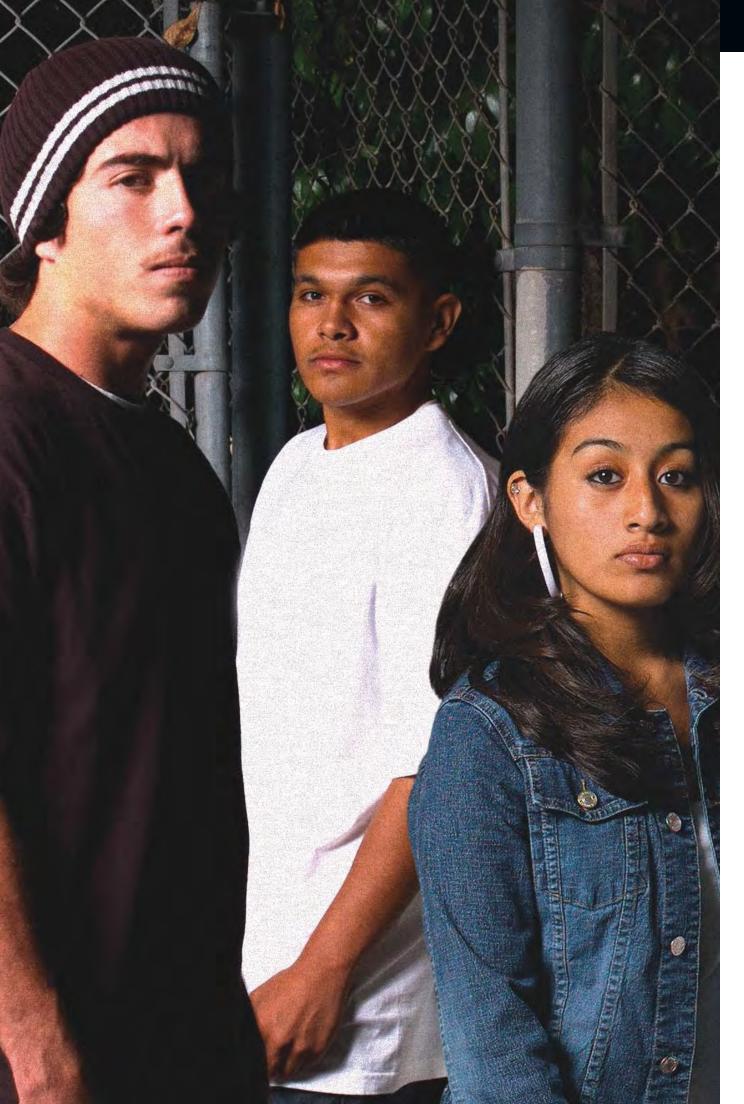


A Call to Action & Recommendations
for Meaningful Youth
Engagement



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT TASKEORCE CALL TO ACTION

INTRODUCTION

Partnerships often yield greater ideas and bolder visions. In 2003, the Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council and the City of Los Angeles Youth Council of the Workforce Investment Board (WIB), partnered to convene a Youth Engagement Taskforce. Our hope was that we could work together - along side with youth and people who care about youth - to create a movement and a new way of thinking. Our goal was to identify best practices and opportunities for a countywide youth engagement effort that would increase the number of youth actively engaged in civic and community life and in matters that affect them.

Over several months, and many long evenings, we arrived at a common definition of what we meant when we used the words "youth engagement." We identified best practices, conducted a series of focus groups with youth and with youth workers, and we began an asset mapping process. We pushed ourselves to go beyond the rhetoric, to move outside of the typical boundaries, and to imagine what our communities could achieve if youth were engaged in more meaningful ways. These rich conversations yielded a belief statement, a set of values, and seven principles – all of which help lay the foundation for real change on behalf of youth. Based on this belief and the values and principles, the Taskforce identified 15 recommendations for Los Angeles County.

This report - which captures the work of the Taskforce - is intended to serve as a Call to Action to all adults that work with or care about youth. While the recommendations are directed to particular stakeholders, the themes we introduce are meant to inspire any adult that is in relationship with a young person. Specifically, we challenge ourselves to broaden our thinking, walk the talk, and share power with youth.

The inescapable truth is this: youth are important stakeholders and essential allies in the struggle for social justice and democracy. This reality leaves us little real choice. We must accept the challenge to ensure that youth voices are heard, youth viewpoints respected, and that youth have meaningful opportunities for participation and leadership. That is the challenge accepted by the Youth Engagement Taskforce, the WIB Youth Council, and the Children's Planning Council. Please join us.

