

Inspiring Healthy Communities

Empowering Youth in Los Angeles County



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & GRATITUDE

Deep appreciation to the many youth, community-based organizations, and schools working passionately to improve the health and well-being of communities in South Central Los Angeles, Southeast Los Angeles, and the San Gabriel Valley.

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What Did We Study and Why?

Champions for Change Youth Engagement Projects

In 2013, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) awarded Champions for Change funding to five community-based organizations through a competitive solicitation process. Funding for these projects was provided to Los Angeles County by the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Branch (NEOPB) via the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education program (SNAP-Ed). Each organization was tasked to conduct youth-led nutrition education and obesity prevention projects through fiscal year 2016 based on the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) framework—a practice-tested model that engages youth in the power of research to address issues that contribute to obesity and chronic disease. Each organization recruited a minimum of four teams, comprised of at least six youth ages 12 to 18 years in eligible communities. Adult allies, specific staff hired to guide and mentor youth teams through their projects, focus on three main goals:

1. Increasing access to and consumption of fruits and vegetables;
2. Increasing daily physical activity opportunities; and
3. Decreasing consumption of sugary beverages.



Assessment Purpose and Goals

Two years after launching youth engagement efforts, LACDPH requested a series of qualitative assessments to examine the application nuances of project implementation to inform future program planning. Results will refine Youth Engagement programs, the YPAR model, troubleshoot issues, and improve services.

One goal of this research is to discover factors that contribute to successful implementation of Youth Engagement programs, including documenting impacts on participating youth, their families, friends, schools, and communities. Research also focused on understanding the alignment between the YPAR framework and the on-the-ground efforts of program implementation.

Champions for Change Awardees and Youth-led Projects



Community Services Unlimited

The mission is to foster the creation of communities actively working

to address the inequalities and systemic barriers that make sustainable communities and self-reliant lifestyles unattainable.

- Increased produce stand traffic
- Increased EBT access at produce stands and farmers' markets
- Opened new produce stands to increase access to fresh produce
- Increased number of corner stores that offer fresh produce



The Children's Collective

The primary mission is to provide high quality, comprehensive, educational and family support services to women,

minorities, children, youth, families and other adults in South Los Angeles.

- Increased water access on campus
- Increased opportunities for structured physical activity on campus
- Established healthy school-wide events/celebrations
- Increased availability of healthy food and beverages sold at the student store



Brotherhood Crusade

The principal mission is dedicated to building and sustaining an

institution that raises funds and resources from within the community and distributes those funds directly back into the community.

- Conducted market makeovers
- Developed joint use agreements
- Increased opportunities for structured physical activity
- Built and sustained edible gardens
- Established institutional healthy celebration policy



Day One

Day One builds vibrant, healthy cities by advancing public health, empowering youth and igniting change.

- Increased availability of healthy food and beverages sold at student store
- Installed hydration stations on campus and at local parks
- Increased opportunities for structured physical activity
- Strengthened school and district level wellness policy to support nutrition and physical activity efforts
- Established school wellness councils
- Adopted a city-wide Complete Streets Policy
- Advanced efforts for a city-wide healthy vending and food procurement policy



National Health Foundation

Dedicated to improving and enhancing the healthcare of the underserved by developing and supporting innovative programs that (1) can become independently viable, (2) provide systemic solutions to gaps in healthcare access and delivery, and (3) have the potential to be replicated nationally .

- Conducted market makeovers
- Revamped school garden into an edible garden
- Advanced efforts to promote complete streets for active transportation
- Transformed the school cafeteria to support healthy eating
- Established a school wellness council
- Adopted school-wide healthy celebration policy
- Re-designed Breakfast in the Classroom program



What Data Informed This Report?

The Public Health Institute (PHI) Center for Wellness and Nutrition worked in partnership with Converge Consulting Research and Training to conduct the assessment over a five-month period from May to September 2015.

DOCUMENT REVIEW¹

- Literature review of 13 studies on youth engagement quality and the YPAR model
- Review of 61 internal documents, such as project plans and recruitment plans
- Review of websites and associated documents

INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

- Key informant interviews with 10 adult allies, two from each of the funded organizations, and one staff person from Los Angeles County Department of Public Health
- Five focus groups with 36 youth associated with each of the funded organizations

SURVEYS

- Organizational capacity assessment survey from 26 project staff
- Post retrospective surveys from 36 youth
- Adult ally feedback survey from 36 youth



Background and Context

Engaging youth using the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) framework is a growing public health approach to address nutrition and obesity-related illnesses in California. YPAR projects typically seek to strengthen youth voice, build relationships between peers, adults, and community stakeholders, as well as increase youth participation in effecting community change. Successful YPAR projects are flexible and adaptable to the needs of youth; recruit youth with diverse life experience and cultural backgrounds; ensure a youth-friendly environment; and exhibit organizational capacity/readiness such as dedicated and trained staff, clear roles, and realistic timelines. YPAR projects have documented changes in knowledge, attitudes, and skills of youth participants, as well as changes in schools, community-based organizations, and the built environment.¹

The Youth Engagement Initiative began in 2006 as a pilot project through a partnership between *CDPH Network for a Healthy California*, PHI, and Youth in Focus. From an initial six sites, the initiative grew to include more than 67 projects by 2014. CDPH NEOPB defines YPAR as an:

“Inquiry process that includes critical thinking, information gathering, service learning, analysis, and logical problem solving, which builds networks and strengthens voices to address nutrition education issues. This framework leads to authentic and meaningful partnerships between youth researchers and an adult ally. The goal is to have young leaders actively working with support from an adult ally—leading to youth working statewide towards a healthier California.”²

Implementation of previous CDPH Youth Engagement projects followed the *Stepping Stones* YPAR curriculum, designed and tailored to adhere to USDA SNAP-Ed guidelines. Results are documented in two reports, *Inspiring Youth as Partners*³ and *Inspiring Youth, Growing Change*.⁴ Based on this work, the USDA now lists YPAR as a model, practice-tested, SNAP-Ed program in the *SNAP-Ed Obesity Prevention Toolkit for States*, where it is described as an:

“Intervention designed for youth, ages 12-18, to identify nutrition and physical activity environmental issues in their community, develop an action plan to resolve the issue, and implement the plan to improve their community.”⁵

The YPAR framework leads a group of young people through the following steps:

1. Identify an issue of greatest interest and relevance to the youth team.
2. Define what is known about the issue.
3. Identify what additional information and research is needed to understand the issue.
4. Determine the methods and approach the youth team will utilize to collect information.
5. Use the information for education, understanding, strategic action, and community change.



