

Lessons Learned From

ACT for YOUTH:

The First Five Years





About ACT for Youth

In the late 1990s, the New York State Department of Health began a critical examination of its youth-serving programs and the approaches they exemplified in communities across the state. Drawing on lessons learned from categorical risk-reduction approaches, the Department considered new ways to foster optimum health and well-being for New York State youth. Two principal themes emerged:

- The most effective youth-serving programs take a positive approach to youth, promoting strengths and potential rather than focusing primarily on risky behaviors.
- In order to reach all youth and achieve long-term change, there must be an extensive shift in consciousness at all levels of government and in all community sectors; a transformation in the way adults view and interact with youth.

Building on these principles, the Department of Health collaborated with Partners for Children, a public and private sector alliance, to design and launch a new youth development initiative. Through eleven community partnerships supported by two Centers of Excellence, Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth seeks to infuse the youth development approach into communities across New York State. The success of initial efforts motivated renewed commitment, and a second five-year round began in July 2006.

About This Report

This report describes how ACT for Youth unfolded over the first five years, capturing individual experiences and identifying common themes and lessons learned across the community partnerships. It is intended to be of value to communities interested in implementing similar efforts, and to contribute to the knowledge base regarding best practices in youth development. Material from this report is drawn from Findings from ACT for Youth: 2000 – 2006, a publication of the ACT for Youth Centers of Excellence.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the New York State Department of Health for their vision, leadership, and support of this innovative initiative, recognizing that our children and youth are truly New York's greatest resource.

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ACT for Youth Center of Excellence

ACT For Youth

The health of our youth mirrors and directly impacts the health of our country.

Today's youth are tomorrow's workforce, parents, and leaders.

The future of youth is shaped by the opportunities we create for them today.

IN 2000, THE NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH launched an innovative and ambitious youth development initiative. Called Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth, the initiative seeks fundamental changes in the ways communities connect with children and adolescents. ACT for Youth supports young people by transforming the contexts in which they live, fostering health and well-being through community-level collaboration and a profound shift in the way young people are viewed by adults.

Findings drawn from the first five years of the ACT for Youth initiative endorse the promise of the youth development movement, and offer a new framework for creating long-term, systemic change.

ACT for Youth supports young people by transforming the contexts in which they live.

Community Partnerships and Centers of Excellence

In the first iteration of the initiative, the Department of Health selected eleven grantees to form cross-sector community development partnerships (CDP) for youth development. The CDPs included the Bronx, Brooklyn, Yonkers, the Capital District (Albany, Rensselaer, and Schenectady counties), and Columbia, Greene, Onondaga, Otsego, Cattaraugus, Jefferson, and Erie counties. Each CDP started with a lead agency selected to launch the part-

nership, and with the support of a full-time coordinator. The work of the eleven CDPs focused on the achievement of five outcomes:

1. ***Build and maintain the community development partnership:*** reach out to different sectors of the community, improve communication and collaboration among partners, and involve all CDP partners in decision making.
2. ***Increase services, opportunities, and supports for young people:*** open new opportunities for young people in family, school, and community contexts; initiate or strengthen support services; and create or enhance activities promoting positive youth outcomes.
3. ***Increase youth engagement:*** offer new opportunities for young people to contribute to their community, including community service, advocacy, and leadership.
4. ***Create organizational change:*** work with community organizations to promote changes that reflect youth development principles, including changes in organizational structures, philosophy, tools, and physical environments.
5. ***Instill community policy change:*** establish policy changes that incorporate youth development principles in community institutions such as schools and local government.

To support this large-scale initiative, two Centers of Excellence provided training, technical assistance, and evaluation support. In the Downstate region, the Center of Excellence was administered by the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center. The Upstate region was led by a collaboration among Cornell University's Family Life Development Center, the University of Rochester Division of Adolescent Medicine, and the New York State Center for School Safety.

Evaluation

The five-year evaluation plan sought to determine whether and how CDPs achieved ACT outcomes, and to illuminate changes in the ways communities worked together to serve and include youth. The Centers of Excellence staff designed a set of standardized tools and collected data from the partnerships to track the initiative as it unfolded in each CDP (process monitoring), determine the extent to which the CDPs were organized as intended (process evaluation), and determine if cross-sector, community-wide adoption of youth development principles was accomplished (outcome monitoring).

