

BUILDING YOUTH VOICE FOR YOUTH POWER IN THE DMV

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD
CREATED BY MOVEMENT MATTERS FOR THE MEYER FOUNDATION



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**PREPARED & PRESENTED
BY MOVEMENT MATTERS**

For the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation

Founded in 1944 by Washington Post publisher Eugene Meyer and his wife, author and social activist Agnes Ernst Meyer, the Meyer Foundation pursues and invests in solutions that build an equitable Greater Washington community in which economically disadvantaged people thrive.

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OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

In the early 2000s, a national intermediary called Listen Inc. had an earmarked project to grow youth organizing in the District. Several youth workers received training in youth organizing and a limited number of projects received funding, incubation, and technical support. This investment led to an uptick in youth organizing activity through the mid-late 2000s, most notably by the Youth Action Research Group (YARG) in Columbia Heights and the Youth Education Alliance (YEA) in Anacostia. Several other groups began to adopt strategies along the youth voice spectrum, ranging from youth leadership development to action research projects, even if they did not invest fully in a youth organizing model. Most of this growth, however, was limited to the District, with little established youth voice work being developed in the broader region. The most notable exception being the youth organizing activities of Tenants and Workers United, which predated efforts in the District by several years.

Though youth organizing activity in the District flourished while incubated under a larger organization, groups like YARG and YEA struggled to develop the necessary support and infrastructure as they transitioned to independent non-profits. Both are currently defunct and there was little continuity of effort, institutional knowledge, etc. to other organizations as they closed. Other groups like Asian American LEAD and Young Women's Project, which also took steps toward youth organizing in the 2000s have shifted back toward youth service models as the result of institutional and funding pressures.

Despite this history, youth voice work, defined by youth engagement strategies that move beyond service provision or "traditional" youth development, is in an early stage of growth in the Washington, DC Metropolitan Area¹. Regional organizations, with a few exceptions, have not yet attained either the capacity or scale to integrate approaches and strategies that create significant racial equity and systems change impacts as a result of youth leadership and action. Neither have they yet integrated an "ecosystem" model that would allow groups to network across approaches to achieve greater collective results.

DMV refers to the Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia Metropolitan Area.

¹ For the purposes of this report, the Metropolitan Area includes Montgomery and Prince George's Counties in Maryland, the District itself, and the City of Alexandria, Fairfax County, and Prince William County in Virginia.

Much of this work is “early stage” due to the relatively short amount of time most current organizations have been doing youth voice work, the persistence of a youth services/development frame as the dominant narrative for the nonprofit sector, and a relative lack of resources to support youth voice work.

With this in mind, however, there are some best practices and work in this area at both the individual organization and collaborative levels that point to exciting possibilities for the growth of youth voice in the region.

APPROACHES TO YOUTH WORK

As we report on the results of our youth voice scan, it is important to begin with Movement Matters’ framework/categorization of the work in this field. For the purposes of this report, we identify four approaches to youth work: Youth Services/Development, Youth Leadership Development, Youth (Civic) Engagement, and Youth Organizing. These approaches exist on a spectrum of youth voice, with Youth Services/Development on the low end of the spectrum and Youth Organizing on the high end. It is important to note that these distinctions are not always pure; organizations at the higher end of the spectrum often integrate practices from the lower end. This can also be true in the reverse, though it is less common and usually involves a program that is higher on the spectrum being housed at a larger organization whose primary approach is Youth Services/Development.

Additionally, it is important to note that this spectrum is not meant to diminish any approach to youth work, but rather to understand each within the context of youth voice. Though Youth Services/Development groups place on the low end of this spectrum, these approaches can still be important parts of the ecosystem. Their placement on the spectrum simply means that they are not directly developing youth voices and youth power.

Table 1 below offers a brief comparison of key elements of the approaches of organizations along this spectrum. *Appendix A* offers more detailed descriptions of each approach.

TABLE 1: Movement Matters Youth Voice Framework²

	Youth Service/Youth Development	Youth Leadership Development	Youth (Civic) Engagement	Youth Organizing
Role of Young People	Passive Clients	Passive Students	Active Leaders	Active Leaders
Asset or Deficit-Based	Deficit	Both	Asset	Asset
Level of Change	Individual	Individual	Individual and Structural	Individual and Structural
Engagement Structure	Limited to “Service Intervention” or Cohort Participation	Limited to Curriculum Completion	Limited to Cohort Participation	Open Membership
Relationship to Power Structures	Ignores/Ambivalent	Accepts	Accepts	Challenges

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Our youth scan included interviews with 18 regional organizations that we identified as likely to be engaged in youth voice work (a listing of these organizations can be found in *Appendix B*). There were a multitude of organizations we did not approach or interview because we knew their focus to be strictly Youth Service/Development. Lastly, we identified approximately five additional organizations, primarily in Prince George’s County, that we researched from afar. Using the internet, foundation contacts, and information from other organizations, we identified that these groups fit squarely in the Youth Services category and therefore we did not interview them directly. However, because of the relative lack of youth voice organizations we were able to identify in Prince George’s County, we still spent the time to learn about these groups to better understand the dynamics in the region.

² For the purposes of this report we condensed some categories (i.e. combining Youth Service and Youth Development) to maintain a focus on Youth Voice.

Of the organizations we interviewed, one had programming throughout the Metropolitan region and one engaged in multiple jurisdictions in Northern Virginia. Of those who had a single jurisdiction focus, ten work exclusively in DC, two in Montgomery County, two in Fairfax County, one in Prince George's County and one in Prince William County. Two of these organizations (one in DC, one in Prince George's County) do not currently engage in youth work³; an additional organization in Montgomery County is developing a new program approach that will incorporate Youth (Civic) Engagement in their broader Youth Services work.

