



A Guide to Youth Activation:
Peers, Power, Purpose, and
Partnerships

Robert Sherman, Ph.D.
Keith W. Frome, Ed.D.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Youth Activation Defined

On Friday, March 9, 2018, the Governor of Florida, Rick Scott, signed Senate Bill 7026, otherwise known as the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act, into law less than one month after the tragic slaughter in Parkland. It was a remarkably swift legislative response in a state famous for its vigorous protections for gun owners. At the signing ceremony, Governor Scott, as reported by the New York Times, stated that the classmates of the slain students and their parents were his inspiration. He “praised them for helping persuade lawmakers to pass legislation.” As quoted by the New York Times, Governor Scott said to the students and parents: “You made your voices heard . . . you helped change your state. You made a difference. You should be proud.”¹

At the end of the same article, the New York Times, quoted Rebecca Schneid, the 16-year-old editor of the Stoneman Douglas High newspaper, *The Eagle Eye*, who, though not completely satisfied by the reach of the bill, said: “I never really expected to get something done so fast. We’ve been calling them out, and that really scared them. And that’s scaring them into making sure they actually do represent us. They know that if they don’t, we’re going to vote them out. We’re going to keep sending people to Tallahassee because when we go away, this goes away.”

The difference between Governor Scott’s comments and Ms. Schneid’s illustrates the vanguard of American education reform. Governor Scott represents the importance of student voice, but Ms. Schneid demonstrates Youth Activation. Governor Scott’s language, while laudatory and appreciative, is also relatively passive. Students “help.” They don’t scream or shout or argue or demonstrate, but rather they “make their voices heard.” They don’t change the world, they “make a difference.” And notice the implication that their protest is an act that is accomplished and done. Temporally, according to Governor Scott, this is already an historical act – to be commended and remembered – but essentially over and done with.

Ms. Schneid’s vision and language, on the other hand, takes the student voice dimension into a new realm. Her language is action-packed.

She and her partners “expect,” they scare, they call out, they make sure, and they “keep sending.” For the Stoneman Douglas Youth Activators, their work is on-going and demands a program of vigilance and measurement. Temporally, they are planning for the future. Senate Bill 7026 is not history; it is a milestone on a longer strategic path. Ms. Schneid vows to take responsibility, because, and it bears repeating, “when we go away, this goes away.” Ms. Schneid’s voice is certainly sounded and heard, but her vision assumes responsibility and continued responsiveness. The Parkland students were able to leverage their position of privilege to attract national and international media attention in ways that communities of color have not been typically afforded. We use Governor Scott’s reflections simply to illustrate the distinction between youth voice and the kind of youth activism that is practiced by young people in schools and communities throughout the country. The point is that youth activists pursue measurable goals and achieve demonstrable results.

This guide explores multiple fields related to Youth Activation. These fields have an experience base, findings, evidence, and methods that effectively build the case for proliferating Youth Activation as an essential high school opportunity, one with the power to spread across the land and help improve schools – and therefore outcomes for young people – everywhere. What follows is more a “why to” implement Youth Activation than a “how to” practice it document, as many such manuals already exist, covering distinct tactics, institutions, and levels of proposed change. But here is a most simple argument: When a corporation wants to improve a product, it first asks its consumers for opinions and ideas. Schools, too, can look to their core constituents, students, who possess the strongest ideas about what is needed as well as the energy to get there. Youth Activation is one important method for building stronger young people, schools, communities, and our democracy.

Youth Activation is a generic new name for a highly promising form of youth-adult partnership, led by young people who want to improve their schools. Easy to articulate and to value, yet still rarely implemented in high schools, Youth Activation takes off from young people’s keen interest in making their school experiences more rewarding and growth-oriented and more likely to encourage engagement, thriving, and development. Alongside adults who embrace young people’s authentic leadership potential, Youth Activators

importantly mobilize their peers and motivate engagement with, and belonging in, their schools, factors deeply related to school success. Youth Activation can take a multitude of effective forms, which are only now about to be explored at scale. An initial summit with early practitioners, nonprofit partners, and funders took place in April 2018. That report can be found at peerforward.org.² (see reference for web address.)

Here is a core definition of Youth Activation:

Youth, along with peers and school/civic partners, create and execute student-designed solutions to pressing challenges they themselves identify in their schools.

Here is what Youth Activators do:

Challenge: They identify an important challenge – a pressing problem or compelling vision that matters, and to which a solution or improvement is sought;

Solution: They generate youth-powered solutions that can make a measurable difference; and

Partnership: They partner with peers and school/civic leaders to work on the pressing problem identified in order to increase impact and press to resolution.

Adolescence is About Development and New Ways to Learn and Thrive

The teenage years hold life's second biggest physical, psychological, and social opportunity for growth, development, and learning. As such, adolescence is a period of exponential growth, and when much of the development up until that point is integrated with new capabilities and a changing body. We know that the years 0–5 witness the first major growth spurt (including motor coordination, language, and thinking), and that much of who we become is laid down through early experiences during those years, combined with realities of temperament and physical assets. In early adolescence, the body and brain explode again with new potentials, the second shot we get at developing, growing, and thriving.³

Writers since ancient times have commented on how chaotic the teenage years can feel, both to teenagers and those around them. In the 1950s, Robert Havighurst codified the developmental tasks of normal adolescence, establishing categories which have since been explored in thousands of studies and books that frame thinking about the challenges of this life period. (See Havighurst's full list of adolescent tasks ccoso.org.) Tremendous excitement, and tumult, attaches to the profound changes during this life phase, several dimensions of which relate directly to Youth Activation:

- New intellectual and verbal capacities are exploding. Adolescents experience a dramatic increase in their abilities to think about their world and lives, and about ideas. Idealism rises, outrage spikes, more complex arguments emerge as abstract thinking comes into the mix (see for instance the works of Piaget,⁴ Erikson,⁵ and Siegel⁶);
- Strong emotions abound. Their regulation requires mastery, neurological tempering through learning and experiences. The process takes years to evolve into adulthood (see for instance the works of Immordino-Yang,⁷ Cozzolino,⁸ and Steinberg⁹). Sexuality suddenly blossoms, and teenagers must adjust to rapidly changing physical bodies, their own and others';
- Intense focus on peers emerges and dominates much of this life period. Developing stable and productive peer relationships becomes a central driver and challenge. Romantic relationships also develop;
- Family ties, relationships with parents or caregivers require renegotiation or reconfiguration, as independence grows (over time) and as separation from family comes into focus (Siegel);
- Identity-formation is active and iterative (Erikson, Chicago Consortium). No longer an extension of one's parents, teenagers ask repeatedly: "Who am I?" This question speaks to their future careers and relationships, but also concerns the person they hope to become as a community member. Key skills, habits, and dispositions regarding how focused on others, or on the self, the developing teen is becoming, consolidate during these important years.

