

UNLOCKING YOUTH VOICE

NATIONAL INSTITUTE TO UNLOCK POTENTIAL

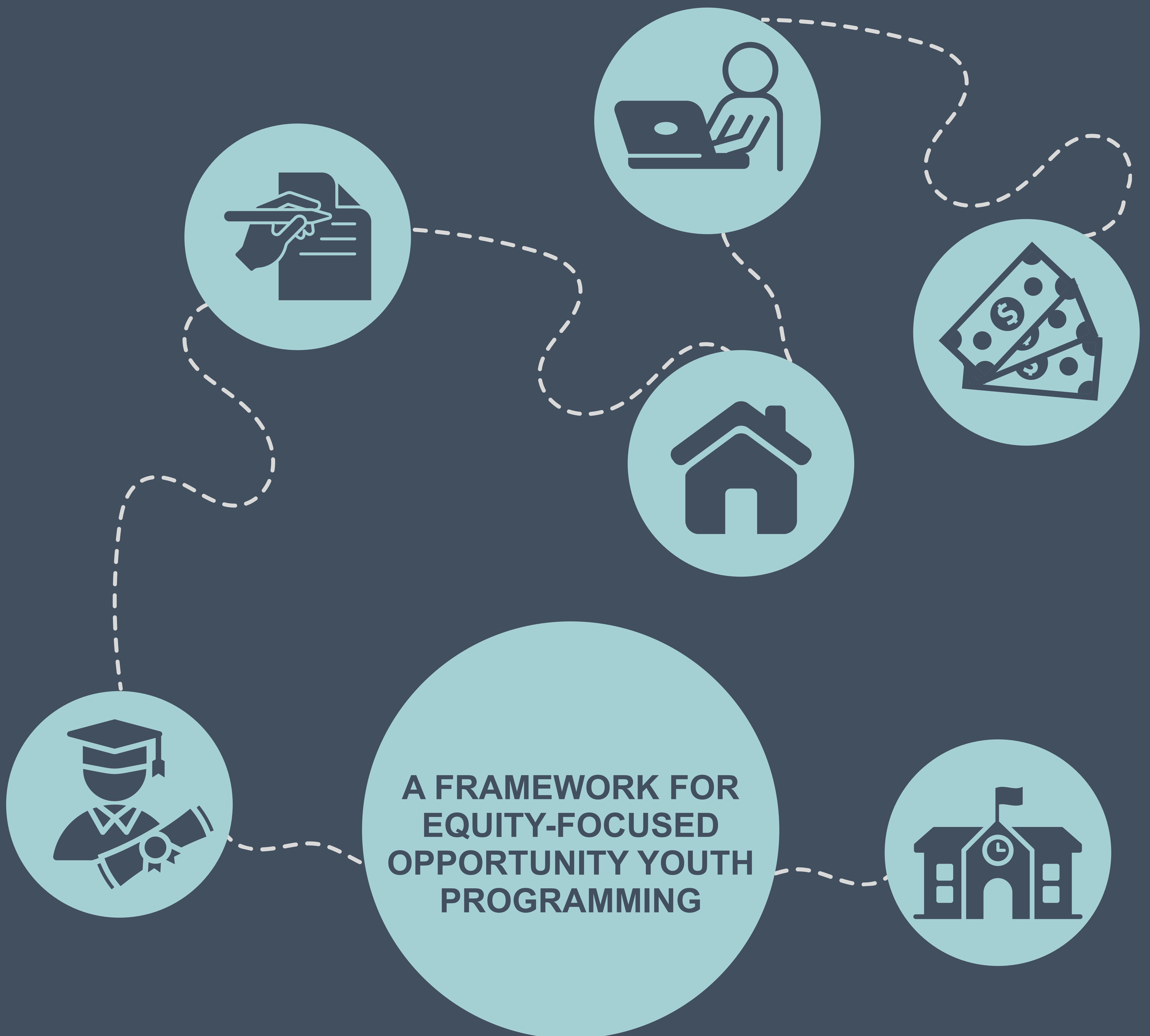


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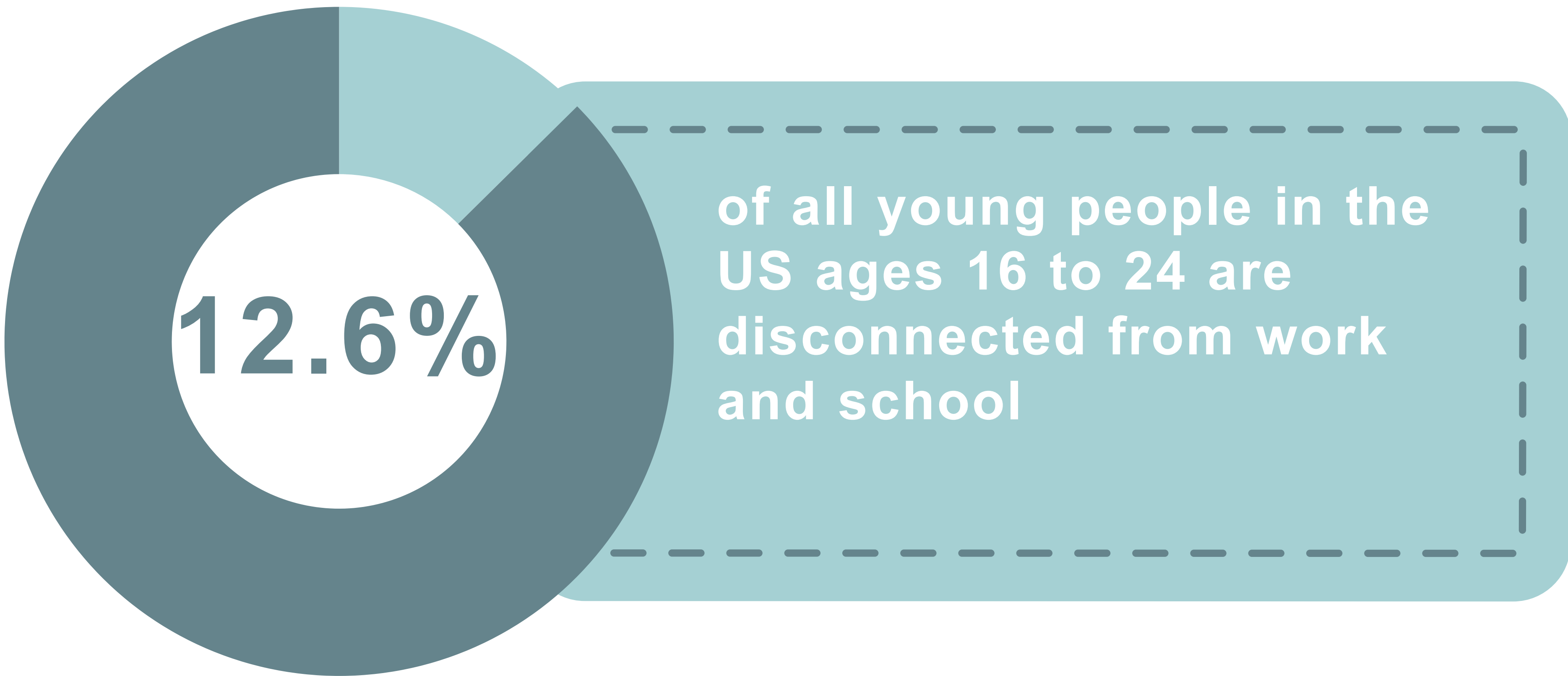
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Introduction

The National Institute to Unlock Potential (NIUP) convened a diverse group of stakeholders, including young people, community based organizations (CBOs), and employers to develop a framework for collaborative, equity-focused employment programs for Opportunity Youth. Opportunity Youth are young people ages 16 to 24 who are disconnected from work and school. **As of 2020, 12.6% of all young people in the US in that age group were disconnected (Lewis, 2022).** The NIUP specifically focused on Black and Brown Opportunity Youth who had experienced parental incarceration, the foster care system, the criminal legal system, or human trafficking and have the most significant risk of experiencing incarceration. The NIUP partners crafted a framework for advancing Opportunity Youth programming, intended as a resource for ongoing work to translate these best practices and guiding principles into concrete, actionable tools for practice. The framework includes 10 Areas of Practice that all stakeholders are called on to engage, supporting one another to actively learn and adapt. **One of the foundational Areas of Practice is Youth Engagement and Leadership, which is the focus of this paper.** This resource can support any organization or program working with Opportunity Youth, whether the focus is employment, education, or other outcomes. It includes three components: an overview of the Ladder of Youth Engagement, a brief overview of the process and organization would undertake to integrate youth engagement throughout their work, and ten principles of effective youth engagement practice synthesized from the literature.