As seen in *Graph 1* on page 9, five of the groups we interviewed fall within the Youth Services/Development category, though three have elements of their work that move into Youth Leadership Development. The DC based group who is no longer funded to do youth work also fell within the Service/Development range with some Leadership Development mixed in. It is important to recognize that nearly one-third of all groups we interviewed fell primarily into the Youth Services/Development model despite our efforts to identify groups that were further along the youth voice spectrum. The approach is pervasive even among "non-traditional" youth groups.

Four groups fell primarily in the Youth Leadership Development category, with two of them also leaning toward Youth (Civic) Engagement. Another four are primarily Youth (Civic) Engagement, though two of these groups straddle the line between Engagement and Organizing. The final three groups are rooted in Youth Organizing, along with the Prince George's County group that is not currently engaging youth.

In addition to having the fewest number of organizations that we could identify as doing more advanced youth voice work, Prince William and Prince George's Counties also seem to have the least robust nonprofit sectors. Our research suggests that much of the funding for nonprofit work in these counties comes directly from the government, pushing organizations into a Youth Services/Development model and limiting the ability to engage youth in systems change work that might challenge government practices, policies, and

³ One of these organizations focuses on community organizing with adults but has not yet developed the capacity to engage youth as deeply and intentionally as it would like. Another engaged in Youth Services/Development work (with some Leadership Development) in the past, but no longer has funding to support this work.

decisions. Though this dynamic is true in other jurisdictions as well, the City of Alexandria, Fairfax, and Montgomery County seem to have incrementally more support outside of government funds and the District has a well-developed philanthropic sector that allows some groups to move beyond government funding.

ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND CAPACITY

STRENGTHS

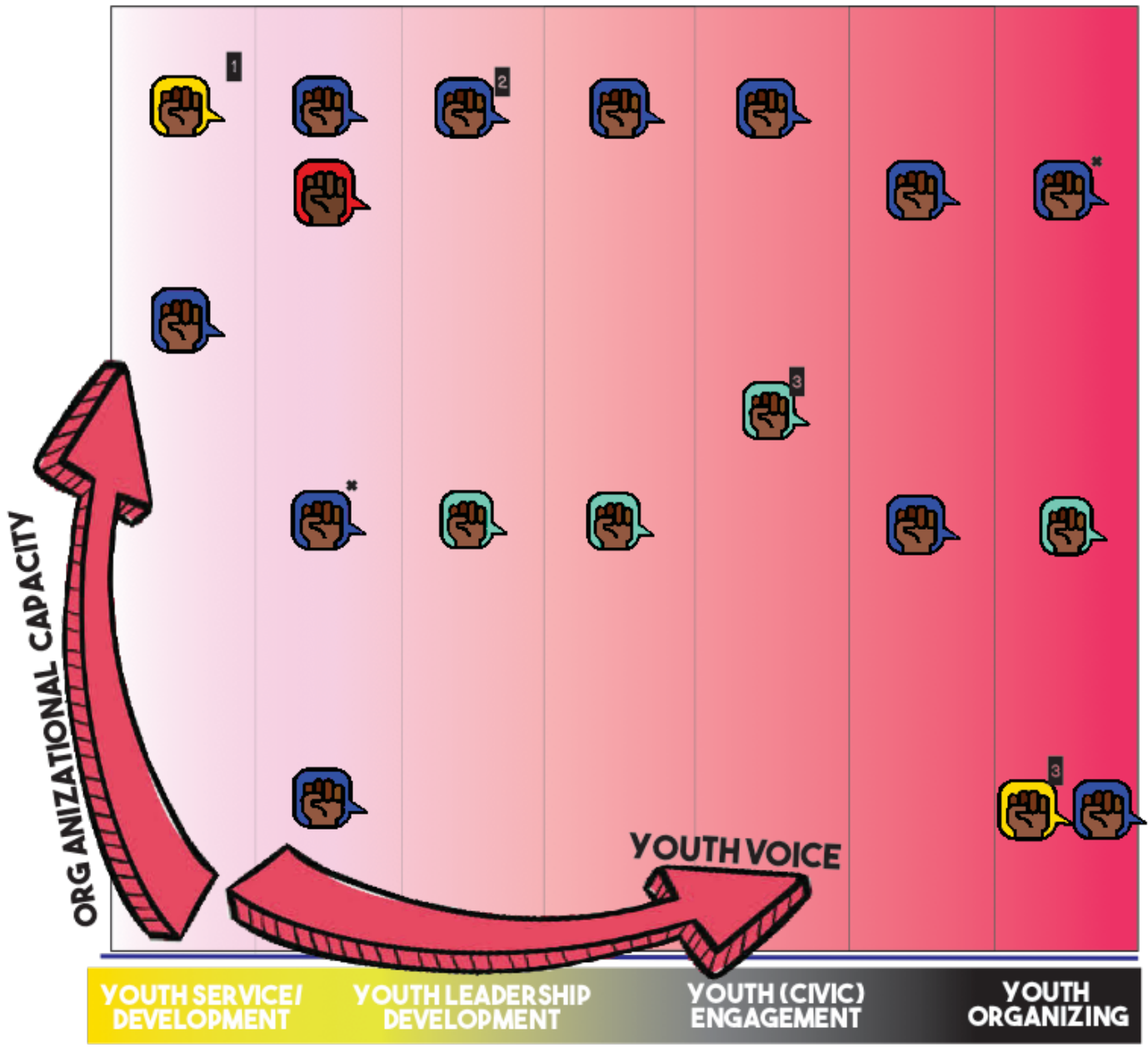
The information presented above simply addresses the lens through which organizations approach their work. It is also important to have a sense of organizational capacity within their approach.