The evaluation utilized multiple data sources, methods, and analytical strategies to address central questions associated with each of the five outcome areas. Data collection tools and approaches included quantitative and qualitative methods, and gathered information from a broad number of key stakeholders and constituents. Data sources included: CDP Quarterly Reports, CDP Annual Reports, Upstate Needs Assessments, CDP Partnership Surveys, CDP Case Studies, Youth Focus Groups, and an Exemplar Study.¹

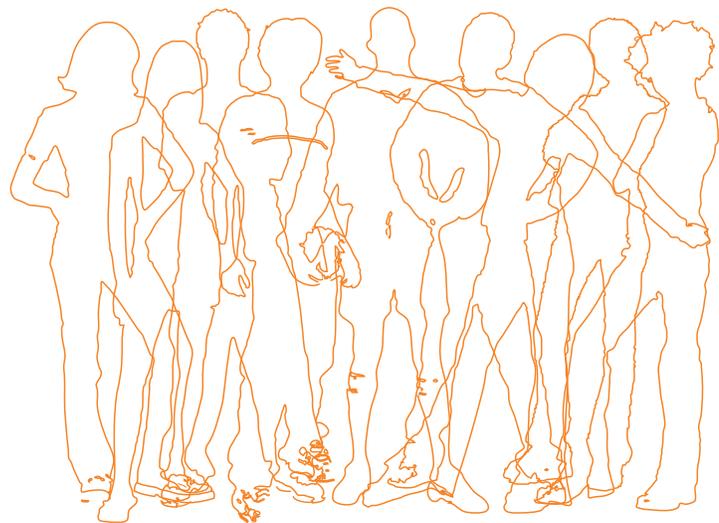
By using multiple data collection tools and methods and diversifying the respondent base, evaluators documented patterns and identified trends emerging across the CDPs, including progress in each outcome area and lessons for future efforts.

¹ Further information about these studies is available from the ACT for Youth Center of Excellence, act4youth@cornell.edu.

What Is Positive Youth Development?

For ACT, positive youth development is not a program but a philosophy that guides communities in the way they organize programs, opportunities, and supports so that young people can develop to their full potential. Communities that adopt a youth development approach emphasize:

- **Positive youth outcomes:** rather than focusing solely on reducing negative outcomes, communities prepare their young people for adulthood by helping them build the competencies and values they need to become healthy and productive adults.
- **Youth Voice:** youth are active and equitable partners in youth development initiatives.
- **Strategies to involve all youth,** not just “high-risk” or “gifted” youth.
- **Community involvement:** all sectors have a role to play in making the community a great place to grow up.
- **Collaboration:** community organizations and institutions, youth, and parents work together toward common goals – and sometimes are required to work in new ways.
- **Long-term commitment:** communities provide the ongoing, developmentally appropriate support young people need over the first 20 years of their lives.



Findings And Recommendations

Collaboration means willingness and ability to...

- Trust!
- Set past conflict or competition aside for the collective mission.
- Resolve turf issues.
- Share time and other resources.
- Actively facilitate access to key stakeholders and networks.

Outcome One: Build and Maintain the Community Development Partnership (CDP)

Developing and maintaining partnerships within each ACT site over the course of the initiative was a central objective. To do this, CDPs needed to identify, recruit, and involve key stakeholder agencies and individuals from across their communities. Community partnerships are dynamic and often difficult to sustain over time. Because of this, crafting a mission, establishing core objectives, and keeping up momentum became critical tasks for CDP leaders. CDPs also needed to identify and leverage community resources while simultaneously working around community limitations.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

To create and sustain their partnerships, the most successful CDPs implemented these practices:

1. **Build on existing collaborations.** Partnerships that grow out of existing coalitions have a head start. Begin by integrating youth development principles into the existing partnership's mission and vision, developing a sense of group ownership before community work starts in earnest.

