



# Inspiring Youth as Partners

*Network for a Healthy California & Youth in Focus*



People can work together, can organize themselves to solve their own problems and fill their own needs with dignity and strength.

CESAR CHAVEZ

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## Introduction

All over the country, from parents to communities to government, people are asking, why are young people so overweight? The *Network for a Healthy California*, a program of the California Department of Public Health, answered this question with a question, who better to ask than young people themselves?

In 2006, the *Network for a Healthy California* partnered with Youth In Focus to support six teams of young people from around the state to answer these very questions. By having youth identify and learn about the most significant issues in nutrition, physical activity, and the built environment in their communities, this project centers on youth, their voices and experiences. Youth become the experts on why their generation is dealing with profound health issues and become the leaders in implementing relevant solutions.

Some key learnings that are critical to this project are connection, structure, and readiness. When embarking on any work for social change, especially a participatory action research project, youth, adults and their sites must be prepared for hard work, a lengthy timeline, barriers, and success. Structure is essential for a site to feel ready and to sustain a successful project throughout the year. Finally, youth need to feel a connection to other youth, their adult allies, and their larger world in order to believe in

the power of their project. Transformed through this process, youth are now leaders in their communities, with sharpened skills, expanded capacity, and strong voices. Young people's ideas and passions offer hope and connection for a just world.

### WHO SHOULD USE THIS & HOW IT SHOULD BE USED

This document is for organizations and individuals thinking about, wanting to, or preparing to work with young people in an authentic partnership to support their skills and leadership around their health and well-being. It is also for anyone interested in learning more about youth-led processes, youth-adult partnership, and/or the impacts of participatory action research on youth, adults, and communities.

There are two main aspects to this report. The first section highlights six schools and youth-serving organizations in different parts of California that spent nearly a year researching nutrition, physical

The kids are advocating both for themselves and their communities and that is the highest level of health education.

ADULT ALLY

activity, and food availability in their communities. This tool illustrates the process youth and adults went through at their specific sites, including challenges, opportunities and achievements. You can also see pictures of the young people in action and read quotes they've offered throughout the project. Over 65 youth participated in the initial pilot project, ranging in age from 12 to 18 years old.

The second part of this document identifies and addresses some of the most significant lessons learned. Following each lesson are ideas for where to begin when trying to start a project similar to this one. They are based on interviews and focus groups with site leaders, project trainers, project administrators, and our experience in working with youth on similar kinds of youth-led projects focusing on nutrition and physical activity.

This document is not a curriculum, nor does it attempt to provide all the answers. It is meant to be a helpful resource when embarking on a youth-led project. This document showcases the six incredible youth teams from San Francisco to San Bernardino who took the opportunity to learn more about the importance of eating more fruits and vegetables. These youth took the lack of healthy food options available to them into their own hands and have started to create change in their communities.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

### *Network for a Healthy California*

The mission of the *Network for a Healthy California (Network)* is to create innovative partnerships so that low-income Californians are enabled to adopt healthy eating and physical activity patterns as part of a healthy lifestyle.

The *Network* seeks to increase Californians' consumption of fruits and vegetables to the recommended cups, increase daily physical activity to at least 30 minutes for adults and 60 minutes for children, and promote participation in the Food Stamp Program.

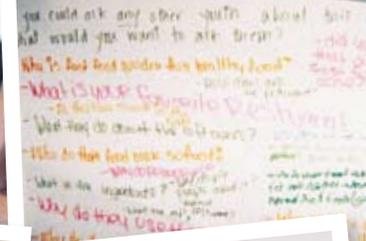
### *Youth In Focus*

Youth In Focus is a non-profit training and consulting organization that promotes youth leadership, organizational development, and community change. Youth In Focus works with underrepresented youth on youth-led action research, evaluation, and planning projects to create the conditions for social justice. Since 1990, Youth In Focus has worked with thousands of young people in over 200 projects all over the state, building their capacity to play critically informed and powerful roles in shaping their own futures and ours.



*If deepened my trust  
in youth as experts.*

ADULT ALLY



## Methods

The *Network* and Youth In Focus spent nearly six months planning for this project before its launch in mid-November of 2006. Together, a training-for-trainers was designed that focused on youth-adult partnership, youth empowerment, and youth-led action research. Youth-led action research is a participatory process in which young people identify a compelling research issue in their community, develop and implement a research design, analyze data, develop findings and recommendations, document and present their work, and implement their research through action.

