



Six Strategies To Build Empowering Youth Engagement

By the Next Generation Coalition (NGC)

June 2021

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Executive Summary

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic and the following day, entire states began ordering the closure of all schools. By March 25, every public school in the United States was closed and underlying challenges unveiled themselves in every different shape and form.

With or without a pandemic, existing challenges have been devastating for our communities and shown us how essential it is to have compassion and collaboration in our communities. With centuries of existing structural racism, inequities in the United States have worsened for vulnerable populations. Being a student or youth (ages 12-25) during this time meant you may have lost essential school support systems, became isolated from your friends, experienced food scarcity, grappled with family challenges, didn't have internet access or technology, or perhaps didn't go to school at all.

Regardless of our backgrounds or privileges, we have all faced and are continuing to face unforeseen challenges. However, one thing was clear—we all do better if we work together. For youth who are low-income, have a disability, and/or of color, it is vital that we uplift student voices to make the important change that needs to occur. This time demonstrated the importance of building compassion and amplifying youth voices together.

This report has three objectives:

- To create greater awareness of youth (ages 12-25) experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic
- To highlight clear recommendations and examples of how different communities have been able to address and meet the needs of youth
- To provide a clear process to develop and implement empowering youth engagement strategies

Next Generation Coalition (NGC)

History
Since its inception, at the 2018 Coalition for Community Schools National Forum, the Next Generation Coalition (NGC) has emerged as a youth-led network (ages 12-25) to build stronger youth and adult partnerships and promote just and inclusive systems for all young people to participate in decisions that create opportunities to enhance social mobility.

Purpose
We are "an alliance built and led by youth leaders that provides a platform to dismantle oppressive systems and to rebuild sustainable and equitable communities by networking, channeling, and training youth to create action and change."

Core Functions
1. **Networking** to connect young leaders, and build trusting relationships and better partnerships with adults;
2. **Training** youth and professionals to expand knowledge, skills and leadership capacities; and
3. **Channeling** youth voices for collective action towards social justice.

For more information, contact us at ccs@iel.org.

Acknowledgements

The report is a result of Next Generation Coalition (NGC) youth voices and in collaboration with adults for whom we want to thank. We also acknowledge that this report is not a complete representation of experiences that embody our diverse communities. However, we hope to shed light on youth perspectives that are often unseen.

This research was funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Inc., and we thank them for their support; however, the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

In the ever-changing world we are in, we acknowledge this is a continuously evolving document. If you would like to share your thoughts, contribute or partner with us, please contact ccs@iel.org.

Timeline

Between March 2020 to June 2021, NGC surveyed youth and hosted 20 virtual convenings engaging over 1,000 youth and adults nation-wide.



Amplifying Youth Voices Project

Interviewed and surveyed 101 youth about their educational experience.

Virtual Youth Town Hall #1

Facilitated virtual town hall with 12 youth across the nation to discuss experiences.

Anti-Racist Resource & Workshop

Created resources to respond to racial discrimination.

Virtual Youth Town Hall #2

Facilitated second virtual town hall with the same youth in 2020 to talk about changes.



Community Circles

Facilitated dialogues on pressing issues to provide healing and understanding.

Study Halls

Open space to support each other with school work and seek advice.

Trainings

Educational learning workshops to increase specific knowledge and skills.

Empowering Youth Engagement Process

“The ongoing practice of networking, training and channeling youth to promote self-agency and equity.”

Cultivating meaningful engagement that improves student outcomes and a collaborative school structure requires intentionality. The “Empowering Youth Engagement” process is designed to adapt to the unique experiences of every community, but not the exact mold. This is a process which identifies conditions which need to be met to build capacity towards sustainable, empowering youth engagement.



Essential Conditions for Empowering Youth Engagement

Empowerment is a resource like time, money, or energy. As such, empowerment can be replenished and transposed with the right conditions and dispositions. Below are building blocks of essential conditions for empowering youth engagement.

- **Prioritize basic needs** like they are still basic needs
- **Acknowledge and actively engage** the most vulnerable students & families; especially students of color and students with a disability
- **Promote historical and cultural awareness** to both the youth and the school.