As seen in *Graph 1* on the following page below, most of the interviewed groups that operate from a Youth Services/Development perspective have a deeper level of support, capacity, and infrastructure than groups higher on the youth voice spectrum. With notable exceptions⁴, these groups had larger staff sizes and budgets, longer organizational history, and more developed systems. In many ways, the higher on the youth voice spectrum, the smaller the organization and the more limited its reach. Scalability and stability for Youth (Civic) Engagement and Youth Organizing programs and organizations remain challenges. This fact reinforces the idea that the nonprofit sector (including philanthropy) has relied on a Youth Services/Development model as its preferred method of intervention.

Even within this context of more limited organizational capacity higher on the youth voice spectrum, several key strengths emerged:

⁴ There are obviously many Youth Service/Development groups that operate on a shoestring, including one of the groups that we interviewed for this scan.

GRAPH 1 : Youth Work in the DMV



KEY

- 1 DEVELOPING NEW PROGRAM AREA THAT WILL SHIFT WORK
- 2 SPECIFIC PROGRAM IN A LARGER YOUTH SERVICE ORG
- 3 WORKING MORE W/ RELATIVELY PRIVILEGED/ "COLLEGE-BOUND" YOUTH
- * NOT CURRENTLY DOING YOUTH WORK

- MARYLAND
- VIRGINIA
- WASHINGTON, DC
- ALL DMV

DEEP ENGAGEMENT

The majority of groups that we interviewed have a deep level of engagement with their youth, both in terms of the amount of contact (frequency) they have with youth while they are engaged with the organization and the amount of time (length) that youth stay connected with the group.

One of the more intensive levels of engagement in terms of longevity is from a group that straddles Youth (Civic) Engagement and Youth Organizing. This organization's model actively plans for involvement of the same young people from middle through high school. Other groups, while not as intentional about creating this length of engagement, see high levels of continued participation that spans multiple years, usually while young people are in high school. Groups structured this multi-year engagement either as a formal cohort model (the same group of young people moving through the program together, with limited access points for new youth to join) or through retention of youth members in a more open membership (a more permeable approach in which young people can join the organization on an ongoing basis). All of these groups have young people engaging with the organization on at least a weekly basis.

This longer-term participation allows for young people to grow and develop skills within the organization and take on new leadership roles with other young people. Additionally, it allows for young people to develop more sophisticated understanding and analysis of racial equity and systems change work through a youth lens/perspective.

This deep level of engagement also sets the stage for youth voice organizations to expand their membership base and develop more refined power building strategies. Though groups have not fully optimized these possibilities and need growth in these areas (see below), the deep levels of engagement that currently exist provide a strong platform upon which organizations can build to achieve greater systems change impact.

ADDRESSING YOUTH NEEDS / TRAUMA INFORMED ENGAGEMENT

Almost every group we interviewed discussed the importance of meeting youth where they are, not only in terms of their understanding of youth voice work, but also in terms of their needs within society. Every group took steps to address the whole young person, not just the part of the young person that intersected with the organization's work/issues. These efforts looked different depending on the group, ranging from explicitly providing services (even in non-service groups), doing "case management light" as a byproduct of their engagement with young people, or developing a network of resources that they rely on to help youth with academic, emotional, or economic needs. Our interviews clearly demonstrated that organizations feel this support is critical to be able to keep young people engaged in their work.

Several of the groups utilize a youth centered or trauma informed approach to address youth needs (again, groups across the youth voice spectrum engaged in these kind of activities, not just service groups). This approach centers the young person as the driver of any intervention (relying heavily on consent) and looks at the whole system that impacts the young person, not just the "presenting issue". In this way, a trauma informed approach fits very squarely within a racial equity frame, as it helps identify the systems of oppression that are causing trauma, instead of looking at youth behavior as the problem.

We discuss later the importance of having clear systems/approaches for managing these responsibilities to insure that they do not supersede or limit the capacity for groups to move deeper into youth voice work. However, recognizing the need for this engagement and the successful ways it is being done is an important step in this process.

CONDUCTING RESEARCH / INTEGRATING INFORMATION

Groups at the upper end of the youth voice spectrum frequently referred to the value of their integration of youth led research or youth led analysis of existing bodies of research. This research work was identified as critical in grounding and reinforcing young people's experiences, creating more systemic and

effective youth-developed solutions, and increasing the ownership youth have over the solutions that they propose.

The development and analysis of research also intersected with groups' approach to racial equity. As young people conducted or analyzed research on issues such as school policies and police interactions, they intentionally evaluated the research with a racial lens, noting disproportionate impact on young people of color as a consistent trend and grounding solutions in a racial equity frame.

CHALLENGES

As identified above, groups engaged in youth voice work in the region are drawing on some important strengths in their approach. However, the relatively short tenure of youth voice approaches and the infrastructure challenges that play out throughout the region and across the spectrum also create some significant areas of needed growth. This growth is critical to developing a robust sector in which young people of color are taking the lead in changing the policies, practices, and impacts of regional systems that influence young people and their communities. The major growth areas that emerged from our interviews include:

BUILDING POWER

With a couple of notable exceptions, even groups high on the youth voice spectrum struggled to articulate a strong strategy for developing youth power that holds decision makers accountable. Many of these groups use metrics related to access when discussing how they make change. While access is better than no access, it does not mean that decision-makers will take young people's views into account. In fact, several groups acknowledged that decision-makers are happy to meet with them to get "youth perspective" on issues, but that these encounters can often be tokenistic and do not necessarily lead to action in line with what young people articulate.

Getting access to decision-makers on their terms (often referred to as "insider tactics" like private meetings and testifying at hearings) is often a new experience for young people who, by and large, are left out of existing mechanisms of participation. This can lead to the sense that participating in the "sanctioned" mechanisms of decision-making will lead to more youth-informed

decisions and an increase in youth voice. While this may be true for less controversial, less systemic, and more surface-level decisions, simple access to the system (while an improvement) does not by itself yield accountability or power.

