

# Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy: Summary Report

Amy McKlindon, Samantha Holquist, Alyssa Scott, Ja'Chelle Ball, Jessica Conway, Iziko Calderon, Janya Clark, Teddy DeLeon-Alvarado, Blandina Flores, Brisia Gutierrez, Sam Joo, Nadirra Monroe, Faith Robinson, Deven Rudy-Johnson, Kyra Stoute, and Tony Turner

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## Executive Summary

Young people with lived experience navigating youth-serving systems (e.g., child welfare, employment) play an important and unique role in identifying, formulating, advocating for, and implementing policy changes to better meet their needs. As organizations, public partners, and funders increasingly engage young people in the policy process, this project sought to better understand how organizations engage youth, factors that help and hinder authentic youth engagement, and outcomes associated with authentic youth engagement.

Authentic youth engagement means that youth are active partners in shaping decisions, policies, and programs; empowered and valued as contributors, co-creators, and decision makers in their communities; and intentionally supported in these roles.

Funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (“the Foundation”), Child Trends partnered with a Research Group of youth and adult representatives from five of the Foundation’s grantee organizations<sup>1</sup> to conduct a qualitative study using a community-engaged research approach. The Research Group met regularly to participate in the design of the project, data analysis, and dissemination of findings. This project focused on analyzing one recent policy win from each organization that featured authentic youth engagement.

Building on prior research,<sup>ii</sup> the experiences of the Research Group, and data from our interviews and document review, Child Trends and the Research Group refined a framework for authentic youth engagement in the policy process—the [Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework](#) (“the Framework”). The Framework includes five components: (1) how youth are involved; (2) at what stages youth are engaged; (3) how organizations support and empower youth; (4) what local factors help or hinder youth engagement; and (5) what outcomes are achieved through authentic youth engagement.

In this report, we first provide an overview of the five policy wins (see [Organizational Profiles](#) for an in-depth analysis of each policy win). We then define key terminology for each component of the Framework, apply each component to the policy wins, and summarize key findings across the policy wins. Key findings for each component include the following:

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Fair Futures, Georgia EmpowerMENT, Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative, Los Angeles Youth Development Department in partnership with Para Los Niños, and New Orleans Youth Alliance

- **How are youth involved?** Youth roles are dynamic, but youth were often less likely to serve in designing roles, compared to speaking and co-designing roles that involve greater adult leadership.
- **At what stages are youth involved?** While youth are engaged across multiple stages of the policy process, they are most likely to be engaged in policy advocacy and least likely to be engaged in policy implementation.
- **How do organizations empower and support youth?** Organizations support authentic youth engagement through a variety of strategies, such as providing youth with resources, adopting inclusive and supportive practices, and connecting youth with supportive adults. Organizations face challenges related to training adults and recruiting youth with diverse experiences and identities.
- **What local factors help or hinder authentic youth engagement?** Stakeholder and partner engagement, the political landscape, and philanthropic/private support are important local contextual factors that can affect the success of authentic youth engagement efforts.
- **What outcomes are achieved through authentic youth engagement?** Authentic youth engagement results in interrelated changes at several levels: policy (e.g., intermediate outcomes on the path to policy change), community (e.g., increased awareness of youth issues), organization (e.g., increased youth leadership), and youth (e.g., youth empowerment).

We close with recommendations related to our conclusions. These recommendations are tailored to organizations, funders, public partners, and researchers, and correspond to the following conclusions:

- **The Framework applies across organizational and local contexts and a variety of policy wins.** The Framework can be applied in different environments to plan for, monitor, and expand authentic youth engagement in the policy process.
- **More work remains to support youth in co-designing and designing roles, where youth hold greater leadership.** Moving stepwise from speaking to co-designing to designing roles over time can help build capacity for youth leadership at the individual and organizational levels.
- **Adult support is a key component of authentic youth engagement.** Prioritizing adult training and ongoing coaching can help ensure that staff members and partners are prepared to support authentic youth engagement.
- **Policy implementation is a stage that would benefit from increased authentic youth engagement to ensure that policies reach their intended goals.** Designating staff members to support youth and building public partners' capacity for authentic youth engagement can help create opportunities for youth to remain engaged into the time-intensive implementation stage.
- **Authentic youth engagement is associated with positive outcomes at the individual, organizational, community, and policy levels.** These interrelated outcomes demonstrate the importance of continued investment in and expansion of authentic youth engagement in the policy process.

# Introduction

Policy advocates and decision makers have increasingly turned to young people with lived experience navigating youth-serving systems (e.g., child welfare, employment) to inform policy.<sup>iii,iv</sup> The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation's ("the Foundation") Foster Youth and Opportunity Youth Initiatives ("Initiatives") have prioritized grantmaking to organizations that engage youth in their policy efforts. To better understand how their grantee organizations engage youth in the policy process, factors that help and hinder authentic youth engagement, and outcomes associated with authentic youth engagement, the Initiatives partnered with Child Trends to conduct a qualitative study profiling five grantee organizations that engage young people in policy efforts – Center for Fair Futures, Georgia EmpowerMENT, Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative, Los Angeles Youth Development Department in partnership with Para Los Niños, and New Orleans Youth Alliance. Each organization identified a recent "policy win" in which they engaged young people. Policy wins included policy changes (e.g., successfully advocating for new state legislation) as well as incremental steps toward policy change (e.g., developing youth capacity and understanding of the policy process, and forming new coalitions).