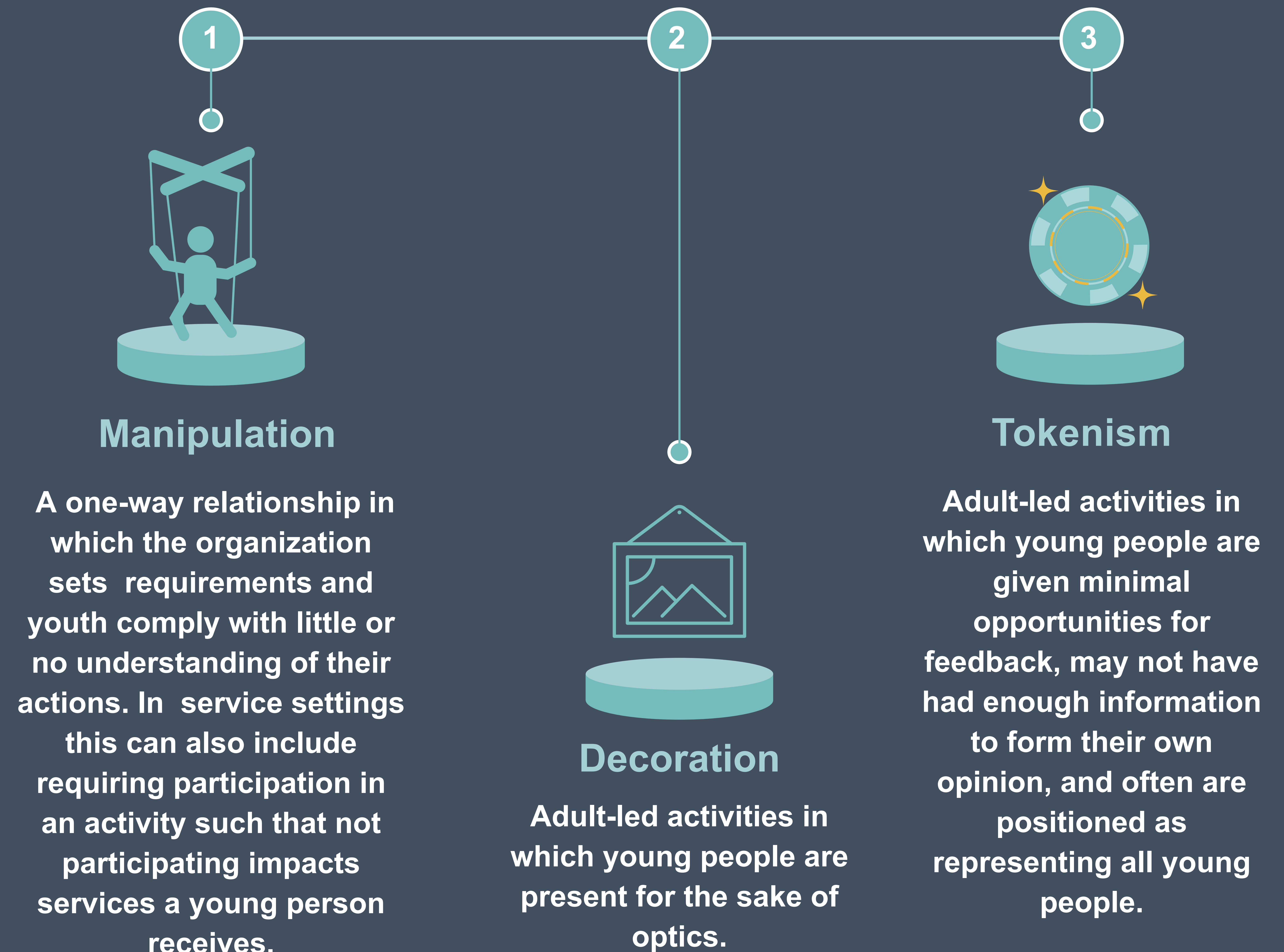
Young people are integral to solving disconnection. Just as in the disability rights movement, the slogan “**nothing about us without us**” captures the core intention that guides all effective youth engagement work. In addition to being a critical foundation of re-designing systems so that they serve young people, **engaging young people to take action for social change can strengthen their individual and collective sense of belonging, power, and hopefulness (Ortega-Williams et al., 2020).** In approaching workforce development programming, all partners (i.e. CBOs, employers, funders, educational partners, etc.) need to make a commitment to support young people in using their voice to shape programs and processes, allowing their work to be changed by the young people they serve. For many organizations, **this requires shifts in individual mindsets and organizational culture to respect young people as fully capable, trusting that they have expertise and first hand knowledge of the barriers they face and the solutions that will work for them (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).** Behaviorally, the organization must shift its processes from creating for young people to creating with young people (Nemoy & Miles, 2018). This shift to welcoming and equipping young people as equal partners in the work contributes to improved engagement and outcomes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

