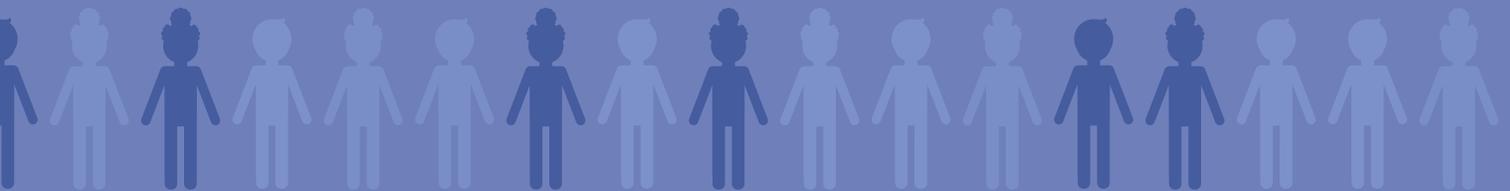


# YOUTH ORGANIZING: A MODEL FOR CHANGE



Produced by Algorhythm  
Supported by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation



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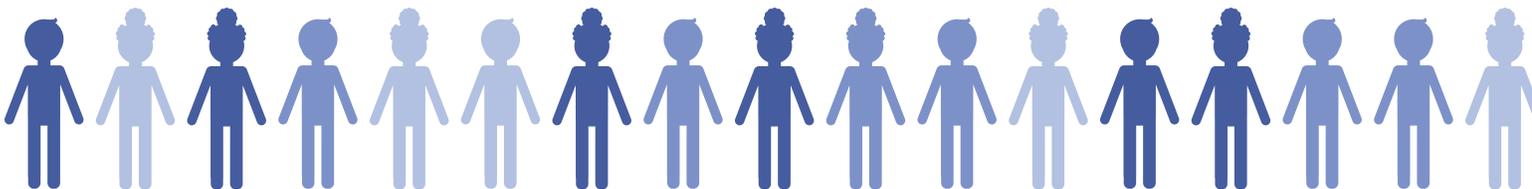


**The Nellie Mae Education Foundation** is the largest philanthropic organization in New England that focuses exclusively on education. The Foundation supports the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches to learning at the high school level across New England—where learning is personalized; learning is competency-based; learning takes place anytime, anywhere; and students exert ownership over their own learning.

To learn more, visit [www.nmefoundation.org](http://www.nmefoundation.org)

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# INTRODUCTION

In August 2016, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) launched an evaluation of their Amplifying Student Voice and Leadership (ASVL) grantees to learn more about their efforts over a five-year period. This evaluation is representative of eight youth organizing groups. Through this study, the Foundation learned that different types of youth organizing models the grantees were using were producing distinct results and promoting various levels of leadership.

These findings—summarized in this brief report—helped the Foundation learn about different models of organizing and their potential for sustainable change. We have developed this issue brief for youth and their adult allies in youth organizing groups, as well others who are interested in learning more about youth organizing. We hope this will help you reflect on your youth organizing model so that you can continue to grow and improve it.

## ABOUT STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING (SCL)

SCL is at the center of the NMEF's mission to increase equitable opportunities for secondary school students to prepare New England learners, especially and essentially those who are underserved, to earn a post-secondary degree or credentials. The four key tenets of SCL are:



**Learning is Personalized:** Students learn in different ways. Individually paced, targeted learning tasks that start from where the student is, formatively assess existing skills and knowledge, and address student needs and interests.



**Learning is Competency-Based:** Students move ahead when they have demonstrated mastery of content, not when they've reached a certain birthday or endured the required hours in a classroom.



**Learning Happens Anytime, Anywhere:** Learning takes place beyond the traditional school day or school year. The school's walls are permeable; learning is not restricted to the classroom.



**Students Take Ownership of Their Learning:** Learning engages students in their own success and incorporates their interests and skills into the learning process. Students support each other's progress and celebrate success.