In identifying individuals and agencies that would be ready for this endeavor, we worked with local *Network* projects to identify those sites that possessed the necessary qualities to do this work. Working with young people takes a dedicated, enthusiastic and flexible professional who can serve as a facilitator, advisor, teacher and cheerleader to the youth leaders. Understanding youth culture and being flexible with their schedules, were key factors in selecting adult allies. Youth are involved with other important activities, in addition to their school work, such as athletics, extra curricular groups, family obligations, and part-time jobs. In addition, perhaps most importantly, the agency staff needs to support, value, and respect youth voice and demonstrate a sincere commitment to youth leadership.

In partnership, Youth In Focus and the *Network* designed a ten-month training process that included gathering adult leads from six sites across California in Sacramento for in-person trainings on curriculum and skill-building. Monthly conference calls were conducted with adult allies to provide support and technical assistance; site visits were conducted to train youth directly and to visit their communities; and a two-day youth forum was hosted for all youth and adults involved with the project.

Over 65 youth participated in this project, ranging in age from 12 to 18 years old. They represented a diverse group of individuals from low-resource communities throughout the State. They also represented youth and communities who do not normally have “a place at the table” in the creation and design of health promotion programs.

The *Network* and Youth In Focus provided curriculum to sites that primarily employed popular education approaches. Activities were interactive and experiential, garnering young people’s best thoughts and ideas throughout the entire research process, of selecting a topic significant to their lives, designing a survey, and making meaning of their data. In 2008-09 youth will lead their teams in action planning and implementation of their research.

Youth are already empowered and already speaking.  
We adults simply have to listen to them.

CHRISTINE BOYNTON, ALAMEDA COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

# SITE #1:

## Tennyson High School

Hayward, Alameda County

### THE LANDSCAPE

The city of Hayward appears suburban, spanning from the eastern shore of the San Francisco Bay to the coastal hills. In reality, multiple families share single-family dwellings creating a dense, urban environment. As the city undergoes gentrification, working class families are forced to move to some of the poorest neighborhoods in the Bay Area.

### THE ISSUE AND METHODS

The students that came together for this local project named themselves the “Overachievers” at Tennyson High School. They created their research question in direct response to a daytime curfew ordinance implemented by the Hayward Mayor and Board of Supervisors. The group felt this was a recent community issue that directly affected their food access and choices.

How will closed campus affect student food choices?

With the ordinance in place, any student who is found in a public place during the school day is in direct violation of the policy, which means leaving campus for lunch is punishable. All 2000 students must eat lunch in the school cafeteria within one lunchtime period. This overwhelming influx of cafeteria dwellers left the “Overachievers” wondering how students would be able to eat healthy, culturally relevant, appealing, and nutritious foods.

On their 31-question survey, youth researchers asked peers to rank their concerns about closed campus lunch, including long lines, access to fruits, vegetables, and other foods, and the length of time and space available to eat. They surveyed a representation of their student body, collecting 347 surveys in English and ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, ranging from freshman to seniors.

### THE RESULTS

Based on student responses, two key findings of the “Overachievers” were the following:

Long lines may limit food choice, availability and if students eat at all.

Students would be more willing to eat school lunch if a more culturally diverse menu was offered.

Even though students at Tennyson feel greatly impacted by closed campus lunch, youth researchers developed significant, but feasible recommendations:

Food services should consider working in partnership with the students to best meet the needs and wishes of the student body.

A monthly calendar should be formulated presenting the whole month’s meal plan, which should have variety and include a variety of fruits and vegetables so that students don’t get tired of the same food and turn away from it.



### THE NEXT STEPS AND ACTION

Although the “Overachievers” lost a few students to graduation, the team is passionately moving into an action phase. A few of the “Overachievers” are working as members of a Hayward School District Committee to support the implementation of closed campus lunch. By giving youth voice to the process, everyone is hoping for a positive start to the new policy. The cafeteria menu has already changed this year to include a broader range of choices. Youth researchers will also present their findings and recommendations to the Food Services Staff and to stakeholders at the Alameda County Office of Education in order to try and affect change in their high school and hopefully their entire school district. This opportunity also allowed the “Overachievers” and the adult ally at Tennyson to deliver nutrition education to the students on campus.



*I have observed these students gain confidence in their opinions and in their report.*

*MOLLY NAKAHARA, TENNYSON HIGH SCHOOL*

I want to make the lives of my family members better.  
I want my sister to eat better. I want her to make  
better food choices and I want her to live longer.