Framing Youth Engagement

There are many frameworks describing youth engagement that can be utilized to help an organization understand and make these needed shifts. The classic Ladder of Youth Participation framework developed by Roger Hart remains one of the simplest and most illuminating. The bottom three rungs represent ways of relating to young people that are transactional and create no space for participation. **As an organization moves their practices up the ladder, young people have increasing access to information and increasingly share decision making power with adults in the program (Hart, 1992).**

No organization is a monolith, and your organization may have practices that span multiple rungs on the ladder. Additionally, it may not be appropriate to reach the top of the ladder in all areas. Progressing from one level to the next is a process that takes time, and should be viewed as an ongoing area of practice and learning for all organizations working with young people, including CBOs and employers.

Models of Non-Participation



Models of Participation

To be truly participatory, a project or initiative must meet all four of the following criteria:

- The youth have a meaningful role.
- The youth understand the intentions of the project.
- The youth understand who makes decisions about their participation and why.
- The youth volunteer for the project giving informed consent.



Assigned but Informed

Adult-led process in which young people are assigned roles or tasks in a directive approach, but are informed about the full process and how decisions will be made by adults.



Consulted and Informed

Adult-led process in which youth understand the process, adults solicit feedback and input from youth, and youth are informed about how their input will be used.

Models of Participation



Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Youth

Adult-led process in which youth are fully informed, consulted, and share equal decision making power. This level represents true co-creation with youth inside an adult-led process.

Youth-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults

Youth-Initiated and Directed

Youth-led process in which youth are the decision makers and the process is supported or facilitated by adults, who ensure the young people have the conditions needed to manage the project or initiative themselves.

Youth-led process in which adults are informed, consulted, and share decision making power with young people. This level also describes many youth-led organizations, as well as youth-led initiatives within organizations.

The existing workforce system in many communities does not currently focus on incorporating youth voice. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act workforce boards are primarily employer focused and do not currently have a required youth voice component. We assert that **workforce development programs for young people should strive to reach the level of shared decision making with young people**. Not every organization needs to strive to reach the top of the ladder on all processes, and this may not always be realistic. Youth engagement work can be deeply impactful without being fully youth-led. The process of moving up the ladder is one of organizational culture change, which is a slow process that can only move as quickly as the slowest individuals in your organization.

Further, just as on a real ladder, it is recommended that organizations take one rung at a time as each new rung requires additional infrastructure and an on ramp for both adults and young people to understand the new dynamic. Well intended efforts to engage youth can unintentionally replicate the non-participatory relationships of manipulation, decoration, or tokenism if the organization does not adequately support young people and adults to engage in the process.



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Crafting a Youth Engagement Strategy



Crafting a Youth Engagement Strategy

As with any change process, organizations working to shift their culture and practices around youth engagement are engaged in a contentious learning process that often is not linear or fixed, with each component informing the others.