## ABOUT THE NELLIE MAE EDUCATION FOUNDATION

NMEF began supporting youth organizers in 2010 through the ASVL project. The idea was to provide long-term support to grassroots youth organizing groups that would help the Foundation build greater understanding and demand for Student-Centered Learning (SCL) throughout New England.

NMEF's Public Understanding and Demand initiative—of which the ASVL fund is a part—combines local/bottom-up engagement and broad-based/top-down efforts to increase support for systems change at the state and local levels. The strategy has four key dimensions:

- 1 Changing the conversation on education reform;**
- 2 Increasing understanding, support, and demand for SCL across the region;**
- 3 Connecting decision makers with community stakeholders to sustain SCL change; and**
- 4 Making authentic engagement a permanent part of the district decision-making process.**

As the Foundation worked to genuinely and meaningfully engage community stakeholders, several youth organizing groups applied for support. They made compelling arguments about their strategic position to do this work. NMEF saw this as a critical opportunity to “walk their talk,” placing students at the center of the work, especially those “living on the margins” (e.g., youth of color, under-resourced communities, LGBTQ youth, recent immigrants, etc.) who are particularly impacted by New England's inequitable education systems.

Accordingly, the Foundation developed the ASVL project to specifically provide long-term support to grassroots youth organizing and youth leadership groups to help the Foundation build greater understanding and demand for student-centered learning (SCL) throughout New England. Foundation staff quickly learned that the ASVL fund would require them to adjust some of their grantmaking practices. They needed to take a more participatory approach to working with these grantees; first, because they truly wanted to learn more about youth and their educational experiences, especially as these related to SCL; and second, because “centering youth” is a core value held deeply by the Foundation.

NMEF hired Algorhythm in 2016 to conduct an evaluation of eight of the ASVL grantees to learn more about their impact. The Foundation chose Algorhythm to lead this work because our philosophy and approach to evaluation are participatory and focused on sustainable learning that empowers and builds the capacity of nonprofit leaders, front-line staff, and youth: an approach that reflects and respects youth-adult partnerships and the values of the ASVL grantees.

# YOUTH ORGANIZING MODELS THAT WORK

From the start, it was evident that the ASVL grantees were using very different youth engagement models. To understand and describe the qualities of each grantee, the Algorithym evaluation team applied the Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) framework that clearly defines the distinctions between youth services, youth development, youth leadership, civic engagement, and youth organizing (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing Youth Engagement Trajectory



Credit: Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing. Listen INC. An Emerging Model for Working with Youth. Community Organizing + Youth Development = Youth Organizing. FCYO Occasional Paper Service in Youth Organizing. No1

ASVL grantees did not always fall neatly into one of these categories. Rather, they had different levels of capacity in each area, painting a much more complex picture of the cohort as a whole (see Table 1). The greatest disparities were evident in the capacities specifically related to youth organizing. Grantees with advanced youth organizing models were uniquely able to:

- Continuously recruit and maintain a vibrant membership base that was prepared to engage in direct actions and political mobilizing;
- Center youth as leaders internally (by having them take on roles including Lead Organizer, paid staff, and Board Member);
- Organize ongoing multi-pronged and multi-level campaigns that targeted schools, districts, and the broader community; and
- Engage youth as public representatives of the program or organization (in various networks and partnerships).

Grantees with *emerging* models were starting to advance in these areas and those with *nascent* models were just beginning to learn about organizing practices and how to incorporate them into their work. The sections below provide brief examples of how *advanced* youth organizing groups brought these practices to life.