Yolie Flores Aquilar Taskforce Co-Chair & Executive Director,

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THE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGE: EMBRACING NEW VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

When we embarked on this journey of aligning our values about youth voice with a strategy for community capacity-building and public policy, we knew that we were not trying to invent something new. The pursuit of youth participation in our public and private democracies has been a large part of our social and political history – however, young people's access to help make meaningful decisions on issues and within institutions that affect them has been more elusive.

We have been clear from the beginning. Youth Engagement is not identifiable by simply giving a young person a lofty title or position without the sincere belief and expectation that he or she will be a major contributor, and have the standing to have his or her opinions considered equal to those of adults. The capacity and will to share power among youth and adults must and can be built so that high expectations for young people can be met, and so that openness to engaging them in decision-

Youth Engagement: Youth meaningfully participate in the decisions that affect their quality of life

making becomes second nature. Our definition of youth engagement is that youth meaningfully participate in the decisions that affect their quality of life.

The Taskforce believes that youth engagement – for it to exist and for it to impact our lives – must be seen as a concept and long-term

process that involves all adults in challenging the status quo of youth-adult relationships. While age often brings experience, it also brings reluctance to share power and give up control. We must not be afraid to admit this truth, nor can we shy away from boldly initiating a youth engagement agenda that starts with asserting a set of values and principles founded upon a respect for youth.

Respect for youth will only be evident when our fundamental beliefs about youth mirror our highest expectations, and when our highest expectations for all youth in our society supercede the limited political roles that current legal definitions and social practices have carved out for them. The values and principles articulated by the Taskforce are based on the belief that youth have meaningful contributions to make, that they are assets, and that they must be involved in co-creating their future. It is our collective responsibility, however, to give youth the opportunity to strengthen families, communities, and civil society overall through their contributions and development as social actors.

A first step in this call to action is for all adults that play a role in the lives of young people to adopt the L.A. Youth Engagement belief statement, values, and principles set forth by the Taskforce:

BELIEF STATEMENT:

Youth are assets to our communities and institutions.

VALUES:

- Adults have a civic responsibility to make commitments to youth in both policy and practice.
- Youth guide their own self-determination, development, and preservation.
- Youth achieve self-efficacy and power over their own destiny.
- Youth contribute their individual talents, knowledge, skill, and wisdom to social change and excellence in our communities.

PRINCIPLES:

- 1. Every young person's life matters equally, including those traditionally excluded.
- 2. All youth must have equitable access and opportunity to achieve their goals.
- 3. Youth are viewed and considered as diverse, self-determining, community-minded individuals.
- 4. All youth must be able to contribute to public consciousness and decision-making.
- 5. Youth analysis of social problems and potential solutions are equal to those of adults.
- 6. Youth must hear sincerity and truth from the institutions, systems, and adults intending to serve them.
- 7. Youth must participate in transforming our institutions to be more inclusive.



Transforming the common occurrence of adults making decisions FOR youth into the practice of making decisions WITH youth is nothing short of a paradigm shift. Indeed, there is well-documented scientific evidence that enactment of such a paradigm shift results in youth who make positive and productive contributions to self, family, community, and civil society (Lerner, 2004). Fortunately, however, this idea is not new nor is it unexplored. We have many allies across the country working to strengthen youth participation and engagement in democratic processes. We also have many individuals and existing organizations here in Los Angeles County that have long been champions of this belief system and that exemplify the aforementioned belief, values, and principles on a daily basis.

The resolve of these local champions is what gives us reason to pause and ask what more we can do to ensure that the principles and values we propose are embraced by all. The Taskforce has spent a year exploring what it will take to move youth voices from so many diverse communities and life experiences into the center of problem-solving, planning, decision-making, and policy-making so that we become more inclusive of each generation of youth. The Taskforce envisions that within the next decade we will shift power relations to the point that young people all across Los Angeles County see themselves with the access and capacity to make decisions alongside adults about the matters most important to them and that affect them most.

Therefore, the Taskforce urges the broadest spectrum of stakeholders across Los Angeles County to adopt the belief statement, values, and principles, and to assume a concrete and active role in building a youth engagement movement across Los Angeles County.