In other words, adolescents crave **Peers, Power, Purpose, and Partnerships**. Adolescents organize their lives around their friends and situate themselves, existentially, within a peer network. They crave community. Who is the most influential person to a 17 year old? Another 17 year old. In addition, they seek agency as they actualize into fully developed individuals. Their quest for power comes in many forms, as we know, from a propensity for risk-taking to pushing back, verbally, against authority; to knowledge and skills acquisition; and to direct action. Young people yearn to be the agents of their lives. They also are natural idealists, and even outward cynicism or apparent apathy are mere armatures against their vulnerable, hopeful selves. Almost every young person we've met wants, at some level, to make his or her world a better place. At the same time, adolescents and young adults seek authentic, developmentally supportive relationships with teachers, mentors, coaches, and parents. The fact that they often complain they do not have these kinds of relationships belies the fact that they yearn for them.

The Place of Youth Activation and Schools Within Adolescent Development

Havighurst also instructs that adolescents must adjust to increased cognitive demands at school. But other than this one task, most of the well-studied, truly core goals of the teenage years are not ones that schools address frontally in terms of coursework and class time, as measured in their own most managed metrics – attendance, progress, grades, and test scores. The identity-oriented, sense-of-self challenges of the teenage years are more obliquely addressed through school norms, expectations, and climate. Individual teachers or other adults may play strong roles, but teaching in the U.S. focuses primarily on delivering coursework content and ensuring that students retain it, at least until the time of a test.

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research which had primarily been studying school-based strategies, stepped deeply into the human development field with its 2015 report on “integrated identities.”¹¹ The report builds on Havighurst’s overall frame, but centers its exploration and conclusions on the task of developing a stable and sustained sense of self, based in feelings of agency (being effective, being able to influence one’s world positively, knowing how to get what you need to progress or

problem-solve) and opportunities to express themselves, and voice (being able to communicate what one feels, one's goals, and to participate through one's actions and words). Mindsets and skillsets for human thriving round out the developmental picture.¹²

The Consortium's formulations echo those of many recent writers, critics of our current education framework and methods, and challenge schools to build these skills that help consolidate identity. Youth voice, as an adolescent achievement, has been shown through extensive research to be a most important asset to carry into adulthood.¹³ Voice develops through practice and opportunity. Agency, according to the Consortium "is the ability to make choices about and take an active role in one's life path, rather than solely being the product of one's circumstances. Agency requires the intentionality and forethought to derive a course of action and adjust course as needed to reflect one's identity, competencies, knowledge and skills, mindsets, and values." Agency is about being able to bring about what one hopes for, and will work toward, in one's world. A further exploration of these ideas can be found at competencyworks.org.¹⁴

By expanding their perspective to the needs of the community, and adding performance management and organizing techniques to voice and agency, Youth Activation offers a direct and integrated way to build agency and voice for students. Youth Activation in practice develops stronger renegotiated relationships with adults (who might have broad influence in a school or district). It creates learning environments that emphasize the importance of peer relationships and collaboration, where goals for improving the community can be verbalized and established (voice), and collective actions can be taken to realize school improvement goals (agency). Importantly, Youth Activation brings goals that students themselves determine are important into play for schools, putting youth interest and motivation at the top of the efforts. Working with and alongside adults, whose roles must be appropriately supportive and facilitative, young people get to act on what they think might positively impact school experience for themselves and their peers.

The Continuum of Youth Engagement Efforts and Positive Youth Development Research

A fundamental sea-change of attitudes towards young people, sparked in the 1960s but taking firmer shape in the 1980s and beyond – and surely building strength in response to the highly destructive and racially discriminatory “super-predator youth” narratives of the late 1980s – saw the rise of the “positive youth development” framework. Positive youth development sees and promotes young people’s productive roles within their institutions and society generally. It has taken root within education and youth development institutions. Positive youth development posits that young people are not only members of the places they inhabit – families, schools, communities, country – but also that they can and must be understood, welcomed, and resourced as full community and institutional participants, even as great decision-makers, if given the right supports and opportunities.

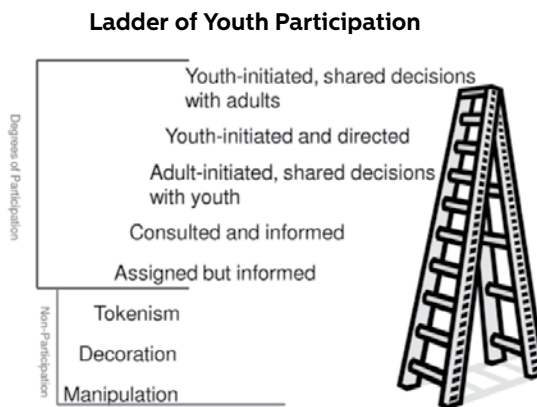
In fact, offering young people a chance to actively steward and execute plans for change builds voice and agency for youth, key components of adolescent thriving. Rather than being seen only as “developing” and waiting to assume useful and decisive roles, students and young people are ready and eager (motivated) to design, solve, and act right away. Instead of problems to be solved, students become problem-solvers. Authentic leadership of their institutions, and ownership of their own development, yields strong benefits for youth, as discovered by multiple fields whose work will be touched on later in this guide. In education, a good parallel is to metacognition, or the awareness of one’s own cognitive habits, tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses, particularly as it relates to academic tasks. Strengthening metacognition has become an important teaching and learning tool because it relies on and reflects active engagement in one’s own progress.¹⁵ Similarly, Youth Activation can reflect active engagement in one’s own civic identity development, with strengths and challenges, focused on the skills, habits, and dispositions which determine effectiveness in reaching civic goals and in working with others.

The variations of effective youth participation are many, most of them offering some level of useful involvement to teenagers. Several forms offer tremendous growth opportunities, among these Youth Activation.

