

Community Youth Engagement in East Palo Alto: A Study of the Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative

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INTRODUCTION

“There’s no arts center here. I think to have a central place where people can gather—creativity is visible, culture is visible and valued and elevated—is a benefit to the community, to civic connection, social connection, to youth visibility and pathways in the arts ...” –YAMC Study Respondent (Adult)

Existing literature suggests a range of benefits associated with engaging in the arts. Children who participate in arts programming demonstrate increased social competence and improved behavior (Lobo & Winsler, 2006) and are more likely to experience positive emotions and improved emotion regulation (Brown & Sax, 2013). Research suggests that the arts aid in the development of skills that help learning and performance in school such as observing, expressing, persisting, and reflecting (Winner, Hetland, Veenema, Sheridan & Palmer, 2006). Engaging in the arts was also found to be associated with better visualization and geometric reasoning skills (Walker, Winner, Hetland, Simmons & Goldsmith, 2011).

Despite the well-studied benefits of engaging in the arts, youth, especially those in high-poverty communities, experience a lack of arts programming (Gallagher, Campbell, Esch, Malin, Mayes & Woodworth, 2008). The shift towards high-stakes standardized testing brought on by No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top’s use of test scores as a measure of academic success has contributed to this shortage. These policies reduced arts programming in the public school setting, particularly for low-income, African American, and Latino youth (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011).

The Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative is a community-wide effort to address the lack of arts programming in East Palo Alto, California, through the development of an arts center. The six-year process, supported by the Goldman Foundation, centered on youth leadership and the arts, and engaged a cross-sector collaborative of partner organizations in an attempt to address the city’s shortage of existing arts programming. This case study analysis of the Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative contributes to the existing literature of community youth engagement; that is, the process of engaging youth in efforts to improve their community. Previous research highlights the range of benefits resulting from leveraging the many assets of youth and facilitating opportunities for them to contribute to their community (McLaughlin, 2000; Gambone, Klem & Connell, 2002). Contributing to existing research, this study describes the characteristics of community youth engagement and provides examples of how these manifested in the case of the Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative. We also consider the factors that helped propel the Initiative forward, as well as important considerations for similar initiatives.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This is a case study of a community youth engagement initiative that focuses on youth development, community building, and placemaking; the Initiative puts youth and the arts at its core. With six years of dedication from youth and adult partners alike, and tremendous progress made toward creating an inclusive and multifaceted arts and cultural center in East Palo Alto, this study provides valuable insights about fostering positive community youth engagement from the perspective of key stakeholders. This study seeks to share those insights with the field and to

further elevate the voices of East Palo Alto youth as well as the community itself, a diverse city of color with a rich history of community empowerment and social justice.

Key Partners

Key partners involved in this study include the Youth Arts and Music Center Project;¹ the John & Marcia Goldman Foundation, whose long-term support and commitment allowed this Initiative to endure; and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University. We discuss these partners in more detail below.

Youth Arts and Music Center Project

The Initiative began in 2010 with Live in Peace (LIP), an East Palo Alto organization committed to advancing the cultural, educational, and economic empowerment of youth in communities of color, and the John and Marcia Goldman Foundation. Both organizations shared an idea to build a space for arts and culture in a community that lacked a comprehensive, centralized hub for the arts. The Foundation and LIP, along with the Mural Music and Arts Project (MMAP), and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center), would form the Initiative's leadership team.² At the heart of the Youth Arts and Music Center Project is the Youth Action Team (YAT), a group of talented, young East Palo Alto artists and musicians behind the movement to create and build an arts center in East Palo Alto (Youth Arts and Music Center Project, 2016a).

In 2015, the John and Marcia Goldman Foundation established the East Palo Alto Youth Arts and Music Center LLC, which operates under the auspices of the Foundation board. The LLC enabled the Foundation to purchase and hold land for the project, and to establish and grow capacity for the nascent organization before transitioning to an independent 501c3. Under the LLC, Foundation staff serve alongside YAMC staff to provide capacity in human resources, fundraising, and finance. The 501c3 was legally established in 2014, but is not yet operational. The aim is to fully transition staff, systems, and board leadership to the independent 501c3 by 2019.

The John & Marcia Goldman Foundation

The John & Marcia Goldman Foundation aims to have an impact on the quality of life of individuals and communities in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. In fulfilling its mission, the foundation focuses its grants in the areas of youth, health, and the arts. They have been supporting the Initiative since 2010.

¹ When referring to the single organization that developed as a result of this Initiative, we use the term, "Youth Arts and Music Center Project." When referring to the Initiative to build an arts center made up of several organizations and diverse stakeholders we use the term, "Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative" or "YAMC Initiative".

² A third youth-serving organization, Youth United for Community Action (YUCA), a grassroots community organization created, led, and run by young people of color, would join the leadership team beginning in 2012. Several other organizations, institutions, public agencies, community members, and consultants would serve as advisors and key stakeholders during the life of the Initiative.

The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities

The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, located within Stanford University's Graduate School of Education, partners with communities, researchers, and practitioners to produce evidence-based research to improve and strengthen the well-being of youth, inform policy and practice in the fields of education and youth development, and emphasize the importance of equity and capacity-building in youth-serving organizations. Our guiding principles emphasize working in partnership with schools, school districts, and other youth-serving organizations on research projects that address community-identified needs, and conducting rigorous analysis to create actionable findings. We embed our work in a comprehensive tri-level framework that focuses on the interactions across the individual (youth), setting (program) and system (community) levels, and the ways that changes at one level influence the others. Guided by this model, we engage our partners to facilitate inquiry to inform and improve educational institutions and youth programs, building their capacity to collect and interpret data in the process. The Gardner Center has a deep commitment to, and long track record of, working to improve opportunities and outcomes for students in Stanford's near-neighbor communities of Redwood City and East Palo Alto.

It should be noted that the Gardner Center research team who conducted this study was not engaged in the program development of the Initiative.

Community Context

East Palo Alto is a city of nearly 30,000 residents, most of which are people of color (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Latino residents make up the majority of the population (62%) and African American and Pacific Islander residents account for 14% and 12%, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). East Palo Alto's population is proportionally younger than the county in which it is situated. Children and youth under the age of 20 comprise almost one-third of its residents compared to less than one-quarter countywide.

The city of East Palo Alto is, and always has been, surrounded by more affluent communities. The city's median household income of just over \$52,000 is well under half that of neighboring Palo Alto (\$126,771) and about 40% below the county average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The poverty rate in East Palo Alto of 16.6% is on par with the statewide average but more than twice that of San Mateo County as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The rate of East Palo Alto youth in extreme poverty³ (12.1%) is more than two and half times that of San Mateo County (4.5%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

³ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, "Extreme poverty' is defined as under 50% of the poverty income threshold. The U.S. Census Bureau uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. The official poverty thresholds do not vary geographically, but they are updated for inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI-U). The official poverty definition uses money income before taxes and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits (such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps)."

