Many Paths Forward: The Systems Change Journeys of Opportunity Youth Forum Collaboratives (2019-2022)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the past decade, Equal Measure has served as the learning and evaluation partner for the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) and its Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF). To support the network's learning, Equal Measure conducts an annual assessment focusing on collaboratives' values, capacities, and engagement in systems change. 2022 marked the fourth year of implementing the current assessment strategy, which consists of both a self-assessment and reflection interviews with collaborative leaders.

In this year's report, we look, as we have in previous years, at the story of annual systems change engagement collaboratives shared with us through their data. In addition to the 2022 snapshot, we sought to understand the arc of systems change work. **What are the trends over time? And what can we infer from those trends about how community-led systems change occurs?**

> **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.

Changes in the OYF Network Over Time, 2019-2022

The OYF network has grown significantly over the last four years from 27 collaboratives in 2019 to 43 collaboratives in 2022 – a 59% increase (Figure 1). As the network has expanded, its characteristics, the communities served, and the backbone organizations that coordinate the OY (Opportunity Youth) efforts have also shifted. Based on self-assessment data, over time, the number of sites who serve rural areas has increased (from 17% in 2019 to 23% in 2022). This is due to the FCS's concerted effort to diversify the network and include collaboratives in rural and tribal areas. Because of this, the years of experience in the network with OY efforts decreased over time (more collaboratives and backbones had fewer than 5 years of experience with OY efforts). These changes have implications for assessing collaborative capacity and systems change trends at the network level.

FIGURE 1. **MAP OF THE OYF NETWORK IN 2022**

BUILDING COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY, 2019-2022

Each year, collaboratives have rated their capacity, or the structures, processes, and resources needed for cross-sector collaboration and systems change work. Across the network, **collaborative capacity dipped in 2020, rebounded in 2021 and remained fairly steady in 2022** (Figure 2). Almost half of the capacity indicators (48%) were strongly evident in OYF collaboratives in 2022, the highest level in four years — although with continued room for development and growth of vital capacities in the collaboratives.

Year-to-year fluctuations in collaborative capacity at the network level are likely due to a few factors. The composition of the network changed as new collaboratives joined the network, and occasionally, collaboratives stepped back as they underwent transitions. For example, the number of collaboratives in the network (who completed the assessment) grew from 23 in 2019 to 33 in 2020 – a period of significant network expansion. Since newer collaboratives generally have lower capacity, it is not surprising to see a dip across the network in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic also influenced collaborative priorities, partnerships, and implementation. The growth in capacity from 2019 to 2022 is also likely due to continued support and technical assistance from FCS and its partners, particularly the focus on building data capacity.

FIGURE 2. **NETWORK CAPACITY SCORES BY YEAR**

% of capacity indicators across the OYF Network showing
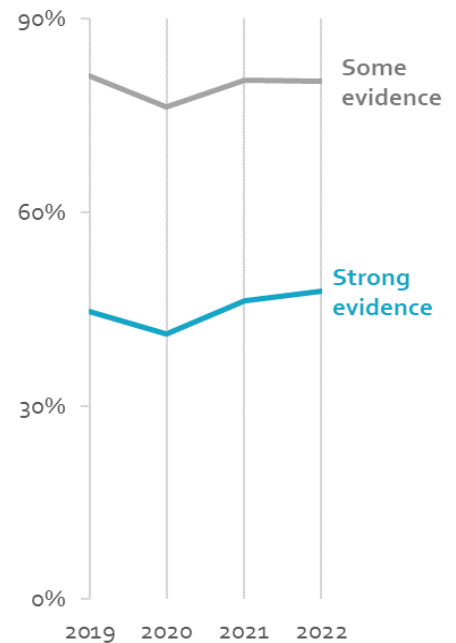
CHANGING SYSTEMS, 2019-2022

Each year, the collaboratives assessed the state of systems in their communities – namely, shifts in public policies at different levels, availability of public and private funding for opportunity youth, using data across systems, narratives about opportunity youth and public awareness, and education to career pathway alignment and scaling. From 2019 to 2022, **systems change in the OYF network has been steady,** even as new collaboratives joined the network. Systems change in the network was steady from 2019 to 2020, increased in 2021, and then declined in 2022 (Figure 3). Overall, systems change stayed the same from 2019 to 2022 with about one-third of indicators (31%) strongly present in communities.

