

How Youth Organizing Groups Educate Toward a Multiracial Democracy in California

March 2023

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Educating toward a multiracial democracy means centering the needs, experiences, and identities of each and every young person; addressing issues of racial and social justice; encouraging respectful, equitable, and informed participation; and supporting engagement and problem-solving within and across diverse communities. Schools and other youth-serving institutions that promote education for a multiracial democracy are places where young people build supportive communities, figure out who they are in relation to peers from a diverse backgrounds, and collectively contribute to a better society for all.

FOR A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE FULL REPORT, visit [Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy: Summary.](#)

For nearly three decades, nonprofit 501(c)3 youth organizing groups have provided adolescents and young adults with hands-on training to address local community concerns in the public arena. Now numbering more than three hundred nationally, these groups largely serve youth from low-income communities and include a significant representation of ethnic/racial minorities, immigrants and refugees, and young people who identify as queer, trans, or nonbinary. Youth organizing groups engage their members in a variety of nonpartisan grassroots campaigns. While most of the work involves advocating for school reform, groups also address racial justice, immigrant rights, health equity, and environmental justice and seek to educate and mobilize voters (Valladares et al. 2021).

As evidenced by a 2019 survey, California is home to at least 110 self-identified youth organizing groups that serve high school students. Many of these groups offer vital opportunities for their members to advocate for changes to government policy and/or engage current and future voters in government elections. Extensive training and support is provided by young adult staff who come from the community served by the youth organizing group (or one that is similarly situated). They serve as credible mentors who can act as a bridge between adolescent members and adult allies.

While these nonpartisan organizations serve a fairly small percentage of California's high school population, their programs nonetheless offer valuable insights into how organizational and educational practices can be geared toward creating a multiracial democracy. The following summarizes some of the ways that these groups promote caring and restorative relationships, center the lived experiences of their members, and guide members as they learn to exercise their voice in thoughtful and constructive

ways. These observations draw on a survey of the members and/or staff of 110 adolescent youth organizing groups and a review of the curriculum offered by each group.