- 1. Articulate a Commitment.** Work with leaders/decision makers inside your organization to clarify where your organization is trying to go. What does successful youth engagement look like at your agency? Leadership articulating a commitment and communicating it across the organization is an important foundation for changing the organizational culture and practices to live into the principles for youth engagement. It is the north star that staff can recenter on when navigating competing commitments (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014). Articulating your organization or program’s commitment is a critical place to center and advance equity. If your work is focused on addressing particular disparities or serving specific populations, integrate that focus explicitly into your commitment to youth engagement. For example, a program focusing on Black and Brown Opportunity Youth who have experienced the foster care system can name explicitly that their youth engagement strategies will be considered successful when they have an active Youth Advisory Board with at least 80% young people who have been impacted by the foster care system.
- 2. Assess Where You Are.** Take stock of the current policies and practices that share how your organization interacts with young people and how decisions are made about programming. Have conversations with organizational and program leaders on how they currently include youth in decisions and respond to youth feedback, and what opportunities they see for advancing youth voice. Talk with young people working with your agency to understand their experience and if they feel like they are heard and respected, and where they would like to be more involved and have more say. The [Youth Involvement and Engagement Assessment Tool](#) is a freely available assessment completed by organizational or program staff to paint a picture of current youth engagement practices and how they might be strengthened.

- 3. Identify Strategies.** Based on where you are starting from, choose strategies for advancing youth voices that are right for the young people you are working with and that are right for your organization. Again, equity-focused programs should be clear on what disparities they are trying to address and on what populations of young people they are trying to engage. As described in more detail below, Opportunity Youth who have been impacted by systems are often more difficult to reach, and strategies that might successfully attract young parents for example may not work for young people who are not parents. Your strategies should respond to what your specific young people are asking for while aligning with your organizational culture. Organizational culture is what enables implementation, so if you choose a strategy that goes against your culture, it likely won't be successfully implemented.
- 4. Implement with Change Management Lens.** Change is often difficult and change efforts within organizations are most effective when approached with intentionality. There are a variety of actionable, concrete frameworks for leading organizational changes. Kotter's framework outlined in *Leading Change* (2012) aligns with values of participation and collaboration, including building a coalition, communicating the vision, empowering staff to act on the vision, and integrating small wins to build momentum.
- 5. Create Accountability and Learning Processes from the Start.** Organizations are most effective when they are held accountable to learning and improving. Without intentional accountability and learning processes, it can be really easy for new strategies to be deprioritized and for an organization to return to business as usual. As you are designing and implementing strategies that you will start with, plan and agree on how your organization will assess if it is working well and what might need to be adjusted. In addition to thinking about what indicators we would use for learning and improvement, it is also important that someone at your organization view this as part of their job that they will be held accountable to (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014).





Through the literature review, we identified 10 principles that underpin effective youth engagement work. These principles are intended to guide the actions and behavior of adults in your organization as they shift to partnering with youth in designing solutions to disconnection. These principles are synthesized from multiple sources and point to a strong consensus that has emerged in the youth engagement literature.

01 Adults facilitate a clear structure and process to build psychological safety. To develop a space in which young people feel safe and comfortable to ask questions, give honest feedback, share new ideas, and engage as partners, adults must balance providing a clear, predictable process with stepping back into the role of a facilitator for young people, leaving space for young people to step into their voice and leadership. Adults create the container where youth can be creative by serving as facilitators, guiding the process without leading or dictating the content. This also requires maintaining and guarding the group process, such as avoiding asking for feedback on decisions that had already been made, managing who is in the setting, and interfacing between the youth-led space and the broader organization (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

02 Well equipped staff trained in youth engagement. These efforts move at the speed of trust between young people and the adults working with them. Adults working with Opportunity Youth need to build their understanding of the harm that our systems cause, especially for Black and Brown youth, often leading to very low levels of trust in programs and the adults who run them in general. The recommendation is to recruit staff who themselves have lived experience as Opportunity Youth or were system impacted as youth. Youth engagement work can stall or plateau if the staff working with young people do not have enough time and aren't on the same page about what the organization is trying to cultivate through youth engagement. Providing training on youth development and engagement, trauma informed approaches, cultural and linguistic competence, and education on racial disparities across systems are all critical to equipping staff. Making youth engagement responsibilities part of staff's core job description and adjusting expectations to allow for the time intensive nature of relationship building with young people will provide the organizational support and accountability to help maintain consistency even when staff turnover (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Nemoy & Miles, 2018).

03

Cultivate authentic two-way relationships rooted in mutual respect.

This requires adults to meet youth where they are, to be accessible in ways that work for youth, and to earn the trust of young people by treating them with respect and truly listening. Within these relationships, adults can support the confidence building of individual young people, which is a critical component of youth engagement. This relationship building is time consuming (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014, 2019).