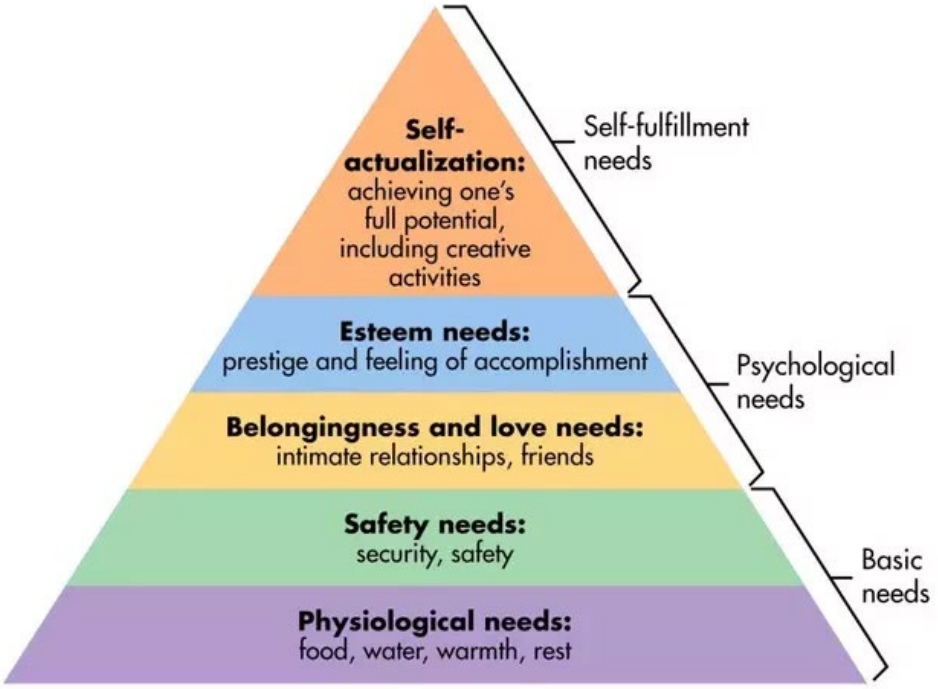
> "If you go to any middle or high school, they will give you breakfast and lunch for the day… You would drive in and get huge cardboard boxes of food instead of needing to come every day."
>
> Aryonna, 12th Grade



1. Prioritize basic needs like they are still basic needs.

Prior to, during, and after the Coronavirus pandemic, basic needs have always been a priority in marginalized communities. And when schools closed, families lost a reliable support system.

Recommendation 1: Put Maslow's before Bloom's
Ensure every youth's basic, psychological and self-fulfillment needs are prioritized and met using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as an assessment tool. Satisfaction of these needs leads to creating the conditions and motivation needed to improve learning across all six categories of Bloom's Taxonomy.



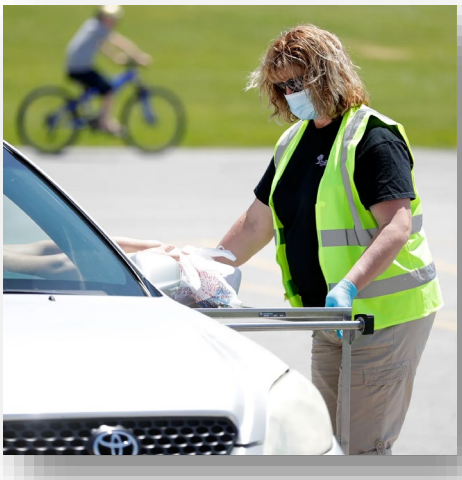
Source: https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html

New York City, NY (November 6, 2020): Although the city has distributed 340,000 iPads with unlimited cellular data plans, at least 215 kids living in shelters still have connectivity issues. The city partners with school bus companies to deliver Wi-Fi to students living in homeless shelters.

Recommendation 2: Make learning more accessible Having both in-person and virtual options is more flexible at meeting the needs of all youth. However, when creating virtual options, it is essential that every youth has the same access to the relevantcontent equipment according to their specific needs and reliable internet.

Recommendation 3: Use schools as a resource hub for youth and families Schools can be critical centers that support youth, families, and the community around it. By embracing a coordinating infrastructure, like what is present in Community Schools, schools can be effective and efficiently distribute resources to people.





Duarte, CA (February 18, 2021): Duarte High School's Family Resource Center provides workshops on how to learn about free and/or low-cost health insurance and healthcare programs, and how to enroll.

Green Bay, WI (June 15, 2020): Across 21 school locations, Green Bay School District served over 460,000 meals to children in need during coronavirus closures.

Recommendation 4: Create professional development opportunities and resources for securing jobs
Providing early-on career exploration classes, assessment tests, and programs can help encourage youth to develop and work toward goals. Youth can learn through these opportunities, but also by watching adults model-learning and application in their professional careers.

