



Creative Youth Development Movement Takes Hold

by Denise Montgomery

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Across the country, hundreds of creative youth development (CYD) programs are setting high expectations for young people, encouraging positive risk taking, promoting leadership development, and offering real-world opportunities to contribute to social change. These organizations, many with 10 or 20 years of positive impact, are poised to continue their momentum and collectively advance their work—particularly now that they are unifying as a field.

Creative youth development organizations and programs, which encompass those working in arts-, humanities-, and science-based youth development with an emphasis on creative inquiry and expression, are a dynamic part of community arts education. These programs link individual growth with the emergence of social responsibility. As young people create, they build the personal, social, and intellectual capacities they need to succeed in school, career, and life.

In March of this year, over 200 youth arts practitioners, funders, policymakers, and students convened in Boston for the first-ever [National Summit on Creative Youth Development](#). The Summit generated new focus and energy in CYD.

The proceedings brought attention to the essential work of organizing and unifying the field with the policy and advocacy agenda, [Collective Action for Youth: An Agenda for Progress Through Creative Youth Development](#). This milestone plan marks a meaningful step toward widespread progress for programs throughout the United States.

Independent Beginnings

Creative youth development has grown from its grassroots inception to an empirically supported field with hundreds of organizations and programs. From the beginning, a central tenet of creative youth development programs has been their belief in the abilities of young people for high achievement and personal growth through participation in a creative activity. Founders largely developed their programs independently and initially learned by doing and through reflective practice. Many organizations were started by artists and remain dedicated to artistic excellence, yet now self-describe as being engaged in youth development through the arts.

Youth development refers to an intentional process that promotes positive outcomes, such as community involvement and positive self-image, by providing the opportunities and support young people need to participate fully in their personal, social, and cultural growth. Youth development through the arts combines personal development with deep engagement and skill building in the arts. The Guild's [Engaging Adolescents Guidebook: Building Youth Participation in the Arts](#) provides national models and practical advice for developing and sustaining teen arts programs that foster youth development and build transferrable life skills.

Recognition and involvement at the national level propelled the field forward. In 1996, the President's Committee for the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH) published [Coming Up Taller: Arts and Humanities for Children and Youth At Risk](#). This seminal report shined light on CYD nationally, making the case for the arts and humanities in youth development, articulating practices of effective programs, and profiling 200 model programs. Two years later, PCAH launched the [National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Awards](#) (formerly the Coming Up Taller awards), which have celebrated and supported excellence in programs that foster learning, self-discovery, and achievement. Awardees have successfully leveraged this prestigious recognition—the Nation's highest honor for out-of-school time arts and humanities programs—to build awareness and support for their programs.

Research and publications have fundamentally strengthened CYD because they have substantiated positive impact and shared best practices. Americans for the Arts' [YouthArts Development Project](#), begun in 1995, broke new ground as a comprehensive initiative that demonstrated the efficacy of arts-based youth programs in reducing risk factors and building protective factors. The companion [YouthArts Toolkit](#) (1998) provided a comprehensive resource for arts, education, juvenile justice, and social service organizations throughout the country for developing and improving arts programs for low-income and marginalized youth.

The publication of **Shirley Brice Heath's** research findings in the late 1990s was a turning point. Heath's work, notably [Living the Arts Through Language-Learning: A Report on Community-Based Youth Organizations](#) (1998) and "[Imaginative Actuality: Learning in the Arts in the Nonschool Hours](#)" in [Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning](#) (1999), was significant in revealing that cognitive and linguistic development were greater for young people participating in arts-based programs, based on a decade of field research on out-of-school time programs identified by young people as being desirable places to learn. Heath documented guiding principles in creative youth development—such as recognizing young people as resources, not problems. She also reported characteristics of effective CYD programs, such as an ethos for achievement, thus identifying some of the DNA that makes these programs effective. Heath's findings further galvanized practitioners, funders, and policymakers because she came to the research as an impartial social scientist with no expectations or agenda around the arts.