2. **Draw a diverse array of youth-serving organizations** into the partnership from a very early stage in the initiative. Success in this area leads to new training opportunities, shared resources, improved service delivery, and collaborative funding opportunities.
3. **Seek cross-sector involvement.** Building a capable, collaborative partnership depends in part on participation from many different community sectors. CDPs learned that it takes new and different ways to engage non-traditional partners such as parents, faith communities, businesses, and informal community groups. Community political figures such as the town supervisor, county executive, or county legislators are particularly valuable allies in spearheading organizational and community policy changes regarding youth.
4. **Engage youth as core partners.** Youth involvement at the partnership level emerged as one of the biggest challenges for most ACT for Youth sites. Young people were seen as active program participants, but not as CDP members. However, youth involvement did evolve over time. Initial goals to recruit young people directly to boards grew into efforts to engage young people in decision-making roles on a variety of levels (see outcome three).

SOS Framework:

- Services are actions done **for** young people to meet basic health and instructional needs, and to provide stability.
- Opportunities are actions done **by** young people in their family, at school, and in the community to explore and experience new roles, skills, and responsibilities.
- Supports are activities done **with** young people to facilitate access to relationships and resources that are essential in creating a positive climate for development.

tees. The Executive Steering Committee, which was the lead decision-making body, included members from the Department of Social Services, Sheriff's Department, Public Health/Family Planning, and the local community college. The remaining three committees included the Operations and Quality Assurance committees and the Resource Task Force. This foundation enabled the partnership to remain strong even when key actors moved on.

The CDP also depended on the active engagement of diverse member agencies. At most partnership meetings, one could find county agency leaders, program coordinators, police officers, school administrators, clergy, and Elk Lodge members sitting around a table discussing their experiences with the partnership, sharing success stories, and strategizing for the future. This CDP's genuine commitment to community-wide partnership, coupled with a commitment to increasing services, opportunities, and supports for youth, made it particularly effective.



Outcome Two: Increase Services, Opportunities, and Supports (SOS)

The SOS framework pioneered by Karen Pittman offers a matrix through which an optimal environment for youth can be nurtured. According to Pittman, pathways to fulfillment are created when young people receive basic services, engage in challenging and rewarding opportunities, and collaborate with adults to create and connect to the supports (relationships and resources) they need to grow.

Many ACT for Youth communities concentrated early efforts on this goal, perhaps because providing services and programs is familiar territory. CDPs were expected to couple their efforts on this outcome with their efforts to increase youth engagement. In general, activities here benefited all other outcomes in that they helped:

- Bring partners to the table by establishing common interests (outcome one).
- Lay the foundation for increased youth engagement (outcome three).
- Promote organizational changes to incorporate a youth development approach (outcome four).
- Open the door to community policy change (outcome five).

CDPs used direct and indirect approaches to achieve success. Direct strategies and activities included creation or enhancement of programs for and by youth, as well as outreach to more diverse audiences. Those using the direct approach anticipated that success at the ground level would filter up into organizations and impact community attitudes.

Indirect strategies and activities sought to affect service delivery and program infrastructure on a broad scale. Rather than address services, opportunities, and supports directly through programming, indirect efforts focused on identifying underutilized community resources such as informal community groups, businesses, and faith communities, and on providing youth development education. By educating service providers and the larger community about positive youth development, these CDPs aimed to create opportunities and supports through enduring systemic and environmental change.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

The diverse efforts of CDPs to increase services, opportunities, and supports for youth in their communities yielded important lessons that can be instructive for future youth development initiatives:

1. *Redefined terms like services, opportunities, and supports need to be taught, reinforced, and adopted early on.* Virtually every CDP operationalized these terms in

Forms of Youth Engagement

Rather than making youth representation on a board of directors the first or only step toward youth engagement, consider a range of opportunities for young people to exert influence:

- **Initiative partners:** Youth serve as recognized and valued partners in the CDP.
- **Community board and committees:** Youth serve as members of boards and committees for community institutions or agencies.
- **Advisory councils:** Youth operate or serve on advisory bodies responsible for providing input into project or agency governance.
 - Philanthropy:** Youth make funding decisions.
 - Program development and planning:** Youth research, plan, and develop programs, events, and other projects.
- **Evaluation:** Youth conduct research used for quality improvement.
- **Education, public policy, and advocacy:** Youth work to inform and advocate for system and social change.
- **Service learning:** Youth learn and grow by contributing to the community.

found this objective demanding, especially in the early stages of the initiative. Many communities struggled not only to create new roles for young people, but also to sustain that involvement over time. Barriers such as transportation, coordinating adult and youth schedules, and overall preparedness (for youth, adults, and organizations) were only a few of the difficulties faced.