**Table 1: ASVL Grantees Continuum of Development in Youth Organizing<sup>1</sup>**

“NASCENT” GROUPS (n = 2)	“EMERGING” GROUPS (n = 3)	“ADVANCED” GROUPS (n = 3)
<b>Base building</b> – Have not developed a base of youth that can be ignited around campaigns and/or issues.	<b>Base building</b> – Beginning to build a base.	<b>Base building</b> – Has a strong member base that is constantly cultivated.
<b>Youth leading</b> – Engages youth in some decision making related to specific activities or actions.	<b>Youth leading</b> – Engages youth in core leadership roles, making decisions either within the organization or as part of governing bodies. However, the number and types of roles—and the decisions they make—are limited due to the scope of young people’s roles and/or the breadth of the group’s organizing work.	<b>Youth leading</b> – Engages youth internally in core leadership roles across multiple organizational levels (e.g., as youth organizers, paid staff, and/or board members), and externally as individual and organizational representatives in various networks and partnerships (e.g., school, district, and/or community decision-making bodies).
<b>Youth taking action</b> – Engages youth in ad hoc or episodic actions, generally targeting only one level of change (e.g., community, school, or district).	<b>Youth taking action</b> – Engages youth in episodic actions, generally targeting only one level of change (e.g., community, school, or district). Working toward more multi-level approaches.	<b>Youth taking action in multi-prong and multi-level campaigns</b> – Engages youth in direct action and political mobilizing at multiple levels (e.g., community, school, and district).
<b>Partnerships &amp; networks</b> – Does not yet engage in alliances and coalitions.	<b>Partnerships &amp; networks</b> – Engages in one or two alliances and coalitions.	<b>Partnerships &amp; networks</b> – Engages in many alliances and coalitions.

<sup>1</sup> Ginwright, Shawn. *Youth Organizing: Expanding possibilities for youth development*. Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing: Occasional Paper Series on Youth Organizing (2013).

# YOUTH ORGANIZING PRACTICE #1: CONTINUOUSLY CULTIVATE A MEMBERSHIP BASE



*I can't change the community unless I have a lot of power. You always need people who are with you [...] People who can step when you step also.*

— ASVL Youth Organizer

The first youth organizing capacity identified in the FCYO framework is “base building.” ASVL grantees with *advanced* youth organizing models continuously worked to prioritize ongoing base building activities: door-knocking, street outreach via membership forms (used to build phone and email lists) and text services (to sign youth up for campaign alerts), tabling at community events and local high schools, and building a social media following. They also made sure to regularly engage the youth in their base via open weekly meetings, events, workshops, and other activities.

The ongoing work of base building has two benefits. First, a broad following of youth members creates a formal role for those youth not yet ready to commit to leadership roles, and then continues to inspire them to engage in deeper and more substantial roles, over time – this is the very beginning of the leadership pipeline. When youth see their peers as facilitators, leaders, and organizers, they are often inspired to become more involved.

Second, when it came time to organize campaigns and actions, a vibrant base ensured that *advanced* youth organizing groups had a significant number of youth who were already thinking critically about key issues in their community. Thus, they were more likely to show up and make their voices heard alongside youth organizers and adult allies. Without a vibrant, active base and the power of a multitude of youth and community voices, *advanced* groups could not have created the “bottom up” pressure that compels systems change.

# YOUTH ORGANIZING PRACTICE #2: BUILD A DEEP LEADERSHIP POOL



*You have to be willing to improve yourself to go on to help influence others.*

— ASVL Youth Organizer

The second youth organizing capacity identified in the FCYO framework highlights the power of youth leadership, specifically “involving youth as part of core staff and governing bodies.” *Advanced* youth organizing groups were committed to creating strong youth leadership pipelines within their programs and organizations, starting with the membership base. Older peers (leaders or organizers) facilitated meetings about key issues impacting the lives of youth in their communities; and they facilitated trainings, events, and discussions that helped youth to develop critical consciousness. Fostering critical consciousness is a central goal of youth organizing. Originally conceptualized by educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, it describes “how oppressed or marginalized people learn to critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them.” All youth organizers engage in activities that raise their consciousness, encourage them to critically reflect on social and political issues, and take action.