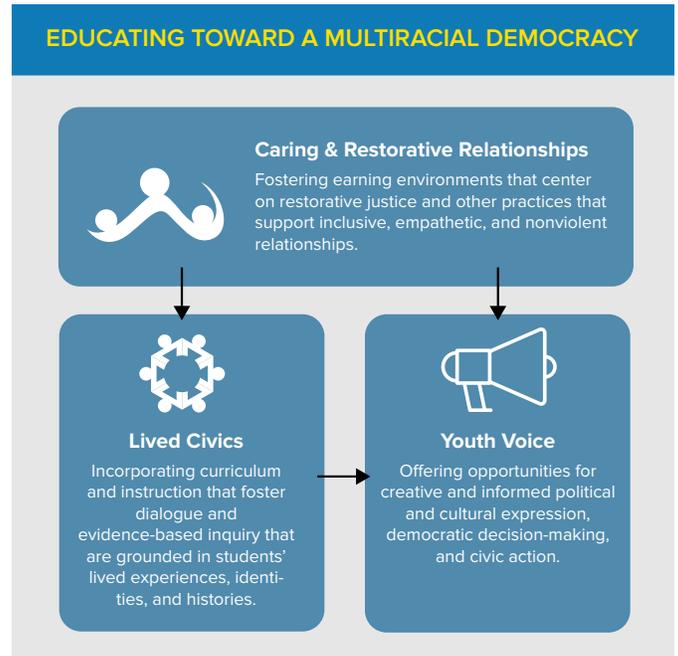
Caring and Restorative Relationships

Youth organizing groups tend to involve young people from communities experiencing economic hardship and other challenges. Hiring staff are often natives or longtime residents of the local community. Because they are familiar with the difficult conditions that their adolescent members encounter on a daily basis, and because they receive targeted training, staff are well oriented to lead discussions about the challenges that members face. They understand that poverty, fear of deportation, neighborhood violence, and exposure to the criminal justice system can cause emotional distress, and that this distress can trigger unhealthy behavioral responses that can negatively affect not only individual members but also the group as a whole. Racial violence, anti-immigrant rhetoric, climate disasters, and the lasting repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have only heightened the distress of vulnerable youth. While the primary purpose of youth organizing groups is to engage young people in campaigns, staff have found that programming and group dynamics are strengthened when they directly address the daily stresses experienced by young people in their communities. Consequently, approximately three out of four youth organizing groups in California include programming that draws attention to members' individual and collective emotional well-being (Terriquez, Santos, and Lin 2020). This focus is intended to address individual mental health needs as well as promote healthy group dynamics. Devoting this attention to young people's emotions helps build inclusive and restorative relationships among members.

In terms of specific health-positive practices, the staff of youth organizing groups set aside time for their members to share their emotions, often through peer-led activities. They remind students that their emotions matter and are valid. Staff emphasize that experiences with trauma and hardship can contribute to disruptive and harmful behaviors. These discussions help students make sense of the tensions and violence they see around them while motivating them to reflect on and articulate the stresses they experience. To facilitate sharing, it is fairly common for youth organizing groups to start or end meetings with peer-led check-ins, which allow members to describe how they are feeling or to discuss something on their mind. Members are often encouraged to respond with positive affirmations or expressions of support.

When gathering in person, members often stand or sit in a circle so that they can see one another. At the Community Coalition in South Central Los Angeles, young people learn that this circle practice aligns with the African principle of Umoja, or the understanding that the circle is only as strong as its weakest point, thus encouraging group solidarity. Various groups have different rituals for sharing experiences. Some, for example, pass around a talking stick or other totem.

Regular check-ins can take five to ten minutes, but groups also engage in longer healing circles, when they delve more deeply into young people's experiences. Leaders may also encourage members to journal. Additionally, some groups allot time for self-



care and mindfulness practices that engage members in meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, aromatherapy, and/or forward stance (a form of tai chi that links mind and body and seeks to help practitioners embody positive social change) (Terriquez, Santos, and Lin 2021).

Moreover, youth organizing groups contribute to inclusive and restorative relationships by setting “agreements” or “ground rules” for communication. They encourage members to use “I statements” rather than accusatory or derogatory language when disagreements occur. They may also establish expectations for communicating. For example, they may ask members to “throw glitter, not shade”—that is, share praise and appreciation rather than put each other down. Additionally, in order to facilitate civil discourse, groups promote the “one mic” idea, which directs only one person to speak at a time. Meanwhile, to foster inclusive discussions, participants learn the “step up or step back” principle: students are encouraged to “step up” when they haven’t contributed to a discussion and “step back” when they have taken up their fair share of speaking time, allowing others to share their perspectives. These agreements promote civil discourse among members and also help ensure that diverse voices are heard.

Finally, in many groups, staff are trained to expect conflict and harm despite their best efforts to prevent unhealthy behaviors and communication. After all, conflict tends to be inevitable in communities facing significant strain or social and political division. Staff sometimes utilize healing and restorative justice circles to help students process harm or address division within the group. For example, staff can lead healing circles when a student either unintentionally or deliberately says something offensive or hurtful, or when a student has failed to fulfill their commitments to the group. Although healing and self-care practices are not substitutes for professional mental health services, they can help prevent unhealthy behavior, lay a foundation for respectful and inclusive communication, and create structures for addressing conflict and repairing harm.

Lived Civics

The curriculum for youth organizing groups is grounded in what we call “lived civics.” Often incorporating interactive popular education workshops, this curriculum typically introduces members to issues of diversity and how they connect to broader social and community concerns. Members learn about and take pride in their multiple identities while promoting an understanding of and solidarity with those outside their own racial/ethnic group. Training sessions and workshops—at times led by guest speakers and adult community allies—help members understand the ways in which various segments of the community are impacted by shared concerns. Additionally, students begin to understand how government policies can be changed to address community issues.