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE: 3 BOLD STEPS AND 15 RECOMMENDATIONS

Integrating the voices of youth into every aspect of their active participation in our society indeed requires a different way of being. Adhering to the values and principles can help us **BE** different when working alongside youth. We must also, however, **D0** differently. Only then will we hear the voices of young people as allies and contributors to our institutions and communities.

The Taskforce identified three specific steps we need to take, with recommendations to help us get there. Taking these steps - or DOING these things - is the real test of our will to meaningfully engage youth:

First, we must **broaden our thinking** about how we serve youth. We must no longer be content with the disparate and disconnected nature of the broad field of youth empowerment and development across Los Angeles County. We must unify existing individuals, organizations, and resources working on behalf of youth into purposeful alliances that increase youth engagement.

Second, we must walk our talk. Simply saying we believe in youth and want them to be engaged is insufficient. We must be willing to put tangible resources towards creating genuine, accessible opportunities for youth to sit at decision-making tables and participate in decision-making and the political process.

And finally, we must expand and safeguard our willingness to share power between youth and adults through long-term policies and practices that institutionalize youth engagement.

The Taskforce believes that youth engagement – for it to exist and for it to impact our lives — must be seen as a concept and long-term process that involves all adults in challenging the status quo of youth-adult relationships. While age often brings experience, it also brings reluctance to share power and give up control. We must not be afraid to admit this truth, nor can we shy away from boldly initiating a youth engagement agenda that starts with asserting a set of values and principles founded upon a respect for youth.

PRINCIPLES OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Every young person's life matters equally

All youth must have equal access and opportunity to achieve their goals

Youth are viewed as diverse, selfdetermining, community-minded individuals

All youth must be able to contribute to public consciousness and decision-making

Youth analysis of social problems and solutions are equal to those of adults

Youth must hear sincerity and truth from institutions, systems, and adults

Youth must participate in transforming our institutions to be more inclusive

BROADEN OUR THINKING



The Taskforce recognized that throughout Los Angeles County, hundreds of dedicated and committed individuals serve young people through a diverse set of programs. Collectively, however, we have been ineffective in positioning youth to be the architects of their own lives. Instead, we have served youth – often unintentionally – in ways that perpetuate their passive involvement in those programs. Collectively, we have not aligned ourselves to a common understanding and commitment to real and authentic youth engagement. To reach such engagement, we must all **broaden our thinking**, and couple it with well-informed action of what it takes for youth to be meaningfully involved and invested in their own outcomes. Specifically, the Taskforce calls for us to unify youth-serving individuals, organizations, and resources into alliances and partnerships that increase this type of youth engagement.

In order to do this, we need to understand where youth programs are in terms of engaging their young people, and to identify opportunities to move them towards a common agenda of youth engagement. The Taskforce found that currently, many youth programs in Los Angeles County fall into at least one of three broad categories:

• Social Services and Prevention

Often indicated by services such as counseling, case management and prevention of diseases, substance abuse, and gang involvement.

• Support and Development

Often exemplified by programs fostering academic skills and college preparation; financial and computer literacy; career, workforce, and character development; leadership skill building; cultural awareness; issuebased education, such as health, violence prevention, educational reform; relationship-building and mentoring.

Participation

Often evidenced by youth-driven and/or youth-led opportunities and roles in political education, civic engagement, community problem-solving, activism, organizing, and decision-making.

The Taskforce believes that any youth program, regardless of its programmatic focus, can and should be a starting point for fostering youth engagement. For example, young people who are recipients of job training services should play a

pivotal role in evaluating the program's effectiveness. Young people who are in a leadership program should determine what they want to learn and how they want to apply their skills. Young people focused on community problem-solving should be empowered to develop their own needs assessments and an ensuing project as the result of their research and analysis. When youth feel that addressing an issue in their lives or communities requires policy change or accountability from local leaders, youth should have the access and support to do so.

Turning ideas such as these into consistent practice and policy, however, is the challenge, but we have resources to meet it that remain untapped and invisible: the first being youth workers – those who work directly with youth. We believe that investing in youth workers' talents in relating to and engaging youth will yield a greater number of opportunities for engagement. We should remove the isolation between youth workers and create opportunities for them to gather and share knowledge. We should also make room for youth workers' expertise to influence how youth programs are developed and run. Further, we must work to link local youth workers and leaders in the field to national efforts that are attempting to fully professionalize, and give status, visibility, and recognition to youth work.