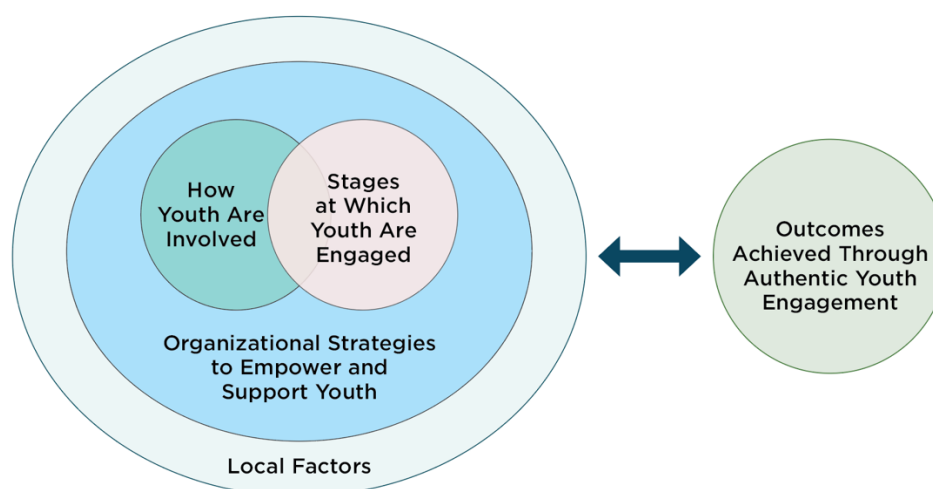
The five organizations each identified one youth and one adult representative to serve on the Research Group, which met regularly to participate in the design of the project, data analysis, and dissemination of findings. The Research Group meeting notes also provided data, as the Research Group members shared from their own experiences and insights (see Methodology and Data).

Building on prior research<sup>i,ii</sup> and the experiences of the Research Group, Child Trends and the Research Group refined a framework for authentic youth engagement in the policy process – the Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework ("the Framework"). We further refined the Framework by applying it to the policy wins profiled in this project. This report details the five components of the Framework: (1) how are youth involved; (2) at what stages are youth engaged; (3) how do organizations support and empower youth; (4) what local factors help or hinder youth engagement; and (5) what outcomes are achieved through authentic youth engagement? (see Figure 1 and [Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework](#) for a detailed visualization of the Framework). While presented in a linear manner, the Framework is not intended to represent a linear or static approach. Each organization takes a unique approach to authentic youth engagement, and we hope the Framework serves as a tool for readers to examine their own work and opportunities to expand and support authentic youth engagement in the policy process.

The following terms are used throughout this report:

- **Youth or Young People:** These terms are used interchangeably to refer to youth and young adults with lived experience navigating the child welfare, education, employment, and other youth-serving systems. In the five organizations profiled in this project, youth ranged in age from 14-26.
- **Authentic Youth Engagement:** Youth are active partners in shaping decisions, policies, and programs. They are empowered and valued as contributors, co-creators, and decision makers in their communities and intentionally supported in these roles.
- **Policy Process:** Policy identification, formulation, advocacy, and implementation. This project focused on local and state policies, including legislative and administrative policies.

**Figure 1. Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework**



In this report, we define key terminology for each component of the Framework, apply each component to the five organizations' policy wins, and summarize key findings across the policy wins. We close with recommendations related to our conclusions. These recommendations can be used by organizations, funders, public partners, and researchers.

- The Framework applies across organizational and local contexts and a variety of policy wins.
- More work remains to support youth to move into co-designing and designing roles, where youth hold greater leadership.
- Adult support is a key component, and more attention to adult training and ongoing coaching can help ensure staff members and partners are prepared to support authentic youth engagement.
- Policy implementation is a stage that would benefit from increased authentic youth engagement to ensure policies reach their intended goals.
- Authentic youth engagement is associated with positive outcomes at the individual, organizational, community, and policy levels.

## Background

The five organizations profiled through this project represent different geographies, organizational structures, populations and issues of focus, youth engagement strategies, and policy targets (e.g., local and state policy, administrative and legislative policy). For each organization, we identified a recent "policy win" and explored the role youth played in achieving that win. Each policy win is described in Table 1, and in further detail in the linked project profiles.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Some of the policy wins include ongoing work; therefore, we use both past and present tense throughout this summary report depending on the nature of each organization's efforts.

**Table 1. Policy Wins**

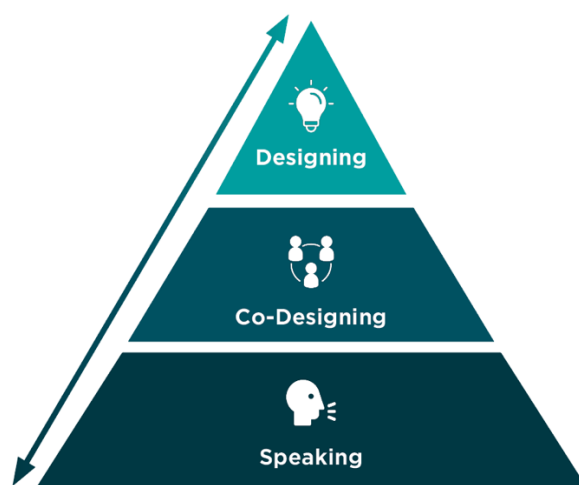
Organization	Policy Win	Policy Win Profile	Hilton Foundation Initiative
<a href="#">Center for Fair Futures</a>	In 2023, the Fair Futures advocacy coalition and Youth Advisory Board (YAB) secured \$30.7 million in annual baselined funding in the New York City budget for the Fair Futures coaching and tutoring program.	<a href="#">Center for Fair Futures Profile</a>	Foster Youth Initiative
<a href="#">Georgia EmpowerMENT</a>	Youth advocates, as part of Georgia EmpowerMENT's Policy Council, advocate to expand access to postsecondary education for young people in foster care or with foster care experience. Young people advocated for SB 107 (2021), which provides tuition waivers for vocational colleges, and later formed the Tuition Waiver Coalition alongside partner organizations to continue to advocate for expanded postsecondary financial support.	<a href="#">Georgia EmpowerMENT Profile</a>	Foster Youth Initiative
<a href="#">Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative</a>	Young Leaders involved in the Director's Youth Advisory Council co-created a strategy to support and prioritize opportunity youth in LA County. In 2023, they presented their strategy and the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) approved the creation of the Youth Engagement Section (YES) within DCFS. YES is a section within DCFS that will continue to prioritize youth-centered case management, with the goal of improving long-term stability for transition age youth.	<a href="#">LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative Profile</a>	Foster Youth Initiative & Opportunity Youth Initiative
<a href="#">Los Angeles City Youth Development Department</a> and <a href="#">Para Los Niños</a> <sup>3</sup>	In 2024, Para Los Niños launched a Youth Advisory Council at both of their YouthSource Center sites, with a total of 10 young people serving on the Councils. The Youth Advisory Councils were created to empower youth with leadership skills, confidence, and community connections while ensuring they have a voice in decision making. The goal was to engage youth and provide meaningful feedback to stakeholders across the city.	<a href="#">LA Youth Development Department Profile</a>	Opportunity Youth Initiative
<a href="#">New Orleans Youth Alliance</a>	New Orleans Youth Alliance's Youth Leadership Fellowship builds young people's capacity to engage in leadership roles aligned with their unique interests in local systems, programs, and initiatives by offering a series of policy- and advocacy-related trainings, workshops, and external advocacy and network building opportunities.	<a href="#">New Orleans Youth Alliance Profile</a>	Opportunity Youth Initiative