Recommendation 5: Address homelessness and support housing access
The pandemic led to job losses in many families, leaving them unable to pay for housing. Being a sensitive topic for some, it is important to build trusting relationships and support families in a culturally sensitive way when reaching out to them about such issues.

2. Acknowledge and actively engage the most vulnerable students & families; especially students of color and students with a disability.

With limited resources, identifying and centering the most marginalized communities will allow you to create the greatest impact. Furthermore, co-designing a process to inform curriculum and practice can lead to student improvement.



"With my younger sibling - he is in Special Ed and schools are not understanding them [saying], "oh why doesn't he have his camera on? They think he's doing something else…" Yeah, but especially for him, he doesn't even think this is real school."

Salma, 10th grader

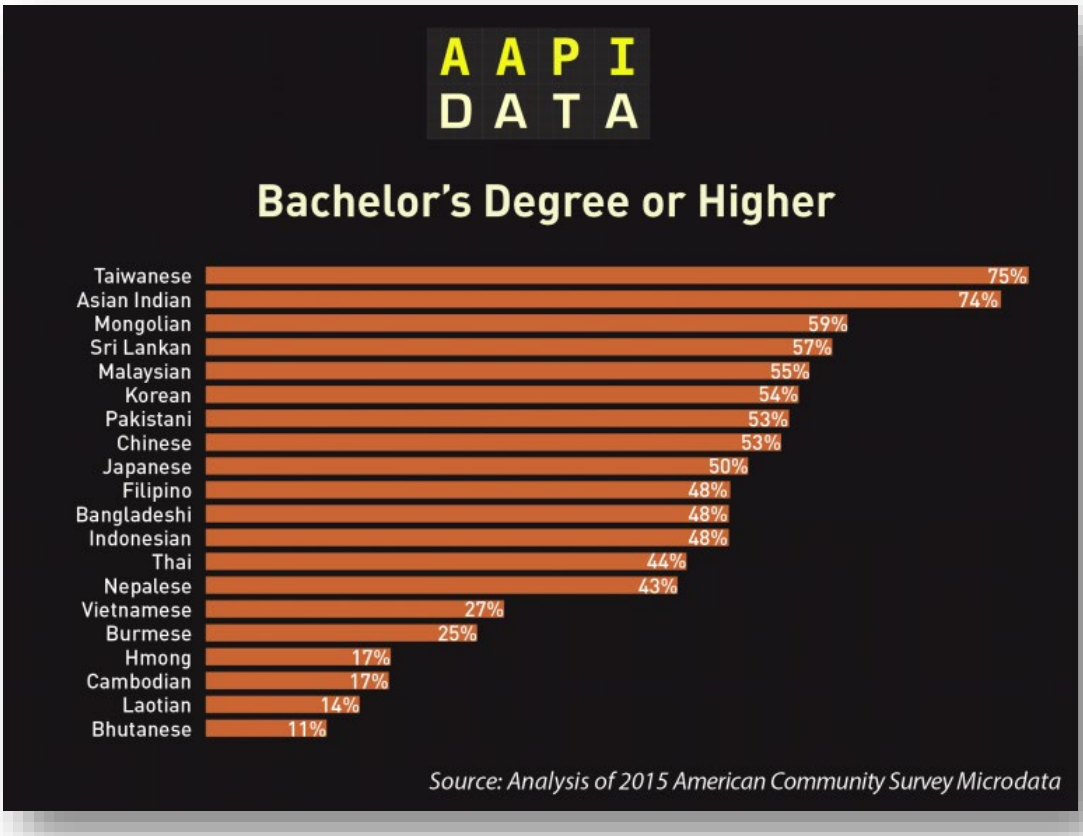
"Having more information about kids with disabilities or any problem with social interaction should be addressed… A lot of kids are seen as weird or different when they have these types of problems which leads them to being pushed out of "normal society." It's also hard to approach these people and the school doesn't teach us how to talk to people well."

Derek, 12th grader



Recommendation 1: Use disaggregated data to help unmask generalizations that produce negative outcomes for overlooked populations

Aggregated data can often clump several populations into one categorization, resulting in ineffective planning and inequitable distribution of resources. Disaggregating data can help more subpopulations—especially refugees, ethnic minorities, and persons with a disability—become more visible such as the example below with Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI).



The model minority stereotype often frames all AAPIs as having adequate resources and ability to achieve high educational attainment and advanced degrees. However, when you disaggregate AAPIs, Southeast Asians are disproportionately less likely to achieve higher educational attainment than East Asians.