Strengths and Success Factors

Overall, the Youth Engagement projects are accomplishing their objectives to improve nutrition and physical activity, prevent obesity, and advance policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change strategies in low-income communities across Los Angeles County. While many successes, outcomes, and challenges are similar to findings in past research^{3,4}, these projects offer several innovations that depart from the statewide *Youth Engagement Initiative* implementation prior to 2013. Most notably, this complex work extends beyond stand-alone, YPAR projects and integrates other nutrition education obesity prevention activities. The following factors are important to the successful implementation of Youth Engagement programs within the County:

Comprehensive, Community-Based Approach

The five funded organizations are non-profit, community based organizations, with long and successful histories of working on behalf of children, youth, and families on a variety of local issues. Most incorporate community health improvement, youth development, and social justice into their missions and programs. The organizations partner closely with local schools, with project leadership and staff rooted in the community realm. This strategy benefits Youth Engagement projects with the selection of project sites, the capacity to work with youth, and the ability to leverage existing partnerships.

School Sites and Community-Based Sites

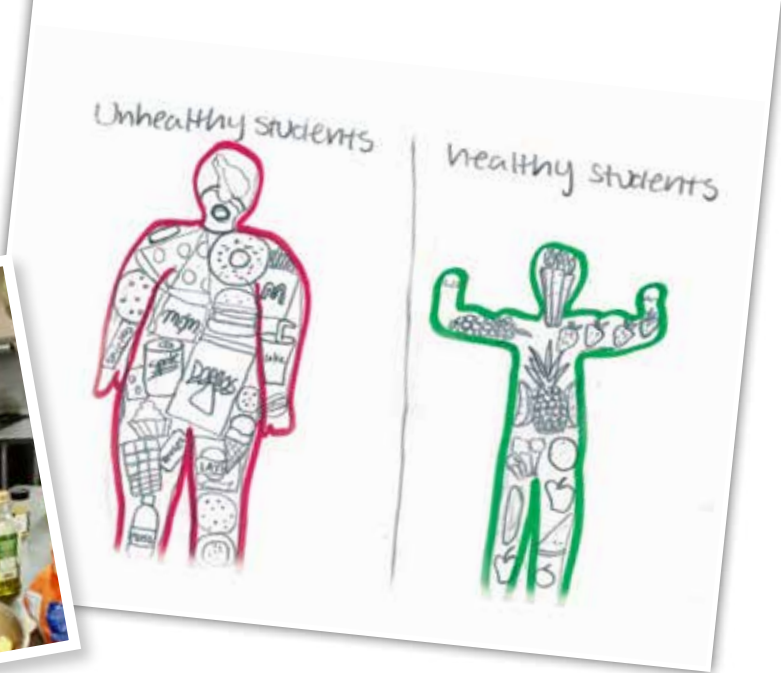
There are trade-offs, benefits, and drawbacks to any project site whether it is community or school-based. A school-based location offers organizational assets such as access to the student body, teachers, and facilities. Students often find it easier to participate in youth team meetings and activities, with fewer challenges related to transportation. Adult allies from the funded organizations reported the importance of partnering with schools.

In contrast, community-based teams, or teams that draw from multiple schools rather than one school site, expand the opportunity for youth engagement beyond a single location and create wider reach for the youth teams' activities. Through this wider reach, youth learn their school or community is not the only one facing similar challenges and there are other youth who want to create change. Community-based sites leverage organizational assets such as gyms and gardens, educational and physical activities, pathways to employment and college, and volunteer opportunities. Those working with community-based organizations also reported having computers available for youth to utilize, vans for transportation, and streamlined processes for parent permission slips to enable field trips.

Skilled Program Staff that Relate to Youth

All five organizations employ skilled program staff from the community who are able to successfully connect with young people. Adult allies serve as guides, primarily drawing on the *Stepping Stones* YPAR curriculum and other SNAP-Ed nutrition education materials as well as supplemental information, tools and field trips to inspire youth behavior changes, expand their thinking and enable informed decision-making about project activities. Adult allies are associated with the ability to relate well to youth, gain trust, and motivate success. In focus groups youth frequently reported that adult allies relate to them and "*know where we're coming from.*" Youth often described adult allies as fun, energetic, and supportive. Both adults and youth commonly attributed this to their "younger" age, which is generally estimated to be in the early-20s to mid-30s range.

Adult allies often share the accomplishments of other Youth Engagement projects in California so that youth teams learn about strategies such as hydration station implementation to increase water consumption and Complete Street Policies to support active transportation. Tools such as *Sketch Up*, a 3-D modeling



computer program, also help bring ideas alive and deepen youth's understanding of possible solutions. In some cases, based on what they learn about certain projects, youth teams decide to pursue different strategies.

Program staff regularly provide guidance, encouragement to go to college, a listening ear, and help with problem-solving. Adult allies generally lead youth through the process of project planning and research by explaining complex ideas and translate technical terms to help youth understand issues, policies, and choices. As one young person described:

"...Our adult allies really help us understand the steps that are needed to achieve our goal."

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

Varied Youth Recruitment Strategies

Recruitment and retention of youth is always one of the most common challenges for Youth Engagement projects. Most agencies found success by working with schools and using assistance from principals, teachers, and other school-based staff such as social workers or parent liaisons. Some agencies reached out to parents and several agencies successfully engaged youth team members to recruit their peers. A competitive application process coupled with framing participation as an opportunity for professional development to boost college readiness and help the community were among the successful strategies. One organization's recruitment efforts included promotional activities during lunch that appeal to teens such as a photo booth or taste tests of fruit-infused water, attracting young people to the program.

