



Ready  
to Lead

## Engaging Foster Youth as Leaders: Lessons from the Works Wonders™ Youth Participatory Process

By Kat Keenan, Caitlin Divver,  
Lauren B. Gates, Sue Pearlmutter

*A Report on Works Wonders™ from Foster Forward,  
in partnership with Rhode Island College,  
Children's Bureau and Workplace Center, Columbia University*

**Regardless of the clear benefits to youth,** adults and programs, the practical application of Youth-Adult partnerships for those doing the work on the ground is often somewhat less clear. What does it really take for an organization to engage youth as partners in the delivery of services?

The Youth-Adult partnership model has been used in school settings, health care settings, and in community organizing for years with documented success. The research is definitive on the benefits for the youth, the adults, and the program or initiatives when youth are engaged as partners in the systems designed to serve them.<sup>1</sup> Youth benefit by gaining experiences that help them develop autonomy, decision making skills, self-confidence, improved social trust, and an opportunity to engage civically that can help to ensure their smooth transition to adulthood.<sup>2</sup> If youth are authentically engaged in programs, reciprocal learning occurs for the adults as well. In a forum where everyone's expertise and perspective is valued, adults can learn how to evolve their practice, expand their perspectives, and build their skill set in communicating and engaging youth.<sup>3</sup> Organizations benefit from youth-adult partnership when they continuously redefine what it means to have a youth friendly culture. Communities benefit from having a cadre of skilled young people who are able and willing to share their perspective and experience to shape civic affairs.

For youth who have experienced foster care, the opportunities to practice adult skills alongside of supportive adults are especially important. These moments allow safe ways to shape the adolescent brain – one that the field of neuroscience says is undergoing significant development specifically in the area of executive function. Youth-Adult partnerships provide chances for foster youth to actively participate in decision making and leading others, as well as reduce isolation and mitigate possible feelings of powerlessness they may have from being involved in the child welfare system.<sup>4</sup>

Works Wonders™ was developed as a youth participatory model from the initial concept design, installation, and implementation. A youth participatory model was operationalized in the project by involving youth in all aspects of planning, decision making and evaluation. In the early conceptual stages the project relied on the youth leaders that were members of The Voice – Rhode Island's youth advocacy board for current and former foster youth. Members of The Voice served on the design team and helped to refine the concept of the intervention, identify potential barriers for youth in participating, and helped to conduct a planning survey. Youth leaders from The Voice were instrumental in the development of the E2 Curriculum and conceived of and helped to develop the E2 Navigator that Works Wonders™ participants each receive and are able to keep for future reference. The Voice helped to initiate pilot testing of training materials and survey questions before going live with the intervention. Youth provided input on youth friendly language that should be used, but more substantively helped inform the structural elements of the intervention, such as what the performance standards for the career coaching aspect should be, incentive policies, and engagement strategies.

As the project progressed, more youth were recruited to become youth leaders. Youth leaders were engaged in using data and feedback to help make mid-course corrections and helped to adapt the program to better meet participant needs and achieve desired outcomes. Youth leaders were engaged in the E2 Training, helping to co-facilitate the peer support component and specific modules (varied based on youth leader interests and strengths), as well as helping to refine these materials as the project progressed. Youth leaders were also instrumental in setting and revising our incentive policy during the research phase and in final iterations during program sustainability.

<sup>1</sup> Heffernan, O.S., Herzog, T., Schiralli, J.E., Hawke, L.D., Chaim, G., Henderson, J.L., 2017; Wu, H.J., Kornbluh, M., Weiss, J. & Roddy, L., 2016; Akiva, T., Cortina, K.S. & Smith, C., 2014; Zeldin, S., Christens, B.D. & Powers, J.L., 2013; Joselowsky, F., 2007; Watts, R.J., 2007; O'Donoghue, J.L., Kirshner, B., McLaughlin, M., 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Heffernan, O.S., et al., 2017; Wu, H.J., et al., 2016; Jim Casey Youth Opportunities, Issue Brief #3

<sup>3</sup> Heffernan, O.S., et al., 2017;

<sup>4</sup> Jim Casey Youth Opportunities, Issue Brief #3



YOUTH AS  
LEADERS IN  
WORKS™  
WONDERS

## What does it take to make youth leadership work in a project?

Engaging young people as leaders in the project brought many advantages and provided growth opportunities for the staff and organizations involved. Throughout the various stages of the project – whether it was during design, installation, implementation, service delivery, or evaluation – there were three principles that were constant in the project’s engagement of youth as leaders.