Additional publications contributed to the growing body of research in creative youth development. "The Surdna Foundation's [Powerful Voices: Developing High-Impact Arts Programs for Teens](#) (2002) was profound in that it was the first report to talk about the importance of artistic rigor and professional artists," said **Rick Sperling**, president and artistic director at Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit. "It showed that if you don't have rigor and high quality, you won't get the same youth development outcomes."

In 2009, [Doing Good by Doing Art: The Effects of Education in the Visual and Performing Arts on the Achievements and Values of Young Adults](#) presented empirical evidence of the association between deep arts involvement and both general academic success and pro-social outcomes such as volunteerism. That same year [Qualities of Quality: Understanding Excellence in Arts Education](#) was a landmark publication in detailing how arts educators, with thoughtful analysis, continual dialogue, and persistence, achieve and sustain high quality arts learning experiences for young people at in- and out-of-school settings.

More recently, [Something to Say: Success Principles for Afterschool Arts Programs from Urban Youth and Other Experts](#) (2013) provided insights on the motivations and barriers for tween participation in out-of-school time arts programs and 10 principles for successful, quality out-of-school time arts programs. The report provides a blueprint for organizations to develop or refine programs.

Erik Peterson, vice president of policy at the Afterschool Alliance, observed, "In afterschool overall in recent years there has been more outcome-based research and more research on best practices. As a result, we're seeing professionalization [of afterschool programs] through more intelligence on what works and better insights into positive youth outcomes."

For a list of key publications in creative youth development, visit the Guild's website at www.nationalguild.org/creativeyouthdevelopment

With much to celebrate and still much to do in the hope of engaging more youth, many see the field as coming into its own. **Dalouge Smith**, president and CEO of San Diego Youth Symphony and Conservatory, observed, "It's a huge step forward that we even talk about the fact that there's a creative youth development field, and that there's recognition that the field has a unique character and needs to work in partnership."

Summit Unifies and Activates

A national community of practice is emerging, but efforts to build the field are nascent and decentralized. Greater recognition, support, and integration of creative youth development across sectors are needed.

In an effort to serve as a catalyst for advancement of the creative youth development field and increase programs' collective impact, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, and National Guild for Community Arts Education organized the first National Summit on Creative Youth Development. "Our ambition with the summit was to try to unite extraordinary people doing extraordinary work across the country in launching a movement, a movement based on unleashing the creative potential of one of our greatest untapped natural resources—the voices, visions, and capacities of our young people," shared **H. Mark Smith**, former YouthReach Program Manager at the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

The Summit delegates' work was informed by a national research study that included in-depth interviews with a range of practitioners and policymakers, focus groups with youth, and a national survey of practitioners and young people from more than 150 CYD programs. The resulting report, *Setting the Agenda*, documented the importance of creativity in the lives of young people and their communities and laid out the five strategic priorities that provided the organizing framework for the Summit: Building Collective Impact to Improve Youth Outcomes, Contributing to Community Development, Facilitating Social Change and Social Justice, Documenting and Communicating Program Impact, and Funding and Sustainability.

A Strategic Agenda

Together Summit delegates drafted a national policy and advocacy agenda, *Collective Action for Youth: An Agenda for Progress Through Creative Youth Development*. This two-page document articulates the purpose and value of creative youth development; asserts its place as central to ensuring young people's academic, professional, and personal success; and identifies five key imperatives for catalyzing on the work of CYD programs nationwide and their impact on students, families, and communities.

The full action agenda is available online at www.nationalguild.org/creativeyouthdevelopment

A key focus of the agenda is increased collaboration with other sectors also invested in supporting youth development—such as education, health, and workforce development—in order to grow positive outcomes for youth and to advance the creative youth development field of practice. Embedded in the agenda are the core values of remaining youth centered and engaging youth in designing and implementing approaches to advance the field. **Meredith Jylkka**, senior program officer at Mott Philanthropic, noted two primary values of the agenda, "The cross-sector platform gives the field more strength and best practices to draw from. The other value is youth empowerment and giving youth a voice to affect their destiny and giving them more of a stake in society as a whole through personal motivation."