A second untapped resource for building a youth engagement movement is the universe of youth development organizations, without which much of the existing knowledge about transforming youth and youth-adult relationships would not have been cultivated. These organizations are not only safe havens for developing youth and youth workers, they also create space for school, family, peers, and community to interact and come together; and when these different spheres are in conflict, youth development organizations often become the only neutral space in which mediation of conflict is possible and youth-centered.



Lastly, as connections between youth development and family strengthening emerge, we cannot ignore the significant role played by young people's families in supporting the development of their capacity to meaningfully participate in the institutions that affect their lives. The more we can include the family as both ally and beneficiary of youth development and engagement, the more we can transform youth-adult relationships and comprehend the powerful influence youth engagement has on families and communities.

To broaden our thinking and unify existing individuals, organizations, and resources into alliances and partnerships that increase youth engagement, we must: a) increase access to information about youth engagement opportunities across Los Angeles County; b) develop resources for building youth engagement networks, and staff and organizational capacity; and c) document youth engagement in practice and its impact on families and communities. The following five recommendations highlight key steps to accomplish these goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BROADEN OUR THINKING:

- 1. The County of Los Angeles and the municipalities within it create a website for youth, youth service providers, funders, media, schools, parents, and policymakers to easily access information and specifically learn about youth engagement opportunities and resources.
- 2. Local youth workers and youth-serving organizations collaborate to establish a regional clearinghouse and convening for youth engagement best practices, strategic planning, staff training, and networking, with support from local foundations and public funders.
- 3. Local media outlets document youth engagement in practice, highlighting the work of local organizations exemplifying the best practices and impact of youth engagement in improving our community.
- 4. All publicly-funded youth programs incorporate youth engagement skills into mandatory professional development and staff training curricula.
- 5. Academic research centers enter into partnerships with municipal and County-wide departments focused on children, youth, and their families to further the research of local youth engagement capacity-building models and their community impact.



WALK OUR TALK

Actions speak louder than words. The Taskforce believes that for youth to be meaningfully engaged, we must do more than talk. As such, the Taskforce urges youth-serving entities and professionals to walk our talk, creating genuine, accessible opportunities for youth to sit at decision-making tables, participate in the political process, and learn to represent their peers. Walking our talk requires that we commit time, space, and resources to ensure that the conditions necessary for youth engagement are met, and to support youthbuilding relationships with one another across communities.

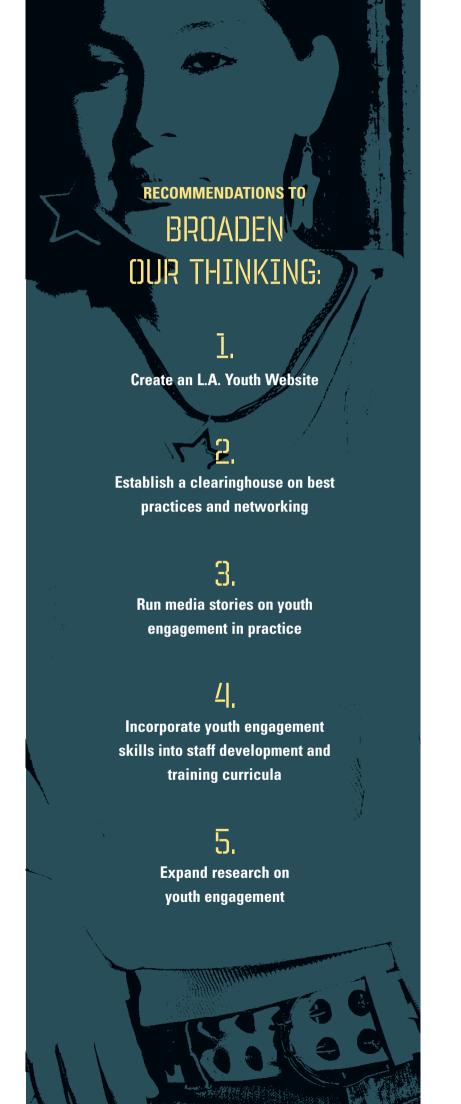
Often we plan for and around youth without understanding that meeting basic needs creates the conditions that allow young people to become fully self-determining, and therefore engaged in shaping the communities and institutions that affect them.