Prior to World War II, the unincorporated area of East Palo Alto was a predominately white community (Anning, 1998). African Americans settled in the area following the end of the war as a result of housing discrimination in San Francisco, and by 1980 over half the population in East Palo Alto was African American (Anning, 1998). As an unincorporated area in San Mateo County, residents had limited say in the policies that impacted them. Examples include: the widening of highway 101 in the 1950s that displaced 45 businesses (Anning, 1998); the valuable East Palo Alto land that was annexed into Menlo Park and Palo Alto in the late 1940s and 1950s, depriving the city of population and property tax revenue (Anning, 1998; Kahan, 2015); and the 1964 opening of Romic, a hazardous waste facility, that was linked to serious public health and environmental concerns before being forced to shut down in 2007 (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2007; Cutler, 2015).⁴

These and other events along with persistent discriminatory housing policies in the region heightened economic disparities and crime in East Palo Alto, with violent crime reaching record levels in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1992, East Palo Alto earned the title “Murder Capital of the U.S.A” because it had the highest per capita homicide rate in the country (James, Maliska, Elam, & Levin 1996). In response, East Palo Alto residents banded together, often across racial and ethnic lines, to combat the violence and drugs (James et al., 1996), laying the foundation for the many grassroots efforts and organizations that would come to define the community (Castrechini & Ardoin, 2011). Although violent crime in East Palo Alto declined significantly after this period, poverty and crime still continued to affect the community (Ardoin, Castrechini, & Hofstedt, 2013). By 1983, the community incorporated, becoming a self-governing city in which residents could influence local policies that historically had been out of their control. However, by the time the city successfully incorporated, it had suffered population loss and had little tax base to sustain itself (Anning, 1998).

By the late 1990s, crime was on the decline and significant demographic and economic shifts were taking place (Anning, 1998; Ardoin, Castrechini, & Hofstedt, 2013). Notable demographic shifts occurred away from a predominately African American population to one that was predominately Latino; by 2000, 59% of East Palo Alto was Latino. African American and Pacific Islander residents comprised 23% and 8% of the population, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The shift away from a majority African American community occurred as a result of larger numbers of other racial and ethnic groups settling in the area by the 1980s as well as fewer African Americans living in East Palo Alto than in previous decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Minnesota Population Center, 2011). The economic shifts that took place included the development of large-scale hospitality and retail businesses, such as the Four Seasons Hotel and the Ravenswood 101 Shopping Center in East Palo Alto, which at the time had lower land prices than surrounding communities (Anning, 1998). Although this development proposed to generate much needed tax revenue for the city, it was also expected to displace residents (Anning, 1998).

Concern over residents’ displacement related to new development continues today. The relocation of Facebook to nearby Menlo Park in 2012, along with escalating housing prices in

⁴ Youth United for Community Action (YUCA) played a critical role in the environmental justice movement to shut down Romic.

East Palo Alto and region-wide, has elevated residents' concerns of displacement given East Palo Alto is one of the few remaining "affordable" communities in Silicon Valley. There was—and continues to be—concern that the Youth Arts and Music Center, a large-scale civic resource, could divert attention from community concerns such as affordable housing or that it may contribute or facilitate the displacement of residents.

To add to concerns, Stanford University has had a complex and sometimes contentious relationship with East Palo Alto. Stanford resources have flowed into East Palo Alto over the years for multiple reasons. Stanford researchers have strived to be good neighbors; however, resources from outside groups that include the university, have engendered distrust and skepticism. The Gardner Center has had to navigate these sometimes turbulent waters with care.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In partnership with the Youth Arts and Music Center Project and the John and Marcia Goldman Foundation, the Gardner Center has engaged in case study research of the Youth Arts and Music Center (YAMC) Initiative in East Palo Alto. The case study is a "research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534). Conducting case study research helps illuminate complex social phenomena (Yin, 2013). With the Initiative in the midst of its program development and building design phase, it is at an important juncture for Initiative leaders to learn more about the experience of key youth, adults, and the broader community in the implementation of the Initiative. This information can guide the Initiative's work moving forward and enable Initiative leaders to share lessons learned with the broader field.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. In what ways has the Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative facilitated conditions for youth to meaningfully engage in their community at the individual, program, and community levels?
 - a. What value or benefit does this initiative provide to the community?
 - b. How do other adults in the community see youth?
 - c. In what ways do the arts and music matter within the community?
2. How does the cross sector collaborative (e.g., local youth serving organizations, philanthropic and research institutions) influence the development of the YAMC?

We addressed these questions through case study research methods that relied on two primary data sources: 1) interviews with key informants, and 2) extensive document review. The specific methods of data collection and analysis are detailed below.

DATA & METHODS

The Gardner Center conducted an extensive review that included an analysis of relevant YAMC documentation in order to learn more about the history of the Initiative and the role it played in cultivating youth leaders and fostering youth civic engagement. The Gardner Center reviewed the following program documents: reports to the foundation; a community needs assessment; interviews and surveys of residents, nonprofit staff, city staff, and others; the Initiative logic model; meeting minutes (e.g., those from the Youth Action Team, Leadership Team, and Advisory Engagement Council); presentations; and on-going work. Reviewing these materials allowed the Gardner Center to learn about the role that youth have played in the development of the YAMC Initiative and the skills youth have developed in becoming key stakeholders. We coded documents for themes that aligned with the conceptual framework and other emerging issues.

As part of this case study, the Gardner Center also conducted individual and focus group interviews with a total of 23 diverse stakeholders including program leaders and staff, youth, grantmakers, and consultants in May and June of 2016. The interviews with adults asked about their thoughts on how the Initiative impacted them and the community, and if youth gained particular skills as a result of their participation. Youth in focus groups were asked what they learned about themselves and their community, including new skills they developed as a result of participating in the Initiative. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes.

THE TRI-LEVEL CONTINUUM OF COMMUNITY YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

To organize our findings from the case study research, we adopt the tri-level continuum of community youth engagement developed by Westrich, Gerstein, Fernandez and Horwitz (2012). The Gardner Center has used this framework to describe multiple examples of community-level work while conducting studies and partnering with organizations in a city that neighbors East Palo Alto. We employ this framework to help illuminate how the East Palo Alto Youth Arts and Music Center has evolved and developed. The tri-level continuum of community youth engagement includes two dimensions: the continuum of youth engagement and a tri-level perspective of community youth development (Westrich, Gerstein, Fernandez & Horwitz, 2012). We briefly summarize each of these dimensions in turn. We then describe the Tri-level Continuum of Community Youth Engagement as a whole.

