



The Opportunity Youth Forum: Boosting Capacity to Drive Equitable Systems Change

2021 Evaluation Report for the
Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum



EQUAL
MEASURE

FINDING
PROMISE
FUELING
CHANGE





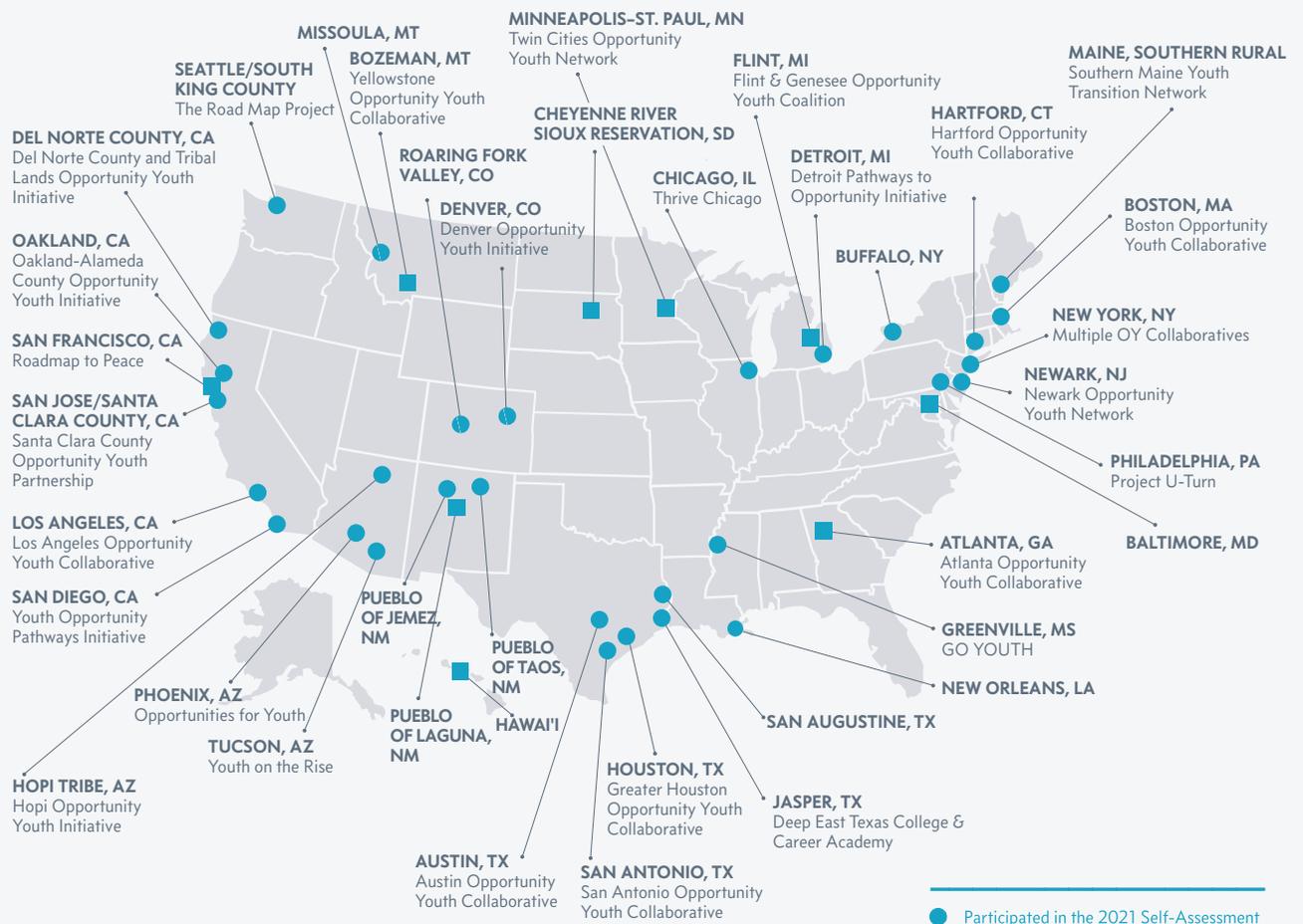
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2021 Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) network represents a diverse set of 39 communities — nearly double its size since its founding a decade ago — which brings together cross-sector partners in local collaboratives to improve education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth.¹ Six new sites, representing urban, rural, and tribal communities, joined the network in 2021.² While partners involved in the OYF network share a common vision, the communities in which they operate, the collaboratives leading this work, and the backbone organizations coordinating these efforts vary greatly.

About the Opportunity Youth Forum

The Aspen Institute’s Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) launched the OYF in 2012, on the recommendations from President Obama’s White House Council on Community Solutions. Since then, FCS has mobilized a national movement, convening and supporting a network of communities dedicated to improving systems so all young people can connect or re-connect to an education or career pathway.

FIGURE 1
OYF Collaboratives in 2021





Organizing for Systems Change

Since the OYF network’s inception, an underlying assumption of using the collective impact model to connect opportunity youth to education and career pathways is the belief that disconnected and inadequate systems significantly contribute to youth disconnection. To successfully engage and re-engage young people, systems of individuals, programs, organizations, policies, and resources must change. By investing in the development, learning, and support of cross-sector collaboratives to change these systems, youth outcomes — connection to education and workforce pathways — will improve.

The OYF evaluation measured two interrelated elements central to the OYF theory of change.

1. Collaborative Capacity:

The infrastructure and processes necessary for the collaborative to carry out its opportunity youth agenda.

2. Systems Change:

“Shifts to the conditions that hold a problem in place”³ — in this case, disconnected pathways and inequitable conditions that prevent young people from achieving education and employment outcomes.