Ethnic studies workshops are a key element of the lived civics curriculum offered by most youth organizing groups. Importantly, these identity-focused workshops tend to be empowering, because students who learn about the histories and struggles of their own group develop a sense of pride and a commitment to advocate for their community. At the same time, exposing members to the backgrounds and histories of others in their community promotes understanding and solidarity. Although workshops often prompt students to think about how their own ethnic/racial group shares similar experiences with other groups, they also allow youth to understand how the effects of slavery, colonization, imperialism, and migration have differed from group to group. Moreover, many workshops also explore how patriarchy and homophobia operate in members’ lives and in the broader society. This curriculum introduces members to

intersectional thinking and encourages them to consider how overlapping systems of oppression shape power and privilege in their own communities.

Youth organizing groups also prepare students to examine the structural causes of community concerns and possible solutions to these problems. Often delivered through popular education workshops, teach-ins, and other interactive and accessible activities, these lessons help young people understand policy-relevant concerns and how they might be resolved through political processes that include diverse constituencies (Rogers, Mediratta, and Shah 2012). Lived civics may also include youth participatory action research, in which young people are tasked with deepening their knowledge of community issues and solutions. Additionally, youth organizing groups also educate their members about the decision-making roles of relevant government bodies and how they might be influenced to address youth concerns. Finally, this lived civics education often stresses how voting can impact government responsiveness to local concerns.

Asian Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL) and Youth Together (YT) in Oakland are among the groups that offer a robust lived civics curriculum. Serving mostly Asian American and Pacific Islander youth, AYPAL offers students interactive, peer-led workshops about the migration history of the Asian American groups that are well represented in the community. Students participate in workshops about their own ethnic group, then they are expected to offer the workshop to other members and youth audiences. Over the years, AYPAL has developed workshops that tell the stories of how people in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam escaped war in the late twentieth century and resettled in Oakland and across the United States. Workshops have also covered how US labor demands and interventions abroad have shaped the histories of migration from China and the Philippines. AYPAL members typically feel empowered by their ability to share these histories with their peers, and they tend to be appreciative when peers from different ethnicities share their own stories. It is important to note that AYPAL's ethnic curriculum is not limited to Asian American histories. AYPAL regularly schedules guest speakers who talk about Latinx and African American stories of struggle. These presentations often lead to in-depth discussions of how racialization processes and immigration laws shape the experiences of young people in their communities.

Serving a very diverse group of students whose families hail from around the globe, Youth Together (YT) takes a different approach to lived civics. This group hosts peer-led introductory workshops on different racial/ethnic groups, broadly defined. For example, YT offers sessions on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Blacks, Latinxs, and Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Americans. Students are then guided to explore their own family and community histories, incorporating interviews with elders and information from academic publications and online sources. These workshops often lead students to examine how US immigration laws have unequally, and sometimes unjustly, impacted lives in their community. Finally, students take turns sharing with their peers what they have learned.

Given that the implementation of ethnic studies curricula remains uneven in California schools, AYPAL's and YT's workshops can be vital resources for deepening their members' appreciation for their own and others' racial/ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, AYPAL and YT also explore identity through peer-led workshops on gender and LGBTQ issues. These workshops help students reflect on the way their own identities have shaped their trajectories and teach them to identify and address sexist, homophobic, and transphobic behavior in their own lives and within the group. These workshops often prompt students to think in an intersectional way, allowing them to grasp how an individual might embody privileged and marginalized identities simulta-

neously. As a result, they learn to be sensitive to the diversity and complexity of experiences within their community when addressing community concerns. Taken together, AYPAL and YT facilitate cross-ethnic and cross-racial solidarity.

As is the case with many other youth organizing groups, AYPAL's and YT's curricula encourage students to take action to address the needs of their communities, which might include school reform, immigrant and refugee rights, housing justice, and civic engagement. Members participate in interactive, youth-led teach-ins, survey their peers and other community members to gauge their interests and concerns, and study policy options. Additionally, youth organizing groups expose their members to the government decision-making and electoral processes that determine social policies. For example, AYPAL and YT members learned about Oakland Unified School District's budgetary processes so that they could weigh in on the city's education funding priorities and other financial matters. Both groups involved their members in debates about extending the right to vote in school board elections to sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. Additionally, AYPAL members received extensive training on Oakland's housing policies and community benefits agreements. Finally, AYPAL and YT regularly introduce their members to the decision-making procedures of government bodies, the roles played by municipal and state-elected leaders, and the processes for intervening in policy debates.