<sup>3</sup> The City of Los Angeles's Youth Development Department created a Youth Advisory Council Pilot Program in partnership with the city's 14 YouthSource Centers and with funding from the Hilton Foundation. YouthSource Centers are publicly funded to provide educational and career development programming to youth ages 16-24. Para Los Niños is a community-based organization operating two YouthSource Centers. This study focuses on Para Los Niños' Youth Advisory Councils.

# How Are Youth Involved?

There are many different roles that youth may play in the policy process as they share their lived expertise. Their roles may continuously shift over time and depend on the activity. The Framework organizes youth roles into three categories, defined below in Table 2 and shown in Figure 2. These roles are visualized in a triangle to reflect that youth often start in speaking roles and—with scaffolding, support, and intentional organizational shifts in leadership from adults to youth—move into co-design and design roles over time.<sup>i</sup> For more detail, see [Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework](#).

**Figure 2.** Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework: How Are Youth Involved?



**Table 2.** Definitions and Examples of Youth Roles

Role	Definition	Example
Speaking	Adults lead policy change, and youth share their ideas and opinions for policy change.	At Georgia EmpowerMENT, youth provided input via surveys to inform the organization’s initial focus on postsecondary education as a policy topic of interest. Youth also reviewed legislative language drafted by adults to address financial barriers to postsecondary education.
Co-designing	Youth and adults partner to lead policy change.	Youth from Para Los Niños were elected to leadership roles on the Youth Advisory Council and worked with staff to plan Youth Advisory Council meetings.
Designing	Youth lead policy change and adults assist.	Fellows from the New Orleans Youth Alliance developed a policy platform with recommendations for change in youth-serving systems related to health and well-being, safety and justice, and economic stability. They spearheaded discussions and petition signing activities with local decision makers to garner support for their policy platform.

## Youths' roles are dynamic, and youth may take on more than one role or shift roles depending on activities.

All five policy wins in this project demonstrated youth serving in all three roles of speaking, co-designing, and designing. We found that youths' participation in these roles can be fluid in nature, as youth can serve in more than one role simultaneously or over time and depending on the activity. For example, the LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative's Young Leaders pushed for deeper involvement on the Director's Youth Advisory Council, and they transitioned into co-design and design roles where they were not just advising policy but helping write it. As they moved into co-designing and designing roles, Young Leaders described having the autonomy and support from the LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative to share their experiences and ideas openly.

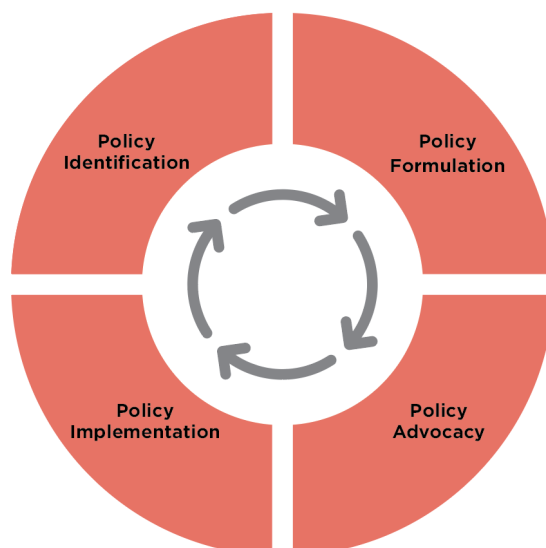
## Additional opportunities exist for youth to move into designing roles throughout all stages of the policy process.

While youth served in all roles, we found that among the profiled organizations, youth were often less likely to serve in designing roles. Specifically, we found that for three of the five organizations, examples of youth serving in designing roles were less commonly described than co-designing and speaking roles. While the profiled organizations value youth leadership and provide opportunities for youth who are interested in designing roles to participate, there are opportunities at other stages of the policy process to provide scaffolding to support youth in moving from speaking roles into co-designing and designing roles, with adults serving in a supportive capacity.

## At What Stages Are Youth Engaged?

Youth may be engaged at different stages within the policy process. The Framework organizes the policy process into four stages, defined below in Table 3 and shown in Figure 3. For detailed examples of the ways in which young people can engage in each stage of the policy process, see [Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework](#).

**Figure 3.** Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework: At What Stages Are Youth Engaged?





**Table 3.** Policy Stage Definitions and Examples

Policy Stage	Definition	Example
Policy Identification	Identifying the problem and gathering background information	Youth surveys informed both Georgia EmpowerMENT's initial focus on postsecondary education and Para Los Niños' focus on employment and housing barriers for youth.
Policy Formulation	Formulating policy solutions, including drafting policy	Fellows from New Orleans Youth Alliance served on a working group to design the Youth Master Plan: a youth-led comprehensive roadmap for creating and sustaining positive youth development.
Policy Advocacy	Advocating for policy change through a variety of mechanisms such as building coalitions, educating decisionmakers, and building public awareness	The Center for Fair Futures' Youth Advisory Board organized virtual rallies during the COVID-19 pandemic, attended by hundreds of participants, to gather support in securing public funding for the Fair Futures tutoring and coaching program model.
Policy Implementation	Monitoring and supporting implementation of policy changes	Young Leaders from the LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative continue to collaborate with their local child welfare agency in weekly planning meetings where they discuss desired outcomes, staff support, and more to implement the agency's new Youth Engagement Section.