All programs have experienced attrition to varying degrees. This is not surprising given prior YPAR studies, and is in part due to the nature of young people, competing priorities and responsibilities in their lives, and seniors that move on after graduating. However, it was reported that some youth remain involved in projects after their formal obligation ends, return to participate in promotional and advocacy activities, or become adult allies for a new youth group. Past youth returning as adult allies was reported as one indicator of a successful youth-led project.

One funded organization, National Health Foundation, credits their competitive application process for helping to address retention issues. To be considered to participate in the Champions for Change program, youth are required to submit applications, obtain nominations from teachers or school administration, and go through an interview process. Recruiting committed youth from the beginning, resulted in less attrition when compared to other youth engagement efforts.

Effective Approaches to Working with Youth

Adult allies overwhelmingly described a range of effective youth development practices employed in their work. Generally, they emphasized the need to make it fun and engaging, connect with youth on a personal level, seek youth perspective, and allow youth to lead.

UTILIZE ICE BREAKERS AND DEMOCRACY

Youth research teams are established and oriented to the project by the adult ally. During this stage, group norms are formed through team building activities



Help you and
your friends
live to be 100!

such as icebreaker exercises and the development of ground rules. Adult allies and youth frequently identified icebreakers as a success factor at the preliminary team-building stage.

Adult allies and youth reported that team decisions are often made by voting after a discussion where all views are heard. The discussions at team meetings are key to learning, understanding research results, and deciding next steps for advancing their project.

MAKE IT FUN AND ENGAGING

Activities that are creative, involve movement, and enable youth to learn new skills are key to a successful Youth Engagement project. Fun activities are an incentive to get involved and stay involved, and allow youth and adults to build authentic relationships. Games, field trips, video production, and dancing are strategies that staff utilized to make Youth Engagement projects fun.

Continuity is also boosted by offering youth fun activities that enhance their skills and learning. Several adult allies reported that small rewards, recognition, and acknowledgement are important incentives that keep youth engaged. Examples include physical activity contests that award “bragging rights,” printed certificates of appreciation with photos that memorialize achievements, and field trips.

PhotoVoice and VideoVoice projects, where youth document opportunities and barriers to health through pictures and videos, also continue to be powerful methods for learning and communicating about community health issues. Youth are motivated and excited by activities that allow them to create something new and result in an end product.

CONNECT ON AN AUTHENTIC LEVEL

Adult allies consistently described ways in which they connected with youth beyond the nutrition education and physical activity focus. Staff reported taking the time to ask about youth interests, share personal stories to demonstrate an understanding of youth circumstances, encourage youth towards a positive future, and

emphasize the importance of caring for individual, family, and community health. Team meetings typically begin with a check-in before launching into project work. Adult allies emphasize longevity and building real, lasting relationships with youth, not just something short-term to accomplish a project. Several staff discussed the need to “*speak youth language*” including using modes of communication that youth prefer such as social media and texting.

A key component to connecting with youth on an authentic level is to be open and participate with youth side-by-side rather than direct them.

“...If you’re having them do an activity, do it too. Don’t make it where I’m the boss and you’re the child...Bring everybody to the same level so that there’s vulnerability. As long as you bring in some type of vulnerability about yourself, you learn that kids are pretty open....”

ADULT ALLY

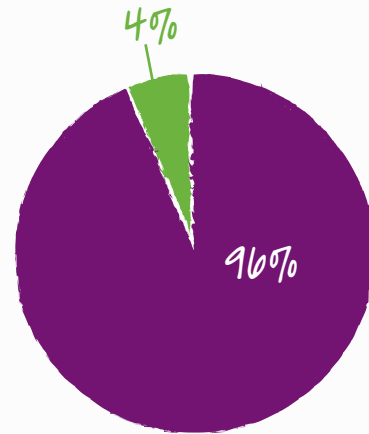
SEEK YOUTH PERSPECTIVE AND ALLOW YOUTH TO LEAD

Adult allies commonly described the need to seek youth perspective to inform project design and decisions as an important component of youth engagement and leadership. It was often emphasized that without youth voice and knowledge, projects may not be as successful. Youth selected health issues to explore, research methods, and strategies and locations that would work best for projects. For example, youth proposed selecting a local corner store across from their school to implement healthy changes. In another instance, youth put the brakes on a strategy that would offer Zumba classes at a nearby park understanding that it would not be safe due to community violence.

In focus groups, youth frequently mentioned learning from their peers, serving as a role model for peers and friends, collecting data, and conducting presentations as ways to provide leadership and influence their projects. The youth also mentioned specific moments when they provided leadership related to advocacy.

94% OF YOUTH PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THAT THEIR ADULT ALLY ALWAYS RESPECTED THEIR OPINIONS.

- Always.
- Mostly.
- Sometimes.
- Never.
- Not sure.



Examples of youth leadership include:

- Facilitating team meetings and activities
- Taking notes and records of meetings
- Educating peers, family, and community on nutrition education obesity prevention goals and issues
- Recruiting participants for surveys, food demonstrations, taste tests
- Administering surveys to gather data on community needs
- Leading food demonstrations
- Planning community events to build community support for projects
- Presenting at meetings with teachers, faculty, principals, store owners, and other stakeholders

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION AND PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Community mobilization is required to address the challenges and complexity of obesity prevention issues and implement effective solutions. While youth lead projects, adult allies play a critical support role by facilitating relationships and building support for youth projects. Adult allies help build networks, promote the Youth Engagement projects and goals, and open doors that might otherwise be closed to youth.

"The things we prioritized a lot were partnerships and exposures. Making sure that everywhere we go, people are very aware of what the youth are doing..."