Youth Voice

Youth organizing groups have an explicit focus on training students from historically marginalized communities to exercise their voice in policy debates, and many also work to engage peers in government elections. To this end, groups offer activities that help their members develop public communication skills so that they can share their experiences and perspectives with peers, adult stakeholders in their schools and communities, and broader audiences. Additionally, some of these groups offer opportunities for members to exercise an informed voice through the arts and various media platforms.

Because young people who join youth organizing groups tend to come from low-income, immigrant, and racialized backgrounds, many have limited experience exercising their voice in public arenas. Youth organizing groups are typically prepared to support students who lack civic experience; staff “meet them where they are at.” Members receive intensive guidance as they gradually develop public speaking skills and learn how to effectively communicate with decision-makers, news reporters, and broader audiences. To promote these skills and instill confidence in members' voice, staff and experienced peers pay particular attention to novice members. It is not uncommon for eloquent members to state that they used to be shy or disliked speaking in front of others. In studying youth organizing groups, Ben Kirshner (2006) found that staff encourage leadership among members by modeling behavior, coaching them, and then fading into the background once students acquire a certain level of mastery. In other words, staff provide a supportive scaffolding that is removed over time (Rogoff 1990).

InnerCity Struggle (ICS), in the Eastside of Los Angeles, is one of many groups that is intentional about developing student voice. Staff recognize that newcomers tend to be quiet at first and need individual encouragement to speak their mind. They thus first ask new members to voice their opinions and experiences within the safe context of their own peer group. Members are gradually assigned small speaking or presentation roles in larger meetings. Eventually, members are expected to take on public roles, because the aim of youth organizing groups like ICS is to persuade peers, other school and community stakeholders, and decision-makers to support their causes.

Students are tasked with making informed public presentations as part of grassroots efforts to change policy or increase voter registration and turnout. To prepare students for public outreach, ICS offers members the opportunity to rehearse presentations in front of their peers, who offer praise and constructive feedback on presentation style and accuracy of information. ICS organizers try to make sure that all core leaders have opportunities to develop their public voice by, for example, negotiating with decision-makers, testifying in public meetings, leading a chant at a public rally, or sharing their story at an event. Rather than relying on the same set of (perhaps extroverted) students to conduct public outreach, organizers maintain a document that tracks who has been given speaking opportunities.

Preparing young members to exercise their voice in front of an audience of adult stakeholders and decision-makers can require additional training and support because young people often encounter ageism—they are not taken seriously by older adults. Additionally, students from racialized, immigrant, refugee, and other marginalized communities must also deal with the possibility that adult stakeholders (including teachers and school administrators) may not be able to relate to or understand their experiences. To address the complex power dynamics between students and adults, Future Leaders of America (FLA), based in the Central Coast, requires their members to role-play adult-youth conversations so that students can practice explaining their perspectives, their concerns, and the changes they would like to see in their schools or communities. Such role-playing, a common practice in youth organizations, helps students respond to potential adult reactions in a constructive manner, thus increasing their confidence and communication skills.

To achieve campaign goals, members seek to convince various audiences to support their causes and/or exercise their right to vote. Students are trained to share their perspectives through multiple avenues. Beyond making public presentations and speaking to elected officials, they may also be trained in door-to-door canvassing, phone-banking, speaking to media outlets, and “artivism” (arts activism). Given that young people spend significant time on social media, they also receive training on how to produce engaging and informative posts for personal or organizational media accounts. LOUD for Tomorrow in Delano, for example, hosts meme and video-making workshops that show students how to develop creative posts that encourage peers to preregister or register to vote. Meanwhile, other groups, such as RYSE in Richmond, incorporate visual and performing arts into their campaign efforts, providing opportunities for members to share their viewpoints on social issues in a creative way.