The Perrin Family Foundation created a table (found at perrinfamilyfoundation.org) that summarizes a majority of these activities and forms, arraying them on a continuum from least youth-stewarded and youth-authentic (being served as a client) to most youth-determined and managed (youth community organizing).¹⁶ The farther to the right side of the table, the greater the levels of youth leadership and authentic decision-making. Opportunities for growth and thriving expand as youth leadership and authority increases. This is a crucial rule of thumb for Youth Activation, within the contexts of where it is practiced.

Ladder of Youth Participation

The Perrin Family Foundation table tracks different levels of authentic youth participation and leadership, by type of activity engaged in by young people. The next table, Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation (shown below), describes a second core dimension of this engagement – the authenticity and structure(s) of the relationships between young people and adults as they take on tasks of leadership and community participation.¹⁷ On this “ladder,” higher (more authentic, powerful engagement) is seen as more instructive and transformative for young people. This ladder is relevant to Youth Activation because it allows both youths and adults to understand and audit the “level” of engagement between them, also illuminating ways to strive for more useful and authentic partnerships, the types that can be sustained in a school environment and be offered to an increasing number of young people.



Source: Hart's Ladder of Participation. (1992). Retrieved from <http://elviscadillac.com/426593-hart-s-ladder-of-participation-1992-cadillac.html>

Roger Hart’s theoretical model has strong resonance today and has anchored hundreds of studies and multiple theories. The “Ladder of Youth Participation” is a way of looking at different levels of youth participation from “manipulated” (bottom of the ladder) to “shared decision-making” (top of the ladder). The intention of this model is not to insist that a school must be at the top rung, but rather, that it should try to move away from the lower rungs of non-participation, always seeking and thinking of ways to foster more authentic and powerful youth engagement. A fascinating 1979 report on this continuum is worth revisiting, particularly Section IX on “The Benefits of Participation”.¹⁸ (p. 34-36) These benefits are still crucial social goals for today:

- Development of social competence and responsibility;
- Community development; and
- Political self-determination.

Youth Activation in Schools

There are two fundamental reasons why schools tend not to be structured to unleash the power of the students through authentic youth-adult partnerships: supply-side school reform and the banking metaphor of learning and teaching which still bewitches educational practice. Recent decades of school reform focused on the supply-side of the education equation and neglected the demand-side. Instead of investing in developing assets that already exist in low-income communities with struggling schools, namely the capacities of students and families, the mainstream reform agenda addressed school-side deficits by externally supplying everything from technology to training to standards to assessments to new schools and new leaders. The most influential reform documents of the past three decades, *A Nation at Risk* (1983)¹⁹ and *The Turnaround Challenge* (2007),²⁰ both recommend a myriad of supply-side responses to the urgency of diminished low-income student success rates, but neither mentions or recommends structuring and leveraging the power of young people to influence and drive their classmates to take charge of not only their academic and career narratives but also to improve the lives of their families and friends. As noted, young people are naturally motivated to make things better, but schools don’t invest in the support and structures necessary to catalyze and encourage this natural inclination. Notice that a typical school

budget does not allocate expenditures for implementing anything like a Youth Activation strategy, which does not fit into standard public school budgeting categories. “Student Support” dollars are spent on adults: guidance counseling, health, attendance, and special needs service providers, but not on students supporting students.

In addition, a pernicious framework organizes much educational theory and practice. The Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire called it the “banking model.” The typical educational dynamic situates students as empty vaults to be filled with currency, i.e., knowledge, standards, and skills, by the banker/teacher. The teacher acts on the student, who is passive and academically disconnected from his or her classmates. The role of the student is to display the amount he or she has absorbed or “banked” in a series of tests and assessments. It is no coincidence that “accounting” and “accountability” are related words that dominate contemporary educational practice.

Supply-side reform and the banking metaphor of pedagogy divorced from a concomitant focus on the power and assets of students (and families) have contributed to decades of lackluster outcomes. While high school graduation rates have risen, college completion rates, which would demonstrate the internalization of important motivation and self-management capabilities, have been stubbornly incremental. In 2015, 12% of low-income high school students achieved a bachelor’s degree, increasing, in 44 years, only 6 percentage points.²¹ Not surprisingly, over the same time frame, the percentage of Americans achieving the American Dream, i.e., earning more money and enjoying a higher standard of living than their parents, has tumbled from 90% to 50%.²²

During this same supply-focused era, an alarming percentage of U.S. youth have disengaged by opting to drop out of school or college or abusing drugs and alcohol. In addition, during this era, we have seen increasing rates of depression, suicide, and obesity. Pointing to those reasons, military research organizations have determined that 75% of American youth are ineligible for the U.S. Army.²³ In addition, the system has eliminated a specific subset of low-income youth via exclusion policies, leading to a school-to-prison pipeline.

Within this context, youth voice, agency, and activation proponents are seeking to invert this paradigm with the expectation that outcomes on any number of measures from academics to physical and mental well-being to hopefulness to civic engagement will significantly improve.



II. RESEARCH AND FIELDS OF PRACTICE MOST ALIGNED WITH YOUTH ACTIVATION

Introduction

The following sections offer short explorations of established fields of practice, key findings, scholarship, and methods which directly touch on Youth Activation, and continue to build the case for its importance and effectiveness as a youth development, education, community-building, and school participation strategy. As is evident from the framing in the section above, Youth Activation intersects with many aspects of healthy adolescent and student development. Surely, Youth Activation involves multiple kinds of learning:

- How to identify a problem, and imagine how making progress on it might benefit many;
- How to find other young people who share an interest in solving the problem;
- Ways to interact most effectively and successfully with adults, who generally make the rules, and might be gatekeepers to the best solutions; and
- How to negotiate, plan, and execute an active, effective school improvement project.

Along the way, several aspects of growth (some discussed above), many of them related to overall thriving, come into play:

- Developing effective peer relationships in adolescence;
- Negotiating and managing power relationships with adults;
- Finding and cultivating peer allies needed to educate on issues, and/or execute plans;
- Developing local mentors (social capital) who can assist and help; and
- Research and planning skills, plus many others, such as negotiating and public speaking.

Youth Activation, in fact, intersects with a host of well-developed fields, each with research and practice bases that can be profitably integrated and harnessed as the practice of Youth Activation expands. These fields are diverse.

Some find basic practice inside schools (for example, in formal civic learning and civics classes), while others identify education innovations which may or may not be in practice in a young person's school (for example, student-centered learning, social/emotional learning), while still others focus on aspects of development that are more universal (youth-adult partnerships, peer influence, developmental relationships).