YOUTH LEADER, ORANGE HIGH SCHOOL

## SITE #2:

### Orange High School

City of Orange, Orange County

#### THE LANDSCAPE

The city of Orange is much more than what was shown in the hit teen television drama, *The O.C.*. While the high school lies on the perimeter of a quaint, historic district in Orange, its population is racially diverse with varying socioeconomic levels.

#### THE ISSUE AND METHODS

Due to challenges finding an adult to lead the team, the “Lunch Bunch” at Orange High School was not formed until spring of 2007. Already six months behind on the project, the team had a lot of work to do to catch up to the rest of the sites. They did it by working diligently and staying dedicated to producing a quality project on a shortened timeline. They would meet on weekends and evenings, in addition to the lunch hour. Their mission is to make students aware of healthier food choices. Their goal is to provide students with healthier, more nutritious food options on campus in order to help them improve academic and physical performance. The “Lunch Bunch” developed research questions that would help them find out if students at Orange would want to try new and different foods.

Do we want healthier food in our school's food carts, vending machines, and our school's cafeteria?

If it were possible to change the food that was available on our school campus, would the students want to try fresh and healthy food?

Youth researchers and their peers feel the impact of this issue vividly on their campus. In their own words: “We are the ones that consume the food on campus. We are also directly affected by the food choices we make, and we care about the health of our fellow students.” Students understand that some of their peers skip breakfast and wait until lunch to eat their first meal of the day. “Lunch Bunch” members feel that school nutrition, including fresh and healthy food, is imperative for these students and all students.

On their survey, “Lunch Bunch” researchers identified vending machines as a critical place to advocate for nutritious, fresh foods on campus. They asked students if they would buy a range of foods from fruits and vegetables to granola bars and sandwiches. While their focus was the vending machine, the youth researchers also asked questions to get to know more about their 293 respondents' beliefs and behaviors, asking about their eating habits and attitudes towards nutrition.



## THE RESULTS

The “Lunch Bunch’s” data directly spoke to their research questions. Some of their key data are highlighted here:

Nearly 100% of students surveyed reported that they enjoy eating fresher, healthier food.

A student surveyed said, “we should have more nutritious foods because our country is the fattest country.”

Another student surveyed said, “eating healthier foods gives me more energy.”

Finally, they found that nearly half of students surveyed said they would change their eating habits if healthy choices were offered.

Two initial recommendations the “Lunch Bunch” has made based on their findings are to:

Offer a mix of fresh fruit, sandwiches, 100% fruit juices and other healthy options on campus.

Add these food options in our cafeteria, food carts, and vending machines.

## THE NEXT STEPS AND ACTION

The “Lunch Bunch” held a meeting with the Food Service Director of Orange Unified School District and the District School Wellness Committee to discuss their project. They are still in the process of determining next steps to move forward in unison. The team aims to contact the vending machine companies in order to research the cost of how much it would be to provide healthier choices at school. The “Lunch Bunch” has strong student voice backing their research as they continue to impact cafeteria, lunch cart, and vending machine options in their school.

*I have seen them become more confident and they are very eager to continue working on this project, they are so driven.*

*PATTY MAIZE, ORANGE HIGH SCHOOL*

They really act as leaders... this [project] has helped them develop leadership skills.

YOLANDA ROMERO, LAMONT UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

# SITE #3:

## Mountain View Middle School

Lamont, Kern County

### THE LANDSCAPE

Lamont represents a region of California that is quite distinct from the other five sites. It is a rural town of 13,000 residents surrounded by farmland and agriculture.

### THE ISSUE AND METHODS

The “Mountain View Motivators” at Mountain View Middle School were gravely concerned with the health of their small town. By mapping their community, the team was struck by the lack of healthy food options in Lamont. They found a lot of places to buy fast food and high calorie, low nutritional value foods, but were limited when it came to healthy food options. This initial investigation led the team to farmers’ markets and their research question:

What would be the challenges and difficulties for creating and sustaining a farmers’ market in our community?

The “Mountain View Motivators” found motivation in facing the obesity challenge in their community. Their hope to improve their town’s health and nutrition began with their inspiration for a farmers’ market. The team understood that a farmers’ market takes a lot of work to sustain, so their research focused on more than just their main question. They also collected information on how often people in their town eat fruits and vegetables, how much they spend on them, and if they understand what a farmers’ market is.

Youth researchers passed out their survey to all 7th and 8th graders in their school. Only 3 students out of 234 did not complete their survey. Since most middle school students would not be their family’s primary grocery shopper, survey questions focused on the kinds of produce youth would want to see at a local farmers’ market. They also asked about their parents’ shopping habits and tried to find out if a farmers’ market would be appealing to Lamont families.