ADULT ALLY

Relationship building is a strategy to establish Youth Engagement projects, an ongoing activity for project implementation, as well as an important factor for achieving successful PSE outcomes. Adult allies frequently described drawing on existing relationships and networks as well as seeking new connections to assist with implementing the Youth Engagement projects.

Pre-existing relationships between the funded organization and other community-based organizations, schools, and professional and personal networks often helped facilitate the launch of the Youth Engagement projects. In some cases, it was the youth team members who had pre-existing relationships that proved to be a key partnership for the project's success.

Through nutrition education, physical activity promotion, partnerships, participation at community events, social media, and other activities, the adult allies and youth are able to increase team presence and visibility of YPAR projects throughout the school and/or community. As a result, key stakeholders invite youth to provide their opinion and weigh in on other issues and projects.

"...Now they present topics back to [the youth] and ask, 'What do they think about this?'"

ADULT ALLY

INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC SPEAKING AND PRESENTATIONS

All projects provided multiple opportunities for youth to practice public speaking and give presentations, often at community events. Presentations are characterized as a

SURVEY QUESTIONS
 How often do you buy produce a week?
 a) 0-1 b) 2-4 c) 5 and more (days)
 Would you be interested in buying locally grown organic produce?
 a) Yes b) No
 If there was a farmer's market in your neighborhood, would you go?
 a) Yes b) No
 What is the most important factor in buying produce?
 a) Price b) Quality c) Location



key step in the YPAR framework; however, they are also a success strategy that keeps young people engaged, builds their skills and confidence, and educates the community on the PSE project.

Adult allies reported that youth presentations increase visibility in the community for their work - an accomplishment that helps further their nutrition education obesity prevention goals. Youth not only present research findings, but frequently provide nutrition education in their schools and communities.

A key component to advancing youth-led PSE projects is stakeholder engagement. Youth conduct research and gather data to identify a public health solution to

the issue. As youth continue to educate the community, they must also gain stakeholder buy-in to support implementation of their selected YPAR project. Youth teams lead efforts in reaching out to elected officials, presenting at neighborhood councils and city council meetings, as well as providing public comment on issue related to nutrition and obesity prevention.

Multi-Level Outcomes and Impact

All youth and adults reported multiple outcomes that resulted from their nutrition education obesity prevention work. These impacts occurred at individual, family, school, organizational, and community levels. Youth research, combined with nutrition education and physical activity strategies, are spurring change in school policies and community norms. The most frequently discussed effort focused on increasing access to healthy food followed by increasing water consumption.

Adult allies described youth efforts to create policy changes in their schools and communities. Examples included ensuring healthy foods and beverages are served at events, establishing school wellness councils, strengthening or enhancing school wellness policies, and advocating for passage of a city-wide *Complete*

Streets policy⁶ to encourage active transportation. Youth also influenced school norms related to increasing opportunities for physical activity by introducing *Instant Recess*⁷ along with healthy changes to food preparation and distribution in school cafeterias. At one high school, youth experimented with changes to the school breakfast program and discovered new approaches that increased participation and reduced food waste. This innovative approach is now spreading to the entire school and is being shared with others across California. While youth found it difficult to estimate the number of people the changes impact, one youth reflected,

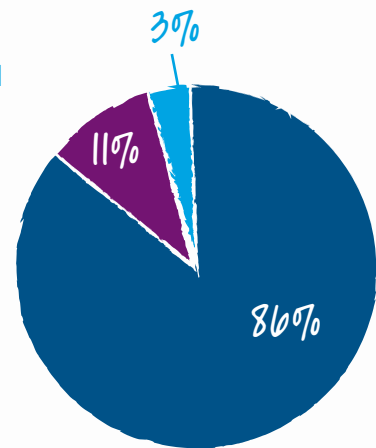
"I think we influenced people who are not even born yet."

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

YOUTH SELF REPORT
AFTER PARTICIPATING IN
THIS PROJECT

**“I HAVE LEARNED
THAT I CAN MAKE A
DIFFERENCE IN MY
COMMUNITY.”**

- Yes, definitely.
- Yes, probably.
- Not sure.
- Not really.



Pride in Accomplishment

Youth participants reported being most proud of the following accomplishments, some of which are described in the Success Stories:

- Adopting a city-wide Complete Streets policy in the city of El Monte
- Implementing a new bike lane to support active transportation and physical activity
- Establishing a healthy basketball league
- Creating a healthy snack bar at basketball games
- Implementing Instant Recess at high school
- Running a free exercise program for teachers, students and community members on campus
- Conducting Market Makeovers and coordinating grand re-openings to showcase healthy changes
- Installing hydration stations at schools and parks to increase water consumption
- Opening a new produce stand to increase access to fresh produce
- Establishing School Wellness Councils
- Re-modeling the school cafeteria to support healthy eating and lunch participation
- Re-designing the Breakfast in the Classroom program
- Adopting a Healthy Celebrations policy on campus to support healthy eating
- Writing letters to City Council members to urge support for YPAR projects

Adult allies commonly mentioned that a significant source of pride stems from the sense of accomplishment derived from “*creating something from nothing.*” Once the youth create something that wasn’t there before, their identity shifts – both in the way they see themselves and how they are viewed in the wider community. One adult ally explains:

Youth participants also take pride in their personal growth. They mentioned differences such as being less shy, having less conflict with others, as well as becoming more social.

“You really do get out of your shell and become a different person, it helped me grow and become outspoken, we talk about real issues.”

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

Youth participants learn new skills related to research and public speaking that seem to boost their academic performance and college readiness. Both youth and adults discussed other examples of youth changes such as improved grades, increased classroom participation, and more respectful behavior. One adult ally explains,

“[The administration and teachers] love the program. It’s an opportunity for their students to learn skills that they wouldn’t have learned otherwise. They love that the students are engaged in the community, that they’re doing a lot of college level research. We don’t hold anything back, we throw everything at them and they respond really, really well...”

