiences underscore the challenges faced more broadly in the growing field of youth engagement. This nascent field has reached a key moment. Those groups who have committed resources to a focused plan are currently looking for ways to expand their community impact, and those who have experienced more challenges are rethinking their programming choices altogether. Meanwhile, many groups continue to wait on the sidelines, watching how all of these early attempts plays out.

This is entirely understandable, given the challenges these groups faced. Funding is, and will continue to be, an issue for all of these youth programs, and especially for CDCs, considering their efforts that have not historically focused on youth. Even groups with adequate funding for their youth programs often seem unsure of their goals, how to measure progress toward them, or how these goals are aligned with those of the organization as a whole. All of these factors can compromise the programming's quality, as an organization may find itself out of its depth in making decisions about staffing, planning, and maintaining youth interest.

The stakes are too high, however, to simply give up in the face of these challenges. These early attempts at youth program implementation are critical to the success of future efforts. If funders do not see success, they will stop providing grants. If the organization experi

ences failure, it may lose the will to continue the work, and devote its capacity elsewhere. It is thus imperative that they figure out what they hope to accomplish, and how to accomplish it. The goals of clarity, capacity, and quality should guide the planning and implementation of youth programs, whatever the type of programming (Figure Seven).

While each of these groups faced substantial challenges, the results make it all worthwhile. As Coastal struggled to find a balance between adult and youth input, it also managed to create a youth-guided public awareness program around trash disposal, and helped plot out a community garden where there was once only dirt and trash. As Northside debated internally about the future of their youth work, YouthArt was busy empowering young people through the arts. The future prospects of these organizations are all the brighter precisely because they are asking these questions. Without these efforts, youth will be deprived of CDCs' substantial resources for improving their lives. And vice versa – CDCs will be deprived of one of the greatest resources of any community, the energy and inventiveness of its youth. If a CDC truly wants to develop a community, it cannot neglect its youngest citizens. Youth represent tremendous community assets, and these and other CDCs have the opportunity to unlock their potential.

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