Calling for expanded public and philanthropic support, the five key imperatives are to:

Position creative youth development as the catalyst for dynamic cross-sector collaborations to ensure young people's academic, professional, and personal success.

Fleisher Art Memorial is a founding member of the Southeast Philadelphia Collaborative and has been an active member for the last 14 years. **Magda Martinez**, director of programs at Fleisher, shared, "As the only arts organization we have been able to join the power of the arts with those of social service, sports, health and educational agencies to have an impact on many more young people in South Philadelphia."

Fleisher and its Southeast Philadelphia Collaborative partners are forerunners of the broad cross-sector coordination that is increasingly recognized as being necessary to affect large-scale social change. John Kania and

Mark Kramer assert this theory in detail in “[Collective Impact](#),” the seminal article published in 2011 in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

These cross-sector efforts can open up new opportunities for support, connection, and resources. And in cases such as the Southeast Philadelphia Collaborative, they help sustain and strengthen investment in youth outcomes. **Lara Davis**, arts education specialist at the City of Seattle Office of Arts and Culture, observed, “When we talk about collective impact we might initially be thinking about the ways in which different organizations come together within arts education. Then we expand our notion of collective impact to be about how organizations come together across the field of youth development. We further expand the concept to include cross-sector collaboration in other areas relevant to young people’s lives such as health, housing, jobs, community, etc., and you begin to see the ways in which creative youth development, as a holistic approach to engaging young people, builds connectivity across systems.”

While CYD organizations around the country such as Fleisher are engaged in collective impact initiatives, this remains an area of opportunity for organizations and programs to show leadership by initiating and partnering in such efforts. **Merita Irby**, co-founder and chief operating officer of the Forum for Youth Investment, stated, “These are high powered tables. This is where a lot of agendas get set. Much of the focus is on workforce development and academic preparation. Often, the community arts education players are not immediately present at the table. The arts are part of the solution, and creative youth development leaders need to shine a light on that.”

- **Build organizational readiness for collaboration toward shared youth development outcomes.**

Summit delegates identified a need to build organizational readiness to effectively engage—and initiate—cross-sector collaborations. **Jon Hinojosa**, executive and artistic director of SAY Sí in San Antonio and co-chair of San Antonio’s *Excel Beyond the Bell* collective impact initiative, recommends providing professional development opportunities for CYD staff ranging in content from introductory level overviews of collective impact and cross-sector collaboration to advanced opportunities that address how to strengthen collectives and diversify partnerships.

To help build knowledge and understanding, CYD leaders can access an increasing array of collective impact resources available online. [Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth](#) is useful in outlining key steps to laying the foundation for a successful collective impact effort (Corcoran et al, 2012):

1. Identifying influential champions and forming a cross-sector group,
2. Scoping and segmenting the population to define the problem,
3. Creating urgency and making the case for change, and
4. Establishing financial resources to launch the effort.

Once an understanding of collective impact is in place, “...then it is a capacity issue and an issue of being able to help partners to understand the conceptual frame [of collective impact,]” stated Dalouge Smith.

- **Invest in structures and strategies that facilitate collective action to support youth and their successful transitions into careers, college, and adult life.**

While many collaborations focus on leveraging existing resources, generating gains in efficiency and impact also requires investment. Resources are needed for convening and facilitation, data collection, communications, and administration. The White House Council for Community Solutions studied needle-moving collaborations, defined as those resulting in a 10% or better change on a community-wide metric, and discovered that, “...in every needle-moving collaborative studied, there was at least a modest investment in staff and infrastructure.” (White House Council for Community Solutions, 2012.) Increasing the number of high-impact collaborations will mean more funders must be willing to make these essential investments.

Perhaps the biggest impediment to more widespread adoption of true collective impact initiatives has been inertia.