But ACT communities also found that meaningful youth engagement is fulfilling. When young people experience being heard and taken seriously, they feel empowered to believe in themselves, gaining a sense of new possibility. Many youth acquired specific skills in writing, public speaking, decision making, and collaboration. Several reported that the experience would better prepare them for college and potentially influence their career decisions. Youth participants consistently cited four main benefits of meaningful youth engagement:

- Acquisition of leadership skills.
- Opportunities to voice their opinions and ideas.
- Exposure to diverse individuals, ideas, and perspectives.
- An enhanced sense of personal power.

The experience can be equally fulfilling for adults. Young people offer energy, new ways of thinking, insights, ideas, and enthusiasm. As one ACT for Youth coordinator wrote:

I think the thing that I will take away from my experience in working with this group in particular is the enthusiasm of young people. Their wisdom. Because in some ways they're more perceptive than adults could ever be. And also just the memory of watching this group grow and mature, and having had the opportunity to be a part of their lives. I'm not suggesting that [our program] is a huge part, but it's neat to watch the group grow and evolve and see them take on new responsibilities and new challenges and come up with amazing ideas and insights.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

Each CDP approached the task of increasing youth engagement in a creative way. However, certain lessons can be drawn from their collective experience:

1. **Offer a variety of opportunities for meaningful youth engagement.** In the SOS trilogy of services, opportunities, and supports previously described, opportunities are vehicles for youth engagement; youth are active players rather than passive recipients of information or services. Opportunities offer youth the chance to practice and expand on what they know through meaningful work, service, or advanced learning. Young people will choose levels of involvement that match their skills, interests, and situations, moving into different roles as their abilities evolve.
2. **Make activities and services for youth universally accessible.** Targeting to specific “at-risk” or “high-risk” groups leads to stigma and decreased youth engagement. One CDP used language of universal, non-targeted services for all activities, services, and programs run by ACT for Youth. They attributed their success in youth engagement directly to the fact that no one would be turned away, no labels were attached to participation, and programs were not offered as part of a service package; rather, they were framed as an exciting set of opportunities for young people to get involved in the community.
3. **Recognize that logistics, location, environment, and time will always play a key role in establishing youth voice.** Adults need to be flexible in order to accommodate young people who wish to attend meetings. Meetings should be held at times that allow young people to participate. One CDP held meetings at school so that students active in the ACT for Youth advisory group in that district were able to attend.

tinely exposed and have to address the negative issues. I wanted to be able to counteract the negative language that seems to creep into our day-to-day work with these kids.

—ACT for Youth participant

Outcome Five: Instill Community Policy Change

The biggest change in our community is to even consider giving youth a voice.

—ACT for Youth participant

One of the most distinguishing features of the ACT for Youth model is its focus on policy change at the community level. More than any other youth development initiative put forth in the past few years, ACT for Youth aimed to effect positive outcomes for youth by instituting policy changes reflecting youth development principles in schools and local government agencies. The ACT for Youth partnerships often served as the catalyst for community change, advancing new attitudes about youth, providing training, and influencing schools and government—all of which are necessary precursors to broad, community-level change.

Fifteen to twenty years are typically required to institutionalize community change.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

The innovative work produced under the umbrella of this ambitious outcome yielded important lessons to inform future initiatives:

1. *Five years is a challenging time frame for CDPs to develop exemplary, sustainable policy change within their communities.* At the outset of the ACT for Youth initiative, CDPs reported that an understanding of youth development was present in their communities, but few had the structures

in place to move a youth development agenda forward within schools, local government, or even their own organizations. CDPs moved quite quickly to use their newly formed collaborations to enact a number of community policy changes. However, as one ACT participant put it, for most CDPs “the simple act of creating and sustaining a community-wide collaboration of partners that was focused on implementing youth development principles and practice was in itself the most profound community policy change.” Establishing durable community-level change in attitudes and practices requires a long-term commitment of resources; research suggests that fifteen to twenty years are typically required to institutionalize community change.