## Youth are often engaged across multiple stages of the policy process.

All the organizations profiled involved young people throughout the policy process, though the timing and focus of their engagement varied. Some began in policy identification, while others started in policy advocacy or policy formulation. The various stages in which organizations engaged youth generally mirrored the stage of the policy process each organization was focused on. For example, the bulk of the Center for Fair Futures' youth engagement fell in the policy advocacy stage as their policy win focused on advocating for public funding. Para Los Niños' youth engagement was focused more on policy identification, which is consistent with the organization's focus on building Youth Advisory Councils to engage youth to provide feedback to improve programming.

## Youth were most likely to be engaged in policy advocacy and least likely to be engaged in policy implementation.

While youth were engaged in all stages of the policy process, we found that the extent to which they were engaged varied by stage. For four out of five organizations profiled, policy advocacy was the

### **A youth advocate with Georgia EmpowerMENT described their role in policy formulation and policy advocacy:**

*"So I helped lead focus groups, helped do research on outcomes and things for former foster care alumni. So basically, what are the rates of youth that want to go to postsecondary education or technical school and what are the rates of those that actually attempt? What are the barriers to entry? [...] What are the outcomes in terms of housing, health care, things like that, if they don't achieve some postsecondary education? So I worked within that group, speaking to the Senate, speaking to the legislators."*

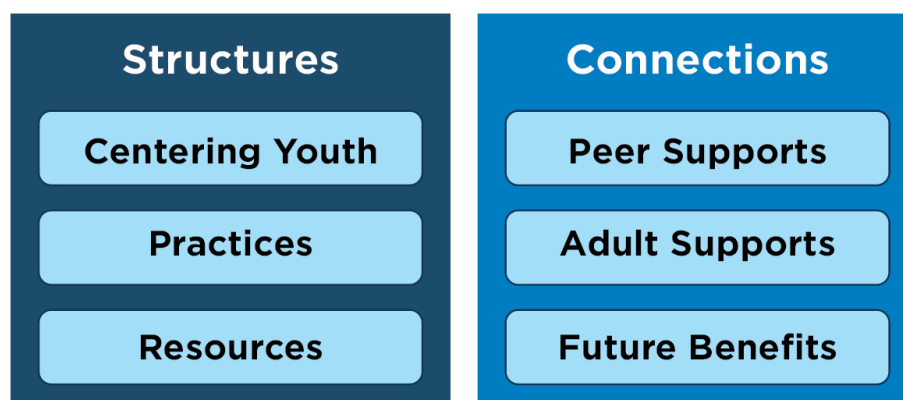


most common stage at which young people were engaged. Policy advocacy included examples of meeting with decision makers, organizing and speaking at rallies, coalition building, testifying before government bodies, and social media campaigns. On the other hand, policy implementation was mentioned the least for four out of five organizations profiled. In this project, policy implementation examples included youth meeting regularly with county agencies to implement policy (LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative) and serving on an Implementation Committee to inform the rollout of a new publicly funded program (Center for Fair Futures). While this may be due in part to the nature of the policy wins profiled, this finding is consistent with prior research<sup>v</sup> and the experiences of the Research Group and points to opportunities to expand youth engagement strategies during the policy implementation stage.

## How Do Organizations Empower and Support Youth: Applying the Framework

The Framework groups organizational strategies to empower and support youth into two categories, defined below in Table 4 and illustrated in Figure 4. For a detailed graphic, see the [Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework](#).

**Figure 4.** Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework: How do Organizations Empower and Support Youth?



**Table 4.** Organizational Strategy Definitions and Examples

Organizational Strategy	Definition	Example
<b>Structures that support youth engagement (i.e., how organizations conduct their work)</b>		
Centering Youth	Adopting specific frameworks (e.g., holistic wellbeing framework) or broader values related to shifting decision-making power and leadership to youth and viewing youth as experts	The LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative uses a Healing Centered Engagement approach, <sup>vi</sup> which values lived experience and supports leadership, well-being, and healing. Using this approach, LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative recognizes Young Leaders as whole people while empowering them to drive change within the child welfare system.

Organizational Strategy	Definition	Example
Practices	Supporting authentic youth engagement through recruitment strategies, regular meeting structures, mutual respect between adults and youth, safe spaces where youth feel comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences, flexible and accessible participation options, regular debriefing of youth experiences, and transparent communication	New Orleans Youth Alliance holds in person and virtual meetings to promote accessibility, allows for flexible youth participation with an open-door policy, and regularly revisits community guidelines during meetings, which serve as norms and expectations for the Fellowship.
Resources	Providing financial compensation and other resources (e.g., transportation) to facilitate participation, connecting youth with external resources to meet their individual needs, training youth and adults, and equipping youth with data and information	Para Los Niños connects Youth Advisory Council members to services and programming, provides a monthly stipend, and provides food and transportation for in-person meetings.
<b>Connections that organizations facilitate between youth and their peers and adults</b>		
Peer Supports	Youth foster an inclusive community, build relationships, and provide emotional support when needed.	The Center for Fair Futures' Youth Advisory Board members developed deep relationships with their peers through regular teambuilding activities and annual retreats.
Adult Supports	Adults support youth on a regular basis, develop mentoring relationships with youth, and connect youth with external resources to support their engagement.	Georgia EmpowerMENT staff support youth through the policy process, provide individualized support for their well-being, and advocate on their behalf. Young people described feeling cared for and advocated for when staff stepped in to mediate between young people and other adult partners when needed.
Future Benefits	Organizations support youths' professional development beyond a specific policy action (e.g., through internships and networking opportunities).	The LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative supports Young Leaders with resume and cover letter development and facilitates professional connections between Young Leaders and other programs and organizations.

All of these organizational strategies play an important role in empowering and supporting youth. Each organization profiled demonstrated all strategies within structures and connections, pointing to strong commonalities in the organizations' approaches to supporting authentic youth engagement.