04

Establish norms and guidelines early and recenter on them regularly.

Being clear about expectations and guidelines up front and following through on those builds trust and shows young people that the adults they are working with do what they say they will do. Norms around difficult conversations and resolving conflict support the group's development. Boundaries also help staff navigate the tension between being available to young people and maintaining their personal lives (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014).

05

Remove barriers and create supports for meaningful participation, including compensating youth. The key to meaningful participation is meeting young people where they are, instead of asking them to jump in where the adults are. This starts with making opportunities to participate accessible to young people – working around young people's schedules, providing transportation, childcare, food, or technology to access remote conversations. Removing barriers is a key area for collaboration and partnership across organizations, as it often is not feasible for a single organization to address all barriers. In addition, providing compensation for the time and expertise of young people communicates that they are full partners while removing or reducing the barrier of lost income for time spent with the organization or program (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014, 2019; Tran, 2023).

06

Provide clarity on the role of young people and practice informed consent.

Every time you invite young people into the process or convene them, clearly outline what role they are being asked to step into and how what they share will be utilized by the organization. For example, let young people know if they are being asked for feedback on an existing idea or practice, to brainstorm and help create something new, to make a decision about a proposed change, etc. Let them know how you and your organization will utilize their feedback, whether it will be kept confidential to the group, shared with organizational leadership outside of the group, or shared in any publicly facing materials. Asking folks to participate always creates some expectations for decision makers to take action based on their feedback, and if this step is not attended to, organization can unintentionally damage trust between young people and program staff (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014).

07

Prepare and support youth to participate in multiple ways. Develop a strong on-ramp so that youth feel prepared and safe to engage in a new space. Asking youth to show up in a space dominated by adult professionals and professional culture without adequate support can feel daunting to young people. Having strategies for preparation that work for a variety of different learning styles equips adults to meet young people where they are and build on their strengths. For example, a more formal training session may work great for some youth, where one on one coaching and role play may work better for another. Examples of supports include on boarding materials, one-on-one mentorship or coaching, peer support connections, and debriefing experiences with young people after meetings or milestones (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014, 2019; Nemoy & Miles, 2018).

08

Provide consistent opportunities for meaningful action, and give feedback to young people. Relationship building with young people takes time, and effective youth engagement strategies include opportunities for them to use their voice, give their input, take action even while the group is building trust. Early wins can support long-term engagement. It is also critical to update young people on how their feedback, recommendations, or decisions are being used and acted upon within the organization (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014, 2019). Additionally, participating in group leadership and action can be a powerful source of relief and hope for young people (Ortega-Williams et al., 2020).

09

Intentional space for storytelling in context of youth ownership. Sharing their stories can be restorative and connecting for youth, giving them opportunities to shape their own narrative and connect with others who have similar experiences. It also gives adults the opportunity to build empathy and learn from young people. However, this must be done in a way that intentionally centers young people's autonomy and in a context that positions individual's stories as belonging to them. Each young person decides for themselves if, when, and how they share their stories. This norm may be different for adults and young people alike, and can help young people navigate what is restorative sharing versus oversharing that may tip into reliving difficult experiences (Nemoy & Miles, 2018; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2021).

10

Flexibility and patience. As described in the *Opportunity Youth Landscape* report, Opportunity Youth are typically navigating multiple challenges simultaneously. Supporting participation also includes accepting that young people will move at their own pace and may need to stop and resume participation at various points as they navigate their multiple responsibilities. Holding space for re-engagement when young people are ready is critical to sustaining engagement over time. We must give space and flexibility for their participation to ebb and flow. Additionally, there is often a tension between the pace that adult staff are accustomed or capable of working individually and the pace that a collaborative group of young people are able to work, where the value of moving at the young people's pace to ensure their engagement may push against organizational or funder timelines (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014).