The comprehensive nature of these intersections suggests that Youth Activation comprises a set of activities which positively promote crucial aspects of growing up and becoming effective, across a range of dimensions and institutions. Further, these intersections demonstrate what is now becoming a standard education-sector conclusion: that learning is anywhere/anytime, not limited to school days or assignments; that broader social capital for students (whom they know and can access) builds their worlds, their capabilities, and their futures; that solving problems experienced by many – addressed by either a few or many – builds civic engagement muscles which most parents and schools see as important to healthy lives, communities, and even our democracy.

A quick tour through these related fields follows.

Civic Learning

Civic learning is that part of formal and informal education which prepares students for active participation in our democracy and in their communities, of course including schools. Its relevance to the discussions above is direct. Civic knowledge (understanding school policies and how they change, how government works, how decisions get made, how laws come into being, how communities function, how conflicts can be resolved, personal responsibility); civic skills (planning, communicating, cultural competence, global awareness, understanding and being able to analyze and respect different values systems); and civic dispositions (habits of participation, voting, serving, volunteering, giving) are all seen as basic, inter-related elements of civic education, and the backdrop for effective future participation.

Schools may or may not have plans, programs, and courses that teach civics and community problem-solving. For many, civic learning involves digesting

information about public systems (for example, “how a bill becomes a law”), understanding citizen and government roles and responsibilities, and appreciating and describing the status quo. For others, civic learning presents the opportunity to build understanding of history, cultural context, and society’s power relationships, imbalances, disparities, and inequities. In this latter set, the goal is building passionate commitment to work toward a more fair and equitable future – actively and with skill.

Civic learning, in fact, occurs in multiple places and ways. (See reference below for a comprehensive list.)²⁴ When Youth Activation – a chance to identify a meaningful challenge/change and organize an effective response/resolution – takes place inside schools (so far), it is generally not connected to the formal curriculum. Learning happens in the doing, assessing, reflecting, midcourse-correcting, and moving-forward, by those recruited to be involved. Below are listed a few resources describing different forms of civic learning, all of which have strong connections to Youth Activation.

1. “Ideas for Student Civic Action in a Time of Social Uncertainty.” [The New York Times](#).²⁵
2. “14 Examples of High Quality Civic Learning Opportunities.” [Edutopia](#).²⁶
3. “Civic Engagement.” [Youth.gov](#).²⁷
4. “Civic Engagement and Educational Progress in Young Adulthood.” The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement.²⁸

Student-Centered Learning

An important education innovation, now spreading across some states and taken up by both districts and individual schools, anchors its methods in ideas about what best motivates and stimulates engaged learning. Rather than viewing either set curricula or the role of the teacher as primary, student-centered learning asserts that a teenager’s personal interests and motivations to engage with subject matter must play central roles in education.

Rather than focusing on regurgitating content, which has been our system’s gold standard for over a century (as we saw in Freire’s concept of the banking model of education), this type of learning puts the learner’s interests, purposes, and feelings into the mix, building both motivation to learn and the skills of self-assessment of learning, or metacognition (discussed above, but elaborated [here](#).)²⁹

To make this simple sounding, yet highly counter-cultural practice clear, the following chart details essential differences between traditional teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches:

A Look at the Differences Between Teacher-Centered and Learner-Centered Learning³⁰

Teacher-Centered	Learner-Centered
Focus is on instructor	Focus is on both students and instructor
Focus is on language forms and structures (what the instructor knows about the language)	Focus is on language use in typical situations (how students will use the language)
Instructor talks; students listen	Instructor models; students interact with instructor and one another
Students work alone	Students work in pairs, in groups, or alone depending on the purpose of the activity
Instructor monitors and corrects every student utterance	Students talk without constant instructor monitoring; instructor provides feedback/correction when questions arise
Instructor answers students’ questions about language	Students answer each other’s questions, using instructor as an information resource
Instructor chooses topics	Students have some choice of topics
Instructor evaluates student learning	Students evaluate their own learning; instructor also evaluates
Classroom is quiet	Classroom is often noisy and busy

Source: The National Capitol Language Resource Center (a project of the George Washington University)

The field developing around this counter-cultural type of education doesn’t yet have a singular name. It is alternately called “student-centered learning” and “learner-centered education,” and it is often linked with innovative

approaches to grading and assessing, sometimes called “competency demonstration.” This approach is now championed by several national initiatives, [Education Reimagined](#)³¹ (Convergence Center for Policy Resolution) and its closely named sister-initiative [Reimagine Learning Fund](#)³² (New Profit, Inc.), as well as an effort in philanthropy [The Partnership for the Future of Learning](#).³³ It is also supported by at least three core education intermediaries, Jobs for the Future’s [Students at the Center Hub](#)³⁴ which is/ who are cataloguing ideas, findings, and assessment tools, [KnowledgeWorks](#),³⁵ and [CompetencyWorks](#).³⁶

A focus on student interest and motivation, as well as competency – strong thinking, demonstrated research skills, and fluency with concepts, theories, science, and facts, well presented – is slowly coming to challenge and supplant paper and pencil tests of “knowledge.” Multiple forms of competency demonstration (portfolios, verbal presentations, written compositions, art projects, public meetings, project-based learning outcomes) are now being pioneered, studied, and popularized.

Student-centered learning is well aligned with Youth Activation because it rearranges power dynamics and core goals to be student-led and youth-relevant. Youth Activation surely involves learning on multiple dimensions, all emanating from youth interest and motivation. And partnership with adults to promote that learning, and simultaneously improve an aspect of the school, is a motivating combination. Youth Activation takes off from the lived experiences of students: how they feel their schools respond to their individual and community needs, and what youth bring with them as community experience and from their homes. It also is not only about what they know. It is about how they feel, their motivations to make change, developing the skills and social capital needed, and seizing the opportunities of Youth Activation.

Social and Emotional Learning

In the last two decades, evidence has steadily mounted that learning and development are not purely cognitive processes, but rather result from an interplay between thinking, feeling, and experiences. These three are braided together like a rope and cannot be disentangled. The field of social

and emotional learning (SEL) has fleshed out the emotion/affect side of this braid, bringing an understanding of how feelings inevitably play into both learning and personal growth, and the ways that self-understanding, self-regulation, and relationship skills in fact shape our worlds and our futures.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#)) is the lead organization cataloguing and summarizing the best information available in this field. It sees social and emotional development as occurring across five key areas (as shown in the illustration below):



These competencies or skills are explored more fully [here](#), demonstrating key links to Youth Activation.³⁷ Relationship skills are the core of SEL: understanding and effectively managing one's emotions; relating well to others and understanding their feelings/empathy; and applying all this to making good decisions. Following Havighurst and a raft of adolescent development researchers, SEL skills are now understood to be essential to succeeding in school. Importantly, they are also keys to successful employment, integration into community life, and strong personal relationships.^{38 39} Self-management, supportive peer culture, and well negotiated, collaborative relationships with adults are key aspects leading to successful outcomes and stronger teen development.