## Youth training equips youth with knowledge and skills to take action.

Youth training was the most frequently identified structural resource provided to youth across the five policy wins. Youth received training to develop their leadership, communication, advocacy, and networking skills, as well as training on the policymaking processes and historical context for their jurisdictions. New Orleans Youth Alliance's 6-week policy series is an example of youth training, during which youth learn about policies from topic experts in areas such as health, transportation, and housing; build community relationships; and develop skills to engage in advocacy and leadership opportunities related to their topics of interest. When making meaning of these findings, the project's Research Group elaborated that training provides youth with a foundation from which to take action and also serves as a protective factor by helping them learn to strategically share their experiences in ways that prevent further harm and retraumatization.

**A Youth Advisory Council member at Para Los Niños described the training they received on topics such as effective communication, leadership, and managing meetings:**

*"I went to this meeting in which we were tackling how to better communicate with one another so we could bring ideas and not try to like, make an argument about it, but come to an agreement."*

## Adult support was integral to all five policy wins.

Of the three types of connections facilitated by organizations (i.e., adult support, peer support, and future benefits), adult support was the most frequently identified across interviewees and documents reviewed. In all five organizations, young people were supported by a designated adult staff member who built ongoing relationships with the young people. In addition to supporting young people throughout the policy process (e.g., facilitating connections to partners and decision makers, and lending their advocacy expertise to youths' efforts), staff were described as caring for youths' wellbeing in a holistic manner. They provided one-on-one support, checked in with youth in between meetings, and helped youth connect to external resources when needed. Youth partnering with Georgia EmpowerMENT described examples of organizational staff advocating for youth and mediating challenging dynamics between youth and external partners. Youth partnering with the Center for Fair Futures, Georgia EmpowerMENT, and the LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative valued when staff shared their lived experience in foster care, which youth reported enabled staff to relate to youth in a uniquely supportive way.

**A New Orleans Youth Alliance Fellow described the support they received from staff:**

*"...[Fellowship Coordinator] checks up on me, randomly asks me how I'm feeling and that's – it's a small thing for me that matters because it's not often you get that – a person that asks you how you're feeling, is there anything I can do to help, how can I support, so I really appreciate moments like that."*

## Organizations face challenges related to training for adults and recruiting youth with diverse experiences and identities.

While youth training was mentioned numerous times, there were fewer mentions of training for adult partners. This could indicate an opportunity for organizations to ensure that staff members and partners receive training and support to partner with youth. While many staff members were described as bringing prior professional and lived experience to their work with young people, interviewees from the Center for Fair Futures reflected that it would have been helpful to have provided training to adults on how to partner with youth. Interviewees from New Orleans Youth Alliance underscored the importance of continued training for both staff and partners. They noted that training could help to combat adultism, which one youth

described as “turning down youth ideas or making us feel like what we think or what we wanna do isn’t as important.”

Interviewees from Georgia EmpowerMENT and the Center for Fair Futures described the importance of having a range of diverse youth perspectives (e.g., youth from marginalized communities, youth in rural areas, youth with disabilities, and youth with a range of experiences in foster care such as residential placement). At the same time, they noted that some youth may face barriers to participation (e.g., accessibility) which need to be taken into consideration to promote greater access to engagement opportunities.

## The absence of these organizational strategies—or incomplete implementation of them—can impede authentic youth engagement.

While the presence of these organizational strategies can help support authentic youth engagement in the policy process, the Research Group identified ways in which the absence of these strategies, or incomplete implementation of them, can impede engagement. For example:

- **Centering youth.** Adopting a youth-led philosophy without developing youths’ skills and supporting them to participate in the ways that work best for them as individuals does not set youth up for success and could cause harm.
- **Future benefits.** While connection to other professional development opportunities can facilitate authentic youth engagement, adults may perpetuate harm if they make promises they cannot keep.
- **Adult training.** Trainings for organizational staff and partners may hinder authentic youth engagement and cause harm if the trainings are not developed in partnership with youth nor representative of the range of young people’s experiences and identities.
- **Youth training.** Trainings for youth may limit their creativity if they focus narrowly on one way of approaching an issue and do not represent diverse perspectives.
- **Peer support.** While peer support can serve as a facilitator of authentic youth engagement, challenging peer dynamics can serve as a hindrance. For example, youth may be continuing to develop their social skills and gain confidence in themselves, which can lead to conflicts, imbalanced workloads, and blurred lines between professional relationships and friendships. With training and adult support, youth can gain tools to navigate these dynamics and have difficult conversations.
- **Adult support.** While adult support can facilitate authentic youth engagement, organizational staff and partners can have a negative influence on engagement when they adopt paternalistic or adultist views or have less experience with authentic youth engagement. Even with intentional efforts to build collaborative relationships, youth may still view adults as authority figures and feel uncomfortable disagreeing with adults.

# What Local Factors Help or Hinder Authentic Youth Engagement?

Much of the work engaging youth in the policy process is influenced by the organization, but there are other local contextual factors (e.g., political, geographical, and historical characteristics) that can help or hinder authentic youth engagement as well. The Framework organizes contextual factors into six categories, defined below in Table 5 and illustrated in Figure 5. For a detailed graphic, see [Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework](#).

**Figure 5.** Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework: What Local Factors Help or Hinder Authentic Youth Engagement?



**Table 5.** Local Factor Definitions and Examples

Local Factor	Definition	Example
Stakeholder and partner engagement	Stakeholders' and partners' receptivity to and engagement with youth	The Center for Fair Futures shared that they benefitted from the buy-in and engagement of both decisionmakers (stakeholders) and community partners.
Political landscape	The effect of local and/or state politics (e.g., majority political party's policy priorities) on youth engagement and state and local policies	Youth from New Orleans Youth Alliance found it fairly easy to garner support for their policy recommendations because the decision makers they spoke to were committed to supporting policy change at the city-level.
History of youth engagement	Historical and recent examples of youth engagement in the community	Historically, opportunities for youth engagement in New Orleans were described as limited, which helped spur the creation of the New Orleans Youth Alliance Fellowship in 2019.