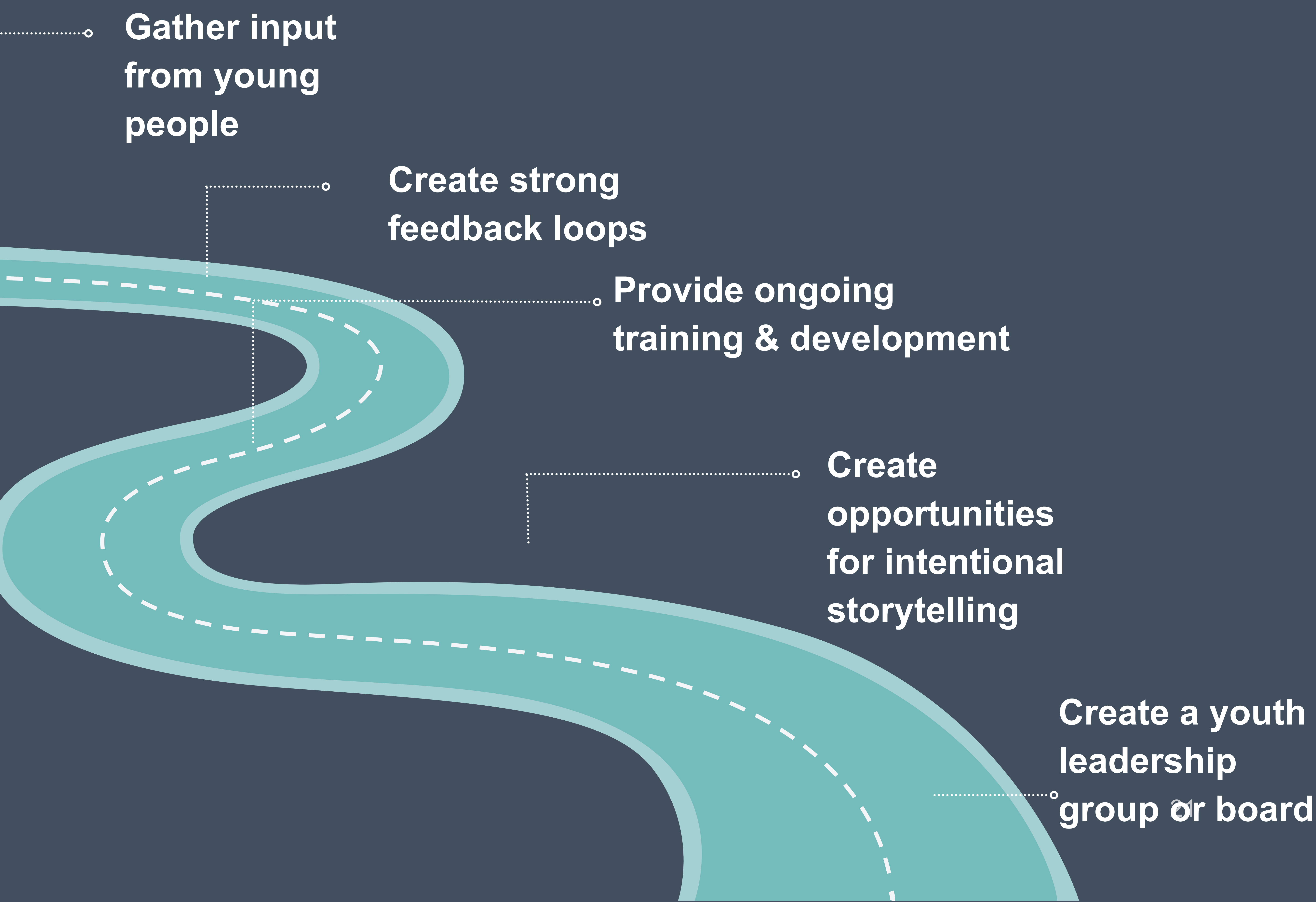


ENGAGE YOUTH



Concrete Strategies

Many concrete strategies appear again and again in the literature on youth engagement and centering youth voice. The strategies outlined here are supported both by literature and the experience of the NIUP, and each should be implemented in alignment with the principles described above. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, and rather is a starting point. For detailed recommendations on a roadmap to integrating youth voice into the program life cycle, see *Plan International’s Youth Voice in Youth Employment* (2021) guide.