2. *CDPs benefit from having a clear definition of community policy change and benchmarks in place for achieving that change.* Clearly defined, achievable steps that are established from the outset of the initiative help CDPs understand and plan for success in this outcome area.
3. *Capture information about community policy change through standardized data collection systems.* Ideally, a set of standardized data tools that include a mix of quantitative and qualitative information should be employed across each initiative site. High quality longitudinal data collection provides important information for future planning, and demonstrates the initiative’s impact to funders and stakeholders.
4. *Promote the visibility of the youth development initiative.* Even the best leadership is not enough to accomplish the broad reach needed to bring about wide-scale community change. Success is more likely when high visibility is achieved through extensive outreach to nontraditional partners, including the media, and the youth development philosophy is endorsed by core community leaders.

A Foundation For Long-Term Change

FIVE YEARS OF THE ACT FOR YOUTH INITIATIVE delivered a number of promising results for communities across New York State. The findings discussed throughout this report indicate that the ACT for Youth initiative made significant progress in building community capacity through cross-sector partnerships, and increased community attention on adolescent developmental needs and capacities. The infrastructure laid in many of the ACT for Youth communities during the first five years provides the basis for creating long-term changes in organizational and community-level policy and practice. Many of these changes altered the way key individuals and institutions regard and treat young people.

In sum, the ACT for Youth initiative achieved significant accomplishments:

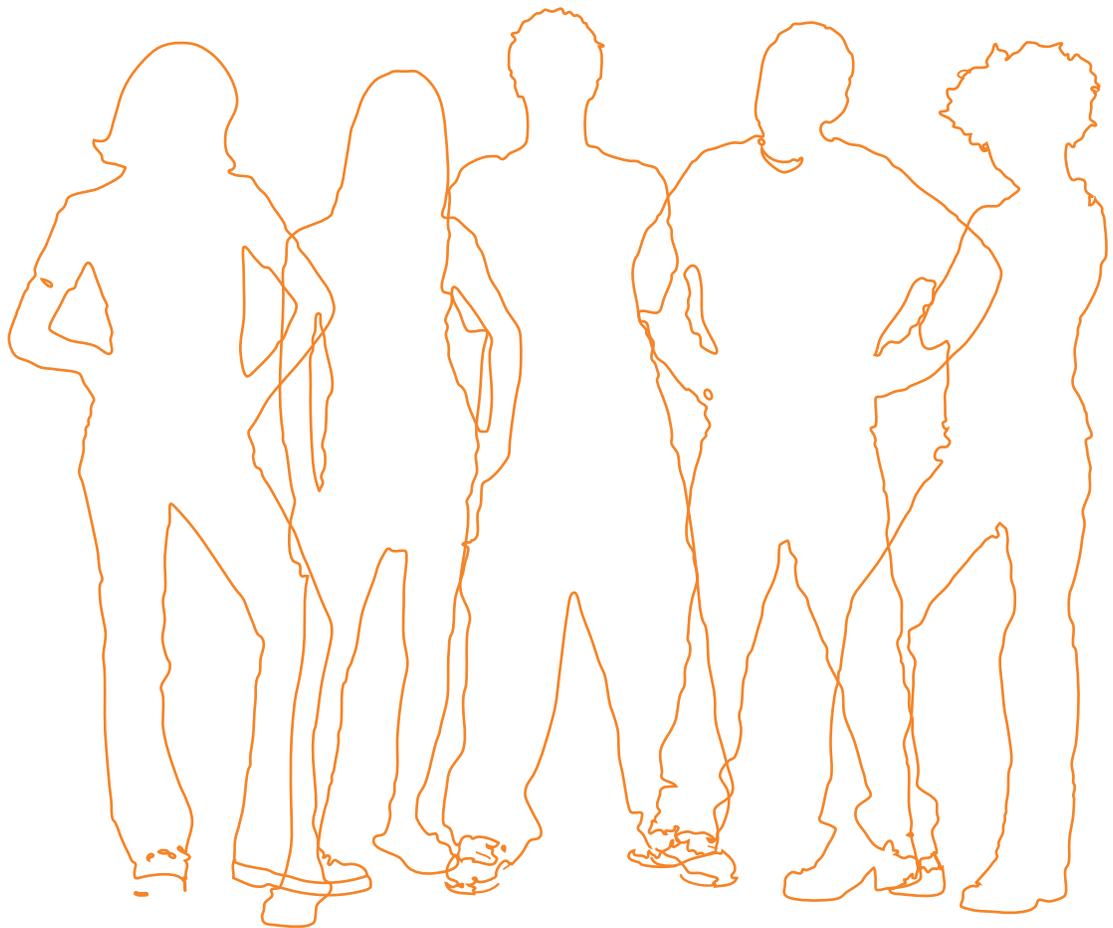
- *Cross-agency and cross-sector partnerships did stimulate and promote community change.* The new and improved cross-sector community partnerships in place represent systems working together, many for the first time. These partnerships were the essential vehicle driving youth development practices and principles at the community level.
- *All communities strengthened and created services, opportunities, and supports that enable youth to transition to adulthood with increased competencies, confidence, and positive experiences.*
- *There was substantial progress on increasing authentic youth engagement efforts beyond token inclusion of young people.*
- *New relationships and positive strategies began to emerge with non-traditional partners such as schools, law enforcement, parents, and business.* Hard to reach constituencies such as education and justice have begun to come to the table to understand how environmental contexts affect positive youth development. There is still much room for improvement in engaging these constituencies, as well as involving parents and youth; however, ACT for Youth has begun to find common ground with these key stakeholder groups.