Local Factor	Definition	Example
Philanthropic/private support	Funder investments in youth engagement	Philanthropic and private support for the Center for Fair Futures' work included significant financial contributions to the advocacy work and representation from local foundation leaders on the Steering Committee. Through this financial and relational support, youth from the Center for Fair Futures were able to expand the reach of their advocacy throughout the community.
Historical local and systemic inequities	Inequitable access to supports and resources	Youth Advisory Council members at Para Los Niños described living in communities with fewer resources and unmet needs related to housing, mental health, and education. Para Los Niños' YouthSource Centers seek to address these historical inequities with a particular focus on youth who are not in school or working; youth described joining the Youth Advisory Councils to advocate for their communities' needs and raise awareness about available resources.
Geography and infrastructure	Physical landscape and infrastructure (e.g., transportation) available to support youth engagement	Para Los Niños' Youth Advisory Councils were formed with infrastructure support from the Los Angeles City Youth Development Department, including trainings, recruitment and curriculum materials, and standardized requirements.

## Stakeholder and partner engagement, the political landscape, and philanthropic/private support were common local factors.

While each contextual factor had an influence on all five policy wins, some of the most common contextual factors included:

- External parties—including stakeholders and partners—**influenced opportunities for and outcomes from authentic youth engagement. Research Group members defined a partner as someone with whom there is a shared understanding of the value and expertise young people bring to the policy process and who will support both young people and the organization in moving their policy agenda forward. On the other hand, a stakeholder is more likely to be a decision maker who has power to make the policy change young people are working towards. Stakeholders may be less likely to have a shared understanding of the value and expertise young people bring to the policy process, so organization staff often engage with them to help build this understanding. A stakeholder might also be engaged for one phase or activity of the policy process rather than throughout the entire process.
- The political landscape can affect the success of youth engagement in policy advocacy.** Not only does the political landscape affect the likelihood of a policy change occurring, but it can also affect the success of youth engagement in policy advocacy. Research Group members shared that the political

**A New Orleans Youth Alliance Fellow described that elected officials valued their lived experience and wanted to act on it:**

*"To be honest with you, the buy in wasn't that complicated. [...] And so that tells me that there is a universal observation that these young folk are going through what they're going through."*

landscape influenced how they work and operate during the policy process. Consideration of who has power and where that power is located changed how youth and adult supporters communicate about their work and how they interacted with partners and stakeholders. All the organizations profiled shared examples of how the political landscape relates to their policy win. Some youth navigated challenges engaging some elected officials (e.g., Georgia EmpowerMENT), while youth at other organizations reported positive experiences (e.g., New Orleans Youth Alliance).

- **Philanthropic and other private support provided flexibility that supports the work of engaging youth in the policy process.** According to Research Group members, philanthropic and private support was a huge help to youth engagement in the policy process. This type of support operates in a way that values relationships and relationship building and often provides flexibility for discovery and innovation in a way that public funding and support might not.

**An external partner to Center For Fair Futures described how philanthropic partners financially support youth engagement:**

*“One of the benefits of us being so engaged was we [funders] could be incredibly responsive [...] to meet the funding needs. And when we realized that we really needed youth voice and young people leading [...we] were pretty quick to be able to mobilize some funding to support the initial coordinator and then to provide a fund of stipends for [...] a broader group of young people to really be able to engage in the Youth Advisory Board as that developed.”*

## What Outcomes Are Achieved Through Authentic Youth Engagement?

The Framework organizes outcomes resulting from youth engagement into several levels, defined below in Table 6 and illustrated in Figure 6. For a detailed graphic, see [Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework](#). This project focused on organizational and policy outcomes.

**Figure 6.** Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework: What Outcomes Are Achieved Through Authentic Youth Engagement?



**Table 6.** Outcome Definitions and Examples

Outcome	Definition	Example
Policy outcomes	Administrative and/or legislative policy changes, and the intermediate steps that lead to these changes (e.g., increased decision maker awareness, new coalitions)	Georgia EmpowerMENT’s Tuition Waiver Coalition is an example of coalition and partnership building, where youth worked alongside partner organizations to advocate for greater access to postsecondary education for youth with foster care experience.



Outcome	Definition	Example
Community outcomes	Changes within the community (e.g., how youth are engaged by other entities, shifting community narratives of youths' strengths and needs, and more equitable access to services)	The Center for Fair Futures' Youth Advisory Board has raised awareness among the general public of issues facing youth with foster care experience.
Organizational outcomes	Changes in how the organization engages youth	Para Los Niños has created more youth-led events, with increased youth participation. The organization has added more resources to meet needs identified by youth, and other departments within Para Los Niños have created youth leadership opportunities.
Youth outcomes	Changes for individual youth (e.g., increased self-efficacy, skill development, and sense of belonging)	Many former and current Young Leaders with LA Opportunity Youth Collaborative have taken career paths related to their advocacy work.

## Authentic youth engagement resulted in interrelated changes at the policy, community, organizational, and youth levels.

We identified outcomes across all four domains for all organizations profiled. While useful to examine outcomes at each level, Research Group members stressed the interconnections between outcomes (e.g., when organizations create opportunities for youth leadership, youth take them and grow, and then when organizational staff see youth in more leadership roles within the organization, it reinforces the importance of sharing power and centering youth in the organization's work).

Authentic youth engagement:

- **Contributed to multiple intermediate outcomes along the path to policy change.** The most commonly identified policy outcomes were coalition and partnership building, increased decision maker support and cross-system awareness of policy issues championed by young people, securing funding or increasing investment in youth-serving programs, and greater youth engagement in youth-serving organizations or policymaking spaces.
- **Increased awareness of youth issues in the community and inspired more opportunities for youth engagement.** The most frequently identified community outcomes were increased awareness of youth issues in other organizations or funders and increased youth engagement opportunities within the community. Other themes included building a pipeline to youth leadership opportunities and the grantee organization serving as a model of authentic youth engagement in the community.