**Patience:** Young people who have recently transitioned from foster care have a lot of responsibilities. In addition to facing the age-appropriate crossroads of being an emerging adult, youth who had involvement with the child welfare system often make that transition without networks of supportive adults. As grant administrators, we had to balance the needs of these young people to have flexible schedules and deadlines with the real time grant deliverables/milestones that needed to be achieved.

Youth leaders would come in and out of the process as their lives ebbed and flowed – whether because of school, work schedules, or other life circumstances. For the paid staff this was frustrating, as it was essential that we were getting the young people’s guidance and expertise infused into every aspect of the work. It required direct line staff to be patient and required modeling from management of how to work the process and still achieve the desired outcomes.

**Persistence:** Working hand in hand with patience was the need to be persistent. The Works Wonders™ project administrators had to remain vigilant to ensure that young people’s leadership in the project endured beyond any particular aspect of the work or any one staff member/youth leader. It was not enough to recruit the original group of young people to participate, but the team needed to engage in continuous recruitment, training, and onboarding of new youth leaders.

Critical to success was the team’s ability to persevere even when faced with opposition from partners, staff, or the youth leaders themselves. For example, young people enjoyed being leaders on the team and were sometimes reluctant to support new leaders in the process for fear it would lessen their standing. To alleviate their concerns, it was important for the project to create opportunities for all those we engaged and provide growth opportunities for those youth who had achieved mastery of their responsibilities.

**Practice:** Organizationally all partners in Works Wonders™ believed in the theory of a youth participatory process. The actual application of that idea was not without its challenges at all levels of the work. Like with any new undertaking, Works Wonders™ had to practice full inclusion of youth leaders as equal members of the team and had to continually do check-ins to make sure that the application of the approach honored the intent. One example of this is when a new youth leader had joined the team and had a suggestion on a different approach to take with the curriculum. Changing midcourse at that particular point in the project would have been difficult, but it was important that we slow down and take the time to consider an alternative approach. Rather than just tell the young person it was too late to change, the team had to take a step back and evaluate with the young person what the cost-benefit would be. This was an extremely difficult moment for the adults in the room trying to keep a research project on track, but with practice the team was able to continue to infuse youth in the decision making.

## Challenges and Opportunities

### CHALLENGES



DEVELOP THEIR  
SENSE OF SELF

**Helping youth leaders develop their sense of self as they transition from youth leaders to professionals.** For some of our older youth leaders they often felt conflicted between seeing themselves as youth leaders versus adult professionals. Progressing in their skills and moving along that continuum meant that they could no longer rely on their “youth” status regarding their behavior and performance; yet they were still learning and practicing their own skills on what you can and can’t do in a workplace. Youth leaders also needed support in learning how to appropriately establish their authority with project participants.



DEVELOP  
PROFESSIONAL  
BOUNDARIES

**Helping youth leaders develop professional boundaries.** Youth leaders needed help to frame or reframe personal relationships with other peers from their foster care experience. They needed help managing new relationships going forward with those that they will meet along their journey. Youth leaders received support in recognizing power differentials and professionally managing instances where they may have had romantic interests in or recreational commonalities with project participants. There were often times when there were few or no years’ age differential between the youth leaders and project participants and staff needed to help youth leaders develop the appropriate boundaries.



DEVELOP  
NON-JUDGMENTAL  
PRACTICE SKILLS

**Helping youth leaders develop non-judgmental practice skills.** Youth leaders often projected their own life’s successes and challenges on to the youth participants. The team would often hear, “but I was able to do it, so they should be able to do it.” There needed to be constant development and support for the youth leaders in helping them to meet the participants where they were and to not assign judgement for what another youth could or could not do. Youth leaders were coached in understanding client self-determination and empowering young people to set their own goals.



UNDERSTAND AND  
RESPECT CLIENT  
CONFIDENTIALITY

**Helping youth leaders understand and respect client confidentiality.** During the training, particularly in the peer support sections, youth leaders would often hear personal information that was shared by participants. It was important to help the youth leaders understand the critical importance of maintaining confidentiality and respecting a participant’s privacy.

“Not to sound cliché, but I feel that with each experience with youth I am gaining confidence around my different responsibilities. Having some of the conversations that I have to have is getting easier and more fluid as I already know what to do and say. I can see that this is going to help me be a better employee in my next job.”

– Works Wonders™ Youth Leader

**Helping youth leaders learn to receive constructive feedback to enhance their professional growth.** Hearing constructive feedback can be challenging for anyone. For the youth leaders it was important to help them hear the evaluation of their performance in the manner in which it was intended – to help them learn from their mistakes and build their skills. Often youth would hear the constructive feedback and become defensive, seeing it as an attack. Difficult situations can evoke negative emotions so staff worked diligently to create a safe, supportive space for youth leaders to develop constructive coping mechanisms and be open to hearing and responding to feedback.