SEL instructs us that feelings aren't marginal. They are central and inevitably present. Youth Activation intentions and efforts take off from the emotional side of community work as well as the cognitive side. Young people pick work that is deeply meaningful personally, and emotionally resonant with peers. Moreover, agency and voice, discussed at length above, are the key results of effective social and emotional learning in the teenage years.

Social and emotional learning, which focuses on relationships, centers empathy as a crucially important human capacity, available to all though not without cultivation. Empathy, our ability to feel what others feel, is a bedrock of community. Without being able to see what others find important, and sense the deep feelings underlying our inter-connections, there is little framework for cooperation and progress. Therefore, empathy plays a strong role in Youth Activation, placing social and emotional learning also at the center of its beating heart.

Developmental Relationships

Search Institute was a pioneer in the positive youth development field, a couple of decades ago identifying early on a roster of 40 “assets” (for example, having a supportive adult in life, understanding emotions, positive peer relations) which predict stronger thriving for young people.⁴⁰ More recently, Search has made substantial progress identifying and fleshing out the specifics of how some particularly effective adult-youth relationships, which they call “developmental relationships,” help young people thrive and grow.⁴¹ These special, important, and necessary adult-youth relationships are described by core characteristics that give them outsized power and potential for development. In fact, Search has determined that the effects of strong developmental relationships are bi-directional, benefitting both young people and adults.

The five key aspects of Search's developmental relationships framework are:

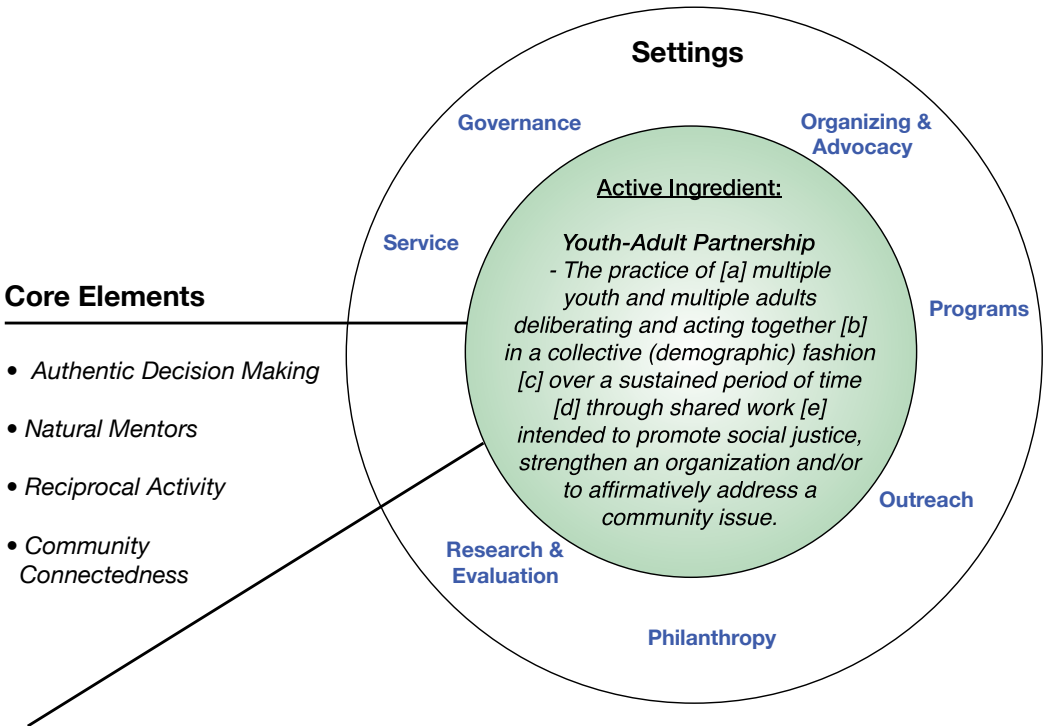
- Express Care: Show me that I matter to you.
- Challenge Growth: Push me to keep getting better.
- Provide Support: Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.
- Share Power: Treat me with respect and give me a say.
- Expand Possibilities: Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.

Youth Activation’s vibrant relationships between enthusiastic adult partners and young people at school have great potential to become developmental. In fact, all five elements are strongly in play in the enterprise. And the higher rungs on Hart’s ladder, shown above, involve core relationships between adults and youth, producing stronger potential for transformative results, both in the development of young people participating and in the results of their Youth Activation efforts. The most surprising developmental factor on the list is “share power,” exactly the dynamic which Youth Activation lifts up in practice. Search Institute’s findings on the centrality and importance of youth–adult power–sharing are firm.⁴²

Youth-Adult Partnerships

While the term “youth–adult partnerships” is generic, a field and a literature about the nature and power of such collaboration has grown dramatically over the past 30 years. Similar to many of the other modalities catalogued in this section, formal youth–adult partnerships are structured relationships leading to learning, development, and (hopefully) community benefit. A leading scholar in this area, Shep Zeldin, defines youth–adult partnerships this way: “Youth–adult partnership is the practice of: (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue.”

The reference can be found in the endnotes for the full, interesting article from which this quote and graphic on page 20 is taken.⁴³



g.1 Conceptual framework for youth-adult partnership

The major conclusions regarding youth-adult partnerships are similar to those covered by other disciplines noted above: that young people and adults working in common purpose build individuals with stronger civic interest and skills, deeper motivation, and generally better school and life outcomes. These same findings encourage the proliferation of Youth Activation.

Youth Advocacy and Youth Organizing

Two specific after-school modalities which resonate well with Youth Activation – youth advocacy and youth organizing – are growing practices across the U.S. Each focuses explicitly on deep civic involvement and learning; are interest-based, adult-coached, and peer-involved; and invariably stimulate strong emotional involvement. They both also surface interests arising from the lived experiences of their youth participants themselves. The two strategies represent the “inside” and “outside” tracks of engaged youth involvement in policy and public system improvement.