**A staff member from New Orleans Youth Alliance shared how their Youth Leadership Fellowship has supported increased youth leadership across their community:**

*"Work keeps building and building, more people doing this work. More youth who have opportunities to be a part of it... It's an ecosystem that has developed... Not saying that we started it, but we helped build a framework that other organizations have seen. Not trying to copy [our] exact thing, but focusing on youth leadership because they understand the importance of youth being leaders in the spaces they're in."*

- **Moved organizations toward a youth-centered culture and increased youth leadership opportunities within organizations.** The most frequently identified organizational outcomes were an enhanced youth-centered organizational culture and increased youth/alumni leadership within the organization (e.g., leading events/trainings, serving as board members). Related organizational outcomes included stronger relationships between young people and staff as well as between the organization and its partners, and increased organizational capacity to support youth advocates. Research Group members observed changes in the power dynamics within their organizations, leading to more equitable practices and a shift away from tokenism toward formal roles of power for young people.
- **Empowers young people.** The most frequently identified outcome for youth participating in the policy process was youth empowerment (e.g., increased self-efficacy, confidence, personal growth, and sense of purpose). Other youth outcomes identified included improved leadership skills and civic engagement, opportunities for networking and professional development, peer support and a sense of belonging, and skill development and capacity building.

**A youth advocate described how their involvement in advocating for their policy win led to personal outcomes:**

*"This whole process has been awesome as far as the people who are willing to hear us, the connections that it has allowed us to make, the networking that it has allowed us to make. I have, because of this policy work, I mean, like I said, it's leaked out into so many other areas, especially personally in our lives, I think a lot of us have gained other opportunities because of this policy work. I mean, there's no way that I would be in law school if [policy win] was not a thing."*

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The five policy wins profiled through this study raise important considerations for organizations that work with youth, funders, public partners (i.e., policymakers and implementers, such as legislators and public agency leaders/staff), and researchers. We summarize key takeaways and associated recommendations for these audiences below. While youth are the most critical partner in every effort profiled, adults are responsible for creating the conditions for authentic youth engagement. Thus, the recommendations that follow are directed at different groups of adults. For additional resources on youth engagement, please see Appendix C: Resources.

- **The Authentic Youth Engagement Framework applies across organizational and local contexts and a variety of policy wins.** The Framework refined through this project demonstrated close alignment with five distinct policy efforts and contexts and can be applied in different environments to plan for, monitor, and expand authentic youth engagement in the policy process.
  - **Recommendations for organizations:** Use the Framework as a tool to assess your current authentic youth engagement practices and identify opportunities to strengthen engagement within your organizational and local context.
  - **Recommendations for funders:** Use the Framework to examine current investments in and identify opportunities to expand and support authentic youth engagement (e.g., providing funding to bolster individual organizations' capacity to support and engage youth).
  - **Recommendations for public partners:** Use the Framework to identify opportunities for authentic youth engagement and stages of the policy process at which you can engage young people.
  - **Recommendations for researchers:** Further research the Framework across additional policy wins and organizational and local contexts and refine as needed.

- **More work remains to support youth in co-designing and designing roles, where youth hold greater leadership.** While youth and adults expressed the importance of youth leadership, youth more frequently served in speaking or co-designing roles for three of the five policy wins. It takes time and intention to scaffold and support young people to move into greater leadership roles and build organizational capacity to share power between adults and young people.
  - **Recommendations for organizations:** Build capacity for youth leadership at the individual and organizational levels by moving stepwise from speaking to co-designing to designing over time. Build an infrastructure that supports power sharing and a youth-centered approach by compensating young people, establishing formal roles for young people and adults, and holding adults and young people accountable to partnership and mutual respect.
  - **Recommendations for funders:** Identify and fund organizations who are ready to support young people's engagement in co-designing and designing roles.
  - **Recommendations for public partners:** Identify opportunities to partner with young people in co-designing and designing roles as you create and implement policies. Identify the preparation and infrastructure—including training for public agency staff—needed to facilitate effective partnership with young people.
  - **Recommendations for researchers:** Examine the models and frameworks organizations use to support youth leadership and their fidelity to those models. Qualitatively explore how youth perceive their co-designing and designing roles, what trainings youth have found most helpful in supporting their leadership, and how organizations empower youth leadership while maintaining a focus on their organization's mission and vision.
- **Adult support is a key component, and more attention to adult training and ongoing coaching can help ensure that staff members and partners are prepared to support authentic youth engagement.**
  - **Recommendations for organizations:** Hire dedicated staff member(s) who are passionate about building trusting relationships with youth. Provide initial and ongoing training that addresses the power dynamics between adults and young people, encourages adult awareness of their position and power, and addresses implicit biases. Foster an organizational culture that promotes accountability and ongoing feedback from young people. Engage youth in the hiring process and prioritize staff with lived experience in the systems youth are seeking to change and/or staff who are alumni of the organization.
  - **Recommendations for funders:** Identify, evaluate, and disseminate effective training models for adults partnering with young people on policy change. Support organizations that intentionally develop pathways for young people to move into formalized roles.
  - **Recommendations for public partners:** Seek training and other professional development opportunities to enhance your ability to authentically engage with young people.
  - **Recommendations for researchers:** Identify the key components of adult trainings and tools and remaining gaps. Evaluate training models for adult supporters. Qualitatively explore what positive adult allyship looks like to adults and youth. Conduct a qualitative study of youth advocates who moved into formal roles to understand the support that is needed along that pathway and opportunities to increase lived experience in formal advocacy roles.
- **Policy implementation is a stage that would benefit from increased authentic youth engagement to ensure that policies reach their intended goals.** While it may have been due in part to the nature of the policy wins profiled, implementation was the stage at which youth were least involved for four of the five organizations. Implementation is an intensive stage of the policy process that often moves at a slower pace than the other stages.

