

EXPANDING YOUTH-DRIVEN SPACE ACROSS SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

EVALUATION REPORT 2020–2021 (YEAR 3)

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EVALUATION OVERVIEW

The Evaluation of Expanding Youth-Driven Space Across Southeast Michigan is a three-year project, beginning in summer 2018, with funding support from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr., Foundation. Youth-driven space (YDS) refers to a positive youth-development environment where young people partner with adults to meaningfully engage in decision-making throughout the organization's governance and programming activities. YDS involves three core practices: tapping teens' intrinsic motivation, supporting teens' developmental needs, and fostering genuine partnerships between adults and youth. This initiative is led by the Neutral Zone, a youth-driven teen center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, that is dedicated to providing social, cultural, educational, recreational, and creative opportunities for high-school teens. Through this project, participating youth-serving agencies receive intensive coaching and training supports to promote youth leadership, social-emotional learning, and effective school and community change.

Since 2010, Michigan State University's Outreach and Engagement (UOE) has established an extensive and mutually beneficial partnership with the Neutral Zone, with a common goal to empower youth in communities across Michigan. The objective for this current initiative is twofold: (1) to support the Neutral Zone and the participating agencies with timely feedback so coaching and training efforts can best be utilized and (2) to identify best practices and effective ways of enhancing youths' experience in engaging in meaningful decision-making, identifying mentors, co-learning with adults, and feeling connected to their organizations and the community at large. These experiences represent the four key aspects of youth-adult partnerships and are aligned with high-quality program standards. Working together with the Neutral Zone, our goal is to transform these organizations into YDS model sites where teens are able to find a voice within themselves and in their organizations and local communities.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic continued throughout the 2020–2021 program year, programs were integrating virtual models and some in-person supports to serve youth in their communities. Neutral Zone adapted its processes to be fully online, working with adult staff and youth from the participating organizations across the region. This Year 3 evaluation report documents some of the major activities during the third and final year of the initiative. The third cohort includes six organizations that have received individualized one-on-one virtual coaching, as well as staff and youth from nine organizations that have participated in group virtual trainings led by coaches.

This report is organized under four themes: **Individual Coaching Sessions, Group Virtual Coaches Trainings, YDS Conference, and Understanding the Virtual Coaching Experience.** The report concludes with lessons learned from the coaches and staff from participating organizations over the past three years.

OUTLINE OF CONTENT

Individual Coaching Sessions

In one-on-one sessions, Neutral Zone coaches worked with individual youth-serving organizations.

Virtual Coaches Trainings

From December 2020 to May 2021, the Neutral Zone hosted monthly Zoom calls with program staff from nine organization, adding two youth apiece from those organizations after the first few sessions. These calls aimed to equip organizations with resources and tools to expand YDS in their programs.

YDS Conference

The virtual YDS Conference allowed youth from programs across southeast Michigan to present pitches and receive small grants from the Neutral Zone in order to finance their initiatives. During the second half of the conference, three youth-serving organizations presented workshops for conference attendees.

Understanding the Virtual Coaching Experience

We collected qualitative data in interviews with program staff and Neutral Zone coaches on the individual organizational coaching and large-group training conducted by coaches.

Looking Back: Three Years of Expanding Youth-Driven Space in Southeast Michigan

This section presents an overview of the interventions conducted over the past three years, the most successful and challenging components of the initiative, and the opportunities for further expanding YDS and youth leadership.

DELIVERY OF ONE-ON-ONE YDS COACHING

From October 2020 to June 2021, staff members from the Neutral Zone served as coaches to six different organizations across southeast Michigan. These virtual sessions, largely occurring between Neutral Zone coaches and program staff, aimed to provide individualized assistance, support, and resources to enhance YDS.

Participating Organizations

Table 1 summarizes information about the organizations that received virtual coaching.