To create and sustain access for youth to take part in engagement activities we must eliminate critical barriers and ensure:

- Accessible transportation
- Stable housing and job opportunities
- Financial compensation for their time and energy
- Convenient times to meet and participate
- Safe, accessible locations to take advantage of services and programs
- Access to technology and communication media
- Real (not token) representation of youth at the decisionmaking table

If we envision authentic youth engagement in Los Angeles County, then we must also keep in mind that youth deserve space and time to be themselves, to invest in their talents and interests, and to express their voices freely, without judgment or interference from adults. Physical space in which to gather, meet new peers, and engage in dialogue with other youth is extremely difficult to obtain in Los Angeles County; indeed, it is one of the greatest barriers in expanding youth programming and providing youth-led and youthcentered environments for engagement. Emphasis must be placed on the need for physical space designed for youth.







Walking our talk also implies that we utilize the most effective means for engaging young people in planning, decision-making, and evaluation. The Taskforce is emboldened by the number of organizations in Los Angeles County that have shown the ability to yield meaningful youth engagement through innovative, intentional practices. We applaud these existing examples yet seek to magnify the lessons they have learned in order to help other organizations build the necessary infrastructure. We suggest that resources be devoted to the expansion and replication of exemplary youth engagement strategies and programs, which include strategies to:

- Thoroughly assess youth's needs and assets, and take into consideration the contexts of their specific communities.
- Effectively harness young people's assets to develop lifelong leadership, learning, and participation in society.
- Provide real opportunities for youth to develop social and political analysis through experiential learning and dialogue with peers.

Lastly, we cannot forget that a key factor in effective decisionmaking is relationships with the constituencies and interests that one represents. In order to fuel youth engagement, we must be willing to strengthen the alliances among youth and encourage youth to become organized in ways that provide opportunities to represent their issues and their peers. Breaking down the isolation from society that youth often feel is fundamental to fostering participation in communities and institutions.

To walk our talk and create genuine and accessible youth engagement opportunities, we must: a) ensure that basic needs of youth are met and the conditions for engagement are created; b) implement methods that have worked best to engage youth; and c) foster the convening and organizing of youth. The following six recommendations highlight key steps to accomplish these goals.



- 1. The Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority and other regional transportation providers establish free and reduced fares (equal to fares for Seniors) during the after-school hours and on weekends to facilitate more youth mobility in order to participate in engagement opportunities.
- 2. The County of Los Angeles and its municipalities increase the public spaces in which youth can gather and build relationships with one another across communities.
- 3. Local foundations expand funding for exemplary youth engagement practices and programs in Los Angeles County, including those centered on youth asset development and leadership.
- 4. Long-standing funders of after-school and other youth service programs, such as the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, incorporate youth engagement strategies into their funding and program priorities. Financial compensation for youth are included in funding allocations.
- 5. Public and private funders dedicate specific resources to support community-based and countywide convenings of youth, which provide a forum for youth to lead, engage, and learn from their peers.
- 6. School districts across the County work with local organizations to increase the political participation and representative power of young people through organized debates, early voter education and registration, and innovative curricula centered on social issues analysis and policy change.



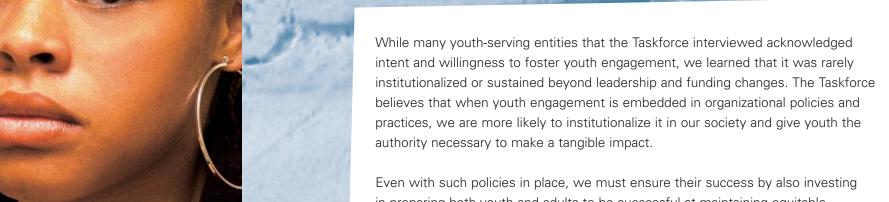


SHARE POWER

To effectively include youth in the decision-making culture of our social institutions, we must build young people's identities and self-images as decision-makers and contributors to our communities. We must not tokenize young people's voices – the minute we do we jeopardize their sense of ownership in their own participation. Nor can we allow our institutions to incorporate youth input only when it supports adult points of view – we must allow youth voice to stand on its own as a constant part of our democracy.

At the root of being an effective decision-maker is the power to have one's decisions taken seriously. The Taskforce underscores the fact that we must **share power** by giving youth the authority to determine the principles, strategies, and outcomes that programs and institutions use to govern their lives. We must **share power** throughout all of our interactions with young people, and do it consistently. **Sharing power** is essentially a transformation of the relationships between adults and youth, and nothing less. Ultimately, youth engagement will not lead to long-term change unless we expand and safeguard it through long-term policies that institutionalize its practice.