**Helping youth leaders develop self-knowledge and self-care skills.** Youth leaders could become triggered in the group setting or could elicit trauma-based reactions from a project participant. There were discussions and activities that would sometimes elicit feelings of grief, loss, sadness, or anger for our youth project participants. It was critical that we had opportunities for those youth to step out, receive clinical supports as needed, and be supported in returning to the E<sup>2</sup> training when they were ready. The youth leaders were no different in this aspect. There were times when the youth leaders would themselves be triggered or that their response in the classroom would trigger the youth. The same clinical and adult supports were availed to the youth leaders and Works Wonders™ staff would work with the youth leader on developing and implementing self-care techniques.

**Knowing when to let go.** One of the most challenging aspects of this work was making the decision to move in a different direction with a youth leader when things were not working out. Organizationally, Foster Forward values “walking the walk” with the youth leaders in providing experiential learning opportunities in a safe, supportive environment. Yet there were challenges with some youth leaders that coaching could not resolve in a timely way and it became important to operationalize limits for the sake of the overall project. Knowing when to let go because a young person wasn’t ready for an opportunity and being open to giving that young person another chance were all a part of the delicate balancing act of youth-adult partnerships.



RECEIVE  
CONSTRUCTIVE  
FEEDBACK



DEVELOP  
SELF-KNOWLEDGE  
AND SELF-CARE  
SKILLS



KNOWING WHEN  
TO LET GO

## Challenges and Opportunities

### OPPORTUNITIES



ENHANCED THE  
PEER SUPPORT  
COMPONENT

**Youth leaders enhanced the peer support component of the E<sup>2</sup> Training.** In addition to the project participant peers in the training, youth leaders were those who had walked in their shoes before them and could relate in ways that paid staff were not always able. Youth leaders helped to build rapport in the training and were seen as go-to supports for our project participants.



BUILT THEIR SKILLS

**Youth leaders built their skills in a safe, supportive environment.** Youth leaders were paid for their time as subcontractors. The opportunities were structured as consultants so that young people would see their involvement as employment experience. The youth leaders built their leadership skills, decision-making skills, communication skills, and team work skills but were able to do so in an environment that supported them when they didn't get it right. Youth were not dismissed for making mistakes or missing deadlines. They were supported to get back on track and to learn how to do the work better so that they could successfully apply those lessons in future employment opportunities – even ones that might be less flexible and developmental.



BUILDING  
SELF-ADVOCACY

**Youth participants were supported by the youth leaders in building self-advocacy and self-determination skills.** Youth leaders were familiar with the group settings youth frequently lived in and were able to offer advice and support on how best to advocate for themselves to have their needs met. Youth leaders provided examples of how they overcame vocational and non-vocational barriers to employment that encouraged participants to see that success was possible.

“

*This past week I felt really great about my work. I was able to meet with different youth and really felt like I could pay it forward.*”

– Works Wonders™ Youth Leader

**Staff built their youth engagement skills as they worked one-on-one coaching the youth leaders.** The Works Wonders™ staff worked closely with the youth leaders and learned about their own professional growth needs. Staff also learned valuable skills of inclusion, shared decision making, and supporting youth self-determination. Having the opportunities for staff to build their patience, perseverance, and practice their youth engagement skills with youth leaders enabled greater project youth engagement as the grant progressed.

**Organizationally, the lead agency – Foster Forward – enhanced its operating framework for program and youth development.** At its core, Foster Forward believes in taking a positive youth development approach that is grounded in the research on the adolescent brain. Foster Forward also values youth voice and choice in program decision making. With all these philosophical underpinnings there was still so much that organizationally had not been operationalized. Embarking on a truly youth participatory project highlighted deficiencies in practice and process that enabled Foster Forward to improve its framework across all its programs.

---

By engaging youth as partners in Works Wonders,™ young people were able to be active in directing the supports that shape their lives. As young people were prepared, empowered, and supported through this experiential learning opportunity they grew, the staff and organization grew, and the project was successful in achieving the desired outcomes for youth in foster care related to career development and employment engagement. There will be challenges along the way, but they are worth working through for everyone involved.

---



ONE-ON-ONE  
COACHING

FOSTER  
FORWARD





55 South Brow Street  
East Providence, RI 02914  
401.438.3900  
fosterforward.net

In Partnership With:



**RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE**



**COLUMBIA | WORKPLACE CENTER**

Works Wonders™ was implemented with funding through a collaborative agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Grant #90CW1141.