Table 1: Organizations That Received One-on-One Coaching Support

| Organization Name | Age Group | Number of Youth | Mission Statement |
|---|----------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Common Ground | 10–24 | 120+ | “Common Ground is a 24-hour crisis services agency dedicated to helping youth, adults, and families in crisis. Through our crisis line and in-person, we provide professional and compassionate service to more than 80,000 people each year.” |
| Detroit Horse Power | 10–18 | 100 summer, 30–35 afterschool | “To give at-risk youth a safe and enriching space that furthers their development. We believe that horses can teach children critical life skills and have developed a social-emotional learning program that focuses on the traits of perseverance, empathy, responsible risk-taking, confidence, and self-control.” |
| Detroit Leadership & Environmental Education Program | High school students | 24 | “For many Detroit youth, green spaces are inaccessible, local opportunities to connect to the natural world are scarce and STEM education lacks local context. To help bridge this gap, the Detroit Leadership and Environmental Education Program (D-LEEP) strengthens relationships between high school students and their families with the natural world in Detroit and beyond.” |
| Downtown Boxing Gym | 8–18 | 150+ | “Through education, athletics, mentorship, and intervention, the Downtown Boxing Gym empowers Detroit students to be positive and productive members of society.” |

| Organization Name | Age Group | Number of Youth | Mission Statement |
|------------------------------|---|----------------------------|--|
| Generation of Promise | 16-17 (high school juniors and seniors) | 60 | “To develop a community of young leaders from across metropolitan Detroit who honor diversity and are dedicated to the elimination of discrimination.” |
| Growing Hope | 15–18 | 15 summer, 10 after school | “Growing Hope fosters an equitable and sustainable local food system where all people are empowered to grow, sell, buy, prepare, and eat nourishing food.” |

Although most meetings between Neutral Zone coaches and program staff served as progress check-ins, programs also received coaching on the following topics:

- Strategic planning and goal setting
- Youth skills development
- Development of “quick win” projects
- Training in youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships
- Curriculum and lesson plan development
- Development of an annual cycle of skill building
- Putting youth on the board of directors

The goal of coaching, as stated by a Neutral Zone coach, is “being a support and a resource to organizations to help them figure out what their goals are and to help them get there, whether that’s through training, conversations, workshops, strategy sessions, brainstorming, etc.”

To better understand the virtual coaching experience, as well as the benefits of hosting virtual coaching sessions and YDS, MSU evaluators conducted semi-structured interviews with four individual staff members from the participating organizations in this cohort, whom we label as Staff 1, 2, 3, and 4. Subsequently, we conducted semi-structured interviews with four Neutral Zone coaches who pioneered the organization’s virtual coaching initiatives; they are identified as Coach 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Impact of COVID-19 on YDS Organizations

To comply with safety guidelines instituted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the State of Michigan, all coaching sessions were conducted virtually, using Zoom, emails, or phone calls. **Before the COVID-19 pandemic, all coaching offered by the Neutral Zone was in person. Virtual coaching was completely new this year.** Participating organizations worked throughout the pandemic to adapt their programs to continue to educate and engage youth, while also keeping them safe.



For Staff 1’s program, everything went virtual. The organization was able to maintain its year-long program, which meets monthly. It reduced the size of its cohort for this year because managing a large virtual space is difficult. As a relationship-driven program, organization leaders believed that a smaller group of students would more easily get to know one another. Additionally, the program integrated virtual security measures in order to combat “Zoom bombing.”

Staff 2’s organization continued teen programming outdoors and in-person (in compliance with CDC guidelines); however, Staff 2 expressed difficulties with icebreakers and team-building activities. Throughout the pandemic, the program continued to offer field trips and afterschool programming at a lower-than-usual capacity to respond to community needs.

According to Staff 3, their program wanted to continue to serve youth in the best way possible. One of the biggest problems due to the pandemic in their community was the loss of childcare. Because many parents were essential workers, their kids needed supervision throughout the day. Complying with CDC and state safety measures, Staff 3’s program used its facility as a space where younger youth could do safe, in-person, synchronous learning, complete with social-emotional and academic support. The program offered virtual and in-person tutoring and opened its space to give youth food, resources, and a safe place with adult supervision.

Staff 4 stated that their program had to reduce capacity in order to comply with social distancing and that it received government support to fund a regular cleaning crew to disinfect the space multiple times a week. Additionally, many program services, as well as youth leadership council meetings, shifted from in person to virtual.