### THE RESULTS

Although survey results indicate many students do not know what a farmers’ market is, their data showed that a farmers’ market is likely to succeed in Lamont. A few of the team’s findings are as follows:

The majority of the students who answered the question said they eat fruits and vegetables 1 to 3 times a day.

Adults travel 20 minutes to Bakersfield or beyond to buy fruits and vegetables in order to keep their kids healthy.

Almost half of the students from Mountain View Middle School said they would go to a farmers’ market in Lamont.



Although the “Mountain View Motivators” are still working out their recommendations, two strong sentiments they had at the end of their research process were the following:

A lot of people are overweight and unhealthy. They need to exercise more and make better food choices.

Our environment needs to establish available, more nutritious food choices, and we have to exercise more often.

### THE NEXT STEPS AND ACTION

The “Mountain View Motivators” chose their name aptly. They have already presented their project results to the School Board and the Neighborhood Action Committee. Both groups were impressed and supportive of the students and their work. Some changes have been noticed in the school environment this year based in part on the team’s work and their ability to raise awareness of these issues. Through more information gathering, key interviews, and action planning, youth researchers will continue with their dedicated pursuit of a farmers’ market for their community.



I think they got other students talking about what good food looks like, and they felt like they accomplished something.

JACKIE ALARCON, GALILEO HIGH SCHOOL

# SITE #4:

## Galileo High School

San Francisco, City and County of San Francisco

### THE LANDSCAPE

The city of San Francisco is a dense urban area located on the San Francisco Bay. San Francisco houses nearly 800,000 residents in only 7 square miles. The city is one of the most racially and culturally diverse in the country.

### THE ISSUE AND METHODS

The “Galileo Nutrition Group” at Galileo High School began their research by observing available healthy food choices and cost on their school’s campus and neighborhood. What they found was troubling, but it also opened up the chance to give their peers a voice over the food options they are given in and around school. First, they needed to find out if their peers wanted that voice, which led to their research question.

What would make nutrition important enough to students at Galileo High School to make a change in their food choices and lifestyle?

A goal of the “Galileo Nutrition Group” is to see if students would make healthy food choices if it were available to them. Some of the major questions the team developed for their research process included examining how food choices affect lifestyle, why students choose unhealthy foods, and how access to foods impacts people’s choices.

On their survey, youth researchers asked students to rank what is important to them in their lunch, from cost to nutrition to size. They also asked peers who influences them in their food choices, where they eat the most nutritious food, and why they choose the foods they do. In order to understand what would make nutrition important to students, the “Galileo Nutrition Group” asked their peers about their current eating habits, attitudes and beliefs about nutrition, and what they would want and need to improve their health.

### THE RESULTS

Based on student responses, “Galileo Nutrition Group” discovered important information to advance their research:

Value for volume – students feel that the nutritional food choices available at school are too expensive.

Students would rather eat unhealthy food, especially fast food, because of taste, convenience, and affordable cost.

“Galileo Nutrition Group” wants to shift the idea that nutritious foods are beyond student means. They developed many recommendations and a few are as follows:

The school needs to provide nutritious, healthy foods at a price that students are willing and able to pay.



The school should sell healthy lunch items in the courtyard where most students hang out during lunchtime.

A group of students should meet regularly with cafeteria staff to look over and discuss lunch menus and find opportunities to incorporate the Harvest of the Month Program.

### THE NEXT STEPS AND ACTION

“Galileo Nutrition Group” took health education into their own hands by holding a nutrition week in the middle of their project to teach their peers about the importance and feasibility of good nutrition. This awareness-raising event was so successful the team has recommended that the school makes it an annual event. The team will present their research results to school district officials, as well as continue working on their recommendations. There is a sense that the school administration is looking to the team to see what kinds of changes they can make to better students’ experience during lunch.

*[This project] was a great chance to give us the responsibility to create and be part of the changes occurring at our school, and not just letting the adults do the change for us.*

*“GALILEO NUTRITION GROUP,”  
GALILEO HIGH SCHOOL*





# SITE #5:

## Francisco Connection

*San Francisco, City and County of San Francisco*

### THE LANDSCAPE

The city of San Francisco is a dense urban area located on the San Francisco Bay. San Francisco houses nearly 800,000 residents in only 7 square miles. The city is one of the most racially and culturally diverse in the country.