Funders and nonprofit organizations are used to focusing on independent action as the primary vehicle for social change and therefore overlook the potential for collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011). However, growing documentation of initiatives that demonstrate collective impact are inspiring funders, practitioners, and policymakers to support or engage in such efforts.

Establish young people and their creative youth development programs as key leaders in discovering and developing opportunities to improve the livability and economic viability of their communities.

Artists and arts organizations contribute to the social, physical, and economic aspects of their communities by animating and activating public spaces, serving as anchors and focal points, and participating in planning efforts—including using arts as an engagement strategy for planning. Creative youth development programs have been contributing to community development for more than 25 years, despite limited staff and other resources (Heath and Soep, 1998). Youth employ their talents to shape the physical and social landscape through creative activities and contribute to creative planning and community-led design processes.

The essence of community development is place-based change. Goals may include improvements in social cohesion, the physical environment, and the local economy—all outcomes supported by creative youth development.

The convergence of CYD and community development holds the promise of more arts-rich communities, community improvement solutions that resonate with young people, and youth who are empowered and engaged in the life and future of their neighborhoods, towns, and cities.

- **Connect creative youth development programs with local community development initiatives to improve community outcomes.**

Creative placemaking is an evolving field of practice that leverages the power of the arts, culture, and creativity for community development. “Creative youth development programs have a powerful ability to inspire and instill the belief at a young age that it is possible to change the place and environment in which you live,” stated **Lyz Crane**, deputy director of the umbrella funding and advocacy organization ArtPlace America. She added, “Engaging youth in creative placemaking programs not only puts their creative skills to work in transforming their communities, but also fosters a sense of ownership, agency, and investment in places in the long-term.”

Effective involvement in community development requires that CYD organizations learn about community development concepts and processes while forging pathways for engagement. CYD staff and youth participants often have deep ties in the neighborhoods where they are based, which can support connecting with community development efforts. Strategies for getting a seat at the leadership table include having CYD leaders serve on civic boards and commissions; building relationships within city government, initiated through a municipal arts agency, City Council member, youth agency, economic development, or planning department; and getting to know local real estate developers.

- **Amplify youth voices and strengthen their roles as key decision makers in community development initiatives.**

Creative youth development leaders recognize that supporting youth in making a positive difference in their communities is an opportunity not only to increase their impact on communities, but also on outcomes for youth participants. Youth are transformed as they transform the community—finding passion and purpose through direct involvement in improving their communities. And young people build skills such as public speaking and gain knowledge about local government and planning processes.

Involving youth in community development also provides the opportunity to counter the notion held by some that

young people have limited pro-social values, lack attachment to their communities, and can't be trusted with meaningful responsibility (Cabill, 1997). The dedication and accomplishments of youth participating in CYD programs, combined with young people's sincere interest in improving their communities, can counteract such misperceptions.

Arts learning expert, **Eric Booth**, asserted, "The imperative is the realizable potential of having BOTH endeavors [creative youth development and community development] succeed more fully as a result of working together. When we can activate and channel the power of youth creative investment into the endeavors that change communities, we have more power, and better communities."

Develop and deepen opportunities for young people to create a more just and equitable society.

The origins of creative youth development are rooted in social justice, as a commitment to equity and access for all youth to participate in quality creative learning opportunities was the genesis for the formation of many programs. From the beginning, many creative youth development programs have taken an intentional approach to civic engagement and social justice issues.

CYD programs employ the arts, sciences, and humanities as vehicles to support youth participants in envisioning the world in which they would like to live and in taking steps to work toward that vision.

Davis stated, "CYD at its best promotes culturally relevant and responsive curricula and situates equity as an essential component of quality. By centering the voices and experiences of young people, employing practitioners who teach for social justice, and prioritizing family and community engagement, CYD fosters high quality learning that supports young people in being creative thinkers and doers."

James Kass, founder and executive director of Youth Speaks, stated, "A [social justice] framework acknowledges that we live in an unjust and non-equitable society and that young people are often on the receiving end of horrible practices and policies designed by people far removed from young people's lives. Youth are hungry for artistic experiences. The critical thinking skills they gain in [CYD] programs and having space to express themselves freely allows youth to articulate these challenges and inspires them to work toward a more just and equitable society."