Power sharing begins with building connection and trust between adult-led institutions and youth - and resisting the habit of allowing adult opinions to consistently dominate the basis of decisions affecting youth. Such trust can only be maintained if there is accountability, as in the adoption and implementation of policies that mandate youth involvement in decision-making. For example, a youth-serving entity can take the bold step of ensuring a place for youth as members of boards of directors through its by-laws. Youth can be empowered through organizational policies to make funding decisions. Youth can serve as formal evaluators of the programs meant to benefit them. Public institutions can make it mandatory that youth have input when resolving challenges in its public service. Youth-serving entities can be required to adopt and implement such youth engagement policies through funding and evaluation criteria.



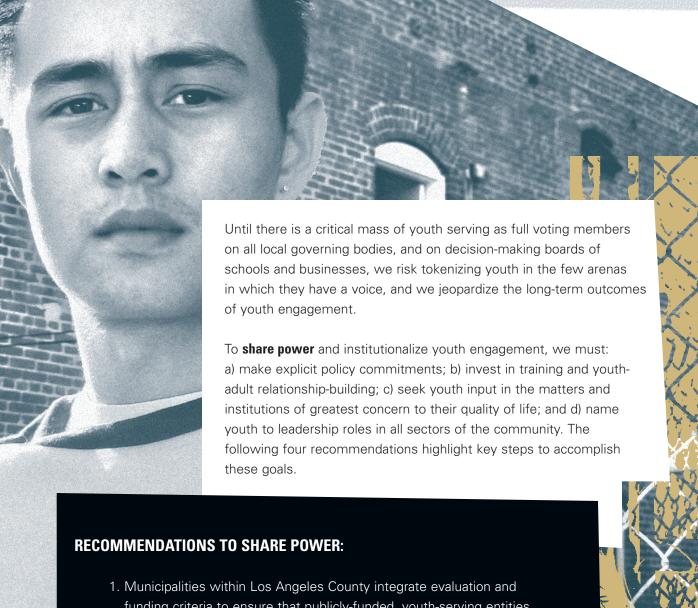
Even with such policies in place, we must ensure their success by also investing in preparing both youth and adults to be successful at maintaining equitable relationships. It will require a learning process that has the time to evolve and mature. It will also require exploring new forms of communication so that youth and adults understand one another's self-interests across generational lines. It will demand commitment to overcome perceptions, stereotypes, and previous expectations each generation has of the other, and to allow new ways of youth-adult collaboration to emerge. We believe, however, that this challenge can be met by conscientious efforts to train both youth and adults in how to engage one another effectively, and how to work through the challenges of **sharing power** and maintaining youth-adult equity.

Lastly, it is imperative that both youth and adults expand their boundaries for when youth voice is relevant and necessary. If we only ask or prepare youth to make decisions in safe environments with limited consequence and impact, then we will hinder youth contributions towards addressing our deepest social and political challenges here in Los Angeles County. The Taskforce learned that many youth, once asked, are ready and waiting for the opportunity to influence policies surrounding their quality of life issues. Through our focus groups, youth across the County expressed a desire to understand and be included in decisions regarding:

- education, particularly curriculum, school policies, funding, and spending
- funding and spending for youth programs
- safety, especially in schools and parks
- parks and recreation
- economic development
- transportation
- laws affecting teenagers, including new ballot initiatives

Few youth, however, find safe and effective settings in which to impact such issues. It is not enough for us to transform day-to-day decision-making to include youth – we must also create ever-expanding opportunities for youth to meaningfully shape public policy and effect long-term systemic change around the issues most pertinent to their quality of life.





- 1. Municipalities within Los Angeles County integrate evaluation and funding criteria to ensure that publicly-funded, youth-serving entities integrate youth engagement as part of their strategy and outcomes, and support its implementation.
- 2. Youth-serving entities set aside time and resources for youth and adults to develop understanding, trust, and communication skills that foster a strong sense of shared purpose and ability to make decisions together.
- 3. The County of Los Angeles and its municipalities mandate and monitor youth representation on planning and advisory bodies such as neighborhood councils, departmental commissions, and issue taskforces. Specifically, the County Board of Supervisors should investigate the status of their 1997 mandate for various county departments and agencies to add youth to their commissions, as recommended by the L.A. County Children's Planning Council.
- 4. Youth-serving public institutions such as school districts and juvenile correction systems include youth on local advisory committees and as representatives on key decision-making bodies, such as school boards, by revising organizational policies to ensure youth involvement in decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Envisioning the End Result:
What a Movement for Youth Engagement Will Yield