### THE ISSUE AND METHODS

“Youth Eating Smart” from Francisco Connection at Francisco Middle School did not get started on their research project until late winter of 2007 because the organization had difficulty securing an adult lead with the capacity for this project. The team quickly determined that fast food is a serious problem for young people. They believe that they and their peers can be part of the solution to countering obesity. The team knew that to tackle such an overwhelming issue, they would need to start at the beginning with their research question.

Why do youth go to fast food?

Youth researchers did not assume that their survey respondents all had the same definition of what fast food is. So, they asked them. On their survey, “Youth Eating Smart” they had their peers list restaurants that they defined as “fast food.” This allowed them to analyze the rest of their survey with consistency. The team also asked their peers their feelings about fast food in relation to cost, taste, and health.

### THE RESULTS

Students living in Bayview, Sunnyside and Visitacion Valley say they have very few healthy stores in their neighborhoods and lots of fast food. Eighty-three percent of these students eat fast food meals once or twice a week.

Students living in Chinatown, North Beach, and the Mission say that they have more healthy food stores than fast food. Sixty-five percent of these students say they eat fast food once or twice a week.

The majority of the students surveyed said that they most often buy items from the dollar menu, because it was cheap.



### THE NEXT STEPS AND ACTION

The students will be participating in their school's nutrition week and will offer nutrition tips and advice, as well as discuss healthier options with their peers. They are looking for fruits and vegetable donations to pass out to the student body.

The students have been interviewed by the school newspaper to explain the research project and also promote healthy messages through the newspaper. They have also created a PowerPoint® Presentation to share to all P.E. classes about their work and explain the importance of a healthy, nutritious diet.



*I am glad I was part of this project. I think my hard work on this project really counts and can help other kids eat better.*

*YOUTH LEADER, FRANCISCO MIDDLE SCHOOL*

This program allows me to be a positive aspect in my community by mentoring younger girls and encouraging them to become physically active.

CHANTELLE, PHASE II

# SITE #6:

## City of San Bernardino Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department

San Bernardino, San Bernardino County

### THE LANDSCAPE

San Bernardino is the 18th largest city in California with an estimated population of just over 200,000 people. This region is commonly referred to as the “Inland Empire”, which lies roughly 60 miles east of Los Angeles. Large parts of western, central, and eastern San Bernardino are home to mixed ethnic low-income communities, of which the Latino and African American population dominates. The heart of the African American community is on the Westside of San Bernardino.

### THE ISSUE AND METHODS

The “Westside Steppers Phase II Drill Team and Recreation Squad (Phase II)” was established as a program of the Department of Parks & Recreation to provide a safe and fun program that challenges youth to learn new and creative ways to express their feelings and to serve as a positive role model for youth in the community. Through this project, the team wanted to spread their positive momentum by investigating and encouraging other young people to be more active. After six weeks of dialogue and activities, the 33-member group finally agreed upon their research question.

What are the effects of physical inactivity to African American teens?

In order for youth researchers to get their peers to “step up, be smart, and get healthy,” they had to start by finding out their peers’ attitudes and behaviors around physical activity and nutrition. The team asked questions about the types of exercise equipment young people need and want, the amount and quality of their exercise, how many fruits and vegetables they eat, and how the people and structures in their community support and encourage their activity.

“Phase II” is full of physically active youth who practice dancing, stepping, and drumming multiple times a week. The team stayed true to their principles by putting on a community dance for their peers where they distributed a first round of surveys. They continued handing out surveys at their schools, neighborhoods, and to their friends and family to collect 165 in all.

### THE RESULTS

“Phase II” is still working on developing key findings, but they have interesting data to work with:

The majority of youth taking the survey said physical activity is very important to them.

Well over 50 percent of youth say they participate in physical activity every day.

At the same time, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and asthma ranked high for health conditions among respondents’ immediate families.



Two initial recommendations "Phase II" has made are:

Provide more age appropriate, accessible activities for teens 16–18 years old.

Provide more programs that will empower teens to make change.

### THE NEXT STEPS AND ACTION

Management at the Department of Parks & Recreation is very impressed with the team's final report. They have recommended the project to the City Council for approval of another year to further develop their findings. Management has also recommended that youth from this project work closely with a newly formed citywide Youth Commission. The Westside Steppers are making big steps towards positive change in their community.



*I am a hard worker and I want to do anything that can help me stay off the streets... This program helps me build friendships and family.*

DAVITSHEA, "PHASE II"

The most profound part of the meeting for the youth and myself was the sense of a bigger picture regarding this project... It seemed to make them feel as though they are part of something bigger.