As youth grow into roles with increasing responsibilities, they act as paid staff, interns, volunteers, and board members. This requires reimagining adult-led structures and challenges all levels of the organization to continuously reflect on how to cultivate authentic youth-adult partnerships. The value of youth leadership within *advanced* organizing groups was so strong that they often stepped back to reflect on their own progress to determine how they could improve. Also, providing authentic leadership opportunities and a progressive pipeline within the organization guarantees that there is a deep pool of emerging leaders to fill future transitions.

Grantees with *advanced* organizing models also worked to assure that young people had permanent seats at critical decision-making tables within the community. For example: school and community boards; superintendent meetings and forums; curricula design meetings; school councils; and monthly school-wide town halls. In this way, these groups pushed the leadership pipeline beyond the walls of their own programs and into political structures, often connecting youth to post-secondary leadership opportunities to continue the work.

# YOUTH ORGANIZING PRACTICE #3: TAKE ACTION AT MULTIPLE LEVELS (INDIVIDUAL, SCHOOL & COMMUNITY)



*Adults often have varied and valuable experiences, means, and knowledge, which naturally complement the abilities of youth. Youth alone can push society forward, [but] the involved participation of adults in this society is critical to its forward motion.*

— ASVL Youth Organizer

The third youth organizing capacity in the FCYO framework focuses on engaging youth in direct action and political mobilizing. *Advanced* youth organizing groups took this one step further, engaging youth in multiple actions at various levels. For example: one program engaged youth organizers in running school chapter meetings within six schools. During these meetings, peer-led groups of youth identified key issues important to students. Next, they organized campaigns and actions that mobilized their base of local youth to shift school and district level policies and strategies. In addition, they participated in and/or formed numerous alliances and coalitions to work on similar issues (the fourth Youth Organizing capacity in the FCYO Framework).

Age-based power dynamics often made partnerships with adult-led school systems extremely difficult for youth organizers to facilitate on their own. Indeed, youth said that systemic bias — including racism, sexism, and adultism — were their biggest challenges. All youth organizers reported that building authentic relationships with school and district-level decision makers, and securing equal seats at decision-making tables, were some of the most difficult aspects of their work.

Adult allies who understand how to effectively and respectfully partner with youth can model this practice for other adults, helping to remove one of the greatest roadblocks to a youth organizer's work. Adult allies spoke about how to disrupt adultism by:

- Consciously “stepping back” to ensure youth organizers were leading conversations;
- Redirecting school/district staff to speak directly to youth organizers if/when they defaulted to addressing adult allies and expecting them to “translate”; and
- Debriefing with adult school and community stakeholders after meetings to provide feedback and support focused on how they could more effectively collaborate with youth organizers.

As a part of the ASVL study, all grantees contributed to the creation of a *Youth-Adult Partnership Manifesto*, offering a guide for both youth and adults seeking to create effective youth-adult partnerships (see Table 2).

We hope that these youth recommendations will support you in your efforts to develop true youth/adult partnerships, particularly within schools and school districts, where youth are so often asked to lead with little to no adult support.