ADULT ALLY

"The benefits definitely outweigh the challenges of doing YPAR. Our students are that much more prepared for college and to be out there to help their community."
ADULT ALLY

"It's a life saver. I don't know where I would be without this program."
YOUTH PARTICIPANT

AFTER PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROJECT YOUTH SELF REPORT...



94%

"I eat healthier"



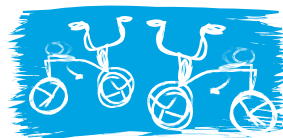
89%

"I can influence others to eat healthier."



86%

"I do more physical activity."



92%

"I can influence others on the importance of physical activity."

Multi-Layered Changes in Eating and Physical Activity

Youth engagement participants reported eating better, exercising more, and influencing their friends and families to do the same. Youth discussed making better food choices such as eliminating or reducing processed and fast foods – especially soda and chips. Some talked about not bingeing or engaging in emotional eating when hungry, but choosing healthy snacks instead. Several youth reported losing weight.

In focus groups, youth commonly described ways in which they influence their peers to improve their nutrition and exercise. The shift in norms appears to create a positive feedback loop that influences continued and sustained behavior change.

"At school my friends eat junk... I try to eat fruits and now I am trying to buy organic fruits. Now, I have my friends try things."

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

Adult allies reported that youth are impacting their families and serve as role models for healthy eating, eliminating soda, and changing purchasing habits.

Youth echoed this and described family changes such as completely eliminating soda, reading labels together when shopping, and switching to organic produce. Some also made it clear that their understanding of health had changed, often describing it in terms of trying to make better decisions.

"Being healthy is more than what you eat – it is about your lifestyle and working out and making healthier choices."

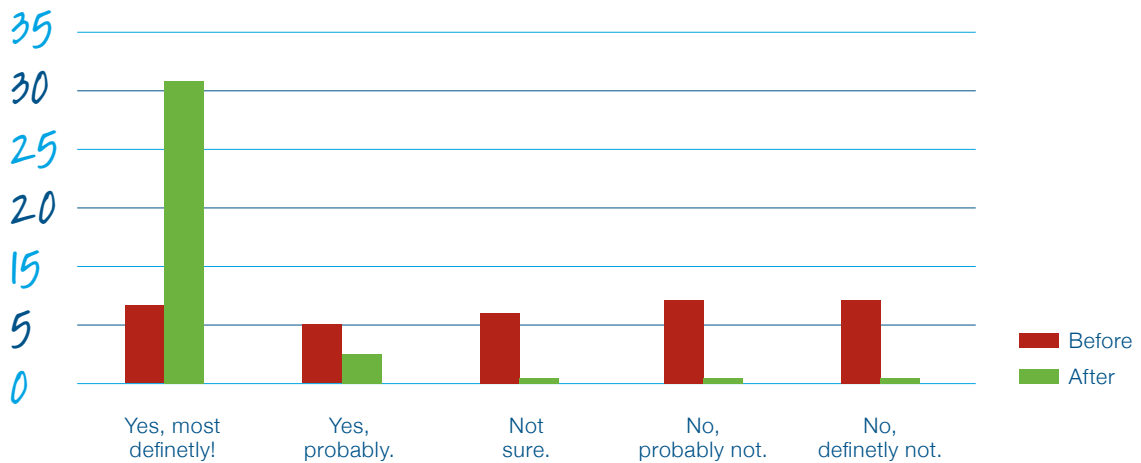
YOUTH PARTICIPANT

Adult allies reported a change in organizational policies and culture as a result of the youth engagement efforts.

"We've never had healthy options at any of our staff meetings or anything, now they make it a point that there has to be at least one healthy option at all of our meetings and at our parent meetings. I think we're reinforcing the message throughout the community, from everybody in our organization."

ADULT ALLY

YOUTH SELF REPORT AFTER PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROJECT
"I UNDERSTAND HOW MY SURROUNDINGS AFFECTS MY HEALTH"



Implementation Barriers and Challenges

There were many challenges identified in the Champions for Change Youth Engagement projects. Some challenges are layered, inter-connected, and indicative of underlying reasons for health disparities. For example, youth transportation challenges are influenced by their families' socioeconomic status, the size of the city, public transit infrastructure, and funding restrictions. Other challenges, such as participation and retention issues, are commonly noted in youth and community engagement literature.

Community Conditions

"[Students from underserved areas] have a million things they have to worry about. Safety, income, plus things going on at home... that's always a little bit of challenge."

ADULT ALLY

Adult allies and youth described challenges and social issues that not only impact the health of the community but also youths' ability to effectively participate in program activities. These concerns included things from neighborhood violence, lack of safety, and drug use; to limited access to grocery stores, an abundance of liquor stores, and no bike lanes; to even the basic lack of free clean drinking water at school. Youth often connected

these issues to their project goals.

Community violence prevented youth from feeling safe at school or in their communities and distracted youth from project activities. Neighborhood violence also interferes with the ability to safely exercise in local parks for youth and adults supporting youth-led efforts to increase physical activity opportunities at school.

"It is hard for me, I have a weight problem. I can work out around here, there is a park around the corner but it is not safe. I don't eat too bad, but I can't work out to get more fit."

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

Navigating the School Environment

All of the funded organizations work in partnership with schools, even if the program is not fully school-based. While this brings many benefits, challenges abound due to each school having its own unique culture, subject to change when leadership shifts. Adult allies and youth invest time in building strong relationships with school administration only to begin all over again when the administration is replaced. Principals often have many other competing priorities which results in delays in scheduling meetings. Programs, projects, and new



policies are delayed without approval from principals, nutrition services directors, or others with decision making authority. Educators may be concerned about sustainability and therefore, reluctant to begin a new partnership or program.

Adult allies play a vital role in gaining buy-in and cooperation from school administrators and faculty by communicating about the long-term benefits of youth engagement work and keeping them accountable throughout the process.

Field trips are an important component for community-based research, learning, project implementation, and encourage continued youth participation. To effectively lead efforts in creating community change, youth need to be able to participate in neighborhood assessments and mapping exercises, visit other communities to learn about the built environment, connect with small business owners, experience community gardens, and attend community meetings and events.