BETTY SELLS-ASBERRY, ADULT LEAD, FRANCISCO CONNECTION

## Connecting the State: Youth Forum

Traveling to Sacramento by train, plane, and caravan. Spending the night away from home. Eating a diverse spread of healthy food. Deepening friendships. Meeting new people. Promoting ideas, research, and work. Playing games. Team building. Learning about nutrition and farming. Planning for action. Laughing. Talking. Creating. This was the May 11–12, 2007 Youth Forum for all Youth Empowerment Pilot Program sites.

The Forum brought together youth researchers, parents, and adult allies from all six sites to connect with each other. It allowed youth to meet with other youth doing similar work around the state, represent their individual site's research, share ideas and strategy, and deepen their team's bonds.

For nearly two days, youth and adults participated in teambuilding games, creative projects, and interactive activities facilitated by Youth In Focus trainers. Youth showed enthusiasm, leadership, and excitement in various activities, and adult leads were not only supportive, but also highly engaged. Together the 80-person group bonded quickly, and the experience lasted throughout the rest of the project.

One Forum highlight included site presentations by each team. Youth prepared creative presentations to represent their work, from their research issues to tools to next steps for their fellow sites. Sites relayed their work through poetry, skits, and visual art.

Participants were even treated to a performance by the Westside Steppers: Phase II from San Bernardino who integrated their research methods into their show. Groups were supportive of each other and began to connect around common themes of food access, physical activity, and nutrition.

In just two days, groups built more trust and better communication amongst themselves. They had a sense now of the bigger picture and how their project fits into it. All teams left feeling clearer about their goals and how they wanted to accomplish them.

The biggest challenge for the participants at the Forum was not having enough time. Adult leads wanted more time for their youth to connect with each other and other youth from other cities, problem solve together with these new friends and reflect thoughtfully about their work without feeling overwhelmed and too busy. In future Forums, youth researchers should gather for an entire weekend, including two nights, with time for rest, team building, and as time permits, touring the local area. For many youth involved with this project, the Forum was one of the first opportunities they had to leave their home community. They should be able to take full advantage of this trip.



## Additional Network Projects that Engage Youth

In 2007 and 2008 other key *Network* initiatives also worked to engage youth in efforts to create a healthier, more active California. Two of those initiatives are highlighted below.

*Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Prevention (CX<sup>3</sup>)* is a program planning framework that utilizes cutting-edge tools and methods to gather information on important nutrition factors taking place in neighborhoods. Lower-income communities and populations are disproportionately affected by less healthy environments. Research shows a clear connection between neighborhood factors and health outcomes. In several sites, youth have been involved, side-by-side with adults, in compiling local data to evaluate a neighborhood's strengths and weaknesses in relation to CX<sup>3</sup> indicators and assets. Additionally, youth have been active in setting priorities in partnership with adults, based on the data collected.

Many of the *Network* local projects have made youth initiatives a priority, as well. The Los Angeles Collaborative successfully led a Youth Photovoice project in the Spring of 2007. Photovoice is a method that engages people in reflecting on representations of their own community and using their voices about how their experiences may relate to larger social

forces. In the Photovoice project, youth researchers took and chose photographs that most accurately reflected the community's concerns and assets as they related to nutrition, physical activity, and the environment. They used this process to tell stories about what the photos mean and identify issues, themes, and theories that emerged. They held a successful presentation of their photo project in March of 2007. Many community leaders and health professionals in Los Angeles attended, and the youth took this opportunity to highlight their project and ask for support from these key stakeholders.





## Lessons Learned

Many lessons come out of work with youth. Some learnings are rooted in the strengths of a project, while others come from challenges in the work. Either way, lessons learned create room for more innovative work and improved strategy. The following lessons were developed through evaluations of the project by youth and adult leads.

If you are thinking of embarking on a project similar to this one, or any work involving youth as leaders, please consider our learnings as a guide.

**Youth voice** means young people gain foundational skills and support to make key decisions, learn from their experiences, conduct their research, and present their results to powerful stakeholders. It also means that adult leads need fundamental skills in developing and supporting youth leadership.

### *Where to Begin*

Build youths' confidence, critical thinking, and public-speaking skills.

Be comfortable challenging young people in a respectful way.

Be prepared to disagree with youth and still trust their perspective and follow-through on their recommendations.

Explore your own and your organization's assumptions about what youth can and cannot do.

Know how to authentically share decision-making power with youth.

[Youth researchers] felt that they had a real opportunity to be leaders.