Recommendation 2: Prioritize restorative justice practices and healthy conflict management to heal relationships

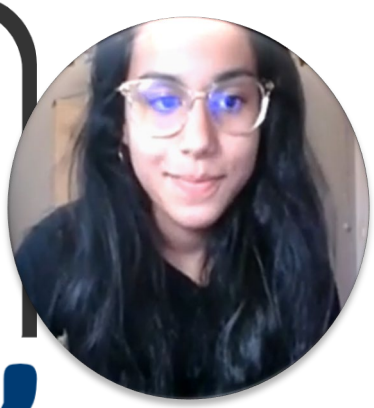
Historically, school discipline, absenteeism and achievement has disproportionately impacted youth of color, economically disadvantaged and those with disabilities which has also caused feelings of being undervalued by educators. Shifting the paradigm from punitive approaches to exploring how to reward students for attendance, assignments, etc. If students are falling behind, encourage reaching out and checking-in first before punishing them. Engage both youth and families, facilitating sustained dialogues, and offer one-on-one support.

Recommendation 3: Create Strategic, Measurable, Ambitious, Realistic, Time-bound, Inclusive, and Equitable (SMARTIE) goals with BIPOC and/or disability focused committees.

SMARTIE goals are a concrete way to drive results that include and produce better outcomes, especially for the most marginalized communities, address disparities, or create belonging. To solve issues, it is essential that those impacted are included in the solution as well. However, be wary of tokenizing people of color and other marginalized identities.

Strategic	Reflects an important dimension of what your organization seeks to accomplish (programmatic or capacity-building priorities).
Measurable	Includes standards by which reasonable people can agree on whether the goal has been met (by numbers or defined qualities).
Ambitious	Challenging enough that achievement would mean significant progress—a "stretch" for the organization.
Realistic	Not so challenging as to indicate lack of thought about resources, capacity, or execution; possible to track and worth the time and energy to do so.
Time-bound	Includes a clear deadline.
Inclusive	Brings traditionally marginalized people—particularly those most impacted—into processes, activities, and decision/policy-making in a way that shares power.
Equitable	Seeks to address systemic injustice, inequity, or oppression.

> "It is important for us to not divorce our schools from our societies, recognizing we are going through a dual pandemic of both systemic racism and COVID-19. We need to mobilize young people to speak on these issues and come up with solutions. Then, having our older volunteers and mentors look at us as partners in the decision-making process, beyond experience, and that we have a stake in this"
>
> Pragya, 12th grader



3. Promote historical and cultural awareness to both the youth and the school.

Self-awareness is one of the key characteristics of a successful leader. Just as important and empowering is acquiring a critical multidisciplinary lens of different cultures which allows individuals to adapt in new settings and work effectively in diverse teams. Understanding the history of one's background will help us strengthen our understanding of diversity and equity, and inevitably, help us improve our communities.

Recommendation 1: Teach us our own history
Provide students with opportunities to learn more about their identity - increasing ethnic and cultural studies. Share readings and discussions on identity, race, and disability. In the classroom, acknowledge heavy events ongoing globally. For example, some students may be more heavily affected by recent events of violence, mass shootings, the COVID-19 pandemic, than others, which impacts their ability to show up mentally or physical in class.



Coined by Jose Rizal, a Filipino nationalist and polymath during the Spanish colonial period of the Philippines, this quote, "know self, know history," signified the importance of knowing ones self and their history. It is a loose interpretation of "A person who does not look back to where he came from would not be able to reach his destination."

The "Sankofa" bird originating from people of Ghana, also means "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot."

Recommendation 2: Integrate youth into all decision-making levels
Include and allow students to actively engage in leadership, school board, and decision-making meetings at and beyond school-sites. Having youth included in decisions gives them agency and drivers of the challenges.

Recommendation 3: Teach cultural humility and create empathy training opportunities for both youth and staff
Provide implicit bias and racial identity training for all school staff, counselors and teachers. Teach and talk about youth with an asset-based approach that focuses on strengths rather than perpetuating the "Model Minority Syndrome" and/or deficit-based style of teaching that focuses on inadequacies.

Building Capacity for Empowering Youth Engagement

Once essential conditions are met, the next step towards promoting and developing knowledge and skills, and fostering engagement is in "building capacity." These include learning with youth to gain self-advocacy and leadership skills, and building processes to maintain wellness and engagement:

- Facilitate and support student-led opportunities for social and emotional learning
- Make [virtual] spaces inclusive, fun, and flexible



4. Facilitate and support student-led opportunities for social and emotional learning.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a key basic need that can indicate whether you succeed in school, career, and life. With or without the physical space of schools, youth need experiences to create positive relationships, reduce negative behavior, improve attendance, and decrease emotional distress.