As with capacity, year-over-year fluctuations in systems changes can be influenced by the composition of the network, which has changed over time. Collaboratives may choose to focus only on certain types of systems change. In addition, the context of the community is a significant factor in the ability to make changes; for example, we've consistently seen established urban communities with higher systems change scores than newer or rural collaboratives.

FIGURE 3. **NETWORK SYSTEMS CHANGE SCORES BY YEAR**

% of systems change indicators across the OYF Network showing
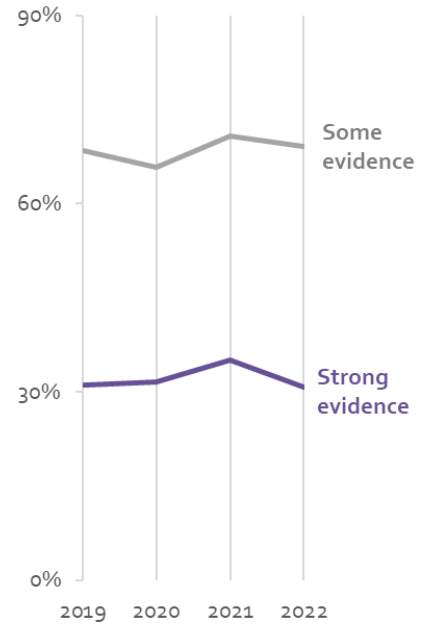
Collaboratives' Systems Change Journeys 2019-2022

Trends at the network level tell the broad story of systems change for a diverse and changing group of OY collaboratives over time. Looking at how *individual* collaboratives begin to shift systems over several years as part of the OYF network provides a more nuanced story of the different types of paths collaboratives take to changing systems to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. **Overall, there is no one common journey towards systems change for collaboratives in the OYF network.** Among collaboratives with at least three years of self-assessment data, 14 of 25 collaboratives (56%) improved systems change from 2019 to 2022. However, the year-to-year journeys were varied, with the majority of collaboratives experiencing some variation of "ups and downs" (growth and declines) over time, such as a zigzag pattern, u-shape pattern, or growth followed by decline.

Steady growth. About a quarter of collaboratives (24%, 6 collaboratives) demonstrated steady growth in systems changes in their communities, indicating that for some, there is a more linear progression in the work and community impact.

Zigzag. Slightly more than a quarter of collaboratives (28%, 7 collaboratives) exhibited a "zigzag" pattern of systems change scores, with yearly changes from 2019 to 2022.

U-shape. About a quarter of collaboratives (24%, 6 collaboratives) followed a "u-shape" pattern of declines, followed by rebounds or a period of growth.