Most of the groups we interviewed are still working toward a definition of power and an understanding of how to build it beyond “access”. This development of power will need to involve “outsider” tactics (e.g. direct action) in addition to the “insider” approaches just discussed. This is a fundamental shift for groups in the Youth Leadership Development and Youth (Civic) Engagement models. But even for Youth Organizing groups in the region, understanding how to build power and accountability for young people is a challenge, especially when it may lead to some loss of insider access, which many groups value.

Another complicating factor when discussing access is the degree to which most of the organizations we interviewed rely on the school system for some level of access to students, classrooms, or space for programming/engagement. Deepening an approach that builds youth power to create change in the school system often involves contentious relationships with school officials. Because most of the organizations we interviewed rely to some degree on a positive relationship with the school, engaging in these kinds of tactics can be difficult.

This same dynamic also exists for groups that receive government funding. Most of the organizations we interviewed on the lower end of the youth voice spectrum receive government funding as a key part of their income. As noted earlier, this is one of the reasons that groups that engage in strategies like Youth Leadership Development might not move into a more active systems change focus. For the smaller organizations at the higher end of the spectrum, school access or an underdeveloped power analysis are more pertinent challenges than risking government funding.

Lastly, and discussed more in detail below, the lack of broad membership bases for almost all of the organizations that we interviewed creates an additional barrier to developing power-based strategies that rely on “outsider” tactics. Building outside power relies on a combination of numbers and strategy. Limited membership therefore limits the potential for building power. There is some emerging coalition work across organizations in DC that may help address the numbers issue, as well as give individual organizations some cover to preserve key relationships or funding even as decision-makers are more directly

challenged. However, this cross-organizational work is only present in DC and is still in its nascent stages, not yet able to meaningfully address these concerns.

MEMBERSHIP STRUCTURE AND SCALE

As articulated above, youth voice organizations in the region maintain deep relationships with the young people associated with their programs. The corollary of this approach, however, is often a limit on the breadth and scale of the number of young people they can involve. This issue is particularly prevalent for groups that utilize a cohort model that closes participation after the initial group of young people is engaged. The need to provide some level of individual youth mentoring or “case management light” was also cited by organizations higher on the youth voice spectrum as a limitation on their ability to scale up the number of young people they are engaging. Given the need for most marginalized communities to build power through a numbers based strategy, these limitations have proven a challenge for groups to build power behind their youth voice.

Groups are experimenting with various ways to tweak their membership and engagement structures to be able to address this need, though they also want to make sure that broader engagement does not detract from the depth of engagement that defines their programs. Some approaches that may allow groups to balance the individual needs of young people with the need to build a broader membership include:

- ⊙ Building a network of trusted service-based organizations to which the group can make referrals;
- ⊙ Developing non-staff intensive ways of addressing individual student needs, allowing staff to put more focus on youth voice activities (see example below);
- ⊙ (As indicated above) developing coalition-based strategies to achieve numbers when needed, even as individual organizations continue to have restricted reach.

OPERATIONALIZING (INDIVIDUAL) YOUTH SUPPORT

One of the youth organizing groups included in this scan has developed a unique approach to meeting the academic and emotional needs of their youth members. Their approach not only offers their youth members this type of support, but also uses this support as a vehicle for attracting new young people to the organization.

This organization has regular membership meetings for their youth on a bi-weekly basis, with some additional school-based meetings. While these meetings include relationship building activities and student check-ins, they are primarily focused on the analysis and planning that go into identifying issues and developing campaigns. Youth may process their traumatic experiences with school discipline policies or security officers, but these experiences are processed through a lens of collective action; they are not a space in which the organizer and youth leaders focus on the individual needs of students.

However, on a weekly basis, the organization hosts a “homework help” session for youth. In this space, young people can come get help with homework (as the name suggests), college or financial aid applications, resume development, etc. They also can get mentoring support from adults in the room on “non school” related issues that they may be facing.

This club is open and advertised to all students, not just youth members of the organization. Several youth members of the organization entered through the homework help sessions, learning about the organizing work through their participation in the tutoring and mentoring.

While this approach is a much lighter touch than some of the groups that we interviewed who are more steeped in a trauma informed approach, it allows this organization to meet many of their students’ needs that otherwise would prevent them from being involved as youth leaders.

Lastly, in term of infrastructure and capacity, this model allows for the individual needs of the students to be met without having a paralyzing impact on the time/capacity of the organizing staff. Though the organizer is responsible for coordinating the homework help sessions, the actual support is provided by

trained adult volunteers. In this way, an up-front investment of time creates a system that runs with a limited amount of oversight from the organizer, allowing her to focus on growing the membership, engaging young people in campaigns, and developing with young people the strategy they need to move their issues.

A final challenge that several groups face in the expansion of their reach is an organizational value on providing stipends to participating youth, especially those youth who are already shouldering economic responsibilities within their households. A financial incentive for participation or a monetary valuation of young people's time creates a budget limitation on the number of young people an organization can engage. Groups have a variety of responses to this challenge, ranging from accepting participation limitations to actively fundraising to increase the number of available stipends to creating more limited paid opportunities for "advanced" youth positions while maintaining a larger base of unpaid members.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND FUNDING

As indicated in various places throughout this report, individual organizations and the youth voice approach in general struggle with adequate resources and infrastructure. This struggle is uneven; several organizations have reached a level of maturity and stability, while many operate on a "day-to-day" basis. And, as described above, the amount of philanthropic and capacity building support for organizations diminishes the further away from the District they operate.

Even for youth voice groups that are higher in organizational capacity, issues such as annual funding cycles and emerging infrastructure challenges (e.g. HR policies and procedures, staff retention) can be a challenge. As seen in the District's youth organizing history, if organizations build effective work but then cease to exist, very little progress is actually achieved. While there is a clear need to continue to develop programmatic capacity, this cannot be done without building individual and shared systems for supporting organizational health and stability.