- **Collaborate with youth to integrate their voices and leadership into the core structures and practices of creative youth development programs and the broader sector.**

"Youth have a unique awareness of what programs, strategies, and practices work with people their age. They should be consulted about best practices," stated **Hodari Davis**, national program director at Youth Speaks. He added that challenges to integrate youth leadership in CYD mostly rest in the experiences of adults whose lack of faith in the abilities and capacities of young people limits opportunity. CYD leaders, with a deeply ingrained belief in valuing youth voice and contributions, counter low expectations that many adults have for youth.

SPOKES, the Youth Speaks' youth advisory board, manifests the types of changes that organizations and young people envision, including youth leadership within CYD organizations. This group of youth leaders wields influence in shaping programs and policies at Youth Speaks. Youth Speaks also provides leadership pathways for interested young people to learn about administration and practice in CYD programs and hires program alums in staff positions. Poet mentors at Youth Speaks talk with young people about societal issues and provide background on the history of social justice movements.

Outside of their own organizations, CYD leaders can help young people in building relationships with politicians, community organizers, artists, and others actively pursuing social change. Such efforts position youth as agents for change, not just people to enact change upon.

- **Champion creative youth development programs as spaces in which young people develop positive self-identities, recognize liberating and oppressive forces, and activate these programs' potential for impact.**

The research prior to the Summit, showed that “young people overwhelmingly chose social justice as a strategic priority for the Summit and action agenda,” said **Robyne Walker Murphy**, director of early childhood and family programming at DreamYard Art Center. “Young people want to discuss social justice. CYD leaders and people who work in the arts have to start having these conversations.”

CYD programs are increasingly providing training to support teaching artists and others engaged in CYD in deepening their practice of teaching the arts through a social justice lens. Youth Speaks provides teaching training through its *Brave New Teachers* program. In 2013 Arts Corps of Seattle held its first Arts Education and Social Justice Institute.

Opportunities to deepen CYD social justice practices should not be restricted to adults. Youth leaders and participants in creative youth development programs and engaged in social change could also benefit from coming together in regional gatherings or a national summit to find kinship and learn from one another.

Document and boldly communicate the vital impact and experience of creative youth development.

Creative youth development programs have yet to attain broad awareness and understanding of their significant positive impact on the lives of young people and on communities. CYD programs have a compelling narrative to share about their work, one that interweaves storytelling with examples of young people’s creative accomplishments and, increasingly, data. Empirical evidence of positive outcomes for youth through CYD programs exists, but must be conveyed more clearly and cohesively to funders, policymakers, and community leaders.

- **Invest in capturing and analyzing impact through shared language, systems, and tools.**

CYD leaders understand that communicating impact is essential to securing and maintaining funding, making the case to policymakers, and securing partnerships and collaborations. **Krista Robinson**, program manager at Downtown Aurora Visual Arts, shared, “Our evaluation efforts have made an impact on our funders feeling like they’re making a solid investment. They’re seeing outcomes, they’re seeing young people gaining 21st century skills.” Workforce development and education are two widespread funding priorities, and it is strategic for CYD organizations to show linkages to these priorities.

Sandra Ruppert, director of Arts Education Partnership, stated, “There are important educational outcomes happening through creative youth development that can be documented . . . The evaluation piece is so important. Making sure we’re able to capture those outcomes is critical to the sustainability of [creative youth development programs] over time.”

Some CYD groups have developed or funded development of evaluation tools that are specific to their organization or to a local consortium of organizations. Two exemplary frameworks are [The Mosaic Model for Youth Development through the Arts](#) and [Boston Youth Arts Evaluation Project Framework](#). Practitioners also use more general youth program evaluation tools such as the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA). A key need is curating and synthesizing existing tools and research to provide a framework for unified communication with stakeholders.