Growth, then decline in 2022. 16% of collaboratives (4 collaboratives) showed growth over three years and then a decline in 2022, likely due to significant internal staff transitions and funding challenges.
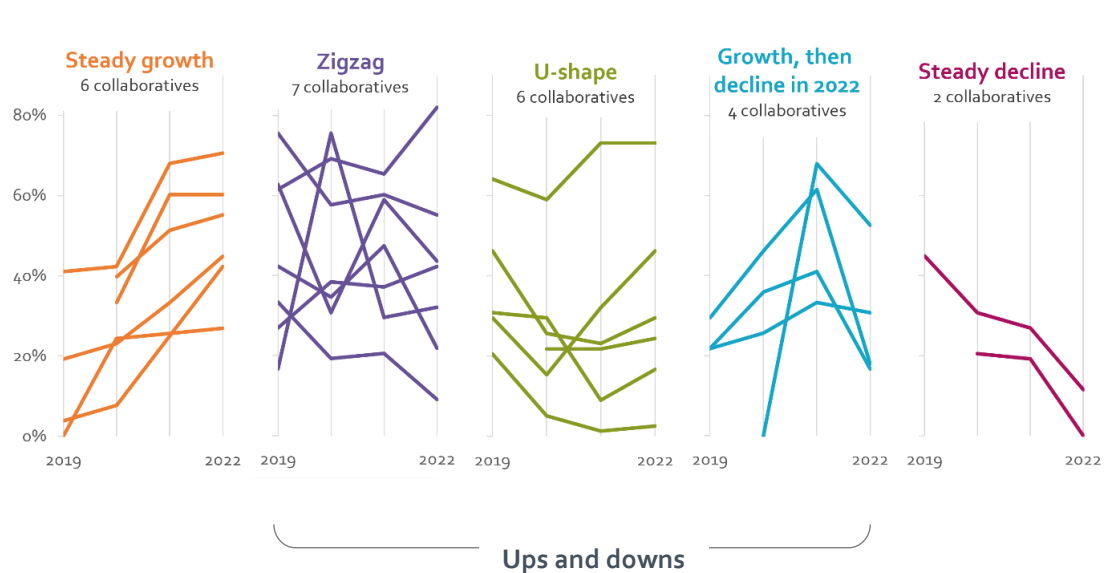
Ups and downs (68%, 17/25 collaboratives)

Steady declines. Only 8% of collaboratives (2 collaboratives) had steady declines in systems change over the three-to-four-year period.

FIGURE 4. **COLLABORATIVES' SYSTEMS CHANGE JOURNEYS, 2019-2022**

% of systems change indicators by OYF collaborative that show **strong evidence**

The range of patterns in systems change scores over time demonstrates that systems change work is not a direct and linear process (Figure 4)*.* Even collaboratives that consistently demonstrate high systems change scores experience ups and downs. All types of collaboratives were found across these five journeys – established urban collaboratives, rural communities, and collaboratives with different types of backbone organizations. For the four collaboratives that experienced growth from 2019 to 2021 followed by a sharp decline in 2002, there seemed to be a significant transition or precipitating factor(s) in that decline, such as a leadership transition or financial instability.

The variety of journeys suggests that many factors can influence a collaborative and a community's ability to shift their local systems in the short-term. Furthermore, collaboratives may intentionally pause their systems change work to prioritize the immediate needs of the community, such as during COVID or other emergencies such as climate disasters.

Understanding the factors that contribute to growth over time, as well as what factors influence backslides, can help us better understand the complex systems change journeys of collaboratives as they aim to change local systems that serve opportunity youth and other young people.

WHAT HELPS ADVANCE AND ACCELERATE SYSTEMS CHANGE AMONG OYF COLLABORATIVES?

Despite the potential for roadblocks to emerge and the fits and starts of systems change, many OYF collaboratives have been able to maintain and improve systems change progress over the years. Through interviews conducted with OYF site leaders, we categorized a set of strategies collaboratives have used to help maintain momentum on their systems change pursuits, "weathering the storm" through the conditions and contexts that can impede progress. These strategies include:

➢ **Shifting public narratives and dispositions on opportunity youth to sustain systems change.** Collaboratives strive to ensure system actors (and their institutions) are brought along with the need for changes in systems and understand why it helps opportunity youth.

➢ **Building relationships to maintain momentum.** Relationships are often key to building coalitions and movements, helping gain the attention of the public, funders, and policy makers.

➢ **Engaging young people as systems change advocates.** Collaboratives seek to both include young people in their advocacy work and develop young people's skills to shape and share their own story.

➢ **Leveraging data to jumpstart systems change.** Over the last decade, FCS has prioritized (through technical assistance, investment, and convening) data capacity and data use by collaboratives. Collaboratives continue to elevate data as a support and enabler of their systems change efforts.