RACIAL EQUITY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

The strengths and challenges identified above also help to set the stage for how to view youth voice work through the lenses of racial equity and systems change. As with the general approaches to youth voice work, the region is uneven in its understanding and integration of racial equity and systems change. With some notable exceptions, even groups who understand the applications are not yet highly skilled at integrating a racial equity and/or systems change approach into their youth voice work. We provide more specific information and examples below.

RACIAL EQUITY

Several groups that we interviewed are still learning about a racial equity approach and how it applies to their work. For example, they articulate that race is an important factor in the lives of the young people with whom they work, but haven't necessarily developed a clear understanding of how their internal processes and external work address racial inequity. They did not seem to have clear approaches to identify, analyze, and address the individual thoughts/beliefs, interpersonal interactions, and systemic manifestations of racism and white supremacy. Some groups, on the other hand, were clearly describing racial equity practices when talking about their work, but didn't necessarily have the language to fully articulate it within a racial equity frame.

Another regional aspect of racial equity is the application of the frame beyond a Black-White paradigm. For many groups in DC, discussion of racial equity immediately fell into this binary. While the African-American experience in the United States is central to an understanding of racism, groups also need to be able to articulate and understand how the histories and experiences of non-Black people of color fit into a racial equity paradigm. Groups outside of the District were more adept at articulating a racial equity frame that addresses anti-Blackness while also incorporating the experiences of immigrant and US-born Latinx and Asian communities. This greater capacity is, in large part, due to the migration histories in the region over the last 20 years that have seen a rapid growth of immigrant and US-born Latinx and Asian communities in the inner (and more recently outer) ring suburbs.

A large number of the groups we interviewed are incorporating some level of racial equity into their internal organizational practices. Systems for recruitment and hiring of new employees, ongoing staff training, and other internal systems are intentionally linked to racial representation and anti-racist approaches. Similarly, these organizations insure that their leadership racially reflects the communities that they serve. But not all are there yet, nor have all of the groups we interviewed adopted these types of internal racial equity goals. Many organizations maintain a majority white staff and culture, especially at the leadership and board level. While each group that has majority white leadership identified it as something they would like to change, very few articulated a concrete plan for doing so.

As an added layer, several of the groups whose leadership is racially reflective of their youth acknowledged in our interviews a class difference between organizational leadership and the young people with whom they work. Lastly, none of the groups that we interviewed had a majority of youth on their board; most of them had no youth representation whatsoever.

In terms of incorporating racial equity into programmatic work, groups focused on the lower end of the youth voice spectrum seemed to translate racial equity into providing culturally sensitive services for young people of color, recognizing that their needs are different from those of white youth. Within a racial equity context, this seems to mean providing resources that young people need to be protected from/resilient to the effects of interpersonal prejudice and structural racism (filling in the gaps that racism causes in their schools, communities, etc. or helping young people develop coping mechanisms to the harm done by a racist system). While important, a sole focus on individual young people doesn't shift the practice of racism at either the individual or structural level. So while racial equity considerations are taken into account in terms of the supports offered, the long-term impact to achieve racial equity is limited.

Groups working in the middle of the youth voice spectrum saw the individual support of young people as having more of a ripple effect toward racial equity. For these groups, young people of color taking on leadership roles actively challenges racism at the individual level. Young people of color communicating about substantive issues, especially when doing so in their "natural" modes of communication and dress, serves as an antidote for the implicit bias that the adults may have (see example below for more detail).

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF ADDRESSING IMPLICIT BIAS

One of the organizations interviewed for this scan has recognized that the individual implicit bias of “powered people” within a system is a factor in that system producing racially disparate and inequitable results. Being rooted in a Youth (Civic) Engagement model, a key part of this organization’s approach is helping youth do the research and preparation to take an equal and lead role in conversations with principals and administrators to discuss issues in the school

Though this organization has seen some incremental change at the policy and practice level, they have also integrated another component into their racial equity theory of change. As this organization creates spaces in which young people engage as leaders with decision-makers, they have found that the decision-makers begin to shift their view of these young people. This shift begins to erode the implicit bias that these decision-makers have of these youth and, by extension, other Black youth like them. This process is further oriented towards addressing implicit bias because the organization does not encourage/require youth to change the way they speak or dress when engaging with decision-makers. In other words, youth do not have to change their identity to become leaders, and decision-makers are confronted with the idea that “problematic” youth may be more nuanced and less problematic than they originally thought.

This approach rests on the idea that eroding the implicit bias of these powered individuals will cause them to be less likely to identify similar youth as “bad kids”, thereby decreasing the likelihood that Black students will be disproportionately disciplined and, eventually, disconnected from the school. In this way, the organization has identified systemic change outcomes from individual level interventions.

This approach is clearly grounded in an understanding and application of racial equity. It also mandates that organizations identify ways to verify that this change in implicit bias is happening, if it lasts, and if it creates changes in the way that these decision-makers utilize their power over students of color in their schools.

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Contrasted to racial equity, the majority of the groups we interviewed demonstrated a firmer theoretical understanding of systems change. However, this understanding does not necessarily translate into an adoption of strategies and approaches that create systems change outcomes. Additionally, groups at the lowest end of the youth voice spectrum did not engage at the systems change level, seeing themselves more as a remedy to systemic shortcomings rather than a locus for stopping them.

Groups in the middle of the spectrum do see themselves as moving towards systems change, though their approach limits the likelihood of deep transformation. Helping young people develop leadership and advocacy skills to engage in existing structures for change (e.g. public hearings) does provide some of the building blocks for systems change work. However, by themselves, these steps will not produce deep systems change outcomes. Skills and participation alone are only likely to result in small scale, “low hanging fruit” changes to the system.