Continuum of Community Youth Engagement

In their review of the literature, Westrich et al. find that there are three major stages of engaging youth: 1) youth have access to activities that positively affect their development, 2) youth participate in meaningful discussions and decisions that affect them, and 3) youth are involved in efforts to better their community. Figure 1 depicts each of these three stages of the Continuum of Community Youth Engagement as positive youth development, youth voice and leadership, and youth-adult civic engagement.

Figure 1: Continuum of Community Youth Engagement



The framework describes how each of these stages of community youth engagement build upon each other. Specifically, as a foundation, “all youth need access to opportunities for involvement in meaningful and high quality programs and activities in their community” (i.e., positive youth development) (Westrich et al., 2012, pp. 4). “Building on this foundation...youth are provided with authentic opportunities for input and decision-making about issues relevant to their own well-being” (i.e., youth voice and leadership) (Westrich et al., 2012, pp. 5). And lastly, “youth have opportunities for meaningful civic engagement through egalitarian partnerships with adults” (i.e., youth-adult civic engagement) (Westrich et al., 2012, pp. 5). As youth and the Initiative move from positive youth development, to youth voice and leadership, to youth-adult civic engagement, youth experience increased independence and responsibility.

Community Youth Development: A Tri-Level Perspective

Westrich et al. (2012) highlight three levels of community youth development: 1) individual, 2) program and 3) community/initiative. In their review of the literature, they find that “the context for community change spans the domains of the individual, organizational, and community and should be examined from a tri-level perspective” (Westrich et al., 2012, pp. 3).

- The *individual level* refers to interactions between individuals (e.g, youth-youth interactions, youth-adult interactions, and adult-adult interactions).
- The *program level* refers to the actions of individual programs, organizations and institutions.
- And the *community/initiative level* refers to initiatives involving multiple programs/organizations and/or the community as a whole (Westrich et al, 2012).

They further note that “effective community youth development work requires the fundamental understanding that change made in one context necessarily influences the others and requires thoughtful attention at multiple levels simultaneously” (Westrich et al., 2012, pp. 3).

The Tri-Level Continuum of Youth Engagement

As described above, this study adopts a framework that was used in earlier work that combines both a developmental and a multi-level perspective on community youth engagement in an effort to best understand the evolution of the East Palo Alto Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative. Figure 2 depicts the tri-level perspective of community youth engagement featuring the *stages* of community youth engagement on the X-axis (i.e., positive youth development, youth voice and leadership and youth-adult civic engagement) and the *levels* of community youth development on the Y-axis (i.e., individual, program, community/initiative). We have chosen to adopt this conceptual framework as a guide for our study. The Youth Arts and Music Center developed over time and in multiple dimensions. This complex initiative required a conceptual framework to structure and illustrate the research.

Figure 2. The Tri-Level Continuum of Youth Engagement

	POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT	YOUTH VOICE AND LEADERSHIP	YOUTH-ADULT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
Community/Initiative	Community/initiative provides sufficient resources to support a wide range of positive youth development opportunities for youth.	Community/initiative supports opportunities for youth participation in decision-making.	Community/initiative provides resources, coordination, and meaningful forums for youth civic engagement. The community benefits from these partnerships.
Program	Programs/organizations provide opportunities for youth participation in positive youth development settings.	Programs/organizations provide opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making.	Programs/organizations provide opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships with youth focused on positive civic engagement. The programs/organizations benefit from those partnerships.
Individual	Youth have access to and participate in positive youth development programs or activities.	Youth have meaningful leadership roles and contribute substantively to the decision-making process for programs and organizations.	Youth and adults are engaged in mutually beneficial partnerships resulting in positive civic engagement.

We adopt the Tri-Level Continuum of Community Youth Engagement to describe the development of the Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative. In our description we define the stages of the continuum of youth engagement exactly as Westrich et al. do in their paper.

We define the levels of community youth development as follows:

- *Individual Level:* Individual youth or adults, and the interactions between individual youth and adults;
- *Program Level:* Individual programs/organizations involved in the Initiative such as Live in Peace, MMAP, the Gardner Center, and the Youth Action Team; and
- *Community/Initiative Level:* The Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative as a whole, the City of East Palo Alto, the Goldman Foundation and the collaborative of organizations involved in the Initiative.

FINDINGS

This section of the report outlines key findings in our investigation of the creation of the Youth Arts and Music Center. The Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative illustrates how community youth engagement in East Palo Alto has generated a new civic resource. Through their involvement in the Initiative, youth accessed programs and activities that positively affected their development (i.e., positive youth development), engaged in meaningful discussions and decisions that affected them and their community (i.e., youth voice and leadership), and partnered with adults in efforts to improve their community (i.e., youth-adult civic engagement). Examining each of these stages of community youth engagement provides insight into the resources and opportunities that the community, initiative, and programs provide to support youth as key contributors. Within each stage, we outline the specific levels (community/initiative, program, and individual) in which the action occurred.

Positive Youth Development: Youth have access to activities that positively affect their development

The Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative created opportunities for youth to gain a range of skills and experiences that not only helped them contribute significantly to the work underway, but also to develop as young adults. The adults involved in the Initiative played key roles in facilitating these positive youth development opportunities. We begin by describing the ways in which the Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative positively affected youth development.



Community/Initiative Level:

The initiative provides sufficient resources to support a wide range of positive youth development opportunities for youth.

The Initiative brought together youth and professionals from various sectors in partnership towards the common goal of building an arts center in East Palo Alto. The Foundation’s investment to train the youth as investigators demonstrates a commitment to enabling positive youth development opportunities. Youth played central roles as key advocates and organizers behind the Initiative that required them to develop new skills and access new experiences. Specifically, in the early stages and throughout the course of the Initiative, youth took stock of existing arts programming to evaluate the need for an arts center in East Palo Alto, conducted site visits to other arts centers to inform the design of the arts center, engaged with adults in an iterative process of conceptualizing a mission and vision for the arts center, and executed events to increase the visibility of and buy-in for the Initiative.

Program Level:

Programs and organizations provide opportunities for youth participation in positive youth development settings.