Despite the critical importance, organizing field trips was frequently cited as a challenge. Most often mentioned were policies that require 45-day advance notice but could not be met because community meetings and events are not scheduled that far ahead of time. Additionally, locations such as corner stores do not meet district criteria for approved locations, in contrast to locations such as libraries, museums, or universities. This made it *“much more difficult to coordinate meetings in project locations,”* says one adult ally. Youth Engagement projects run by non-profit organizations have greater flexibility in organizing field trips. They often have procedures in place to coordinate parent permission, transportation, and other details.

However, community based organizations are only able to schedule field trips during after-school and weekends.

YOUTH TRANSPORTATION

As with many grant-funded programs, challenges were reported with funding restrictions. Creativity and patience are essential in filling the gaps in transportation, incentives, and even the purchase of some program supplies. For example, SNAP-Ed funding cannot be utilized to purchase bus tokens or pay for taxis and prior approval is required for van rentals. To address issues, organizations often developed partnerships and creative solutions to continue to support youth-led efforts and related transportation costs. Some examples include providing transportation service from school to meeting sites or coordinating meeting times aligned bus schedules.

TIME PRESSURE

Achieving PSE changes through youth and community engagement takes time. There are many competing priorities for program staff, youth participants, partners, and community members. City-wide policies such as Complete Streets may be adopted, but it can take years and additional funding to see the results reflected in the built environment.

Another time-related issue is coordinating youth and school schedules. At times there may be unexpected changes that are not communicated to adult allies. Many youth do not have access to internet or phones at home, creating barriers to communication outside of regularly scheduled meetings.

HealthMatters



"I wasn't always into being healthy either and I come from the same place as you. You can change your way of thinking."

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

Advice From Youth

- Start out with the youth
- Let your voice be heard no matter what, don't be stifled
- Talk with your group to get your thoughts out about the project
- Never work as one person – work as a team
- Don't doubt each other - back each other up
- Be serious about it
- Stay organized
- Keep trying and always try your best
- Don't give up, there are many ways to do things
- You need persistence. If they see you go in once and you give up, they won't help you
- Do your research first, find out what you want and who you're going to talk to...if you are going to start a project you should know SOMETHING first.
- Figure out all of the aspects and know what you can do about it – what would make the biggest difference or how much will it cost. Know what you want to do and why it is important, why they should listen to you, what are you going to do about it, and have the research to back you up
- Take a lot of surveys, sometimes too many surveys
- Get other people's input outside of the group
- Get the community involved!
- Open up to your school
- Be a mentor for young people
- Don't get frustrated, not everything is going to work, be willing to keep going and look for another direction
- Athletes should get healthier, eat fruit and drink water
- Just do it - like Nike

Success Stories

The following success stories highlight the important community benefit of Champions for Change Youth Engagement Projects, and provide examples of implementation within a variety of different organizations and settings.



Healthy Hoops

Brotherhood Crusade's *Champions for Change* program incorporates all three nutrition education obesity prevention priority goals. Additionally, the program focuses on reducing violence and ensuring a safe community. Described by one adult ally as a "favorite project" because it was "so simple yet so difficult at the same time," the Healthy Hoops Basketball League is a good example of how one strategy helps to achieve multiple goals.

Despite initial pushback and doubts from some, this youth driven structured physical activity project successfully incorporated a healthy snack bar with the support from Challenger Boys & Girls Club, a *Rethink Your Drink* infused water station, and mandated water breaks. The weekly games also provided an opportunity to implement a *Healthy Celebrations* policy. At the ten minute mark of each half of the games, all action stops and everyone receives free fruit infused water to encourage healthy beverage consumption. Using a weekly healthy theme, youth team members emcee the event and make health tips and water reminder announcements to community fans and spectators. Youth set up, prepared the food, and ran the free, healthy snack bar. An average of at least 150 people

attended games each week, including community members, teachers, parents, and youth.

Youth responded enthusiastically to the healthy basketball league:

"This opportunity shows us a different way to see life... Like in the neighborhood where we grow-up, all we see violence but NEOP is positive."

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

"It teaches you to take care of your health, be physically active every day and teaches you to help others be healthy."

YOUTH PARTICIPANT



From the Ground Up Fresh Fridays

An estimated 3,050 people shop each week at Century Market, located at the corner of 39th and Western Street. The store had a long history of strife with community residents, who viewed it as a negative influence that attracted loitering, drug dealing, and violence. The closure of a major grocery store chain in 2013 accelerated the push to address the decreased access to healthy food.^{8,9} Community Services Unlimited's *From the Ground Up* youth team worked in partnership with Community Coalition for Substance Abuse and Prevention to launch *Fresh Fridays* which included the implementation of a weekly produce stand in front of the liquor store to provide the surrounding community access to fresh produce.

As the produce stand became established, interest in expanding grew. The subsequent youth team developed a survey to determine the level of community awareness about the produce stand and whether they were purchasing fruits and vegetables. After practicing and discussing safety measures, small groups of youth went door-to-door throughout the neighborhood to interview community residents. The majority of residents surveyed expressed strong support for the produce stand and that a significant majority would buy produce from Century Market if it was available in the store.

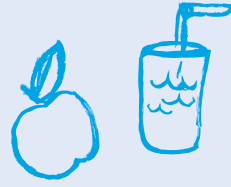
In July 2014, the summer youth team and adult ally met with the store owner to share their research findings, which helped convince him that the demand for healthy

food existed. The group began to discuss how to address the community need by working together. In September, LACDPH staff conducted a *Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Prevention (CX³)*¹⁰ survey to collect baseline data. Now renamed Century Market, the store and partners held a grand Re-opening celebration for the new produce section in November 2014.

An adult ally describes the impact on youth:

"Seeing [the youth] get to put things they had been learning in the program into practice with people in the neighborhood, and seeing the creation of this new produce section, I know how exciting that was for them. It was really powerful."