In addition, the OYF theory of change is undergirded by a set of core values — equity, youth-led change, and community power building — embedded in the strategies and efforts to change local systems that affect opportunity youth.

FIGURE 2
Simplified Theory of Change



Network Trends

The 2021 collaborative self-assessment captures information on collaborative capacity, systems change, and core values, and comparisons with the previous year show strong signs of progress. Across the OYF network, **collaborative capacity, systems change, and core values all increased from 2020 to 2021.**

Collaborative capacity increased by over five percentage points (at the strong evidence threshold). In addition, each of the four types of capacity — particularly *data and learning* and *raising awareness and strategic communication* — also increased from 2020 to 2021.

Systems change increased by almost four percentage points (strong evidence). Each of the seven types of systems changes also increased from 2020 to 2021, but especially *data use* and *public policy change*. *Funding change* has also consistently increased since 2019.

Strong evidence of **core values** increased slightly from 2020 to 2021. Two of the three core values — *equity* and *community power* — were stable, while *youth-led change* increased by four percentage points. Among the three, *attention to equity and equitable practices* was the most strongly evident core value in 2021.



Moving Together: Capacity and Systems Change

The relationship between collaborative capacity and systems change in 2021 was consistent with prior years, where collaboratives with greater capacity are statistically more likely to see greater evidence of systems changes necessary for opportunity youth to succeed.⁴ These findings reinforce the need to invest in and build the “collaborative muscle” necessary for creating systems that promote success for opportunity youth.

FIGURE 3
Greater collaborative capacity is associated with greater evidence of systems change

Values reflect the % of indicators reported as strong evidence by each collaborative.

● = Collaborative



A Deeper Look into the OYF Network’s Systems Change Strategies

The OYF report delves deeper into the complexity of systems change work across four areas: **data use, public policy, funding changes, and equity**. Based on data from the 2021 collaborative self-assessment and site lead interviews, these systems changes emerged as areas exhibiting growth or as key FCS priorities as OYF moves into its next decade of work.

Data Use

FCS has made significant investments in building the capacities of OYF collaboratives to collect and use data to improve systems and outcomes for opportunity youth, and these efforts are paying off. In 2021, **data and learning was the highest rated collaborative capacity and collaboratives have seen substantial growth in data capacity and data use for systems change**, increasing nine and 15 percentage points from 2019 to 2021, respectively. In particular, the network has demonstrated growth in *using common data definitions* and in *sharing data* within and across systems. Shared understandings and common definitions of key terms and markers of progress among stakeholders and partners within and across local systems allows for data to be aggregated. This makes data much more useful for understanding progress and making strategic decisions at the systems level.

“...being in a data collaborative and seeing not only youth-serving organizations, but even our public school system being very transparent about [their data], the challenges and successes that they’re having engaging young people throughout the school year, has really, I think, shifted the culture...”



Public Policy

Public policies influence the flow of resources within systems, set rules and accountability structures for system actors, and incentivize and prioritize behaviors for system stakeholders. OYF collaboratives work to enact new or modify existing public policies to address barriers encountered by opportunity youth. **In 2021, the network's scores represent promising signs of growth** — increasing five percentage points from 2020 levels. Collaboratives elevated several policy “wins” — including expanding access to youth jobs programs, increasing wages for youth, and advocating for youth-focused research. Collaboratives leveraged several strategies to influence policy including raising public awareness to youth-related issues. Collaboratives sought to build relationships and share data with public officials and inform the public of their goals through publications and reports. Several collaboratives engaged young people in their advocacy work, taking them to meet with public officials and including young people's voice in testimony supporting bills. Collaboratives have begun to recognize the value of specialized expertise to advance their policy goals. Some collaboratives bolstered their policy efforts by hiring staff with policy and advocacy training.

“Unless we change the rules and the regulations that govern [systems], we'll always be swimming upstream...”

Funding changes

Public and private funding represent intentional decisions and priorities of system leaders and reflect presiding public narratives, policy preferences, and historic precedents. Collaboratives work to shift funding practices and distribution of resources to create more opportunities for opportunity youth and fund transformative systems change. **In 2021, the network continued its steady annual growth in funding** — increasing six percentage points from 2019 levels. Collaboratives shared examples of types of funding shifts they supported in 2021, including shifting public dollars from the justice system to local youth programs, supporting school district funding for drop-out prevention programming, and allocating funds to youth wages. Collaboratives elevated several barriers to shifting funding practices, including misalignment of goals and strategies between collaboratives and funders, funders' limited interest in funding backbone activities like convening, and challenges to expanding established funder relationships beyond what is presently funded. Collaboratives leveraged various strategies to overcome these barriers, including shifting narratives around opportunity youth to influence funding and building organizational capacity to navigate complex public funding streams.

“What we've been trying to do is actually getting an inside voice into our city government to determine how that funding is going to be distributed over the years.”

Equity

Equity, along with youth-led change and community power, is a stated core value of the OYF work — embedded in how collaboratives build their internal capacity and work to change systems to better serve opportunity youth. **Equity shows up in collaboratives in a variety of ways.** In 2021, over three-quarters of collaboratives reported that planning for OY work included *explicit acknowledgement of racial equity and/or community-specific disparities*, and this increased from 2020 to 2021. Most collaboratives report *diverse memberships* reflective of local communities and use *disaggregated data* to develop targeted strategies. As FCS transitions to a north star of **Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing, and Purpose** (BMWP), there is evidence that many collaboratives in the network are already incorporating equitable youth practices around meaning-making and healing from trauma.

“...equity is what frames all of the work that we do.”