



Getting Started

A BRIEF HISTORY

The Youth Leadership for Development Initiative (YLDI), a three-year project coordinated by the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development with the support of the Ford Foundation, was launched in September 1999. Twelve diverse organizations in seven states and the District of Columbia were selected to participate in this initiative to explore civic activism as a strategy for youth development. YLDI provided financial support for the participating organizations, all of which promote positive youth development by building youth leadership skills through civic activism.

The project participants documented their progress in both areas and worked together as a learning network to evaluate and disseminate discoveries. The participants reflected a wide range of youth constituencies: low-income Asian immigrants; Asian/Pacific Americans; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth; Latinos; African Americans; Native Americans; suburban youth; youth from faith-based organizations; and young women and girl leaders.

Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) was contracted to conduct a two-year evaluation of YLDI. SPR, which is based in Oakland, CA, has nationally recognized expertise in research and evaluation of programs and policies. The process for evaluating YLDI was specifically designed to strengthen the field of youth development by identifying and disseminating best practices and other lessons learned about the intersection of activism and youth development.

Through YLDI, the Innovation Center and the project participants hoped to build the capacity of YLDI participants to

- ★ use civic activism as a component of their work;
- ★ give youth development practitioners models and information on how to integrate civic activism into their programming; and
- ★ stimulate research and new practices and policies for integrating civic activism and youth development.

Learning and Leading was designed with practitioners in mind. It draws heavily on the experiences and knowledge of the groups that participated in YLDI. Each section incorporates resources on civic activism and youth development.

In addition to the community partners who participated in YLDI, the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development would like to recognize the authors of the research reports and practitioner tools, stories, and activities that contributed so much to the creation of this tool kit. These include activities created and piloted by YLDI partner sites, especially Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, OUTRIGHT, Youth United for Community Action (YUCA), and Leadership Excellence.

Building Community: A Tool Kit for Youth and Adults in Charting Assets and Creating Change. Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003.

Creating Youth-Adult Partnerships. Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 1996.

Lessons in Leadership: How Young People Change Their Communities and Themselves. Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003.

H. Lewis-Charp, H. Cao Yu, S. Soukamneuth, and J. Lacoé, *Extending the Reach of Youth Development Through Civic Engagement: Outcomes of the Youth Leadership for Development Initiative.* Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003.

I. Mohamed and W. Wheeler, *Broadening the Bounds of Youth Development: Youth as Engaged Citizens,* Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2001.

Youth-Adult Partnerships: A Training Manual. Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003.

C. Garthwaite, ed., *Youth Leadership for Development Initiative Resource Guide.* Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2002.

Youth Leadership for Development Initiative: Broadening the Parameters of Youth Development and Strengthening Civic Activism. Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2001.

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OUR GUIDING FRAMEWORK




Learning and Leading is grounded in a *youth development* approach. By this we mean that the program tools and activities were designed to enhance the likelihood that young people will experience positive rather than negative outcomes as they transition from adolescence to adulthood.

The National Research Council (Eccles and Gootman, 2002) has found that youth development programs succeed when they create positive settings. Such settings are characterized by physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for personal effectiveness and mattering opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts. Gambone, Klem, and Connell (2002) have also determined that youth benefit when they have access to

- ★ supportive relationships with adults and peers,
- ★ challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences, and
- ★ meaningful opportunities for involvement.

For three years, members of the YLDI learning community grappled with one key question: How does civic activism serve as a component of youth development programming? This question grew out of a strong conviction that civic activism and youth development are complementary, not competing, approaches to youth work. By *civic activism*, we mean a safe and constructive way to build a positive identity and acquire leadership skills while gaining satisfaction from building community and creating social change.

The findings of the YLDI evaluation documented by Lewis-Charp, Yu, Soukamneuth, and Lacoé (2003) suggest that at least three factors can explain how and why civic activism can be used to “broaden the bounds” of conventional youth development programming:

-  **1.** Youth involved in civic activism were attracted by the programmatic and organizational focus on their own cultures and backgrounds.
-  **2.** Civic activism provided a forum and context for them to reflect and solve problems related to day-to-day challenges facing their families and communities.
-  **3.** Civic activism gave youth opportunities to apply vocational and leadership skills.

These conclusions reflect the reality that an increasing number of youth are active in organizational decision making and program planning and that others are acting as agents of social change. As youth development organizations seek to enhance leadership opportunities for adolescents, both within their own organizations and in the community, activist organizations are looking for ways to pay more attention to holistic youth development.

Learning and Leading does not claim to have all the answers, but it does reflect a growing understanding of *youth leadership* as a critical link between civic activism and youth development. The concept of youth leadership seems to capture how the YLDI practitioners understand their work across a variety of organizational and program contexts. Youth and adults within these organizations, for instance, repeatedly emphasized that leadership is about learning to listen, empathize, cooperate, and subsume personal interests to those of the group.

In keeping with the insights and experiences of YLDI participants and the findings from the evaluation process, *Learning and Leading* uses a leadership development framework to explore identity development, youth organizing, and youth involvement in organizational decision making as crucial links between youth development and civic activism. The following sections emphasize three sets of practices and lessons that flow directly from the findings mentioned above.

- ★ **Personal Leadership** is tied to identity formation.
- ★ **Organizational Leadership** expands on the role of young people as decision makers.
- ★ **Community Leadership** focuses on youth organizing as a catalyst for community change.

The three areas reinforce each other as part of a developmental process. Young people cannot be effective change agents unless they are developing holistically; the ability to engage young people at all three levels is a crucial part of the link between youth development and civic activism.

ABOUT LEARNING AND LEADING

Each section of *Learning and Leading* includes a description of key concepts, a set of promising practices, checklists, a list of resources, vignettes illustrating practical lessons from YLDI learning community members, and workshops or activities that have been used successfully with groups of young people. In general, *workshops* are longer, more in-depth, sessions, but they may require less preparation. *Activities* are quick, simple exercises that can set the stage for deeper discussions on a given topic.

If you work with a *youth development* organization, you can use this publication to enhance leadership opportunities for adolescents both within your organization and in the community. If yours is a *civic activist* organization working with young people, it can enhance the developmental aspects of your work. It is our hope that youth workers of all kinds will use this resource to create a range of supportive contexts and of opportunities for young people to grow.