Many groups acknowledged that their leadership development and engagement models have created small changes in policy or practice, but have not gotten to the core issues that shape life outcomes for young people. For example, the youth of one organization were successful in getting feminine hygiene products available for free in girls’ bathrooms. While this is an important step in the day-to-day experience of students and their ability to focus at school, it does not significantly impact the achievement gap or the criminalization of young people in the school system (two systemic issues echoed by multiple groups whose work is focused in the education arena). Without a more robust understanding of power and systems for developing it, youth voice work is easily sidelined and relegated to superficial changes that do not get to the root causes of injustice and oppression.

As identified above, even for the groups in our scan who operate more in the youth organizing arena, a major gap in the landscape was a clear orientation, theory, and practice about how to build power and hold decision makers accountable. The access and positive reinforcement offered to youth (and the organizations that engage them) who are seeking to make systemic change can often feel, in and of itself, like progress. However, this treatment absent a commitment to enact young people’s suggestions/demands can actually detract

from a sense of urgency around creating campaigns that build youth voice and power. With a couple of exceptions (one of which is highlighted below), the groups we interviewed have not yet moved beyond this quandary to integrate “outsider strategies” that would allow them to achieve deep systems change impacts.

In addition to the challenge of identifying strategies to implement systems change approaches, many groups also have not yet identified transformational systems-wide demands. As articulated above, some organizations have focused on lower-impact (though more attainable) changes. Others have begun investigating more systemic issues like treatment of youth by transit police or unjust school discipline policies. But very few have articulated and carried out campaigns that change systemic policies and practice that are creating inequitable outcomes for young people. And even in the rare instances where those campaigns have been built, they still operate at a single-issue focus, shaping one aspect of a multi-layered system (i.e. creating a restorative justice process for a school system but still not addressing issues of curriculum, teacher training, educational achievement, etc.). For these groups, who understand and have integrated “outsider strategies” to build power, focusing on deeper strategy or larger scale are important next steps to achieve broader systems impact.

ORGANIZING FROM THE OUTSIDE

One organization that we interviewed stood out as unique in our scan. It is not a formal non-profit organization (though it is exploring that option), but rather an organized network of students with no paid staff or formal structure. This organization grew out of recent national movement to end gun violence, though it has moved away from a sole focus on gun violence and currently focuses on other local issues like school segregation, funding, and redistricting.

Because this work grew out of an “outside” movement for change, their strategies and tactics move beyond simple access and meetings with decision-makers. While they do use these insider strategies and recognize that they are often given high levels of access (though some of it is tokenistic), they also use direct action tactics like school walkouts to drive home their demands and build their power.

A recent walkout orchestrated by this group involved almost 4,000 students. During the recent mid-term elections, they registered approximately 2,500 new young voters. They have student-led “chapters” in 10 of their school district’s 25 high schools, anchored by approximately 60 core leaders. They have a scale and orientation that is far greater than most of the groups we interviewed, resulting in a higher media profile and a growing sense on the parts of elected and school officials that their demands need to be taken seriously.

However, their major actions to date have been coordinated with national days of student protest. And because they operate on a voluntary basis with very loose structure, they do not have a consistent or well-developed approach for engaging members in collective analysis to arrive at deeply held organization-wide issues. As a result, there is some uncertainty as to how much their “rank and file” members are on board with an agenda other than action on the gun violence issue. This includes a lack of a broadly held commitment to or understanding of racial equity beyond a core group of student leaders.

Additionally, the leadership has not yet fully developed their capacity to plan out campaigns and tactics in a strategic manner beyond “one-off” actions. However, what they have achieved to date is impressive. If they continue along their path of solidifying their organizational structure and grow through these challenges, they have both the scale and orientation to create tremendous systems change impact.

INTEGRATION OF RACIAL EQUITY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

As identified above, some groups in the scan worked toward racial equity outcomes without an explicit systems change approach. Similarly, some groups focusing on systems change did not actively integrate a racial equity lens, even if the outcomes of their work would increase racial equity. A handful of groups, however, were integrating the two approaches.

In these cases, groups engaged young people in unpacking the mechanisms and impact of racism and white supremacy on their lives, their schools, and their communities. Issues raised by the young people were explicitly examined through a racial lens, researching and identifying disproportionate impact on

youth of color and parsing out the intersections of individual and systemic racism. This analysis is then used to create systems level demands that will create better outcomes for all youth by rectifying racial inequities in the system (see example below). Lastly, these organizations build campaigns that are intended to shift policy and practice at the systems level, developing the necessary power to hold decision-makers accountable to the young people's demands. The work did not end with articulating the solution, but in building the power to see it through to implementation. Success is defined as a change in the system's function to achieve racial equity.

SYSTEMS CHANGE FOR RACIAL EQUITY

For the last 7-8 years, one of the organizations that we interviewed has been working on restorative justice issues within its school system. The campaign was selected based on the interests of youth members, along with surveys that they conducted with the broader student body. Issues of unfair school discipline emerged and the organization developed a focus on restorative justice. Over the last several years, using a combination of insider and outsider tactics, it has changed the code of conduct at local schools, as well as policies related to suspension. In addition, it has secured funding that has resulted in 90% of all high school staff receiving training in restorative justice practices. The organization is currently working on changing the MOU between the police department and the schools to put more restrictions on or eliminate police presence.

The systems change elements of this ongoing campaign are obvious. By doing a deep dive on the issue, learning from best practices in other cities, and continuing to focus on how initial wins were implemented, this organization has clearly changed policy, practice, and funding when it comes to school discipline. In this instance, school district level impacts were easier to achieve because the district has only one high school. However, the organizations' work has also changed policy and practice at feeder middle schools. As it expands its work to other districts that have multiple high schools, it is planning to focus on individual school transformation until it builds sufficient power and capacity to impact district-wide policy. Whether the change is at a district-wide or individual school level, the intentional focus on changing policy, practice, and outcomes clearly demonstrates a systems change approach.