By being principle-driven, action-oriented, and focused on outcomes and systemic change, the Youth Engagement Taskforce believes that collectively we have the capacity to significantly alter the standing and influence of youth across our County. We believe that youth engagement can transform long-standing generational gaps into new, intergenerational alliances that serve to improve the way we manage and govern our local institutions and resources. We believe that it is in every generation's best interest to see a movement for youth engagement come to fruition and to support its goals.

We stand firmly behind these fifteen recommendations. We are confident that building a movement for youth engagement guided by these values, principles, and ideas will bring about tangible change, as well as further insights about what it will take to truly transform the way adults and youth work together. The Taskforce has also taken the liberty of putting forth a definition of success. In the long journey towards social equity, we must not be satisfied until we see the following nine outcomes:

- 1. Youth having positive self-image, confidence, and relationships with their peers, adults, and communities
- 2. Youth being served by the media through positive images that they co-create with adults
- 3. Youth discovering and fulfilling their potential through access to information, education, resources, and opportunities for life-long learning and growth
- 4. Stronger youth-adult relationships and collaboration within families, neighborhoods, public agencies, and community-based institutions
- 5. Youth able to put their own assets and those of their communities to use in addressing challenges faced in their pursuit of a high quality of life
- 6. Maximum social value placed on youth serving their communities and becoming involved in social change
- 7. Youth able to hold youth-serving entities accountable to their missions in policy and practice
- 8. Youth supported in eliminating adult-held systemic policies, attitudes, or value systems that hinder their opportunities and self-esteem
- 9. Youth who emerge as adults connected to and leading their communities

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SHARE POWER:

 $\underline{\mathbf{1}}$

Establish funding criteria
to ensure youth engagement
in program strategies
and outcomes

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Set aside time and resources for youth and adults to develop understanding and trust

3.

Mandate youth representation on all city/county planning and advisory committees

Include youth on educational and juvenile correction systems decision-making bodies

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES

Youth have positive self-image, confidence, and relationships with their peers, adults, and communities

Youth are served by the media through positive images

Youth discover and fulfill their potential

Youth put their assets to use in their pursuit of a high quality of life

Youth are valued for serving their communities and becoming involved in social change

Youth hold youth-serving entities accountable to their missions

Picture these images as part of our day-to-day reality because they are truly within our reach. The Youth Engagement Taskforce specifically issued this document as a **CALL TO ACTION** for the sole purpose of going beyond the norm. Indeed, each of us – from wherever we sit – can take concrete steps to bring in youth from the margins and be their allies. Similarly, all of our respective public and private institutions, organizations, networks, and businesses undeniably have the political and economic capital to ensure that youth have the opportunities to influence how the world works. It is only a matter of will and commitment to **broaden our thinking, walk our talk, and share power** in our relations with youth. Let us maintain and demonstrate an unconditional belief in the value of youth to the integrity of democracy, and let us not waver in the pursuit of fundamental change.



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Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center

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Asian American Drug Abuse Program (AADAP) – Olympic Academy Program

Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team - Bionic Chicks. Pro 96.7, and Women on Women Programs

Asian Youth Center - Friday Night Club

Bienestar Human Services – SABORES Youth Program

Bresee Youth Foundation - Bresee Youth Program

Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) – Quality Education Campaign and Pico-Union Revitalization Team

Chinatown Service Center - Youth Center

City of Los Angeles Commission for Children, Youth and Their Families Youth Council

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Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights' of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) – Wise Up

Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) – Youth for Environmental Justice (Youth EJ)

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Q-Team

REACH LA

Southern Californians for Youth

Semillas de Aztlán

Shakespeare Festival LA - Will Power to Youth Program

S.M.I.L.E. Productions

Tavis Smiley Foundation - Youth to Leaders Program

Trauma Foundation - California Alcohol Policy Reform Initiative (CAPRI) Youth Coalition

UCLA Community-Based Learning Programs

United Way of Greater Los Angeles

William W. Oneal Foundation - Equal Opportunity Productions (EqOPs)

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youTHink

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OUR VOICE IS YOUR FUTURE

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