The participating programs and organizations played a significant role in facilitating opportunities for youth to actively engage in the Initiative. Aside from recruiting youth through their own programs⁵ and providing the space for youth to convene, programs and organizations trained youth in research and community organizing, urban planning and design, and the arts. For example, in 2010, staff from the Gardner Center trained 10 youth researchers to assess the need for the arts center in East Palo Alto by helping them develop data collection skills related to survey administration and interviewing. Youth analyzed the data, presented findings, and made recommendations for the center to the Foundation. In addition, the arts-focused, youth-serving agencies allowed youth to refine their musical and artistic talents through positive arts programming. In 2013, the Youth Action Team collaborated with MMAP, Live in Peace, the Gardner Center, and Stanford students to premiere three documentaries at City Hall that focused on environmental issues in East Palo Alto. Adults from arts-focused, youth-serving agencies

⁵ LIP, MMAP and YUCA recruited youth from their own programs to be involved in the YAMC Initiative.

collaborated with youth on all aspects of the documentaries, including movie editing and live instrumentation.

Adults who engaged in the development of the Youth Arts and Music Center not only relied on their own technical expertise to create positive youth development opportunities, but also on their relationships with youth. Several adults involved in the Initiative also worked for community-based organizations (CBOs) in East Palo Alto such as MMAP and LIP, and worked with YAT members as part of their own organization's programming. The YAMC Initiative likely benefitted from partnership with these well-known and respected CBOs.

One youth reflected on the positive rapport that Live in Peace had with youth in East Palo Alto:

A lot of good things happen here at Live in Peace. They found a way to get the youth to actually appreciate and love a place so much that they're willing to just be here and just show up for no reason. It provides refuge to a lot of people. Because of the people that work here... It's definitely a place for the community. The feeling, the vibe here is created by the community.

One youth commented on how YAT allowed her to see her community in a new light:

YAT taught me to respect East Palo Alto because all the many leaders that have started all these nonprofit organizations... So I think through YAT I learned to respect EPA and the people who care about it, care about this community.

In addition to including adults with existing relationships with youth in the community, the initiative also included adults with significant experience in youth development. A leader from one youth-serving agency shared his philosophy of working with youth:

I really believe that ultimately good youth development work is rooted in love, in young people feeling loved as the baseline...Any of the success that Live in Peace has had [in helping kids] is due to the fact that we are here and we are a family to young people. That's the kind of youth development work I really believe in. For foundations, for example, taking the time to find out who is in that community that is either already doing the work and just needs support or has a natural inclination to love kids in that manner, and to be available. [Foundations should identify] those leaders, those community members and equip and support them.

The adults in the Initiative successfully built trust among youth in the Initiative. One youth reflected on how she was able to be herself among the adults involved who she had never previously met:

I had this vendetta against authority figures [growing] up. Being a part of this project helped me work a lot on my attitudes without requiring too much of me in terms of changing myself. I never really had to be somebody else when interacting with [the adults leading the initiative]. I am who I am.

Adults involved in the initiative used structures and strategies to reinforce positive youth development principles. For example, the youth and adults co-created agreements for YAT weekly meetings such as only allowing one person to speak at a time, giving respect and expecting respect from each other, and encouraging youth to express themselves freely. While adults collaborated with youth to create the agreements, youth had the shared responsibility of upholding them. These expectations created a safe space for youth to establish trusting relationships with one another. One youth compared her interactions with her peers on the Youth Action Team to those with other friends:

I feel like I can trust [people in YAT] more. I can be open. I've had friends [outside of YAT] that I've told things to and they've been not truthful or real with me. I would think one way and they'd be behind my back saying stuff. But when I come here it's like 'oh, I understand you and I know where you're coming from.'

Individual Level:

Youth have access to and participate in positive youth development programs and activities.

Through their deep involvement in the many aspects of the initiative, youth developed interpersonal, problem solving, and time management skills. Participation in the initiative also helped them gain insight into being an adult, the challenges facing their community, and the inner workings of an organization. For example, one youth reported learning to be more mindful of her peers:

At YAT I learned to be mindful of other people—of their voice, opinions, and things like that. When we went on our retreat we each went off to our own little area and we wrote. I was thinking I'm mindful not to be in another person's space because I'll throw off their thinking. Or I might make one of my friends laugh and they won't focus on the task at hand.

Whether learning about the skills of research and how to approach an adult to conduct an interview or refining their artistic talent, the youth involved in the Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative gained real world experience and were treated with respect by adults and peers alike.

Youth Voice and Leadership: Youth participate in meaningful discussions and decisions that affect them

The YAMC Initiative not only facilitated opportunities for youth to develop new skills and gain new experiences, but also positioned them in formal leadership roles. Youth were able to fulfill these leadership roles with the guidance of adult and peer mentors. In the process, youth began to find strength in their voice both within, and outside of, the Initiative. Next, we describe the ways in which the Youth Arts and Music Initiative created opportunities for youth voice and leadership.



Initiative Level:

Initiative supports opportunities for youth participation in decision making.

Youth held positions in key decision-making bodies for the initiative. The Advisory and Engagement Council (AEC),⁶ formed in 2014, included staff of youth-serving organizations in EPA, community leaders, parents, local artists, and Youth Action Team members. Being a part of the AEC offered youth the new experience of working side-by-side with adults and influencing a project they felt passionate about. One youth shared his experience on the Architecture Task Force⁷:

Being on the Architecture Task Force, most people there are older than me. Being one of the youngest members was slightly uncomfortable at the beginning. You just learn to adapt to it and say 'I have ideas that I want to contribute' and you [share] them...I felt passionate about what they were talking about and I was eager to share my ideas.

⁶ The AEC advised the Board of Trustees, YAMC staff and consulting experts in site selection, program development and space design, staff and governance decisions; represented the Initiative in the community as a whole; engaged diverse stakeholders in planning and developing the center; and worked in partnership with youth and other colleagues around the development of the center.

⁷ The AEC Task Forces provided content-specific program planning and space design recommendations around community development, youth development, visual arts, digital arts and performance arts; identified and helped cultivate partnership opportunities and alignments; and presented their findings and recommendations to the full AEC.

Program Level:

Programs/organizations provide opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making.

An experienced facilitator was central to the work of the YAMC Initiative to help guide and facilitate youth involvement. The facilitator coordinated meetings and developed agendas; guided goal-setting across Initiative leaders and youth; documented and shared key accomplishments of the Initiative; and trained youth in action research, community organizing, and event planning. The Foundation provided dedicated funding for this position and recruited the Gardner Center to fill this role, given the Gardner Center's experience in cross-sector youth development work. Having the Gardner Center as the external facilitator enabled CBOs involved in the Initiative to continue existing programming and participate in the initiative without the responsibility of shepherding the work. Multiple respondents referred to the facilitator as key to insuring forward progress.