Recommendation 1: Teach youth how to plan events and facilitate dialogues
Like the saying "if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime," Creating workshops, co-designing, or providing courses is a critical way to help youth learn how to design meaningful events and see themselves as part of it. Teaching facilitation allows them to bring people together to work towards goals and consensus. Teach Results-Based Accountability, which is a disciplined way of thinking and acting to improve entrenched and complex social problems.

Recommendation 2: Facilitate community circles that center those impacted
Facilitate conversations around what is most pressing on the students' mind: mental health, identity, intersectionality and privilege, especially after significant events such as gun violence, racial unrest, etc.—hold space for the individual(s) to process. Have external partners teach or facilitate conversations with youth if there is no internal capacity.



United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County hosts virtual Homework Diners in response to COVID-19. "Due to the global COVID-19 health crisis, in-person Homework Diners are no longer happening in accordance with county and state mandates to Stay Home, Stay Safe, however virtual Homework Diners are now taking place online for both Asheville and Enka Middle Schools."

Recommendation 3: Allocate time for school staff to check-in with youth
The building blocks of relationships begin with one-on-one connections and trust. Connect with youth inside and outside of the classroom. It can be as simple as a 15-minute conversation about how they are doing. Make it a goal that every student is contacted twice each semester.

Recommendation 4: Ensure all schools have robust health services on-site or accessible to the students and school
Students and their families rely on schools to access health care for a full range of services including:

- primary medical care
- mental/behavioral health care
- dental/oral health care
- health education
- substance abuse counseling
- nutrition education

Creating partnership between the school and a community health organization, such as a community health center, hospital, or local health department, can provide a gap in services to meet the needs of the community.

> "It is not enough to have a mental health counselor and their contact information. There needs to be a mental health center to be established"
>
> Sage, 11th grader

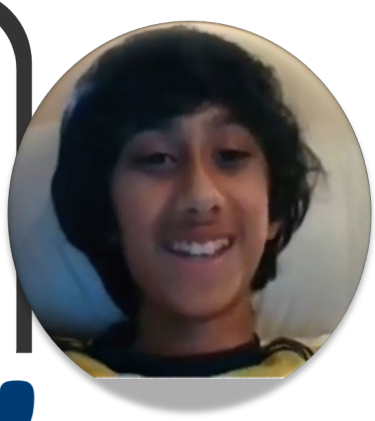


5. Make [virtual] spaces inclusive, fun, and flexible.

Being inclusive means ensuring everyone has an opportunity to fully engage—emotionally, intellectually, and physically. Learning does not discriminate, but the way it is facilitated does. Therefore, co-designing an adaptive space for students to feel safe, be creative, and have fun is how high engagement is achieved.

Recommendation 1: Make spaces inclusive, fun, and flexible.
Creating an inclusive space means to acknowledge and dismantle all social, cultural, physical, and intellectual barriers from engaging meaningfully. Instead of treating people the way you want to be treated, treat others the way they want to be treated and ask for specific needs and accommodations required for them to engage. For virtual learning, do not require students to turn on their videos, unless all students agree to following this norm—due to the intrusive behavior and shame this could potentially cause in some situations. How we engage meaningfully is constantly changing, therefore continuing to have these conversations is important to sustain trust and empathy.

> "One of the hardest things about online school is the transition from elementary to middle school. I need peers to help me, but I don't see that happening because every time I go online, we can't use the chats or mics unless we are called on, and in breakouts we can't talk to each other—if you get a wrong answer, everyone will make fun of you. I can't make friends in an environment like that"
>
> Ryo, 7th grader



Recommendation 2: Co-design community agreements to build consensus and accountability
Co-create community agreements for what it means to be present and engaged in the classroom. Provide clear expectations, flexibility, and accommodations. Designing agreements together allows everyone to see themselves a part of it. Allow time to revisit the agreements when addition is needed, or when they aren't being upheld.

Recommendation 3: Use different tools, activities, and facilitation strategies to creatively engage students

Every youth learns differently. Be courageous and take risks to creatively utilize different facilitation or technological tools to engage.

