

PATHWAYS INTO LEADERSHIP: A STUDY OF YOUTHBUILD GRADUATES

A new CIRCLE report, entitled “Pathways into Leadership: A Study of YouthBuild Graduates,” describes the transformation of a remarkable group of young people from high school dropouts into exemplary civic leaders. The study, made possible by a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, was released on June 4 at the White House Summit on Community Solutions for Disconnected Youth and then presented at a Capitol Hill briefing convened by Representatives Robert Dold (R-Il) and John Lewis (D-GA).

YouthBuild is best known as a set of local programs in communities across the country that enroll high school dropouts and provide GED classes, job training, community service opportunities, and leadership development. Previous research has found positive effects on the participants’ education and, employment, and (for the students who have criminal records) reduced recidivism.

CIRCLE studied something different: a leadership pathway that begins in the local programs when students are asked to help manage the organization and continues at the national level for some alumni.

We conducted an evaluation with quantitative and qualitative components and a dimension of community-based participatory research. Surveying and interviewing alumni who were involved with the alumni programs, we found a gigantic difference between their experience before and after YouthBuild.

“I’M IMPORTANT TO ME COMMUNITY AND MY COMMUNITY IS IMPORTANT TO ME ... I BUILD EVERYTHING OFF THAT PREMISE” IS HOW ONE PERSON SUMMARIZED THE EFFECTS OF YOUTHBUILD.

Then: these were “disconnected youth,” outside of school or college, jobs, and civic organizations. Almost all had dropped out of high school or had been expelled. Many were victims of violence and homelessness and a substantial minority were members of gangs or had criminal records. Half expected to die before age 30, many before age 25. As one graduate stated, “Before I joined YouthBuild, I honestly thought the depression of my life would kill me.”

Now: these are civic leaders. Some hold public office or serve as pastors. All expect to live to a ripe old age and feel they have a lifetime of service to contribute. They are optimistic, satisfied, and dedicated. “I’m important to me community and my community is important

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THE RESEARCH ROUNDUP COLUMN HIGHLIGHTS RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS COMMISSIONED OR GENERATED BY CIRCLE. ALSO INCLUDED IS AN UPDATE ON NEW CIRCLE PRODUCTS SUCH AS FACT SHEETS, RESEARCH ARTICLES, RESEARCH ABSTRACTS, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, AND DATASETS.

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to me ... I build everything off that premise" is how one person summarized the effects of YouthBuild.

More than one-third work as professional educators or youth workers and almost all are leaders in their families, workplaces, and communities, focusing on the needs of the younger generation. In response to a question about aspirations, one graduate responded, "I want to get young people excited about learning and get to them to take an active part in the development of their lives and future." Another said, "I believe in myself and therefore, I have a future."

Many graduates observed that YouthBuild provided a supportive and caring family-like environment, where they would not be judged based on their past actions. "I wasn't depending on them, but I could depend on them," remarked one YouthBuild graduate. "It was a great feeling... to have someone there...to guide you and get you where you need to be."

Graduates reported that the YouthBuild staff recognized their talents and accomplishments and they felt valued by the program. For many alumni, this was the first time in their lives they had been recognized as having something of value to contribute. "They would tell me —'you have a voice and you and it needs to be heard—your concerns are important.' And they made me feel like I was important, like I did matter" recalled one YouthBuild graduate.

"THEY WOULD TELL ME —'YOU HAVE A VOICE AND YOU AND IT NEEDS TO BE HEARD—YOUR CONCERNS ARE IMPORTANT ARE IMPORTANT.'"

Participants had opportunities and encouragement to develop specific civic skills that transfer into civil society and the workplace. As one graduate recalled, "I never knew what a budget plan was, I never knew how to keep minutes, I never knew how to do all that, and when I got to the policy committee and they started showing me these things, it just kept motivating me more and more to just keep doing positive and wanting to sit on not only the policy committee at YouthBuild, but what committees can I get on in my neighborhood and can I be on a neighborhood association committee?"

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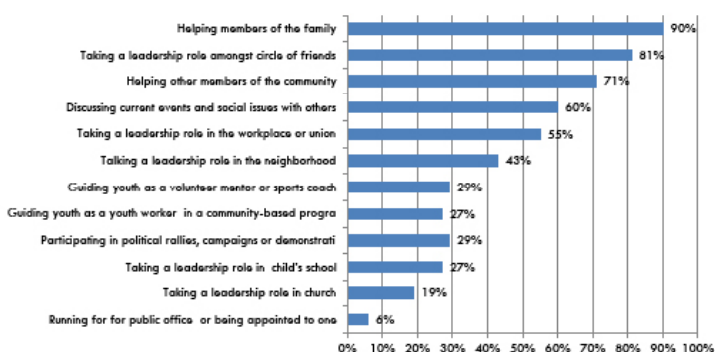
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We draw two lessons:

First, leading and serving others is integrally connected to succeeding and flourishing in life

Second, to lead and serve requires opportunities that must be deliberately built and maintained, and very few organizations other than YouthBuild are building those opportunities for disconnected youth.

Figure 1: Civic Leadership Among YouthBuild Graduates



Few young people have opportunities to engage in civic leadership outside of the educational system. Within schools, civic opportunities are disproportionately offered to students from upper-income backgrounds.

WITHIN SCHOOLS, CIVIC OPPORTUNITIES ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY OFFERED TO STUDENTS FROM UPPER-INCOME BACKGROUNDS.

Given the scarcity of opportunities for civic involvement, programs such as YouthBuild that specifically focus on empowering poor and working-class young adults are more important than ever. As one graduate noted, "If I wanted to start a whole movement in the neighborhood right now, I would be able to because I know the necessary steps and I have the skills, thanks to YouthBuild, to go about these things."

The full report, findings and implications are available at: <http://www.civicyouth.org/released-today-at-the-white-house-circle-study-shows-youthbuild-builds-leaders/> ★

NEW BOOK: NO CITIZEN LEFT BEHIND

Meira Levinson's book *No Citizen Left Behind* (Harvard University Press, 2012) began with a CIRCLE grant and develops the argument of Levinson's CIRCLE Working Paper 51, "The Civic Achievement Gap." Levinson is also a CIRCLE Advisory Board member.

Levinson combines anecdotes from her eight years of teaching middle school in Atlanta and Boston, political theorizing, and social science analysis. She argues that the United States suffers from a civic empowerment gap that is as shameful and anti-democratic as the academic achievement gap targeted by *No Child Left Behind*.

Levinson shows how schools can help address the civic empowerment gap by teaching collective action, openly discussing the racialized dimensions of citizenship, and provoking students by engaging their passions against contemporary injustices through action civics. The book also includes chapters on historical counternarratives, heroes and role models, school culture, and accountability.

Praise for *No Citizen Left Behind*:

"A must-read for anyone who cares to see young people from all backgrounds grow into self-confident and efficacious citizens."—Danielle S. Allen, *Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton*

"A landmark book that should influence teachers of all subjects in American schools while providing an important model for scholars."—Peter Levine, *Tufts University*

"Brilliant. *No Citizen Left Behind* is must reading for anyone concerned with the reform of civic education in America. An inspiration for both scholars and practitioners."—Robert D. Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone* and co-author of *American Grace*

