

Lesson 1: Youth Development & Community Organizing

Youth development is an assets based approach to working with young people. It seeks to develop skills within young people such as public speaking, research and problem solving. Youth development goes beyond a prevention model of working with, e.g. one that seeks only to help teens avoid pregnancy or substance abuse, and asks the question “what is needed to foster the development of young people into healthy, productive adults?” Youth development strategies flow from this question. Our project draws upon the work of Bonnie Benard and the field of resilience, one of the many “schools” of youth development. The core of this approach consists of:

- 1) caring relationships between adults and young people;
- 2) opportunities for meaningful participation by young people, and;
- 3) high expectations of young people.

These elements assist young people to address community problems and, in the process, develop their skills to negotiate other parts of their life now and in the future.

The resiliency framework is not a prescription but a guide for developing activities that foster youth development. It is a resource intensive approach because it requires program staff to think through their methods and put young people – not the product or promised outcomes – at the center.



Direct action community organizing involves the people who are affected by a problem in solving it. It looks directly at the issue of power – who has it and who doesn't – and seeks to involve people in changing the power relationships that affect their lives. Community organizing strategies involve building power to get decision makers to do what is best for a community. Our experience in Contra Costa County has shown that this approach resonates deeply with young people because they are disenfranchised as a group in our society.

When combined, the practices of youth development and direct action community organizing enhance each other. Youth development guides the real hard work of leadership development that is at the core of community organizing. Direct action community organizing provides a roadmap for youth based community efforts. It also provides a rich context for the three tenets of resiliency to be realized. We have found the direct action community organizing approach to provide consistently high quality and meaningful opportunities for participation. Conducting community assessments, presenting results at city council meetings and other community meetings, testifying at public hearings, interacting with law enforcement and policy makers – all give young people experiences where they can develop and utilize new skills. High expectations are intrinsic to these types of experiences as they give young people the message that they can succeed.

Like youth development, direct action community organizing is a labor intensive, time-consuming process. Being strategic involves constant analysis, evaluation and action planning. Leaders must be prepared. The role of the adult staff person is crucial in supporting young people to learn new ways of thinking and taking action so that they can succeed in building power to improve life for themselves and their communities.