FIGURE 5: **ACCELERANTS AND BARRIERS TO SYSTEMS CHANGE**
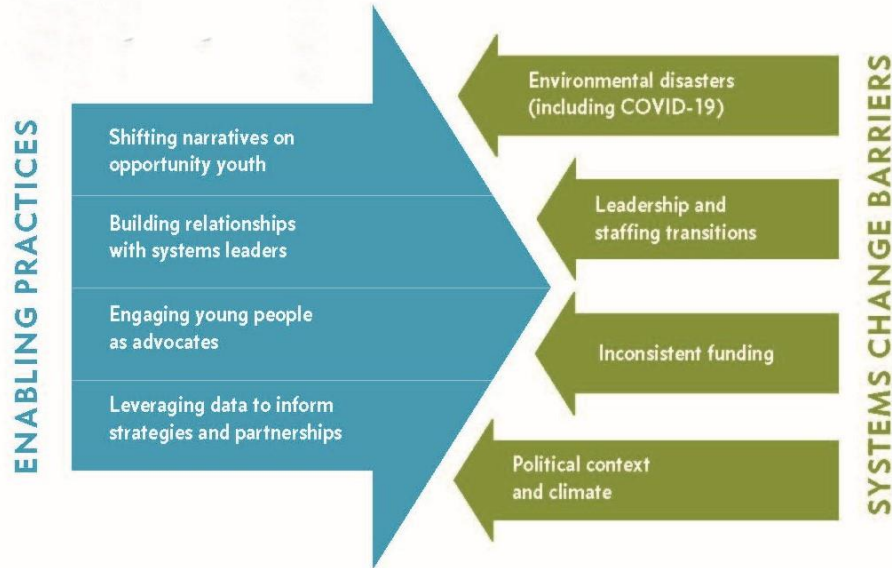
WHY IS THE WORK HARD TO MAINTAIN?

Collaboratives working to change systems navigate the ebbs and flows of changing social and political climates. Embracing this complexity means acknowledging that all collaboratives, no matter how well prepared, hit stumbling blocks. As we dug more deeply into collaboratives' experiences over the past four years, we found much to learn from investigating setbacks to changing systems. Four interconnected challenges posed the most issues for collaboratives:

➢ **The impact of COVID and natural disasters.** COVID had both immediate and long-term impacts on collaboratives' systems change work, including enduring impacts on youth disconnection, the political climate, resource distribution, and leadership and staff turnover which delayed partnership efforts. Natural disasters also divert attention from long-term systems change work toward the immediate needs of the community.

➢ **Leadership, staffing, and backbone transitions.** Staff turnover, leadership transitions, and shifts in who provides backbone support for the collaborative can all disrupt systems change work.

➢ **Funding and resources.** Though some collaboratives were able to take advantage of time-limited COVID-related funding over the past few years, funding and resource scarcity continues to impact all facets of a collaborative's work. Collaboratives mentioned the need for backbone support, the challenges navigating programmatic funding restrictions and timelines, and the strong desire for meaningful youth inclusion supported by stipends.

➢ **Political context and climate.** All OYF collaboratives ground their efforts in the local political, economic, and social realities of their communities. Challenges can emerge and impede progress such as system administration changes in local government and school districts, as well as the local political climate influencing narratives about opportunity youth, particularly related to racial and gender equity.

OYF communities' systems change journeys are as varied and diverse as the network itself. Systems change work, by its nature, is complicated. It responds to local and national politics. It reacts to shifts and transitions in relationships and leadership. It speeds up and slows down with shifts in the public's interests and discourse. Importantly, these journeys are neither linear nor predictable.

Short-term (i.e., annual) advances and declines are typical in systems change efforts and should be expected for complex, multi-actor, multi-step processes. And while we can learn about these efforts, including what facilitates and stalls changes in the short term, we should consider a longer-term window for understanding their progress and success.