When youth are properly trained and supported to exercise their voice, they can have a significant public impact. Thanks to the guidance adolescents have received in California’s youth organizing groups, youth voice has had a measurable effect on wide-ranging policies and democratic processes. It been critical in successful efforts to, for example, influence school district and city budgets, reform school disciplinary practices, increase healthy school lunch options, reduce harmful pesticide use on school campuses, define city sanctuary policies, increase health care access for undocumented immigrants, guide local government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and hold police accountable. Members have also registered and preregistered tens of thousands of young voters, educated them on their voting rates, and mobilized them to get to the polls, even though the members may not yet be eligible to vote themselves (Terriquez and Carmona Mora 2020; Terriquez, Santos, and Lin 2020). Finally, in a trend that bodes well for the future of community organizing, adolescents who have gained extensive experience in exercising their voice in the democratic process tend to take civic leadership roles after they graduate from high school (Terriquez 2015).

Future Possibilities and Paths Forward

Given their focus on youth engagement in social change efforts, youth organizing groups are uniquely positioned to educate for a multiracial democracy. There are, however, certain challenges. For one, these nonprofit organizations tend to engage only a small proportion of young people within any given community. Additionally, they disproportionately rely on grant money from private foundations, which limits their ability to grow in sustainable ways. To counter these constraints, the Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy framework offers guidance on how youth organizing groups and other youth-serving institutions can prepare a greater number of adolescents for civic leadership roles and also prepare them more effectively. In fact, some best practices and activities for youth organizing can already be found in select youth-serving institutions, and these can be taken to scale through widespread and equitable adoption. The following points lay out how youth organizing groups can expand programs that promote caring and restorative relationships, embrace a lived civics curriculum, and encourage the expression of youth voice.

Caring and Restorative Relationships

- ▶ Adopt culturally grounded and age-appropriate approaches to collective emotional expression, peer-to-peer validation of feelings, and wellness.
- ▶ Encourage “agreements” for respectful and inclusive communication in classrooms and other youth spaces.
- ▶ Utilize healing or restorative justice circles to address conflict and harm.

Lived Civics

- ▶ Discuss how a history of slavery, colonization, imperialism, and migration has defined the experiences of different groups represented in the local community.
- ▶ Introduce adolescents to intersectional thinking by encouraging them to think about overlapping systems of oppression and the complex ways in which individuals may embody marginalization and privilege simultaneously.
- ▶ Adopt a curriculum that explicitly discusses the historic, economic, and political causes of local community problems, encourages debate on local government solutions, and explains how government decision-making bodies and government elections can determine responses to community problems.

Youth Voice

- ▶ Create opportunities that employ various forms of arts and media to scaffold the development of basic civic skills, including public speaking, event planning, and public outreach.
- ▶ Promote nonpartisan voter preregistration and registration, voting rights workshops, and youth-led debates about local electoral issues.
- ▶ Create structured opportunities for young people to connect to existing nonpartisan grassroots campaigns through partnerships with other youth organizing groups and nonpartisan organizations.

The extent to which schools and other youth-serving organizations adopt the best practices of grassroots organizing will be determined by local opportunities and constraints. Moreover, successfully engaging diverse students as future civic leaders will in part depend on understanding and incorporating young people's community ties into various aspects of programming.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ What important steps can youth organizers take to advance the goals of a multiracial democracy?
- ▶ How can youth organizers work in coalition with others (such as teachers, school and district leaders, families, and community members, etc.) to advance this agenda?
- ▶ What are the unique challenges and barriers that youth organizations face in trying to advance this agenda?
- ▶ What support do youth organizers need to deepen the impact of this work?
- ▶ What are the implications of educating toward a multiracial democracy for the recruitment and development of youth organizers?

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FOR THE FULL REPORT, visit [Educating Toward a Multiracial Democracy in California, including references.](#)

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