As with Youth Activation, the most important priorities of young organizers and advocates have been shaped by their own experiences, often regarding education, justice, immigration, and with their experiences of poverty and (political) powerlessness. Environmental degradation, typically affecting poor communities more directly than others, has also been the focus of youth organizers. Disciplinary policies, addressing the schoolhouse-to-jail-house pipeline through which many pushouts move almost seamlessly from school, has also been a strong focus across the U.S.

Like Youth Activation, youth advocacy programs offer young people direct collaboration with adult leaders, usually in government, but sometimes in nonprofit organizations. These young people are trained to serve on advisory commissions, youth leadership councils, and other authorized bodies which provide input and guidance to adults, on a range of issues. Young people are trained to analyze a complex public policy issue (education, health, policing, juvenile justice, transportation), and then are placed as youth leaders on advisory councils serving city government agencies and leaders such as the school superintendent, chief of police, health and youth commissioners, or Mayor. Young people work with their

peers, studying policies from a young person's point of view, become knowledgeable about policy, study related policies from other municipalities, and make recommendations accordingly. They often produce public reports and interact directly with top policymakers. Youth are frequently well respected and regarded as an expert voice. Dozens of cities provide youth policy and advocacy opportunities. These can be either tokenistic or impactful, depending on training and history, and particularly on the attitudes of adult public leaders. Youth advocacy focuses young people on key civic issues and puts them into relationships with adults who work on them. Two organizations, Mikva Challenge and Youth on Board have been providing significant national leadership for decades.^{44 45}

Unlike youth advocates, youth organizers work from outside the authorized system to bring about policy and political change. Youth organizers find deep personal interest – often outrage – and motivation to make strong, community-determined changes to conditions and policies which negatively affect the lives of many. They focus on policies seen as harmful to the community and to young people. Youth organizing is frequently connected to adult organizing groups, leading to many clearly developmental relationships as a key part of multiple, strong outcomes for participating young people. The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing is the field's leading intermediary, and scores of reports and analyses can be found at its website.⁴⁶

Just as with Youth Activation, youth organizing is clearly a mode of civic learning focusing on the specifics of policies at work in government, communities, and schools. Historical study undergirds organizing campaigns, and power analysis of who controls the levers of authority and decision-making are, to repeat, always at the center of the beating heart of youth organizing. Working with adult leaders who act as coaches, youth organizing groups rely on collective interest, passion, and peer support. Agency – the conviction that personal effort can have authentic and deep effects; and voice – that one's intentions can be expressed and heard – are central to this set of activities. Further, youth organizing has been demonstrated repeatedly to result in better education outcomes (grades, high school completion), stronger social and emotional learning, and sustained commitments to civic life as seen in voting and volunteering.⁴⁷

The Sociology of Schools

Beginning with the groundbreaking quantitative work of Otis Dudley Duncan in the 1950s and 1960s to more recent studies by Robert Crosnoe, Laurence Steinberg, Andrew Sokatch, and other researchers in the field of the social aspects of schooling have documented both the positive and negative impacts of peer influence on academic achievement and social mobility. Sokatch, for instance, performed a regression analysis on postsecondary outcome data for a cohort of high school students and concluded that the greatest predictor of whether an urban low-income student of color went to college was whether his or her friends were planning to go and whether these friends wished for or expected him or her to also attend.⁴⁸ Indeed, Sokatch found that evidence of friends' postsecondary wishes for their peers, coupled with their personal higher education plans, increased a low-income student's chances of enrolling in college by nearly 30 percentage points.

The sociological research on Youth Activation (which Crosnoe refers to as “instrumental assistance”) turns on the distinction between formal and informal processes of schooling. Formal processes involve the deliberately engineered and constructed aspects of schools as institutions including curricula, success metrics, calendars, standards, discipline protocols, evaluations, awards, extra-curriculars, student and faculty evaluations, academic groupings, etc. Informal processes are found in the social context of a school, including how peers select their groups, choose their identities, and visualize their future. Sociologists argue that a school's informal and formal processes are organically intertwined and impact each other. In other words, to understand how a school's formal processes work one must also understand its informal, social context. Furthermore, this research literature shows that the intended outcomes of a school's formal processes can be thwarted or accelerated by its peer networks and groupings.

Once the interplay of formal and informal processes is understood and documented, then policies and programs can be manipulated and implemented to harness the power of positive peer influence to drive academic and social-emotional outcomes, such as belonging, well-being, and a sense of hope. James Coleman, in his 1961 book Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and its Impact on Education, was the first to

make this argument, suggesting that since a school's positive peer culture is nurtured during interscholastic athletic competitions, schools should establish academic leagues to inspire each student to pursue academic achievement as a service to the school's community in the same way their athletes do.⁴⁹ In his book [Fitting In, Standing Out](#), Robert Crosnoe extended this argument, showing through a mixed-method analysis how the social aspects of schooling impacts academic achievement.⁵⁰ Analyzing a school's social structure by its peer networks (people you know) and its "crowds" (self-selected groupings that give participants a sense of identity), Crosnoe demonstrated that networks and crowds can and do positively motivate students to succeed and engage in pro-social behaviors. Crosnoe concludes by noting that schools can leverage this dynamic by intentionally strengthening positive peer influence employing the conduits of networks and crowds through extra-curriculars, peer mentoring systems, and accessible mental health services. A robust summary of this literature can be found in the article "The Social Contexts of High Schools" in the [Handbook of the Sociology of Education in the 21st Century](#).⁵¹

Moral Development

The practice of Youth Activation also aligns well as a platform of practice for competing theories of moral development. In Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, people develop a capacity to think and act morally by progressing through six stages of moral reasoning arranged into three levels, the pre-conventional, the conventional, and the post-conventional. In pre-conventional moral reasoning, the person is either interested in avoiding punishment or enhancing their self-interest. Those operating at the conventional level make moral decisions based upon considerations of conformity to social norms, such as being a "good boy" or "good girl," or analyzing a right course of action based on what protects the social order from chaos and confusion. The post-conventional level represents, for Kohlberg, the highest platform for moral thinking and includes the fifth and sixth stages of moral development. Thinkers and actors at the fifth stage seek to contribute to a social contract that enhances the well-being of as many individuals as possible, whereas those who operate at the sixth stage base their judgments on universal moral values such as goodness, justice, truth, and fairness.