ADULT ALLY



Veggies Over Everything Youth Team Revamps Cafeteria

Veggies Over Everything is the Health Academy youth team working on cafeteria improvements at Jefferson High School with the National Health Foundation. Through observational assessments and surveys, the “cafeteria team” learned about factors that influence school lunches and student nutrition. One youth explained their research finding, “*More than half the students were not eating lunch, and many don’t have the time.*” There is approximately thirty minutes to eat lunch, yet some students reported waiting an average ten to fifteen minutes for their food – almost half of the lunch period.

Another factor is the uninviting? Condition of the cafeteria and unappealing presentation of food. By partnering with the cafeteria manager and cafeteria staff, youth were able to redesign the cafeteria, incorporate healthy messaging, and promote the health benefits of eating lunch. A young person explained, “*We were able to change the way the cafeteria looked... Students didn’t like how things were organized, it was too crowded.*”

After the changes, the team observed students in the cafeteria and interviewed them for feedback. “*The changes we made are improving what students eat. We are tracking how many students eat lunch,*” one Health Academy youth participant explained.





Health Academy's Mini Farm Stand Project

After successfully implementing a *Healthy Celebrations* policy at school, the Legion of Health youth team created Jefferson High School's first ever School Wellness Council. These "*Champions for Health*" include the principal, school clinic staff, the National Health Foundation, and other organizations working at the school. Youth attend most meetings to talk about ways to make the Jefferson community live healthier. Students provide leadership by suggesting programs and policies that can be introduced at school to promote healthy living. One Initiative at Jefferson High is *Breakfast in the Classroom* where students eat together in the classroom, usually during their homeroom, at the start of the school day.¹¹

Los Angeles Unified School District introduced the Breakfast in the Classroom program to all schools in the fall of 2014. Previously, students had to arrive before the school day started to grab breakfast in the cafeteria which resulted in extremely low participation. However, the change had unintended consequences. Youth noticed one striking result of their school assessment: only 35% of students participate in Breakfast in the Classroom, despite it being available at no cost to the

entire student population, in part because students began to arrive late to school. After students realized the first half hour of homeroom was devoted to eating breakfast and listening to announcements, tardiness increased and food waste also became a problem.

As a result, Health Academy youth designed a pilot program to test what would happen if uneaten produce from breakfast (i.e. apples) was available in classrooms after the designated breakfast time. They also wanted to capture the leftover food that would otherwise go to waste. Instead of teachers sending the leftover breakfast back to the cafeteria, the food remained in the classroom in a decorative basket. The youth team hypothesized that by the end of each day, the food would be gone.

After piloting this approach in a few classrooms, students found evidence that supported their hypothesis. The youth team presented findings to cafeteria staff, school administration and teachers to advocate for school-wide implementation. As of January 2016, baskets were placed in every classroom on campus. Next steps include plans to present to the school board for district wide implementation.



Water on the Softball Field

Over the course of a year, Day One's Pasadena youth team at John Muir High School assessed school water quality and access through peer surveys and a PhotoVoice project. While they confirmed there was a need, they also learned that the cost of a new hydration station isn't the only factor to consider. While the \$5,000 cost is about the same as a traditional water fountain, old plumbing systems may be the bigger barrier to installing new hydration stations. Eventually, it became apparent that unless renovations were planned, school officials were unwilling to add a water station to existing plumbing because it would likely require multiple costly repairs.

Yet, these students were not deterred. They decided a more effective approach might be to recommend a new water station be included with an existing renovation. Youth presented their findings to the Pasadena Public Works Department and proposed that new water fountains be included in the remodel budget for the high school's softball field. In January 2015, youth attended the school's Softball Field Groundbreaking Ceremony to celebrate the remodel and future inclusion of a hydration station.





YOU High School's Custom Instant Recess

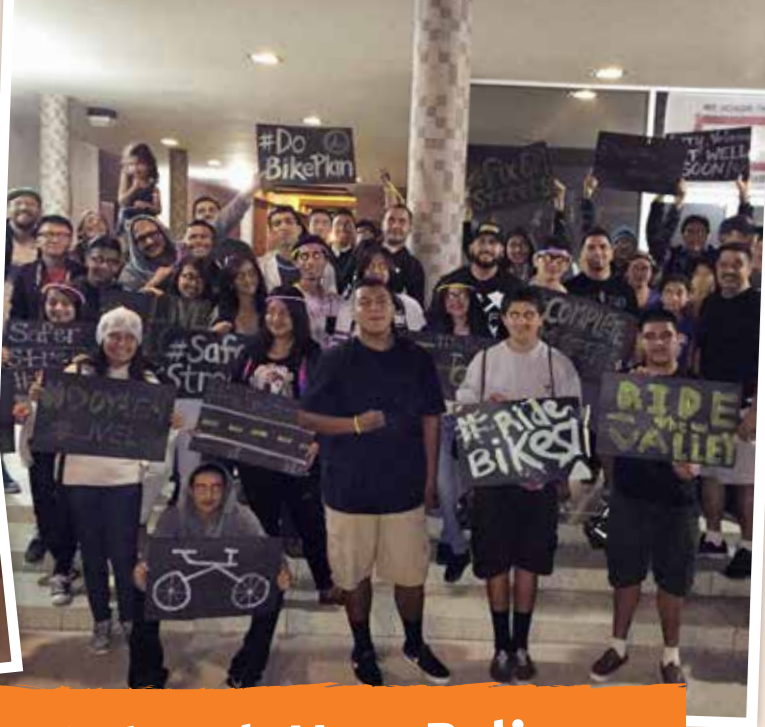
Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU) High School is an alternative school that primarily provides a short-term educational experience to students; the school schedule differs from standard schools being that it runs on a quarter system. Students typically attend a few months until the final credits needed to graduate are earned. Youth realized that unless physical education credits are required or there is a rare special event, students do not have many opportunities for physical activity while at school. With no green spaces and limited open space on campus, the adult ally suggested organizing some activities in the park about four blocks away. "But these kids are afraid to go to the park, because of gang violence and drug activity," she explained.