The YAT served as the major organizing body behind the YAMC Initiative. The 2012-2013 YAT consisted of and was led entirely by 27 youth members between 13 and 24 years of age. The YAT organized events to increase the visibility of and buy-in for the center, and also played a significant role in planning and implementing the Initiative.

To equip them to fill these leadership positions, adult mentors taught youth to create meeting agendas, present to each other and external audiences, facilitate discussions with a range of audiences including fellow youth and adult stakeholders of the Initiative, and execute community events. Youth not only received training from adult mentors, but also from one another. The "ladder of leadership development" allowed older YAT members involved in the earlier stages of the YAMC Initiative to mentor new members. This cycle of training and mentoring not only helped sustain the momentum of the Initiative as YAT members moved on to other jobs, college, or interests, but also provided a key support to incoming YAT members. Two YAT members shared that having a peer mentor with whom they identified made them more comfortable and aware of their capabilities.

[Our mentors] started off as youth just like us. They developed themselves. It makes you feel stronger, a little more confident. Having a lot of mentors was really helpful.

[Before the Initiative] I disliked adults. I disliked the way they felt like they can overpower you sometimes. I look at [our mentors] as adults because they're older than us. It changed my view [of adults] because [our mentors] are cool, they understand, they can connect with you on certain things, but then they can disagree with you but then find a reason to come back in...and say 'you're right in a way but you're wrong in this way.' They'll show you when you're wrong and when you're right. They act like a teen sometimes and that makes people wanna connect with them. They find what our interests are and they use it to their advantage sometimes.

One young adult mentor, in particular, truly exemplified youth voice and leadership. Involved in the Initiative from the very beginning as a youth, he eventually became a key member of the team leading the Initiative, which early on consisted largely of adults; he played a critical role in

recruiting youth and co-facilitating the YAT with the support of adult mentors; and had a natural gift for the performing arts and often took center stage at Initiative events. This individual continued in this and similar roles with greater responsibility over the years until he most recently became a full time paid community liaison for the Initiative.

Individual Level:

Youth have meaningful leadership roles and contribute substantive input in the decision-making process for programs and organizations.

The design and execution of the Youth Action Team positioned youth as decision makers in the YAMC Initiative. Youth not only held leadership positions and received leadership training, but also learned to engage in critical discussions and express their opinions in multiple settings. Youth reported that through this initiative they came to understand that “their voice mattered.” For example, one youth reflected on how she found the strength in her voice by becoming more comfortable sharing her ideas:

I joined YAT because my mom found out about it. I really didn't want to join. When I was a freshman I kept everything to myself. I didn't want to talk to nobody. Ever since I started going to [YAT] I started opening up to people, stepping outside of the box...Just being comfortable around people. Just learning how to share your ideas with everyone instead of keeping it to yourself. Because if you keep it to yourself nothing's gonna happen.

Another youth reflects on how she was positioned in a serious leadership position on equal footing as adults leading East Palo Alto organizations. Being able to articulate herself in discussions with adults and hearing them respect her opinions helped her gain confidence in her voice:

But I learned how to interact with adults on a more professional level...We're interacting with people who are executive directors of other organizations in EPA. Talking to them and kind of seeing that adults have to respect our voices made me more confident in my voice when I'm in a circle of adults and I'm the only young person. Being able to still represent and do it confidently.

Both of these youth demonstrate how their experiences with meaningful leadership roles began to affect them in ways that extended beyond the YAMC Initiative. The significant decision-making roles entrusted to youth enabled them to grow and try out their new found skills and capacities in other arenas (e.g., home, school, church). These experiences also enabled them to forge trusting relationships with peers and adults. Multiple respondents, both youth and adult, described the significance of trust in developing leadership.

Youth-Adult Civic Engagement: Youth are involved in efforts to better their community

The Youth Action Team organized events that brought community members together while also increasing the visibility of the Initiative. And at the individual level, youth and adult leaders built mutually benefitting partnerships in which they learned about each other through their engagement in the Initiative. Here we describe the ways in which the Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative created opportunities for youth-adult civic engagement.



Initiative level:

Community/Initiative provides resources, coordination and meaningful forums for youth civic engagement. The community benefits from these partnerships.

The YAMC Initiative engaged youth in efforts and critical dialogues to improve East Palo Alto. For many youth and adults in the community, learning that their voices were truly valued and made a difference was a novel experience. One key youth leader reflects on the sense of ownership he felt over the Initiative, and how he felt it was improving his community:

What I've gained from the project is definitely something to wake up for every day...this project gets me to a point where I can go to work and feel good about it. I don't go to work and hate it like a lot of people do every day. I go to work, I love it, I feel good about. I make critical decisions that are critical for the [right] reasons. If you're a CEO you're making a critical decision that can affect a lot of people's lives, but for money. Rather, I'm making really critical decisions that can affect people in ways of either inspiring them to have a great community and live together in a peaceful manner or telling them 'Nothing in East Palo Alto is built for you anymore. Get out of your community.' Those decisions that I make are critical. They have far-reaching implications.

Youth involved in the YAMC Initiative both participated in and led discussions with community members around the design of the center and incorporating it into East Palo Alto. In addition to holding positions on the Advisory and Engagement Council (AEC), a major decision-making body behind the Initiative, youth facilitated and participated in design charrettes with community

members beginning in 2013. Design charrettes⁸ sought to incorporate the voice of the community in the design and implementation of the center. Youth also spoke on behalf of the Initiative in larger community forums including the city council meetings and the Youth Empowerment Strategies for Success (YESS) Collaborative meeting convened by One East Palo Alto.⁹ For example, in 2013 two young leaders participated in the YESS Youth Development committee representing the YAMC Initiative and continue to build buy-in for the Initiative within East Palo Alto.

Youth and adults garnered support for the YAMC and created an environment in which community members felt a sense of ownership over the center. Engaging the broader community in the center's development helped ensure that it would reflect the diversity of East Palo Alto and serve as an inclusive space for the arts. One adult leader reflected on the broad spectrum of community stakeholders involved in the AEC:

...[The Initiative] moved beyond just individual leaders of key partner organizations but even more broadly into looking at residents, parents, local artists; thinking about the different kinds of perspectives that should be represented in the advisory council and making sure they had a voice and seat at the table, including pulling from the youth action team and having some of those youth represented at the table too.