Youth Activators tend to exhibit at least stage five thinking in Kohlberg's taxonomy and many speak in terms of stage six using universal moral precepts to explain their work. For instance, a team of Youth Activators wanted to improve the relationships between 12th and 9th graders which had a history of toxicity. They devised a kindness week campaign wherein 12th graders would do acts of kindness for the underclassmen and register these acts on Instagram. The mayor of Nampa, Idaho caught wind of the campaign and declared that all of Nampa should participate in kindness week, taking out a billboard to announce the effort. This example, indicative of many Youth Activation efforts, reveals elements of stage five and stage six thinking, including taking action to authenticate and reinforce the social contract to serve the well-being of individuals which echoed beyond the walls of the school in service of universal values such as fairness and justice.

A major critique of Kohlberg's research is that it excluded women and girls and thereby neglected to include the importance of relationships and narrative and ignored the power of care and empathy in moral development and action. Powerfully argued by Carol Gilligan in her book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*⁵² and Nel Noddings in her *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*,⁵³ Kohlberg's theory was shown to have not understood that compassion motivates, drives, and lubricates moral action. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum distinguishes "empathy" from "compassion." Empathy, Nussbaum argues, is the ability to reconstruct another's experience without judgment about the value or nature of the experience, i.e., whether it is good or bad or paltry or happy or sad. (*Upheavals of Thought*).⁵⁴ Compassion is more complex, involving three elements: 1) a judgment that someone is suffering; 2) the belief that the person is innocent, that is, they did not bring about their own suffering; and 3) the understanding that we have what Nussbaum terms a "related vulnerability" in that we identify with the person because the same misfortune could befall us someday, which authentically connects us to the person as we share with them a common set of values and understandings of what is good and just. Clearly, we need the power of empathy to be compassionate. Nussbaum makes the point, though, that when the three elements of compassion are in place, their conjunction is "very likely to lead to action." (p.335)

Though Youth Activation uses performance management and organizing techniques to drive measurable outcomes, these outcomes ought to be grounded in Nussbaum's three elements of compassion. Through their skills in storytelling and listening, Youth Activators should seek to empathically imagine the situation of their classmates. They understand that the status quo of their community is not the fault of their classmates and friends but are accidents of their zip code, the result of centuries of injustice, and they know that they too are vulnerable. Thus, they are propelled to act, to in the words of the sociologist, Robert Crosnoe, "instrumentally assist" their classmates to meaningfully and measurably improve their situation. Compassion, is, therefore, not a disposition; it is an action.

Adult Needs and New Institutions

While it is clear that young people want to step directly into leadership roles offered by Youth Activation, it is less evident that adults will understand or choose to share power and decision-making with young people. Adults will need to be convinced that shifting attitudes towards youth, and towards their own roles as well, will yield the right results. This short guide attempts to build that case.

That said, the difficulties of adults adapting to best roles in youth-adult partnerships is a major focus of the literature evaluating these relationships. In an illuminating [paper](#), several authors outline counter-cultural challenges for Youth Activation, found on all sides. Adults in our society maintain consistent suspicions about youth: that they are apathetic, disinterested, disrespectful, and that the role of the student is to learn the content schools have to offer and not be distracted by idealistic notions.⁵⁵ Young people maintain consistent suspicions about adults: that they are controlling, inflexible, and hold institutional (and family) power for themselves. Overcoming these prejudices, and having a storehouse of examples, is a major goal of the Youth Activation movement.

III: CONCLUSION

A Mindset Shift on Student Capabilities, Interests, and Partnership Is Underway: Youth Activation Can Play a Role in Advancing It

This guide cannot detail the largely failing accountability framework now stifling schools and student learning across the U.S. (high stakes testing, fluid accountability, vilification of teachers). Yet the review of allied fields and evidence does suggest that as we transition to more effective education ideas over the coming years (for example, toward student-centered learning, social and emotional learning, youth leadership, as well as many other initiatives), Youth Activation offers solutions and methods regarding ways young people can begin to take steps to improve their schools, education, and life outcomes. While not a full reform strategy in and of itself, Youth Activation, scaled well and widely practiced, could play a signal role in reshaping our understanding of effective learning and thriving in high school. Strong evidence already demonstrates that engagement in community/school problem-solving builds deeper ties, a sense of belonging, and motivation to learn. Further, the power and methods of Youth Activation are simple to describe, and tools for its proliferation already exist. There is not yet widespread public and education-leadership knowledge or the will and understanding to harness and scale it.

Youth Activation helps translate positive youth development ideas into action, positioning teenagers not only as consumers of education services, but in fact as partners and shapers of their environments and learning. Youth Activation moves both adults and young people from the sidelines of complaints about school's challenges directly onto the playing fields of community improvement and community-building. It honors what each partner brings, regardless of age and station. It democratizes the environment by encouraging new forms of youth leadership and progress that go beyond academics alone connecting young people to broader and deeper community issues.

While the sections above cover the relationship of many fields to the core ideas of Youth Activation, they do not tell the complete story. Amplification for Youth Activation's concepts and techniques are found in many other fields not discussed above.

Among these are:

Neuroscience. Modern technology allows a look inside the physical brain, illuminating the gigantic rush of new neurons produced in adolescence which must be integrated. The rise of abstract thinking gives rise to a simultaneous rush of idealism about the world. In a sense, the neurobiological tasks of adolescence directly mirror Havighurst's charting of the hormonal and neural explosions which must be sorted out and organized by the teenager as he or she develops. Key concepts^{56 57 58} from the neuroscience of adolescence are:

- The brain is organized to remember what is personally meaningful, and to forget the meaningless or irrelevant. Put another way, the circuitry of the brain is determined by relevance and narrative;
- Learning is relational – we primarily learn from and with others: peers, teachers, parents, others;
- Safety-seeking, novelty, and risk-taking are all strong drivers of adolescent growth;
- Agency and voice are directly connected to the neurological center of reward, and therefore drive behavior; and
- Peer influences on behavior are stronger in adolescence than in other stages of life due to the disconnect in brain development. The parts of the brain that develop most rapidly after puberty control sensation-seeking (the socioemotional control center) while the parts that control cognition (and self-regulation and control) develop much later during the transition into adulthood.