This is not the whole story, however. As it developed this campaign, the organization

looked intentionally at the racial impact of school discipline policies. Youth members noted the disproportionate representation of students of color in disciplinary reports, penalties, and referrals to police. In one middle school, for example, Latino students were the most likely to be referred to the police despite being the smallest demographic group in the school. Unsurprisingly, and unfortunately, similar disproportional discipline results were seen in the Black immigrant and African-American student populations as well. The organization intentionally investigated and held up these discrepancies as part of its campaign, making sure that issues of racial equity were front and center. Given that white students will also benefit from restorative justice practices and systems, the organization could have created a “color blind” campaign to build healthier school cultures and decrease suspensions, arrests, etc. But by incorporating racial data and language, it made sure that racial equity was incorporated into its systems change work. The organization continues this trend as it adds layers onto the campaign to insure racially equitable outcomes.

The organization also incorporated sophisticated elements of racial equity into its base building work. Despite having a reputation as a Latinx-based organization, it intentionally developed a membership that incorporated African-American and Black immigrant students as well. Creating the opportunities for Black-Brown co-development of a campaign within the same organization is rare in the region. Usually this type of work is done at the coalition level. However, this organization’s membership model and deep analysis of the impact of race on its issues create a solid foundation for this type of work to emerge.

Lastly, this organization recognized in our interview that racial inequity in the school system is present despite the emergence of Black and Brown leadership within the school system, which has shifted dramatically from being 100% white 20 years ago. However, this change in leadership has not resulted in more equitable outcomes for youth of color. As the lead organizer stated, “Once you start to work for the system, you become the system. Regardless of your race.” As a result, the organization’s campaigns demand that simple representation is not enough, school leaders have govern in racially equitable ways.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given this snapshot of the landscape and better understanding of the state of youth voice work in the DC region, we have identified the following three sets of actions that could help cement a stronger youth voice ecosystem and practices that are rooted in a racial equity and systems change approach:

CREATE A COMMON REGIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF RACIAL EQUITY, SYSTEMS CHANGE, AND YOUTH VOICE/POWER

Several organizations that we interviewed expressed frustration at feeling like they were doing racial equity, systems change, and youth voice work but not understanding how to communicate it in language that foundations understand. Alternatively, other organizations articulated that they weren't sure what different kinds of work would look like and what it might mean for their organization to make these shifts.

As a foundation focusing on racial equity, systems change, and youth voice/power, Meyer is uniquely positioned to create *concept papers, case studies, conversations, learning opportunities, and capacity building support* that allow organizations in the youth field to better understand these issues both *conceptually and in practice*. When possible, coordinating these opportunities with other foundations to create a common set of standards would also be helpful.

SUPPORT INDIVIDUAL PARTS OF A YOUTH VOICE ECOSYSTEM

As we have articulated in several places in this report, organizations need to and are developing collaborative approaches to youth voice work, even as they are also focusing on their own internal efforts. The Meyer Foundation should consider how it is supporting a broader eco-system to support youth voice. Maintaining a focus on building a stronger youth voice sector and strengthening youth power in the region, the foundation can also recognize that not every group needs to approach the work in the same way.

The strength of a youth voice ecosystem requires healthy organizations that are stable and strong enough to meaningfully engage in collaboration with others. To achieve this end, the Meyer Foundation should:

- ⊙ Direct unrestricted multi-year funding to groups engaged in various approaches along the youth voice spectrum, with a particular focus on the higher ends of the spectrum that are currently less well funded as well as areas of the region that are underdeveloped;
- ⊙ Provide capacity building support to strengthen individual group performance and the development of strategies and systems to better implement youth voice approaches;
- ⊙ Offer infrastructure support to strengthen organizations that engage in youth voice programmatic work (e.g. HR systems development, admin resources, staff training);
- ⊙ Help groups access “ancillary capacity” in such areas as communications and research, either through consultants or partnerships;
- ⊙ Have clear metrics and benchmarks by which groups can demonstrate their progress toward youth voice, racial equity, and systems change practices and impacts.

FACILITATE INTERDEPENDENCE IN THE ECOSYSTEM

As individual inhabitants of a youth voice ecosystem are given the resources they need to do their work, a corresponding step is to provide support for organizations to cross-pollinate. Again, this does not mean every group needs to replicate what the others are doing, but that they need to be connecting in a resource rich environment in order to be able to identify shared opportunities, complementary approaches, and joint strategies. As identified elsewhere in this report, some of this work is already happening, particularly in DC where several youth voice groups have begun to come together as Youth United 4 Change. However, these efforts are still fledgling and could be strengthened and expanded by targeted foundation support.

To nurture this kind of organizational interdependence, the Meyer Foundation could:

- ③ Foster spaces for local groups to gather, build relationships and trust, exchange knowledge, build a common theoretical framework grounded in common language, and be able to integrate their work. This support can look like convening and/or funding the facilitation of these kind of spaces, providing targeted funds to support peer learning opportunities, etc.;
- ③ Offer additional funds specifically designed to increase groups' capacity to work collaboratively (when appropriate and when it strengthens the ecosystem). For example, funding a youth services organization to have dedicated staff time, data management, etc. to provide designated services to groups doing work higher on the youth voice spectrum;
- ③ Invest in relationship development/learning with groups from outside the DC region. This support may include travel stipends to local groups to send delegations to observe and learn from non-DMV organizations, sponsoring regional or national gathering spaces (potentially in collaboration with other funding institutions), or providing funding to high performing youth organizations from other areas to allow them to have time to mentor and coach local groups;
- ③ Resource groups to more intentionally connect their youth leaders during their summer programs and throughout the year.