In addition to discussing the Initiative, youth engaged in larger conversations about the future of their community. One city leader reflected on what it was like to see youth actively engage in community discussions over a period of time. He noted that these youth leaders were maturing and gaining skills and the adults in the community learned to change perceptions of youth:

The only thing that dispels that misunderstanding that youth aren't necessarily ready to take on these issues is the fact that they keep coming back and every time they come back they're that much better. So the planning commission and other folks are less dismissive of youth because again, when they're consistent...Many times they wind up reading their statements, but then several years later they're no longer reading their statements and it no longer looks canned and they're answering questions. That I think has helped a lot because you actually have a proven track of youth being able to make cogent presentations, have impact on policy or implementation of policy or project. You can actually see it. So that I think has dispelled some of those prejudices that exists among adults.

⁸ A charrette is a strategy often used in the field of urban planning to engage multiple stakeholders to solicit input and feedback on designs. The process typically engages design experts, community members, and others and can occur over a period of days or weeks.

⁹ Youth Empowerment Strategies for Success (YESS) is a network of organizations and institutions dedicated to ensuring that East Palo Alto and Belle Haven/eastern Menlo Park children, youth, and young adults, ages 0 – 24, are able to achieve their full potential through education, employment and a healthy community.

Through their involvement in the Initiative, youth also learned about the issues facing their community. One YAT member explained:

My whole life I kinda would hear my parents or my cousins or any grownups say it's a struggle to be living, to be growing up. When I joined YAT I kinda saw what the struggle was. Basically that was the issue of gentrification. Up until that point I didn't really know what gentrification was, I never even heard of the word. Because of YAT the problems that affect me and my family and those around me every day have become much clearer to me. That's definitely one thing it taught me about my community. Even though I know it happens in a lot of different communities, EPA being one of them. Something that I'm glad to have known.

Program Level:

Programs/organizations provide opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships with youth focus on positive civic engagement.

The YAT not only played a critical role in the design and implementation of the center, but also organized events for the community that, in many cases, increased the program's visibility. In 2012, the YAT began partnering with other organizations as the representatives of the YAMC Initiative. That same year, they planned and executed the first Art and Music Fest, bringing together local artists, musicians, and about 100 community members around performances and learning through the arts. This event became an annual tradition wherein the YAT collaborated with community-based organizations such as Live in Peace and MMAP. In 2013, the YAT partnered with students from Able Works and College Track to make over 130,000 meals to support food insecure communities locally and abroad. The YAT also provided Spoken Word arts intervals for the youth and adults involved in packing these meals.

The YAT collaborated with a range of partners and organizations, bringing together community members to enjoy the arts, increase the visibility of the YAMC Initiative, and expand awareness and knowledge about issues affecting East Palo Alto and other communities.

Individual Level:

Youth and adults are engaged in mutually beneficial partnerships resulting in positive civic engagement.

Through the Initiative, youth and adults partnered to improve their community. Both youth and adults learned from each other in a mutually beneficial way. Adults provided positive youth development programming and trained youth to play key roles in the Initiative. And several adults reported learning lessons from the youth that they would not necessarily have gleaned from their peers.

One key adult leader shared:

Working with kids...They point out hypocrisy in ways that I think I would be very comfortable skirting over in myself and in decision making. I think I've learned a lot about my rigidity and have had to question certain professional norms I hold sacred—some of which should be held sacred and some of which need to be a little bit malleable and thoughtful. I think they've taught me a ton about where I'm culturally incompetent and blind and still have a long way to go there.

Ultimately, respondents perceived creating the YAMC as an enormous and positive change to the community/city. The act of youth and adults working together to create this new civic resource will benefit future generations.

To summarize, the framework of community youth engagement depicts a developmental continuum where youth and adults gradually forge stronger partnerships for mutual responsibility and civic engagement. The East Palo Alto Youth Art and Music Center is a powerful example of community youth engagement; specifically, an example of youth assuming a leadership role in developing a new civic resource.

LESSONS LEARNED

The YAMC Initiative is the story of community youth engagement in East Palo Alto. As detailed in the findings section, our case study investigation of this Initiative sheds light on the conditions at the community/initiative, program, and individuals level that created opportunities for positive youth development, youth voice and leadership, and youth-adult civic engagement. Three important features of the YAMC Initiative were (1) including a broad spectrum of stakeholders in collaborative community engagement, (2) intentionally keeping youth at the Initiative's center throughout the entire process and (3) the Initiative's focus on the arts. In this section, we highlight lessons learned and organize our reflections by each of these three features.

Collaborative Community Engagement

A skilled and multi-dimensional facilitator was essential for moving the work forward.

Collaboration across sectors and entities (e.g., nonprofit organizations, research institutions, philanthropic institutions, and public agencies) requires an explicit and agreed-upon articulation of common goals, along with the strategies to reach them (Collaboration for Impact, n.d.). Not only did the YAMC facilitator need to be skilled at running meetings, but also with working across sectors and partnering with youth. The YAMC facilitator was highly skilled in all of these areas as well as in community organizing. The Foundation's steady support of this role enabled the work to unfold.

With a skilled and dedicated individual to guide and facilitate regular meetings with Initiative leaders, document decisions and responsibilities, and support the development of the center's

mission and vision, organizations were able to be active participants in the process without having the added responsibility of shepherding that work given existing demands on their time.

The facilitator was instrumental in guiding an iterative approach to constructing the center's mission and vision with core leaders and youth, who in turn reached out to the broader community to gain support and buy-in for the Initiative. One respondent on the AEC discussed how, in addition to being able to better serve youth, he saw the YAMC as strengthening the network and quality of programming in East Palo Alto:

Because of that collaboration... the capacity is multiplied by the network. That's amazingly powerful. You're [the YAMC is] the first-stop shop, you're not the one-stop shop. You're the first stop shop. And then they route you to us or so on and so on, or themselves. And I think that demonstrates a lot of value, both in the power of the network and also the fact that your capacity is increased. And then again being the voice for that. So to me I find tremendous value.

Developing the mission and vision was a key first step in creating buy-in and building trust. Once articulated, the mission and vision were recorded in a living document which Initiative leaders revisited and edited over time. This ensured that, as the Initiative evolved and new issues came to light, the mission and vision would reflect these changes in perspective. In speaking with respondents, several discussed the center's mission and vision as what drove them and kept them engaged. One youth respondent commented:

It's all about patience and taking it slow in order to reach your goals. Definitely have a lot of patience. I can say that after 3 years, towards the ending I've started losing a little bit of interest in going to the meetings mainly because I just want to get down to the building... Talking about the main mission or the main goal that we were going for here. That's something that really got me engaged.

This process created buy-in to the Initiative because partners and youth provided valuable input and could envision the benefits of the center (e.g., the center would "bring together local artists under a common identity" and "elevate East Palo Alto as a cultural and artistic hub") as they had defined them while developing the center's mission and vision. Overall, leaders viewed the Initiative as beneficial because it would increase their capacity—as well as the community's capacity as a whole—to serve youth.