**Table 2: Youth-Adult Partnership Manifesto**

WHAT IS YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP?	
A SAFE, EQUITABLE SPACE • TRUE COLLABORATION • POSITIVE COMMUNICATION + ACTION • YOUTH-LED • EXPERIMENTATION • OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH	
HOW CAN YOUTH & ADULT ALLIES CO-CREATE THIS VISION?	
BEST PRACTICES FOR YOUTH PARTNERS	BEST PRACTICES FOR ADULT PARTNERS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>KEEP YOURSELF SAFE:</b> Assess [whether] the program space is safe.</li> <li>2. <b>COMMUNICATE</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Maintain open communication.</li> <li>b. Remember that it’s NOT ABOUT shutting out the adults, just making sure youth are heard.</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. <b>BE CONFIDENT</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Represent yourself/be you!</li> <li>b. We [youth] need to see ourselves as experts!</li> <li>c. Remember that you are doing real/meaningful work.</li> <li>d. Believe in yourself, “don’t put a limit on yourself!”</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. <b>PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT:</b> Be comfortable presenting/leading [trainings and actions], know the information yourself.</li> <li>5. <b>RESPECT YOUR PEERS:</b> [Youth] peers are your best and strongest allies, respect your peers.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>OFFER GUIDANCE</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Provide guidance and support for youth goals.</li> <li>b. Give youth skills/tools to “check” adults.</li> <li>c. Push youth to do things vs. expecting adults to do everything. Don’t enable.</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. <b>ENGAGE IN ACTIVE LISTENING</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Ask, don’t assume!</li> <li>b. Listen, don’t judge.</li> <li>c. Use reflective language (e.g., “I hear that...”).</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. <b>EDUCATE YOURSELF &amp; BE WILLING TO BE EDUCATED</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Love/know youth organizing and development.</li> <li>b. Build awareness of systems/structures youth face.</li> <li>c. Be open to learning from youth, listening to youth.</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. <b>PRACTICE EQUITY</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Be aware of and challenge power dynamics.</li> <li>b. Take youth seriously.</li> <li>c. Balance youth, don’t expect youth to behave like you.</li> </ol> </li> <li>5. <b>STEP UP, TAKE ACTION</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Put youth ideas into action.</li> <li>b. Change how you act based on what you learn.</li> </ol> </li> <li>6. <b>STEP BACK, FOLLOW</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Actually give youth power to make big decisions.</li> <li>b. Ensure youth are leading partnerships with adults.</li> <li>c. Hold space for young people’s agenda.</li> </ol> </li> <li>7. <b>BE TRANSPARENT:</b> Recognize your youth partnership approach (e.g., acknowledge your rung on Hart’s Ladder<sup>2</sup>).</li> </ol>

<sup>2</sup> Hart, Roger. *Children’s Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Center (1992).

# TIPS AND STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING A SOLID YOUTH ORGANIZING MODEL

If you want to assess your youth organizing model, try using the following chart (see Table 3). Invite youth organizers to anonymously rate your work in each area on a scale of 1 to 5 (with five being the highest). Once you have gathered their reflections, total their ratings and note score ranges.

Use this data to facilitate a conversation with the group. Ask youth to discuss why some areas were ranked higher than others and discuss how to improve in each area. Use the reflection questions listed below to help guide this dialogue.

**Table 3: Sample Youth Organizing Self-Assessment**

OUR YOUTH ORGANIZING GROUP...	RATING <i>(1 = not at all well, 5 = extremely well)</i>
<b>Youth Development Capacities</b>	
Provides services and supports, including access to caring adults and a safe space	
Provides opportunities for youth to grow and develop	
Meets youth where they are	
Builds young people’s individual competencies	
Provides age-appropriate support	
Emphasizes positive self-identity	
Supports youth/adult partnership	
<b>Youth Leadership Capacities</b>	
Builds authentic youth leadership opportunities into our programming and organization	
Helps young people deepen their historical and cultural understandings of their experiences and community issues	
Builds skills and capacities of young people to be decision makers and problem solvers	
Includes opportunities for youth to participate in community or school projects	

OUR YOUTH ORGANIZING GROUP...	RATING (1 = not at all well, 5 = extremely well)
<b>Civic Engagement Capacities</b>	
Engages young people in political education and awareness-raising	
Builds young people's skills and capacity for power analysis and action around issues <i>identified by young people</i>	
Helps young people build a collective identity as social change agents	
Engages young people in advocacy & negotiation	
<b>Youth Organizing Capacities</b>	
Builds a membership base	
Involves youth as part of our core staff or governing body	
Engages in direct action and political mobilizing	
Participates in alliances and coalitions	