The Motives for Organizations to Get Involved with (Virtual) YDS Coaching

Staff 1 initially got involved with YDS training because, being from a youth-focused program, they “wanted to become more youth-driven than a more ‘traditional’ organization.” Fostering a YDS aligned with their board’s goals and allowed for flexibility and creativity.

Staff 2, who had experience with the Neutral Zone in a previous position, witnessed issues with their current organization’s teen programming and knew that more support was needed. The organization needed support in the process of starting an afterschool program. In particular, Staff 2 found that many youth struggled to find the right balance between taking on meaningful responsibilities and simply relaxing and having fun.



The goal of Staff 3’s program was to be more youth focused and have youth in more leadership roles, so the collaboration with the Neutral Zone was a natural fit. Staff 3 stated that “as an afterschool non-profit, attendance is different every day. It’s difficult to put students in leadership, but youth should be involved in decisions and programming.” In light of problem-solving and other obstacles, Staff 3 reported that YDS has been great at providing support.

According to Staff 4, their organization’s youth leadership council did not exist before they joined the organization. Their position transitioned from part-time to full-time in order to enhance staff capacity and enable Staff 4 to serve as a staff liaison to a youth council. Because this youth council is in its infancy in YDS terms, Staff 4 said they “needed support and help from people who have done this before in the community.” Because the coaching was offered at no extra cost, Staff 4 and their organization was able to participate in this intervention.

Useful YDS Resources and Activities

Reflections from Coaching Recipients

Staff 1 and their program enjoyed an exercise where they learned about the **developmental needs of young people** and brainstormed ways to meet each of the seven developmental needs. The organization’s board members frequently revisit this activity and have found it “good to have a concrete list of things to meet the needs of youth.” Additionally, staff regularly used the **Circle App** during community-building exercises, with great success. Post-pandemic, Staff 1 stated that **strategies that strengthen youth-adult partnerships** would be useful—particularly having adults think through their advantages over young people. They also stated that, for **youth board members**, they plan to use an exercise that presents youth with multiple tasks, and the youth decide whether each task is the responsibility of the board or the program staff.

Staff 2 spoke highly of a **fill-in-the-blank agenda** provided by the Neutral Zone for teens to create their own workshops. Additionally, Staff 2 received training on “**quick win**” projects, which worked particularly well with a group focused on activism. Staff 2’s youth undertook a project on Instagram, and the quick nature of the results made teens feel that the project was doable.

Staff 3 has already utilized features for virtual icebreakers and discussion circles, and they are working through a **YDS checklist** created by the Neutral Zone that will help them make their space more youth-driven. Their program has youth who are interviewing for a new leadership role as a youth representative to the board of directors.

One activity Staff 4 used with program youth involved creating a **Venn diagram** with things that could be done with youth, adults, and both. Staff 4 stated that this activity “shifted a lot of thinking and re-wired perceptions in a positive way.” Additionally, Staff 4 was helped by the **Community Building Guidebook** provided by their coach, which served as a resource with sample activities and icebreakers. After using the guidebook’s icebreakers and community-building activities, program youth eventually developed their own activities.

Reflections from Coaches

Coach 1 enjoyed the **large-group training sessions** during Years 2 and 3 of the YDS initiative, because these sessions “were a really nice way to continue to keep people connected.”

Additionally, Coach 1 worked with their programs extensively toward strategies for building out **youth councils**, with a strong emphasis on youth voice. One of the organizations this coach worked with, even through the pandemic, brought on a **youth ambassador to its board of directors**. Coach 1 stated that, even with virtual programming, the organization’s “goals were still met, and *huge* things were happening.”

According to Coach 2, many of the digital platforms used during coaching sessions and trainings have been well received by attendees. Some of these programs include **Circle App** for community-building activities, **MiroBoard** and **Google Jamboard** for brainstorming activities, **breakout rooms** for pair or small-group sharing, **MentiMeter** for live polling, and **Google Docs** for document sharing.



Coach 2 stated that some of the activities organizations most valued involved project planning, which was conducted using **MiroBoard**. Coach 2 worked with individual program staff and youth during the virtual trainings to plan what they wanted to bring back to their organizations. Coach 2 taught general content and then created breakout rooms for each organization, where staff and youth could develop a plan to integrate the content they just learned into their program. Trainings that encouraged staff to think about the identities of the youth with whom they worked were also attractive to programs.