The skillful facilitation enabled the community to own the mission and vision of the center. The process was inclusive and continually enrolled increasing numbers of people. Without this continuity of support the center might not have moved forward.

The inclusion of a broad spectrum of stakeholders helped ensure that the center would encompass the diverse needs and values of the broader community.

Initiative leaders recognized that a transparent and inclusive decision-making process that included a wide array of stakeholders was important in garnering support for the Initiative from the very beginning. Although this is true in any context, it was especially true given the challenging East Palo Alto community context (e.g., fear of displacement and the YAMC as possibly a contributing factor, skepticism of “outsiders”). These efforts on the part of Initiative leaders laid the groundwork for the trust and commitment necessary to support community engagement over time. The Initiative fostered community involvement because the youth and organizations involved were very visible to the broader community as a result of the youth action research, community-wide YAT events, presentations at public meetings, and building design charrettes open to the public. One youth commented:

When you bring a project into a community... how important it is for the mission to in some way be set on improving that community and have influence.... And also having the community be involved, make sure the community is involved in the planning process.

In addition to intentional efforts to highlight the YAMC Initiative in the community and encourage residents to get involved, it was important to develop a community liaison position, to be filled by a community member with long-standing engagement on the Initiative. It was crucial to have a direct link to the community in the form of a key youth leader who was involved in the Initiative from the beginning. Had the effort to develop the YAMC remained solely in the hands of “outsiders,” the community might have resisted. Instead, including stakeholders and the community liaison enabled multiple strategies for two-way communication.

An inclusive collaborative community engagement effort can surface tensions.

Tensions arose from deliberately including multiple stakeholders with different organizational cultures and/or professional norms. For example, one stakeholder’s norm of being organized and systematic might conflict with another’s more informal style. It raised important questions including: what does a collaborative community engagement process look like in practice? How are decisions made? Is it possible to develop common agreement and still be inclusive in moving the work forward? This collaborative community engagement approach, although democratic, opened the door to unique challenges related to differing organizational cultures or professional norms that, on the positive side, exposed partners to new ideas and approaches, but also made working together challenging. It also proved to “raise the organizational capacity bar” for multiple participating programs.

Specific tensions arose from varying expectations related to the scope of the Initiative, the role and commitment of key stakeholders, and differing opinions on who makes up the community. A lack of a shared understanding of key terms in some cases caused confusion. Although key Initiative leaders made a conscientious effort to work from a common understanding among themselves and extending their plans to the broader community, there were still concerns of

mistrust from within the community. Part of this mistrust stemmed from a different understanding or expectation of the scope of the Initiative. At the start, youth conducted action research as well as a needs assessment to determine if community members would support a proposal to build an arts center. However, given the myriad concerns facing the community, some respondents voiced hope or expected more flexibility in the scope of the Initiative, specifically in regard to the youth action research as a means to shed light on other community's needs (e.g., affordable housing) that perhaps the center could address (e.g., youth/young-adult artists in affordable residence housing on site at the center). One respondent described the different Initiative leaders' expectations as a "cultural disconnect" stemming from the dynamic of "outsiders" versus community members and its effect on collaborative efforts.

It is also important to acknowledge the changing demographics of the community. East Palo Alto's population was predominately African American in 1980, whereas only 14% of the population was African American in 2014 (Anning, 1998; U.S. Census, 2014). Also important is how more recent concerns over the shortage of affordable housing has influenced how individuals view the community, namely who is a part of it. Disagreement regarding who is part of "the community" erodes trust and challenges who should have a voice and be at the table as well as who should lead. In the words of one participant:

A lot of people are community but may not be the perceived as the right community. There's a lot, again the definitions of what constitutes a community member, what are people actually saying when they say community member?

Facilitating broad engagement and gaining agreement to move the work forward in concrete ways involve skill and trust.

As one respondent noted, a collaborative could be doing all the right things to be successful, but none of these factors matter without trust across partners. Patience and trust-building are necessary and time intensive, requiring a long-term commitment from those involved.

The YAT and Initiative leaders who guided this process learned the difficulty of maintaining engagement over the length of an initiative given competing priorities and the time and patience needed to stay the course. A collaborative community engagement approach—though promising—is not easy to employ, because it involves a large group of stakeholders with differing opinions. What helped move this initiative along was a small, consistent set of stakeholders, poised with the resources and skills to navigate the complexities of this large-scale initiative, and the patience and drive to stay the course, even as some stakeholders came and went.

Keeping Youth at the Center of the Initiative

Adults with significant training and experience in youth development helped keep youth at the center of the initiative.

To remain at the center of the Initiative, youth had to develop a wide range of skills including research, urban planning, and design and leadership skills. The Initiative not only sought youth participation, but also deliberately placed youth in positions with clear roles and expectations. Adults played a significant part in preparing youth to fill these leadership roles. These adults needed specific skills and training to support the youth in this way. For many adults who work with youth, this is a new paradigm. That is to say, many adults maintain a particular authority when working with youth. To engage in a positive youth development stance and to fully empower youth to engage in leadership, the adults need to see the partnership as truly mutual.

For many of the youth-serving partners this was both a draw to participate and also new work. One leader of a youth-serving agency highlights the importance of not only giving youth space at the table to share in the decision making process, but also in enabling youth to contribute. He stresses that preparing youth to lead this type of initiative is necessary, but also very time intensive and challenging work due to the lack of training and experience youth may have:

One thing is saying 'invite [youth] to be a part of the conversation.' The other things is equipping them so their voice is better equipped to be heard...It takes effort and hard work [for youth]. It takes knocking on doors and overcoming your shyness. [And for adults] being able to value that and creating an environment for that to happen. So when I saw this extension where you see a handful of youth...walking alongside, and leading some of these conversations. There's tremendous value in being able to do that...Again inviting them around the table and giving them so much time, but the equipping part, the mentoring part...that's the magic. And that takes time. It's very labor-intensive work.

Adults' willingness to mentor youth and partner closely with them on a civic engagement initiative enabled youth to participate fully in leadership roles. Many adults on the Initiative shared a background in youth development or community engagement, or were supportive of efforts that valued youth voice or placed youth in leadership roles. This included program staff, community leaders, and funders alike.

A charismatic, young, Initiative leader and community member was essential in keeping youth engaged throughout the Initiative and serving as a source of inspiration for Initiative youth, adult leaders, and the broader community.