REFLECTION QUESTIONS
<p>1. WHAT... do we notice about our youth organizing group's various capacities?</p> <p>2. SO WHAT? Think about all the things we've noticed... why do they matter? How do they impact our work?</p> <p>3. NOW WHAT... do we do about that?</p> <p>a. Which practices do we want to make sure we continue to do well? Why?</p> <p>b. Which practices might we spend less time and energy on? Why?</p> <p>c. Which practices do we want to improve? Why? And what resources could help us (partner organizations, trainings, etc.)?</p>

# CONCLUSION

Supporting the development of leadership pipelines is an investment in building a healthy and robust democracy. Without such pathways for leadership development, we are missing an important opportunity to foster creative and innovative leaders who will tackle our most pressing social problems. The success of movements around the world is the result of skilled, knowledgeable, and passionate individuals who have been prepared to assume the responsibility to lead.<sup>3</sup>

**At the time of the ASVL evaluation, more than 7,000 youth associated with Nellie Mae’s grant fund had been engaged in improving education in New England.** Grantees engaged more than **300 youth organizers** per year, who organized campaigns/initiatives and events that annually ignited **7,000 youth peers** in their local schools and communities. Grantees also built awareness of key educational issues among their **8,000+ social media followers**.

ASVL youth organizers had a notable impact on both individual schools and larger school districts as a result of organizing 35 campaigns/initiatives and more than 11 events targeting schools and school districts. These efforts impacted a total of 126 schools throughout New England, changing critical aspects of students’ school and/or educational experiences and developing fertile ground for student-centered learning to take root. However, each grantee’s capacity to implement the complete FCYO model impacted the depth and breadth of their impact: all grantees created positive change within their communities, but it was youth organizers enacting advanced organizing models who achieved systemic change in 87 schools across three school districts.

NMEF and Algorhythm are grateful for the candidness and insight of the youth and adult leaders of the eight ASVL grantees who participated in the evaluation. Thanks to their inspiring work, and their willingness to share and reflect on successes and challenges, we were able to learn an enormous amount about their impact, how they are achieving change, and how funders can better support youth organizing groups. We also hope the findings presented in this report — as well as the reflection tools and examples of ASVL grantees’ successes — support and inspire you to continue developing your youth leadership practices.

<sup>3</sup> Ginwright, Shawn. *Youth Organizing: Expanding possibilities for youth development*. Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing: Occasional Paper Series on Youth Organizing (2013).

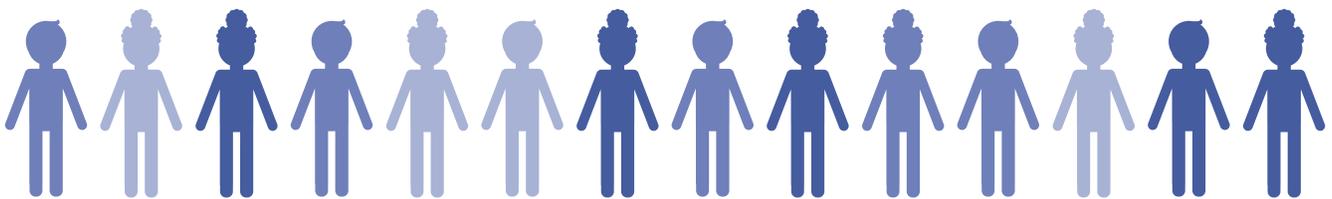
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# ADVANCING STUDENT VOICE AND LEADERSHIP IN NEW ENGLAND

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**300+** youth organizers  
PER YEAR

organized 35 campaigns/initiatives and 36 events



**MORE THAN 7,000 YOUTH**

ENGAGED IN IMPROVING  
EDUCATION IN NEW ENGLAND

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# AWARENESS BUILT

among

**8,000+**



# SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS

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Representative of 8 youth organization groups who participated in this evaluation. 5 had been funded by NMEF for about a year when the evaluation started. This evaluation covers the work of these organizing groups over the period of 2010-2017.