- **Demonstrate impact in order to cultivate shared ownership of creative youth development across sectors.**

Creative youth development outcomes must be positioned so that other stakeholders who care about outcomes for youth see their role in CYD and see CYD’s role in their own work.

“Big picture I see the opportunity for the youth arts field to link the outcomes for youth participants with larger outcomes for society,” said **Mari Barrera**, senior advisor at Hunt Alternatives. “The key is being coherent and unified.”

Communicating CYD outcomes and linking them to larger societal outcomes such as increased volunteerism and decreased substance abuse positions CYD programs as resources and solutions for young people, communities, and society as a whole. Such positioning would empower the field, invalidate beliefs of CYD as being peripheral to other youth programs and services, and convey CYD as a strong player in cross-sector initiatives.

CYD will also benefit from national organizations powerfully and consistently making the story of creative development visible. The National Guild, President’s Committee for the Arts and the Humanities, Americans for the Arts, and National Assembly of State Arts Agencies are all invested in advancing the agenda.

Support and advocate for a strong creative youth development sector with effective business models, new revenue sources, and partnerships that generate adequate funding and sustain the sector.

- **Organize and mobilize as a sector to increase capacity, sustainability, and impact.**
- **Advocate for and develop funding strategies to increase the strength and long-term impact of creative youth development programs.**

Financial sustainability is an urgent need because too many creative youth development organizations and programs are in uncertain financial situations. **Terry Blackhawk**, executive director of InsideOut Literary Arts, stated, “Finances are clearly a big part of the challenges in advancing this work and this field. It is so hard for small organizations to keep up a level of work [due to insufficient financial resources].”

Multiyear targeted funding and professional development programs such as the Massachusetts Cultural Council’s YouthReach Program and Hunt Alternatives’ *ARTWorks* for Kids have helped strengthen and grow creative youth development. Regularly bringing together participating organizations to share best practices and develop tools creates a community of practice and helps programs advance their work.

Barrera envisions creating an ecosystem of private support for youth arts organizations—and then having them work together for public support and public sector funding. *ARTWorks* for Kids is following that model, first with a collaborative fundraising initiative and now through engaging youth arts organizations in collective advocacy.

“Fundors need to hear from grantees about sustainability, and the impact of long-term funding,” observed Jylkka. “Grantmakers in the Arts’ (GIA) [National Capitalization Project](#) has been a good way to educate funders about the broader operational needs of organizations. The conversation has been having an impact.” According to GIA’s 2013 “Funding Snapshot,” general operating support for the arts has increased from 19% twenty years ago to 32.5% in 2011.

Janet Brown, president and CEO of GIA, stated, “Organizations supporting youth development in the arts need to take advantage of all their resources including cultivating an understanding of public policy, organizing networks of parents and advocates, and developing strong programs with components of impact.”

Building a Movement

The field of CYD is ripe for advancement, and individuals and organizations are answering the call to forge the future of this work.

“Youth arts organizations are positioned well to raise awareness with the public and to bring resources to the work they are doing,” stated **Matt Wilson**, executive director of MASSCreative and a veteran community organizer,

“Building a movement and building resources requires three things: telling a good story, advocating and asking for what you need, and organizing to build power. These things are inherent to creative youth development.”

Dalouge Smith commented, “The conceptual goals of the national policy and advocacy agenda are strong. It will take time for people to understand, embrace, and know how to pursue them. The goals are about a new movement. . . . We must recognize that the goals will evolve as the movement coalesces.”

“I would encourage collaboration around the agenda with the larger youth-serving field,” Peterson advised. He continued, “Partnerships between local providers and larger intermediary organizations can help make the case and raise public understanding of the benefits of [CYD] programs—the key part is developing the youth outcomes side.”

Summit partners are working with other local, state, and national organizations to advance the agenda, and the National Guild will continue the dialogue and build on the agenda at its annual Conference for Community Arts Education, Nov. 19-22, 2014, in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, Summit participants and partner organizations are strategizing and taking steps to advance the agenda at the national, state, and local levels. Together, they are building a movement.

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