Adults with significant training and experience in youth development helped keep youth at the center of the Initiative and paved the way for young leaders to thrive, fostering mentorship and partnership between youth and adults and amongst youth as peers. The face of the Youth Arts and Music Center Project was the community liaison, who represented the Initiative's values: a young adult with a strong presence and connections in the community, a passion and natural

talent for performing arts, and a role in the Initiative since its inception. He served as a source of inspiration for YAT members given his long history and commitment to the Initiative and his ability to empathize and relate to youth from experience. One adult leader expressed the importance of having a charismatic figure at the center of the Initiative to build excitement, not only among the youth he recruited and mentored, but among adult leaders and the broader community as well:

Someone like [him] that will feature and highlight these beautiful aspects of the program and of the work... Those people tend to build excitement about YAMC. Seeing his growth makes us excited about the future of the entity. Seeing him excited about it makes young people want to engage. And also, seeing him authenticates it. Because you know..., someone like [him], who's..., loving it, talking about it authenticates it and it brings such a positive vibe to it. Because that's what you need... His voice, his passion for the project, his vision and inclusion and voice will make all of us stay invested for him and the future leaders. That in and of itself is pretty incredible...

Multiple adult leaders reflected on how this individual had grown as a youth, able to hold his own with the adults in the Initiative. One adult leader close to him commented:

...To watch how someone can grow and change through life with the proper support and proper opportunity. I think opportunity is a key thing here too. Not everybody has had the same opportunity to engage. That's a recruitment issue, that's a retention issue, that's a leadership issue. But for those who have had the appropriate opportunity, how are they taking advantage of it? And [he] is a great example of [it].

For the young leader, the six year commitment to this Initiative had its benefits and challenges. The personal benefits include the development of a wide array of skills in research, urban planning and design, the arts, and leadership. In addition, being able to see how efforts to develop the center progressed over time was a great accomplishment. This particular young man has chosen to focus on building this civic asset—and this commitment means he had less time for his own artistic pursuits.

Youth leadership has its downsides—youth grow up and have conflicting priorities.

The decision to keep youth at the center of the Initiative not only required effort on the part of adult mentors to train youth over a long period of time, but also significant dedication from the youth involved. For some youth, remaining engaged through a multi-phase initiative spanning many years proved difficult because they wanted to see the arts center built as soon as possible. Youth also struggled to balance their responsibility to the Initiative with other obligations in their lives such as school, household responsibilities, and opportunities to develop other skills. While the Initiative relied on youths' contributions, it also experienced challenges when youth discontinued their involvement.

Keeping youth at the center of the YAMC Initiative increased their sense of ownership and allowed them to develop as leaders. Ensuring that youth remained at the center required significant training and dedication on the part of adult leaders, as well as long-term and time-intensive commitment from youth.

Focus on the Arts

The arts focus increased buy-in and helped move the initiative forward.

The Initiative's focus on the arts acted as a facilitating factor at the community, program, and individual levels in creating opportunities for positive youth development, youth voice and leadership, and youth-adult civic engagement. The decision to build an arts and music center in East Palo Alto stemmed from the city's lack of existing arts programming, the Foundation's deep interest in the arts, and their commitment to communities in the region. Aside from being the inspiration behind the Initiative, the arts acted as a medium of connection between those involved in the Initiative, often with different identities. As one youth shared:

It's a way to speak to other people and for people to feel for what you're feeling for. Music brings people together to be one and to find something ...not find your differences, but find something that makes you feel like you're part of the community.

In addition to being a way for community members to communicate, the arts offered a means through which the multicultural community of East Palo Alto could come together and contribute to evolving art forms. One leader of a youth-serving organization highlighted the spirit of coexistence and cultural competence associated with the arts, and how this openness contributes to the evolution of arts in East Palo Alto and elsewhere:

I do think that there is a collective understanding that there is no one correct art form. There are all of these multiethnic, variegated, and evolving art forms. Some rising from the community and growing elsewhere and coming here and getting our flavor. No doubt about it that the group of people working on [the YAMC] have that understanding...

Many involved in the Initiative believed that the YAMC would not only bring East Palo Alto community members together around the arts, but also be a way to elevate East Palo Alto as a cultural and artistic hub to outside communities. The arts were the great unifier. Much hope was placed on the opportunity that the center would bring. One adult leader explained:

It'll do a lot of things. It will elevate both within the community and outside, elevate EPA as cultural and artistic hub which will excite and energize community members. But my hope is that it will speak to the outside pressures that are pushing the whole displacement, make them realize we don't want to lose this place, even regionally. Help identify EPA as a community that is good for the region because of artistry and culture and all these things the arts center can shine a light on. Will also help to bring together local artists under a common identity...

The YAT-organized events gave youth the opportunity to update community members on the status of the Youth Arts and Music Center and garner support for the Initiative. The YAT was able to engage community members in fun, arts-focused events which in turn made the Initiative more visible in the community. For example, the annual Arts & Music Festivals drew between 100 participants (in 2012) and 450 participants (in 2015). Other events such as the 2014 Block the Bells Festival and 2014 Library Holiday Event drew 250 and 200 participants, respectively.

Ultimately, the success of the Initiative in increasing the available arts-related activities created ample space for youth to develop. The existing literature highlights the range of benefits associated with arts programming specifically among youth in high poverty communities. These include higher academic performance, greater involvement in extracurricular activities, and greater interest in local civic issues (Catterall, Dumais & Hampden-Thompson, 2012). Interview respondents echoed findings from the literature, characterizing the arts as a means of channeling the energy of youth into something positive and increasing their engagement in other aspects of their lives such as school.

The Youth Arts and Music Center Initiative's focus on the arts acted as a facilitating factor in moving the Initiative forward; that is, it acted as a source of inspiration for those involved and made the Initiative more visible to the larger community. This demonstrates that an arts focus can increase buy-in and broad engagement within the community.

CONCLUSION

What is remarkable about this initiative are the many stakeholders who have been involved throughout its life, including, youth, program leaders, community members, and Goldman Foundation staff and consultants.

The Initiative benefits from the involvement of a diverse set of stakeholder perspectives, even though all do not stay the course. As stakeholders come and go, others engage as they learn about the Initiative and identify with its mission and vision, filling the void left by those who can no longer participate. The Initiative also benefits from the small set of individuals—youth and adults—who provided continuity to keep the Initiative moving. The Goldman Foundation's long-term commitment to the center and to youth development was a critical facilitating factor.

Without long-term unwavering support from the Goldman Foundation, the YAMC team would not have persisted. Community engagement on a grand scale is never a straight line. To engage in this type of effort with youth leadership required additional perseverance and was facilitated by the focus on the arts, which acted as a medium of connection and inspiration for those involved.

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