CHRISTINE BOYNTON, ACOE

**Participatory learning** accommodates a variety of learning styles in youth and adults. The adult allies were engaged in the process and content of the project and were able to translate it more effectively to their youth researchers. Through active learning styles, youth and adults could more easily and enthusiastically connect to difficult subjects like research design, methodology, and analysis.

#### Where to Begin

Assess your skills and knowledge in various educational modalities. Practice what you know and get training in things you don't.

Various teaching methods can include acting, drawing, writing, games, and teambuilding.

Lecturing at anyone doesn't allow them to fully engage in the material, especially for youth after a long day in school. Learn strategies and methods that allow the information to come from youth, like brainstorming, mapping, small groups, and pair sharing.

Choose and set up a physical space in order to implement a participatory approach.

**Structure** is critical in any project that wants to achieve success, but is even more important in a train-the-trainers model. Projects need detailed timelines, clear curriculum, regular trainings and check-in calls, a stable location, and a transparent process. It was vital for project trainers (Youth In Focus and *Network for a Healthy California*) to provide at least one in-person training to youth researchers; to visit their site and understand their community; to give one-on-one, face-to-face coaching to adult leads.

#### Where to Begin

Be prepared before you begin! Secure project staff, determine timelines, know your methods, set goals, and reserve enough organizational capacity and space to embark on a project like this.

Agree upon expectations, roles and responsibilities for all involved, including organizational administrators, staff, youth, and external trainers.

Expect things to change. Although it's imperative to have all pieces in place for project launch, be flexible when timelines, goals, people or resources shift.





## Lessons Learned, continued...

**Readiness** of a site, its administration, staff, parents, and community members is crucial to a project's sense of collective action, empowered youth and adult leadership, research implementation and institutionalization. If a site is not prepared to listen to youth voice, allow for their decision-making, and support their recommendations, it can be devastating to everyone involved.

### *Where to Begin*

Assess the “readiness” of your organization or school community. Identify assets and allies for your work. In addition, identify possible barriers and develop ways to address them.

Be honest with your site's ability to authentically partner with youth. If the challenges are too great, you may not be ready to bring young people into the mix just yet. Start to work through barriers and prepare for youth's integration so that everyone has a valued place.

**Technical assistance**, including timely responses to questions (usually within 24 hours), thorough feedback on project materials from trainers and administrative staff, and useful curriculum and tools can provide necessary support to adult leads. Offering groups guiding questions as opposed to advice on their work empowers them to create their own solutions to issues and challenges that arise.

### *Where to Begin*

Technical assistance can be defined as providing specialized tools and knowledge to increase organizational capacity.

Connect with technical assistance providers or other support organizations that can build skills in youth leadership development, youth-adult partnership, participatory research, organizing, and coalition-building.

Cultivate solid partnerships with other community-based organizations, government agencies, and social service providers to offer layered and unique opportunities to youth members.

We definitely grew stronger as a team. I hadn't seen the young people as energetic and excited about each other's presence up until that point. It was amazing for me to see them have so much fun... I certainly feel as if they trust me in a whole new way now.

BETTY SELLS-ASBERRY, ADULT LEAD, FRANCISCO CONNECTION

**Youth-to-Youth** interactions and mentorship can provide unique opportunities that adult-to-youth relationships cannot always yield. In addition to connecting youth to each other, it is also critical to create project connection. Although each project focuses on its own topic, their issues are intertwined and can create a powerful force on a state-level.

#### **Where to Begin**

Schedule opportunities for cross-project connection at project onset, including retreats, conferences, youth forums, and research exchanges.

Use Internet tools, like networking sites, for youth to interact with one another about their project work and personally.

Stay aware of what's going on in your school and community. Connect youth to relevant opportunities.

#### **Connecting to community and world issues**

is essential for young people to understand the significance of their project, relate it to a bigger picture, and make broader impacts. Building context for project issues helps youth develop and sustain interest in their work, and it motivates them to act on their research.

#### **Where to Begin**

Bring in relevant speakers and workshop presenters to work with the team on their issue area.

Set up field trips for youth that help to inform their chosen issue area.

Have youth conduct background research on the Internet, through the newspaper, books, documentaries, and informational interviews or oral history from relevant figures.



The students felt empowered. They feel they can make a difference at our school and at home.

PATTY MAIZE, ORANGE HIGH SCHOOL

## Lessons Learned, continued...

**Consistency is key** to any project that is trying to support youth leadership. Having the same adult leads throughout an entire process can support the success of the youth and their work. Consistency is essential in a train-the-trainers training model as well. When two sites had new adult leads partway through the training cycle, it was challenging for them to catch up in the process. They faced time barriers getting themselves trained, training their youth teams, and connecting their youth with other sites in the project.