Because programs were operating virtually, Coach 3 believed the staff members appreciated seeing Coach 3 model the use of virtual tools, including **MiroBoard**, the **Circle App**, and **Jamboard**, to get input and foster active participation. Additionally, programs benefitted from **community-building activities** at the beginning of each training session, which served as a way to get everyone “in the room” and ready to participate. Coach 3 stated that these activities “gave an opportunity to see something else in action to connect to and implement later.” Overall, Coach 3 believed that a lot of the content presented in the trainings was valuable. The virtual trainings and materials showed youth how they could lead meetings and “create a flow,” as many of them didn’t have prior experience.

After implementing a few workshops, Coach 4 believed that the most useful one involved **thinking about youth and adult roles** and how they play out in various organizations. Coach 4 said, “The **Venn diagram** activity made them think about the roles that have been assigned to adults and how we can shift that over to youth to have increased agency and decision-making abilities and being able to contribute at a higher level.”

DELIVERY OF THE VIRTUAL COACHES TRAINING

From December 2020 to May 2021, Neutral Zone coaches conducted six monthly virtual coaches training sessions for youth-serving organizations across southeast Michigan to equip these organizations with tools and resources to expand YDS in their programs. Nine organizations were represented in this cohort, with roughly 30 participants in total. From December to February, trainings were reserved for adult program staff. From March to May, adults were able to invite up to two youth from their organizations to join them in training sessions.

Organization Information

The nine organizations that participated in the coach-led virtual trainings are described in Table 2.

Table 2: Organizations That Received Group Training

| Organization Name | Mission Statement |
|---|--|
| Community Development Advocates of Detroit (CDAD) | “CDAD is a membership organization for community development and neighborhood improvement groups, enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of its members and Detroit residents through advocacy, training, technical assistance, information sharing, education, and facilitating common action.” |
| Congress of Communities | “To provide leadership and facilitate collaboration of residents, youth, and stakeholders to foster a vibrant and sustainable community” |
| Cooking with a Purpose | --- |
| Downtown Boxing Gym | “Through education, athletics, mentorship, and intervention, the Downtown Boxing Gym empowers Detroit students to be positive and productive members of society.” |
| InsideOut | “To inspire students to think broadly, create bravely, and share their voices with the wider world” |
| Local Circles | “To facilitate youth-led research in which young people pose their own questions and conduct research to inquire upon social issues that are meaningful to them” |
| Michigan Engineering Zone (MEZ) | “As part of the University of Michigan College of Engineering, the MEZ strives to provide world-class STEM resources, instruction, and counseling to students who very well may be the next generation of Victors.” |
| Neutral Zone | “The Neutral Zone is a diverse, youth-driven teen center dedicated to promoting personal growth through artistic expression, community leadership and the exchange of ideas.” |

| Organization Name | Mission Statement |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Teen Grantmaking Initiative | “Youth are put in charge of deciding which worthy causes and organizations to support and grant their time, talent, and treasure to these youth and community-focused programs throughout the year.” |

(Virtual) Group Norms

Part of the first training session was devoted to the development of group norms. Coaches asked training participants to respond to the question, “What do you need to feel safe, supported, and engaged?” Creating group norms amplifies youth voice by enabling youth to create and dictate their own rules to guide their meetings or programs. At each training session, before beginning to discuss content, the Neutral Zone coaches displayed the group norms to give the participants an opportunity to add new norms or ask questions.

Figure 1: Virtual Coaches Training Group Norms



Community-Building Activities

A primary focus of the trainings was fostering a strong sense of community in the virtual space. When developing community-building activities, coaches considered the safety and comfort level of the participants, the language they planned to use, and the promotion of diversity and inclusion. The examples below show some of the community-building activities coaches used.

Alphabet Conversations. Participants go around in a circle where each sentence begins with the next letter of the alphabet, beginning with any letter, until they're back where they started.

A: Anyone seen my cat?

B: Black one, with funny eyes?

C: Can't say I remember.

D: Don't tell me you've forgotten what it looks like?

E: Every cat looks the same to me.

F: Fortunately, I found one yesterday.