Will the ACT for Youth initiative succeed in reducing risk behavior and increasing positive outcomes for youth in ACT communities? Ultimately, answers to this question remain unclear. Not only is it very difficult to measurably alter community social, political, and economic topographies; accurately capturing the nature and extent of change is something not all scholars agree can be accurately accomplished. Nevertheless, although research on the long-term impact of

Many of these changes altered the way key individuals and institutions regard and treat young people.

community initiatives such as ACT for Youth is mixed, there is a small but growing body of research that provides compelling evidence that when communities nurture youth through supportive relationships with adults and peers, engage youth in challenging activities

and learning experiences, and develop meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership, communities can expect to see dramatic improvements in developmental outcomes in late adolescence and early adulthood.



Beyond The First Five Years

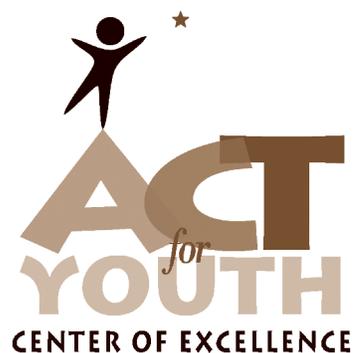
THE SUCCESS OF THE FIRST ROUND of ACT for Youth partnerships led the New York State Department of Health to fund ACT II. For this second round, Collaborations for Community Change were funded in twelve communities, including continuation of two of the original CDPs. ACT sites are supported by one Center of Excellence, a partnership among Cornell University's Family Life

Development Center, Cornell University Cooperative Extension of New York City, the University of Rochester Medical Center's Division of Adolescent Medicine, and the New York State Center for School Safety. The Center of Excellence also provides technical assistance to selected adolescent health programs funded by the New York State Department of Health.

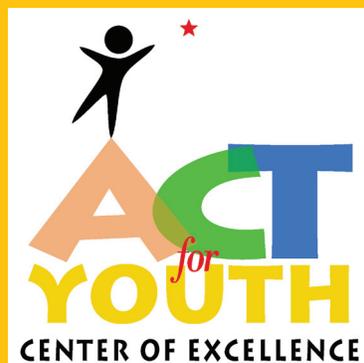
Resources For Further Study

For more information about positive youth development and the ACT for Youth initiative, see:

- ACT for Youth Center of Excellence web site <http://www.actforyouth.net/>
- Journal of Public Health Management and Practice Supplement: Improving Public Health Through Youth Development Journal of Public Health Management and Practice, 2006, November(Suppl)
http://www.health.state.ny.us/community/youth/development/journal_supplement.htm



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