

executive summary

September 2016

COMMUNITY YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN EAST PALO ALTO: A STUDY OF THE YOUTH ARTS AND MUSIC CENTER INITIATIVE

Jamila Henderson, Francine Biscocho, and Amy Gerstein

The Youth Arts and Music Center (YAMC) Initiative is a community-wide effort centered around youth leadership and the arts, and engages a cross-sector collaborative of partner organizations, supported by the John and Marcia Goldman Foundation, in an attempt to address the shortage of existing arts programming in East Palo Alto, California. Currently in the program development and building design phase, it is at an important juncture for Initiative leaders to learn more about the experiences of key youth, adults, and the broader community in the Initiative's implementation. This information can guide the Initiative's work moving forward and enable Initiative leaders to share lessons learned with the broader field of youth development.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This is a case study of a community youth engagement initiative that focuses on youth development, community building, and placemaking. The following questions guide the research:

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?

To address these research questions, Gardner Center staff conducted analyses of relevant YAMC documentation, as well as data from interviews and focus groups with diverse stakeholders including program leaders and staff, youth, grantmakers, and consultants. The analyses were conducted using the tri-level continuum of community youth engagement framework developed by Westrich et al. (2012).¹

¹ Westrich Lisa, Gerstein, A., Fernandez, M. A., & Horwitz, I. (2012). Promoting community youth engagement through collaboration: A tri-level perspective. Paper presented at the Society for Research on Adolescence Conference, Vancouver, BC Canada.



Through their involvement in the YAMC 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 provided insight into the resources and opportunities provided by the community, initiative, and programs to support youth as key contributors to the Initiative. The complete set of findings from the case study can be found in the full report.

LESSONS LEARNED

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. Key lessons learned include:

- A transparent and inclusive decision making process that included a wide array of adult and youth stakeholders was important in garnering support for the initiative from the very beginning. Initiative leaders laid the groundwork for the trust and commitment necessary to support community engagement over the course of the initiative.
- The initiative not only sought youth participation, but also deliberately placed youth in positions with clear roles and expectations. 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.
- Art is a great unifier, offering a means through which the multicultural community of East Palo Alto could come together. The arts acted as a medium of connection between those involved in the Initiative, often bringing together community members with different identities.