G: Gee, that's great!

Commonalities and Differences. Participants are paired up at random. Before going into breakout rooms (or turning to their partner, if in person), participants write down three things they think they might have in common with their partner and three differences. In breakout rooms, partners see how accurately they guessed. This activity can be followed by a large-group share-out, where each pair shares two things they have in common and one difference.

That's Me! Everyone turns off their camera and microphone. Each person gets called on to unmute and say something about themselves. For example, participants could say, "I prefer coffee over tea," "My birthday is in August," or "I'm a twin." If other people agree, they turn on their camera and microphone and say "That's me!"

Talking Circle. Before the meeting begins, the coach creates a PowerPoint slide or a web graphic that has a large circle in the center for a question like "What is your favorite type of music?" or "What is your favorite pastime for uplifting your spirit?" Surrounding the large circle are smaller circles with each participant's name. A talking piece – usually a feather – is moved to indicate each person's turn to speak. Participants state their name, pronouns, and organization, and then answer the prompt.

Mindfulness Check-In. Following the icebreaker, participants are given a set of prompts and given a few minutes to complete them independently. Next, participants are put in breakout rooms or small groups to share their responses. Sample prompts include:

- Three things that made me smile this week
- Two things I've learned this week
- One goal I have for this coming week

Mindfulness Moment. The purpose of mindfulness moments is to ensure that participants are present – both mentally and physically. Through breathing and other exercises aimed at centering participants, this activity allows participants to shift from “doing” to “being,” encouraging them to recognize that they’re alive and in the moment in order to prepare themselves for the day’s training. One mindfulness moment involved awareness of the five senses. Participants were asked to think of five things they could see, four things they could feel, three things they could hear, two things they could smell, and one thing they could taste.

Three Pillars of YDS

One of the key components of the virtual coaches trainings was focusing on coaching program staff on the three pillars of YDS (Figure 2): intrinsic motivation, supporting teens’ developmental needs, and youth-adult partnerships.

Intrinsic Motivation

Research shows that intrinsic motivation is a powerful engine for learning, engagement, and development – especially for metacognition, strategic thinking, creative solution making, and deeper processing of information. Intrinsic motivation is at the heart of a YDS, because these settings are designed to be intrinsically exciting for youth. YDSs ultimately aim to give teens a place where enjoyable and challenging activities foster curiosity, creativity, and leadership and where youth have meaningful control of nearly everything that happens across the organization.

Figure 2: Three Pillars of YDS



Adults were asked to brainstorm some concrete ways for programs and organizations to support the four components that lead to intrinsic motivation in youth participants. The four components and the results of the brainstorm are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Four Components to Support Youth's Intrinsic Motivation

| | |
|--|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Enjoyment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staying relevant to teens by asking them what their interests and capacities are • Checking in with youth about current events • Playing quick games • Being accommodating around having cameras on/off | <p style="text-align: center;">Curiosity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth choose to opt in • Discuss topics that are connected to the youth • New things happen in each session • Use example work • Ask them a lot of questions – modeling being curious about them • Share things about yourself – opportunity to be curious about each other • Ask open-ended questions, without judgment; affirm that, whatever the answer is, it's okay • Natural leads – bring resources based on the last leads they shared |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Control</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking students, providing choices • Picking teams • Project based • See curriculum, be transparent • Setting norms, and doing low-risk activities where they have control (can be difficult when they're so used to hierarchy of power/control) • Understand stages of group development • Youth on board of directors (scaffold if new!) • Youth having control over space they're in • Tools to lead/co-lead – make sure they're trained well • Making sure they understand that failure is a success/growth | <p style="text-align: center;">Challenge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New skills required to do it • In order to do it, practice and application is required • Difficult launch off point • Loss of motivation through process and practice if you practice too much • Decision-making process for input – most outgoing voices often decide activities • Challenge youth to participate in decision-making in an equal way |

Supporting Teens' Developmental Needs

This pillar centers on seven developmental needs:

1. Physical activity
2. Structure and clear limits
3. Creative expression
4. Self-definition
5. Competence and achievement
6. Meaningful participation

7. Positive social interaction

After the coach presented these seven developmental needs, adults brainstormed practices and strategies to support each need. Table 4 summarizes the brainstorm responses.