Motivation science. A fairly new field, motivation science attempts to unlock the secrets of engagement, curiosity, persistence, and success. Motivation science has focused on student mindsets for learning (for example, growth vs. fixed mindsets). While many theories abound in motivation science, a clear summary of evidence, and also a compelling education case, has been

made by Kathleen Cushman in [The Motivation Equation](#).^{60 61} Cushman outlines, in a student's voice, eight core features which build motivation to engage and learn – all backed up by science. The eight, which by now should be familiar, are:

- I feel OK, I am safe
- It matters
- It's active
- It stretches me
- I have a coach
- I have to use it
- I think back on it
- I plan my next steps

As this short guide demonstrates, Youth Activation brings the work of many fields focused on youth development, education, and thriving into a simple framework for action. While the preceding is not a “how to” on Youth Activation, it does seek to build its case as an effective, low-barrier-to-entry strategy. It can be practiced, in fact, in any school where willing adults who see its potential invite the authentic partnership of a group of students who are motivated to improve the environment and institution. Moreover, as adults and young people in a school become familiar with and experience its results, Youth Activation plants the seeds of its own expansion, within a school or district, and across the U.S.

Youth Activation can take place anywhere a good partnership between adults and youth can be imagined and structured, where adults in a school come to understand that everyone can be on the same team, working together from appropriate roles and platforms to achieve a common goal. Young people see the potential instantly, though they may not expect adults to be able to be authentic partners. Adults must overcome decades of attitudes towards youth which consistently get in the way. Establishment of a common goal and a shared purpose, with clarity, early on, assists both sides. Aspects of the [process](#) are well described by Julie Petrokubi, an author with deep experience in youth-adult partnerships:

The notion of partnership is rooted in the concept of win-win; it includes notions of a common goal: that together,

partners are more likely to achieve both their individual goals and the collaborative goal. This establishes a precondition of respect for the partnership to work—a genuine respect for what the other partner brings to the table. Partners do consult, mentor, serve, coach, help, and train each other, but as secondary activities to the overall purpose of working together to achieve a common purpose. The common goal, and moving towards achieving concrete results, is action-oriented, which is developmentally appropriate for young people. The common goal creates solidarity, while allowing for diversity of participation styles, roles, and interests. **Success breeds success and the regeneration of new partnerships and goals.**⁶²

To conclude, the multi-domain Youth Activation research literature can be incorporated into the operating systems of our nation’s schools when they adopt the following seven principles. These foundational practices must form the organizational and conceptual structures of a school if the practice of Youth Activation is to be authentic and effective. Before and while implementing a Youth Activation framework, the school community must audit its strength against each principle, and deliberately and thoughtfully remediate where necessary.



Seven Principles of Youth Activation in Schools

1. Students are regarded and treated by all stakeholders as sources of solutions, not problems in themselves.
2. Students identify problems/structures/attitudes/rules/habits that are meaningful and consequential, and whose improvement would be important to their peers and their communities.
3. Adults provide support, scaffolding, and structure as allies and partners, not authority figures.
4. Adults and students share power.
5. Students hold themselves accountable as they pursue meaningful, measurable goals.
6. When appropriate to the challenge, the greater community outside of the school is engaged and supportive of Youth Activation through frequent communications and celebrations.
7. The administrative apparatus of the school (schedule, resources, evaluations, discipline processes) supports and helps facilitate all aspects of the process of Youth Activation.

In other words, students are no longer regarded as problems to be solved but problem-solvers.







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Keith Frome, Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder

Keith is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School (M.T.S., religion and education), and Columbia University (Ed.D., philosophy and education). In 1993, while teaching writing at Harvard College, he helped J.B. Schramm create and run a weekend college admissions workshop that became the noteworthy PeerForward summer workshop. As the organization's Co-founder and first Chief Academic Officer, he created PeerForward's national Education Department and led PeerForward's expansion to begin serving students 9th – 11th grades. In 2014, Keith became PeerForward's second CEO and led the organization's design and launch of its student-driven college success initiative.



From 2010–2015, Keith led the design and implementation of the expansion of the King Center Charter School, a K–8 school on the east side of Buffalo. Keith has also served as the Assistant Headmaster of the Browning School in New York City and the Headmaster of the Elmwood Franklin School in Buffalo, NY. During this time, he also led the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-funded College Knowledge Challenge resulting in the launch of 19 free post-secondary navigation apps, many now can be found at linkforward.org. In 2014, this work was featured at the White House's Datapalooza as one of the top education innovations of the year.

Keith is the co-editor of *The Columbia Book of Civil War Poetry* (Columbia University Press, 1994), which the Wall Street Journal named as one of the top five war poetry books of all time. He has written two award-winning books on parenting and education, “What Not to Expect: A Meditation on the Spirituality of Parenting” (Crossroad Publishing, 2005) and “How’s My Kid Doing? and Other Frequently Asked Questions about Schools and Education” (Crossroad Publishing, 2008). He sits on several boards, including America Achieves, the King Center Charter School, Teach for America – Buffalo, and the St. Joseph Collegiate Institute. He is also a life member of the Elmwood Franklin School's Corporation and a Pahara-Aspen Education Fellow.

Robert F. Sherman Ph.D. – Robert Sherman Consulting, Inc.

Robert F Sherman Ph.D. has been focused on youth civic activism and social justice teaching/learning for most of his career. He works as a consultant to philanthropies and nonprofits in areas of education, youth development and leadership, civic engagement, communications and arts education. A subset of recent clients includes: Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing; New Teacher Center; The Future Project; Mikva Challenge; Robert Wood Johnson, Ford and Stuart Foundations; Movement Strategy Center; Morningside Center on Teaching Social Responsibility; CASEL, the Collaborative for Social, Emotional and Academic Learning.



Until March 2013 Sherman was Director, Initiative for Social and Emotional Learning at the NoVo Foundation where he helped design the largest scaled SEL initiative working with 8 school districts. Prior to NoVo, Sherman served as Executive Director of the Action Center to End World Hunger, a division of Mercy Corps where he supervised the agency's Global Citizen Corps, a youth activist and service program involving thousands of young people from 11 countries who convened in person and online in a yearlong peer-to-peer leadership, learning and service effort focused on local action-taking on global challenges around hunger, poverty, conflict, and human rights. Sherman, founded and directed the national Effective Citizenry program at the Surdna Foundation in New York City, where he served for 15 years. Sherman served in the NYC government for 8 years, founding and directing a grassroots focused division of the Mayor's office. He graduated from Haverford College, and holds a clinical psychology Ph.D. from the Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies at Adelphi University.



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Partnerships

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Keith W. Frome, Ed.D.