- **Recommendations for organizations:** Prepare youth for implementation efforts to take time. Educate and support public partners to authentically engage young people. Designate a staff member to support implementation over time, which is especially important when public partners and young people transition out of their roles.
- **Recommendations for funders:** Identify and fund organizations engaging young people in policy implementation activities. Support organizations to build public partners' capacity to partner with young people.
- **Recommendations for public partners:** Policy implementation often occurs within youth-serving systems. Authentically engaging young people in this process can help avoid unintended consequences and ensure policies achieve their desired outcomes.
- **Recommendations for researchers:** Address gaps in this study by researching ongoing policy efforts—particularly longer-term implementation efforts and qualitatively exploring public partners' perspectives on, experiences with, and barriers to engaging with youth. Explore whether authentic youth engagement leads to cost and/or time savings.
- **Authentic youth engagement is associated with positive outcomes at the individual, organizational, community, and policy levels.**
  - **Recommendations for organizations:** Build and expand organizational capacity to engage and support youth in the policy process. Educate partners to build their capacity for authentic youth engagement, and develop shared values and practices between your organization and your partners for engaging and centering youth.
  - **Recommendations for funders:** Continue to fund and strengthen organizations' capacity for authentic youth engagement.
  - **Recommendations for public partners:** Acknowledge youth as experts in their own experiences and the systems they are impacted by and be willing to learn from youth.
  - **Recommendations for researchers:** Further explore the mechanisms through which authentic youth engagement leads to positive outcomes (e.g., are certain youth activities/roles more impactful than others, and in what contexts?). Evaluate the long-term effects of authentic youth engagement.

## Acknowledgments

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# Appendix A: Methodology and Data

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This project was a community-engaged research project: a collaborative approach to research that enables researchers and community members to develop and/or conduct research that is motivated by and meets the needs of a community. Child Trends conducted this qualitative study in partnership with a Research Group comprised of one youth representative and one adult representative from each of the five grantee organizations participating in the project. Research Group members were paid consultants to Child Trends. Child Trends served as the research and technical assistance partner and convened the Research Group 10 times from July 2024 to June 2025 to participate in the design of the study, data analysis, and dissemination of findings.

The Research Group refined the research questions for this study, which included:

1. How have Hilton Foundation's grantees engaged youth to develop, advocate for, and/or implement policy change?
2. What are local contextual factors that help or hinder youth engagement in policy advocacy? How have these local factors influenced youth engagement in policy advocacy?
3. What conditions within Hilton Foundation grantee organizations help or hinder youth engagement in policy advocacy? How have these conditions influenced youth engagement in policy advocacy?
4. How has engaging youth influenced Hilton Foundation grantee organizations' policy advocacy and outcomes?

At the beginning of the project, Child Trends built on existing frameworks<sup>i,ii</sup> to refine the Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework. Research Group members provided feedback and revisions based on their experiences. The draft Framework was tested and refined through an examination of one recent policy win for each of the five organizations. Research Group members identified their policy wins, compiled relevant documentation, and recruited their peers and partners to participate in interviews. Child Trends conducted 30 virtual interviews with 42 interviewees who were compensated \$50 for their time, and supplemented this information with 27 documents reviewed.

Child Trends then coded all transcripts and documents in Dedoose and conducted thematic analysis. The Research Group met for a series of individual and full group meaning making meetings to revise the Framework and apply it to each organization's policy win. We had three full Research Group meetings focused on meaning making. Notes from all Research Group meetings were included in our analysis as an additional source of data for this study, as Research Group members shared from their own experiences and insights.

The final Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework, presented here, was expanded to include local contextual factors that influence youth engagement in the policy process. Child Trends completed a pattern matching analysis to determine the extent to which the final Framework aligned with each of the five policy wins, as detailed in this report. Research Group members were instrumental in finalizing the written products and developing our dissemination plan.

## Appendix B: Limitations

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This study profiles five unique examples of organizations engaging youth in the policy process. The organizations were selected based on input from the Hilton Foundation and the organizations' availability to participate. While the Hilton Foundation sought to prioritize diversity in some characteristics (e.g., geography and how youth were engaged), we did not purposefully select organizations to be representative of all relevant characteristics (e.g., the stage of the policy process at which youth were engaged). The organizations varied in size and function (e.g., service providers, advocacy organizations), operated in four different local contexts and political environments, and employed different mechanisms for engaging youth in the policy process (e.g., advisory boards, training cohorts). The policy wins of focus occurred at both the local and state levels and led to changes in both administrative and legislative policy. While it is affirming that the Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework demonstrates a good fit across these five organizations, the policy wins profiled – and therefore our findings and the Framework itself – are not representative of the full range of authentic youth engagement approaches, contributing factors, and outcomes.

# Appendix C: Resources

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- New Orleans Youth Alliance's *Authentic Youth Engagement Checklist*: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a5fb5adb1ffb6cb741dbee5/t/5defe8618594a9745b8f273e/1576003809004/NOYA+Authentic+Youth+Engagement+Checklist>
- Every Hour Counts' *Engaging Youth in Policy and Advocacy: A Guide for Intermediary Organizations*: <https://everyhourcounts.medium.com/engaging-youth-in-policy-and-advocacy-a-guide-for-intermediary-organizations-4b96123c04c8>
- National Homelessness Law Center, TrueSelf LLC, and Alston & Bird's *Youth Compensation Legal Guide*: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1iB2zBoIH8u6EVksNDRtdNzwmfydOUfKY/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.epomb2ncphwy>
- Thriving Families, Safer Children's *Equitable Compensation Taskforce Report*: [https://cdn.ymaws.com/flchildren.org/resource/resmgr/custompages/tfsc/tfsc equitable compensation .pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/flchildren.org/resource/resmgr/custompages/tfsc/tfsc_equitable_compensation.pdf)
- Urban Institute's *Youth Engagement in Policy, Research, and Practice Community Voice and Power Sharing Guidebook*: [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104936/youth-engagement-in-policy-research-and-practice\\_0.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104936/youth-engagement-in-policy-research-and-practice_0.pdf)
- Journey to Success' *Federal Advocacy Insider's Guide*: <https://www.journeytosuccess.org/advocacy-insiders-guide-introduction>
- Michigan State University and The Neutral Zone's *Youth-Adult Partnership Rubric: A tool for professional development and program evaluation in youth settings*: <https://cep.msu.edu/projects/yaprubric>



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