### Where to Begin

When selecting an adult lead to run your project, assess availability, commitment, and barriers to meet project outcomes.

Make sure more than one adult in an agency is connected to the project and the team. This not only allows information to be exchanged more easily in cases of transition, but demonstrates a commitment to the institutionalization of the project.

Choose a day and time for team meetings. Try to maintain it weekly and ensure the whole team's buy-in if the day or time has to change.

**Baseline knowledge** is necessary for building project context. Youth and adults not only need training in youth-led action research, but all sites need a basic foundation in nutrition education and food access from which youth can make decisions on the direction of their projects and their own lives.

### Where to Begin

Provide or bring in trainers to offer culturally-relevant nutrition and health education.

Engage young people in discussions and activities around nutrition and food access in order to illuminate their voices as part of the baseline knowledge.

Remember that you all hold a wealth of information on nutrition and food access within your own bodies, families, and experiences. Utilize this inherent information to form your understanding for later project work.





**Systemic barriers** create significant impacts to the project's content and process. Youth struggle in carrying out their research and implementing their results when outside systems and people with power make decisions that challenge or prohibit their work. Youth must be prepared for the slow pace of social change. Setting context by looking at other youth movements can be very powerful in maintaining youth motivation and empowerment.

### **Where to Begin**

Make a commitment to understanding the root causes and structural barriers to fair food access. Work with young people to develop their understanding and give their own expertise and experiences with food injustice.

Learn and practice how to be a true adult ally to youth. Find local youth development/empowerment organizations to help grow your skills in this area. This includes making a commitment to acknowledging and understanding how youth voice is silenced by caregivers, organizations, and institutions or systems.

Encourage youth to recognize their individual and collective power by sharing resources that document past youth movements and social justice efforts.

Finally, youth-led action research requires a great deal of time, effort, capacity, and work. When a project is rich in these resources it is sure to succeed, given an adequate timeline, an authentic process, committed participants, and attainable outcomes.

The most meaningful thing I have gained is actually walking through this project with the youth. Seeing and hearing what and how they think and the reasoning behind it. Watching them discussing the problems and coming up with ways for solving them... It gives me hope for the future.

GLEND A MARTIN-ROBINSON, CITY OF  
SAN BERNARDINO PARKS & RECREATION



## Next Steps

*Network for a Healthy California* and Youth In Focus will continue their partnership training with four new sites from around the state in youth-led action research. The four new sites will be/are new locations that will gather again for an updated and improved train-the-trainers module throughout 2008. Sites will recruit 8 to 12 young people to tackle current conditions in nutrition and physical activity. Instead of surveys, sites will use Photovoice as their research instrument. In PhotoVoice, youth researchers use photographs and focus groups to answer their research question and address a salient issue in their community. A new group of sites has been selected and is eager to get into their work.

In youth-led action research, young people often feel disempowered and discouraged when action does not follow the research. In order to proactively address this challenge, all six sites from the Youth Empowerment Pilot Program will continue with an action phase. Sites are currently reviewing and sharpening their research findings and recommendations. In addition to presentations to key stakeholders, they are creating strategy and participating in action planning to move towards implementation of their results. California Project LEAN will work in collaboration with the *Network* on this phase of the project. Youth researchers from the pilot project who have not graduated are still eagerly participating in the project.

## Closing

No one can tell us why young people are overweight, why they eat chips and soda for breakfast, and why they watch hours of television, better than young people. They are also the ones who can tell us how to best engage youth in their communities, connect them to other people, address current conditions, and build and sustain hope. Youth are impacted when their cafeterias serve unhealthy foods; when school campuses don't provide healthy options; when fast food is the most appetizing and cheap choice; when food options are not culturally appropriate; when video games are more appealing than a run-down park; and when access to fruits and vegetables is non-existent. They can speak with honesty, passion, and commitment about these issues and are motivated to change them. This project has provided youth from across California with the opportunity to speak truths in their communities, work with other youth and adults to develop solutions, and fight for their rights to healthy foods, physical activity, and conditions. Youth enthusiastically took on this opportunity, found their voice, found their power, and are speaking with conviction about what they want for their bodies, their families, and their communities.

One of the most meaningful things I have gained from working on this project is learning that students really care about nutrition and all they need is a little support.

JACKIE ALARCON, GALILEO HIGH SCHOOL

### *Inspiring Youth as Partners DVD*

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