After assessing their environment using the *Empowering Youth with Nutrition and Physical Activity*¹² guide and through team discussions, the youth decided to focus on increasing opportunities for physical activity as one of their projects. Youth began hosting basketball and volleyball tournaments, which enabled them to feel a sense of accomplishment in reaching their initial goal.

Then, after seeing an *Instant Recess*⁷ video, youth were inspired to make their own brief physical activity

instructional video. After planning the music and physical activity movements and exercises, the youth team filmed the video. The video was presented to classrooms and the youth team asked teachers to offer Instant Recess for the first few minutes of class to allow for a quick stretch or exercise so students can increase daily physical activity and regain focus. Their next goal is to incorporate the use of their video and mini-physical activity breaks into the school wellness policy so that during school assemblies, faculty meetings or other events, the video can be showcased "to increase movement and physical activities with the students and the staff."

Between October and November 2015, youth discussed ways to start an after school physical fitness program. With the support of the adult allies, school principal, teachers, and the Rita Walters Learning Complex- a neighboring facility with an accessible gym, youth were able to implement free boxing, kickboxing, yoga, dance, and basketball classes. Students promoted the program to the school and surrounding community and have had strong attendance for all classes.



Complete Streets and Sketch Up a Policy

A Day One youth team at Mountain View High School in the city of El Monte selected a YPAR project that advocated for safer, more pedestrian friendly streets to promote physical activity and active transportation. The youth planned their project during weekly lunchtime meetings. Which included healthy food demonstrations, practice in public speaking and leadership skills, as well as stakeholder and community engagement strategies.

Through their research, youth discovered that more than two thirds of adults and nearly half the youth in El Monte are overweight or obese with an abundance of fast food restaurants and lack of parks contributing to these statistics. They also observed that many people ride bikes but face barriers such as the lack of bicycle infrastructure (no bike lanes at the time) and do not always follow safety rules such as wearing helmets or riding in the same direction as car traffic.

Youth attended a variety of community outreach events to educate people on public health issues and collect data on community needs and opinions. The youth advocates surveyed more than 300 people. "We even went to public places and asked community to fill it out." They discovered that 58% of those surveyed wanted bike lanes and over half bike for exercise, to get to school or work, and to save money. Youth also took pictures and video throughout the city of bicyclists, streets, and sidewalks for a PhotoVoice project, and participated in bicycle street audits. Through the data collection, youth determined that the public health solution to safer, pedestrian and bike friendly streets, was a city-wide *Complete Streets* policy.⁶

As a result, the youth advocates created a compelling video that featured their YPAR project and urged El Monte City Council to pass a *Complete Streets* policy.

Youth also presented their findings to community stakeholders such as El Monte Union High School board and organized a rally prior to the City Council meeting when the vote would take place. One youth participant recalls how they advanced and led the project:

"...We went to City Council meetings - they were really boring... because everyone that comes just complains. When we presented, I felt like they all woke up. They were paying attention. I think they hadn't seen so many youth. They took us seriously."

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

The youth team's efforts culminated with a triple header win in November 2014 when the City Council unanimously adopted the *Complete Streets* policy, a bicycle master plan, and a joint use agreement with a park all on the same night. An estimated 130,000 people will be impacted citywide – including those who work, live, or visit El Monte. Due to policy adoption, the City has striped its first bike lane and made over three dozen "complete streets" improvements throughout the city. In addition, El Monte can expect to see its first green bike lane and left turn boxes by summer of 2017. This project would have not been possible without the leadership and support from Councilmember Victoria Martinez, Mayor Andrew Quintero, City Engineer, Cesar Roldan, Mr. Larry Cecil, Mr. Allende, and former Day One Staffer, Javier Hernandez.



Ramping up the POWER

A youth team at Mountain View High School wanted to develop a free physical activity program open to students, teachers, staff, and the community. Day One's adult ally coached them through the process of identifying needs and resources and developing an action plan. The youth team brainstormed responses to figure out what they would need from themselves and partners to implement the physical activity program. Next, they determined the appropriate people to engage and existing partnerships— for example, identifying local trainers who could be approached to contribute their expertise and services. From this information, the youth created a task list with responsibilities and deadlines. The POWER (Providing Opportunities for Wellness Education and Recreation) program kicked off in February 2015 at Mountain View High School. Due to popular demand, Day One was able to acquire additional

funding through Kaiser to conduct the program at an additional 5 sites with daily programming.

The youth include social media outreach and competitions in their action plans. One outreach effort includes "Twitter Storm Thursdays," where everyone on the youth team tweets the same message with the same #HealthyElMonte hashtag to raise awareness. Youth talked to city council members to encourage the use of consistent hashtags. The recommendation was relayed to the Parks and Recreation Department and now all communications follow consistent branding for all health related programming in the City of El Monte. For more information regarding Day One's efforts in El Monte, please visit facebook.com/doelmonte or go to godayone.org.



Conclusion

This report has several limitations. Focus group participants and surveys represent a small sample size of youth who currently participate in the YPAR projects and as such, findings may not represent former or future project participants. Adult allies were present in some focus groups, which may have biased youth's responses during the focus group discussions. In addition, survey responses were self-report, which could lead to social desirability bias. Our findings represent the experience and perspective of youth and adult allies from projects in Los Angeles County. These findings may provide insights and useful recommendations for YPAR projects in other settings, but may not be generalizable.

In closing, the collective impact and comprehensive approach of these projects strategically connects school with community and leverages genuine youth and adult relationships in supporting youth voice for healthy community change, in communities that need it the most. LA Youth participants feel, not only, that their opinions and ideas are welcomed and respected, but that they have ownership and responsibility in making a difference in their community. This is ultimately reflected in their shifts towards healthier choices as well as their influence on the choices of their peers and families. LACDPH has created a platform for this work that builds on the foundational history of YPAR within SNAP-Ed and showcases how young people as change agents are key partners in inspiring healthy communities.



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