APPENDIX A

MOVEMENT MATTERS YOUTH VOICE FRAMEWORK

YOUTH SERVICE / YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Youth Service/Youth Development organizations are fundamentally trying to create change at the individual level by giving a young person (perceived) needed support or skills. The young person in this model, by and large, is a passive recipient of this support. Their main role is to accept whatever guidance or service is given. Though groups at this level may operate from an asset perspective, the basic framework of this approach is that the young person is in need of something that the organization can provide. In this sense, the youths' relationship to the organization is defined by their needs, hence the approach operates from a deficit model.

Since young people in this model are viewed as individual clients, there is no membership structure or engagement beyond the required sessions. Lastly, the services/development model does not make any effort at changing structural issues for young people. In this way the approach not only leaves the power structure unchallenged, but it largely ignores its existence.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Youth Leadership Development aims to create change at the individual level by building a particular set of skills in young people that is designed to help them enact leadership roles. While the end result of this type of engagement is youth taking on leadership, the role of young people in the program is, somewhat ironically, passive. Generally, in this model, the skills to be developed and the curriculum by which they are developed are determined by adults. The young person's role is to show up to receive these skills, and then to use them. In this sense, young people are seen as assets (potential leaders) and deficits (absent of the skills that they need to be leaders) at the same time.

The engagement in this model is generally structured around a curriculum, so young people are finished with the program upon completion. And though the

goal of the skills development is to create leaders, this approach accepts the existing power structure; as long as young people develop the skills to engage in leadership, they can make change happen without changing the way power operates and decisions get made. The leadership curriculum is seen as their access to existing power structures, not as a mechanism for disrupting them.

YOUTH (CIVIC) ENGAGEMENT

The Youth (Civic) Engagement model focuses at both the individual and structural level. The approach rests on the idea that young people not only develop skills in navigating systems, but also use these skills to participate in the system as part of the program. In this way, the individual student is experiencing transformation while also, theoretically, creating change at the systems level. Youth in this context are viewed as active leaders who are identifying issues and solutions and engaging in existing mechanisms for having their voices heard. In this process, the youth are viewed as assets because their lived experiences and vision for change are the cornerstones of the model.

This approach generally operates in a cohort model, with participation ending at the end of a cycle (often a school year), though some who utilize this approach offer the opportunity for the same students to participate in multiple cycles. This limited engagement often curtails the depth of change that students can achieve. Lastly, the Youth (Civic) Engagement approach generally accepts the existing power structure. Though young people are taught to envision change that will benefit their communities, they are also taught that plugging into existing civic processes will yield progress on these goals. This focus on maneuvering the current system legitimizes the existing power structure and teaches young people that the way to make change is to participate as “good citizens”.

YOUTH ORGANIZING

The Youth Organizing approach focuses primarily at the structural change level, helping young people come together collectively to identify change that they want to see and work toward it. While some level of individual transformation is expected in the young people who participate, this individual transformation is part of the process of collective and structural change. Youth are active leaders

in driving not only the efforts to create change, but also the demands for what needs to be changed. Young people are viewed as assets in this work whose lived experience, ability to analyze situations and develop solutions, and political engagement are critical to the approach.

Youth organizing generally operates with an open membership structure, allowing students to join on an ongoing basis and relying on growth in membership as part of the process of building power. The model inherently challenges power by encouraging young people to analyze existing power dynamics and identify strategies for changing them in ways that move towards the young people's vision for change. Young people attempt to make decision-makers accountable to them, instead of trying to fit into the decision-makers' processes.

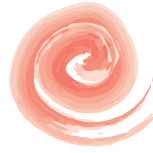
APPENDIX B

LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED

Washington, DC	Maryland	Virginia	Regional
Black Swan Academy (BSA)	Identity, <i>Montgomery County</i>	National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC), <i>Fairfax County</i>	Asian American LEAD (AALEAD)
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)	MoCo Students for Change, <i>Montgomery County</i>	Prince William County NAACP, <i>Prince William County</i>	
Critical Exposure (CE)	Progressive Maryland, <i>Prince George's County</i>	Tenants and Workers United (TWU), <i>City of Alexandria, Fairfax and Prince William Counties</i>	
DC Alliance of Youth Advocates (DCAYA)		Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement (VOICE), <i>Prince William County</i>	
Latino Youth Leadership Council (LYLC), <i>housed at LAYC</i>			
Many Languages One Voice (MLOV)			
Mikva Challenge DC			
Supporting and Mentoring Youth Advocates and Leaders (SMYAL)			
The Future Foundation (TFF)			
Young Women's Project (YWP)			

Additional information was gleaned from staff of the Greater Washington Community Foundation and the Meyer Foundation.

ABOUT MOVEMENT MATTERS



MOVEMENT MATTERS:

Building Individual & Organizational Capacity for Change

The driving vision of Movement Matters is to ensure the development of greater infrastructure and capacity for movement-based community organizing. Created by Marta Vizueta Bohórquez and David S. Haiman, Movement Matters works directly in partnership with organizations and individuals doing or moving towards social change work to provide culturally competent training, technical assistance, and mentorship that strengthens their work.

We also seek to identify larger opportunities to serve as a catalyst for groups to come together to strengthen the local organizing infrastructure in ways that are beyond the mission and scope of any one organization. In these instances, Movement Matters identifies and proposes ideas, vets these ideas with members of the organizing community, and serves as the mortar for these ideas to reach fruition by providing the support necessary for their development.

Movement Matters is committed to the use of a values-based approach to organizing and movement building that is intersectional, anti-oppression, and anti-racist. Our educational approach and capacity building framework are firmly based on popular education, cultural organizing, and other liberatory pedagogies, with the ultimate goal of developing local community organizing leaders from the ground. Though our main focus is the District of Columbia, we also work locally in other communities, and with national partners.

In the last two years, Movement Matters has expanded our team to include Brittney Washington and Karina Hurtado-Ocampo, who bring a range of experience in arts and cultural organizing, media production and strategy, facilitation, and youth work.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MOVEMENT
MATTERS VISIT:

WWW.MOVEMENTMATTERS.NET