- Polling Tools
  - Mentimeter: Live polling tool
- White Boards
  - Google Slides
  - Google Jam Board
  - Padlet
- Activities
  - Skribbl: Free multiplayer drawing & guessing game
  - Quizlet Live: learning tool
  - Kahoot: Game-based learning platform
- Virtual Video Conference Platforms
  - Gather Town: Video-calling space that holds separate conversations in parallel, walking in and out as you please
  - Zoom Video Conference Calls: Video conference platform
  - Google Meetings: Video conference platform

This is a working list. To add, please contact ccs@iel.org.

Sustaining Empowering Youth Engagement

To sustain empowering youth engagement requires local assets, cultural wealth, and collaboration of everyone in the community—youth, families, schools, and all associated parties. After building the elements of essential conditions and building the capacity of schools and youth, you now focus on creating a system which promotes collaboration and sustainability.

- Unite youth, families, communities, and schools together using the Community Schools strategy to promote equity, collaboration, and partnerships



6. Unite youth, families, communities, and schools together using the Community Schools strategy to promote equity, collaboration, and partnerships.

Every local community has unique cultural assets, challenges, and history. To create a sustainable leadership structure, local leaders and those impacted must work together to solve the issue.

Recommendation 1: Learn and connect with the community and its deep history
Every community and its food, culture, businesses, history, and land—including the first Indigenous occupants—is unique. Learning about these elements and connecting with the people who live there helps build awareness and map cultural assets; especially redlining and gentrification and how it may have caused inequities.

Recommendation 2: Promote self-care and community-care
Self-care, in its most simplified form, can be defined as an act of prioritizing one's health without harming others. Often, people with the greatest need are the ones who are caring for others, therefore we must take care of each other interdependently. Community healing can only sustain itself if we can ensure care, rest and love for not just ourselves, but for others as well.

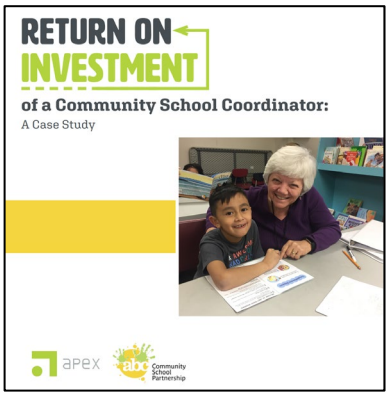
Recommendation 3: Create leadership and mentoring opportunities
Enriching learning opportunities are just as important as developmental mentorship programs for youth and early professionals, such as bus leaders and upper/lower classmate buddy systems.

Recommendation 4: Advocate for Community Schools to advance equity, collaboration, and youth voice

"A Community School is a strategy that coordinates relationships and resources through a public school to accelerate equitable outcomes in health, education and employment" (Coalition for Community Schools). One of the key components of what makes a school a Community School is hiring and sustaining a Community School Coordinator. By having a coordinator dedicated to facilitating resources and partnerships within the school, you can transform an entire school's trajectory and that of families and communities surrounding it.

$$\text{ROI} = \frac{\$1{,}202{,}736 - \$148{,}258}{\$148{,}258} \times 100 = 711\%$$

Resulting in each $1 invested in the coordinator
returning approximately $7.11 net benefits.



ABC Community School Partnership contracted with Apex to conduct a study to examine the return on investment (ROI) of a Community School Coordinator. The community school strategy has proven effective in improving academic outcomes for students and it is well accepted among Community School practitioners that a crucial piece of this strategy is the Coordinator.

Conclusion

Moving forward, we need to reimagine more collaborative and youth empowering education system that dismantles oppressive systems and cultivates meaningful relationships, so all youth can thrive. For years, adults have organized and created change in many different movements. However, the change youth want to make can not be done alone. It is vital that both youth and adults support young people in the work they want to do. As adults it is important that you enter spaces and ask. “is this work empowering youth?” or “how have we engaged youth in this work?” These questions gives space to acknowledge gaps in youth engagement, centers youth in decision making, and creates shared accountability and trust. Although engaging with youth looks different in every situation, these elements of essential conditions, building capacity, and sustaining empowering youth engagement can be implemented to advance equity in any community.

Authors

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About Us

Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL)
Since 1964, IEL has equipped leaders to work together across boundaries to build effective systems that prepare children and youth for postsecondary education, careers, and citizenship.

Coalition for Community Schools
The Coalition for Community Schools is an alliance of local, state and national partners who relentlessly leads efforts to advance equitable systems and opportunities.

Staying Connected

- Email List: https://bit.ly/nextgenemail
- Facebook Group: https://bit.ly/nextgenfacebookgroup
- Instagram: https://bit.ly/nextgeninstagram
- Twitter: https://twitter.com/nextgencoal