- 1. Gather input from young people on program services and processes during planning.** This strategy requires planning processes to be structured in a way that is accessible, creates real participation for young people, and is rooted in a commitment to make changes based on the feedback received. There are a variety of ways to approach this strategy. For some organizations, it is accomplished through a time-limited data collection project with young people, such as a photo voice project, a human centered design process, a participatory journey mapping process, or focus groups and surveys; for others, a Youth Advisory Board or similar group is formed and participates in planning in an ongoing way (Tran, 2023; Plan International, 2021). Organizations may choose to work with the youth committee associated with their local Workforce Development Board, if one is active. The specific methods you select should be informed by what is feasible both for the organization and for young people to participate.
- 2. Create strong feedback loops between young people and the program through data collection and action throughout program implementation.** While the above strategy is focused on the design process, continuous feedback loops between young people and the program decision makers ensure the program has relevant information to evolve in ways that continue to meet young people’s needs. It also builds trust and credibility when organizations take action and follow through on recommendations offered by young people (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Plan International, 2021). The goal of this strategy is to integrate processes for hearing from young people and taking action on their feedback into the ongoing operations of the program. This entails data collection with young people, consistently reporting back what you learned to the organization and to young people, taking action or making decisions based on what you have learned, and sharing back with young people what those actions were. We recommend positioning this process as a core element of your program evaluation, and utilizing participatory methods within that evaluation to the extent possible.

3. **Provide ongoing training in youth engagement and youth development to staff.** Youth engagement and positive youth development are areas of practice worthy of professional development investment for all organizations working with young people, and well-equipped staff has consistently been found to be a critical element of effective programming. As mentioned above, providing ongoing training on these topics can also ensure consistency within the program despite staff turnover. (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Nemoy & Miles, 2018)
4. **Create opportunities for intentional storytelling.** As described above, sharing their stories is often a positive, healing experience for young people, and needs to be handled with intentionality and care (Nemoy & Miles, 2018; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2021). As part of your youth engagement strategy, we recommend working with young people to identify how they would like to share their stories, engaging them in the design and supporting the implementation with skilled facilitators who can hold the container. Informed consent is critical, including being explicit about how young people's stories will or will not be used by the broader organization with internal or external audiences. There are a variety of approaches to collective storytelling, and this may be a time-limited project or an ongoing effort of a formal youth leadership group convened by your organization.
5. **Create and sustain a youth leadership group or board.** Youth leadership groups are formal groups convened by a service organization to support that organization in delivering programs for young people. The specific role and scope of the youth leadership group can vary, with shared decision making on some topics and consultation on other topics. Creating and sustaining a youth leadership group is a significant undertaking that will require sustained focus and an ongoing time commitment from staff members. For a more detailed guide and toolkit to creating and sustaining a youth leadership group, see *Game Changers: Creating a Youth Advisory Council* (generationOn, 2012), or the *Toolkit for Implementing Authentic Youth Engagement Strategies Within State Advisory Groups* (Hudson & Powell, 2023).



Call to Action

Organizations and programs that are currently engaging young people or who are expanding into serving this population can utilize this resource both to reflect on where your practices currently stand and to guide the design of an equity-focused youth engagement strategy. We recommend starting with discussions about the Ladder of Youth Participation to clarify what engagement currently looks like and what level your program or organization will ideally move towards. As you move through the process to craft your strategy, think through how you will operationalize each of the 10 principles of effective youth engagement in your program or organization. What will each of the 10 principles look like in practice, and what processes need to be developed or refined to support that? Finally, the invitation is to engage with this area of practice as an ongoing space of learning and adaptation. Return to reassess and refine your youth engagement strategy regularly, in particular integrating feedback from young people as you receive it.

Our young people are not defined by their disconnection and continue to have dreams and aspirations for themselves even as they continue to navigate the many systematic barriers and challenges that they are faced with. Young people are the experts in their own experience – they hold the keys to understanding how our systems have failed them and what it would look like for the systems to meet them as they are and provide meaningful support. Our young people are capable, resilient, and creative, and they hold the knowledge of how best to support themselves and how to change the system so all youth thrive. In envisioning a future with equitable, high quality education and employment pathways for all young people, we must actively center and partner with the young people we seek to lift up.



Help lift up the Youth!

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Young Adult Lived Experiences (2023-2024): Georgia-DNaysha; Florida-Devin, LilCrystal, Maci, Tashia; Indiana-Essence; Tennessee: Chyniece, Jasbrianna; and Texas Ania, Angelica,

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~Persevere and the Guiding Team of the National Institute to Unlock Potential