Table 4: Strategies to Support Youths’ Seven Developmental Needs

| Developmental Needs | Strategies |
|----------------------------|---|
| Physical Activity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness, breathing exercises • Icebreakers or energizers that involve getting up and moving around • If you have a lot of space, set up different parts of your agenda in different parts of your room so you have to get up and move as a group • Exploring physical activities that may not be common in their lives • When brainstorming, place ideas around the room in different locations, have students move from one idea to the next to add their thoughts and read others |
| Structure and Clear Limits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have youth set their own group norms • Go over the agenda in the beginning • Review and revisit group norms when they are not being met – bring up a stress-free way to redirect behavior that isn’t always adult initiated (for example, students say “ouch” when someone says something that breaks established norms) • Healthy blocking – structurally integrate healthy blocks of things such as meditation, centering exercises, physical movement, eye breaks, rest, etc. into each meeting • Clear instructions for activities or assignments |
| Creative Expression | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating space for students to choose a handful of creative genres to respond to a discussion topic or area • TikToks • “There are no wrong answers” • Planning an event • Youth Instagram take-over for a day • Presenting data in a creative way • Planning a presentation • Youth teaching other youth certain crafts, or other things they know how to do/make • Cooking as creative expression • Having the youth create a symbol for themselves |
| Self-Definition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity exercises where they lift up different identities that they align with • Open discussions and dialogues about power, privilege, oppression, race, gender, etc. • Conversations about different cultures in the room • Exposure to many identities and different people from the onset – allow students the opportunity to relate to folks in different ways |

| Developmental Needs | Strategies |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Competence and Achievement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing their successes celebrated on social media • Set a private intention/goal for the day/week and give them structured time to reflect on that goal. It helps to do a midpoint check-in on that goal, too • Setting goals, reflecting on outcomes, identifying areas of improvement for next time • At the conclusion of a project, reflect on accomplishments/skills developed • Culmination event or meeting reflecting on successes • Modeling failure and emphasize what can be learned or what was learned |
| Meaningful Participation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentionality around values and action – co-design direction, initiatives, activities, and events inspired by shared values and personal/community needs the youth identify • Opportunities to contribute to the meeting agenda and lead discussions and activities themselves • Opportunities for the youth to plan the meetings, set the agenda, facilitate the meetings • Ask the group to arrange activities in an order that works for them • Opportunities to apply what they have learned • Youth lead! • Express what meaningful participation looks like for a particular setting |
| Positive Social Interaction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow space for the youth to build connections with each other; plan activities that allow for that • Chances to spend time together in addition to working • Interacting with people of different backgrounds, ages, interests • Restorative practices • Natural adult mentors • Cultivate lighthearted, carefree fun and the enjoying of each other’s presence and company • Unstructured time for natural dialogue and conversation/check-ins • Social interactions that do not include adults • Celebrate success/achievement/effort |

Youth-Adult Partnerships

Youth-adult partnerships consist of multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together in a collective and democratic fashion over a sustained period of time. The shared work is intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization, and/or affirmatively address a community issue. Youth-adult partnerships encompasses four core elements:

1. Authentic decision-making
2. Natural mentors

Restorative Practice

Another important topic that was introduced at the virtual coaches trainings was the teaching about restorative practice. Both youth and adults were trained on restorative practice, which aims to build communities that are supported by clear agreements, authentic communication, and strong relationships. It includes both proactive strategies to build community and relationships and reactive strategies to bring issues and conflicts forward in a helpful way. Coaches introduced strategies for integrating restorative practice into youth-serving organizations:



- Affirmative statements: “I feel” statements to help group members understand the impacts of their actions on others
- Circles: Discussion to foster community building, teaching and learning, group norms, dialogue, and grieving and healing
- Conferencing: A formal circle formed using “restorative questions” to repair harm and resolve conflict

Misconceptions, Perceptions, and Corrections

Youth and adults were placed into separate groups and asked to discuss the other group’s misconceptions about them, their own perceptions of the other group, and corrections they would offer based on their experiences. Table 5 shows the responses.

Table 5: Misconceptions, Perceptions, and Corrections Responses

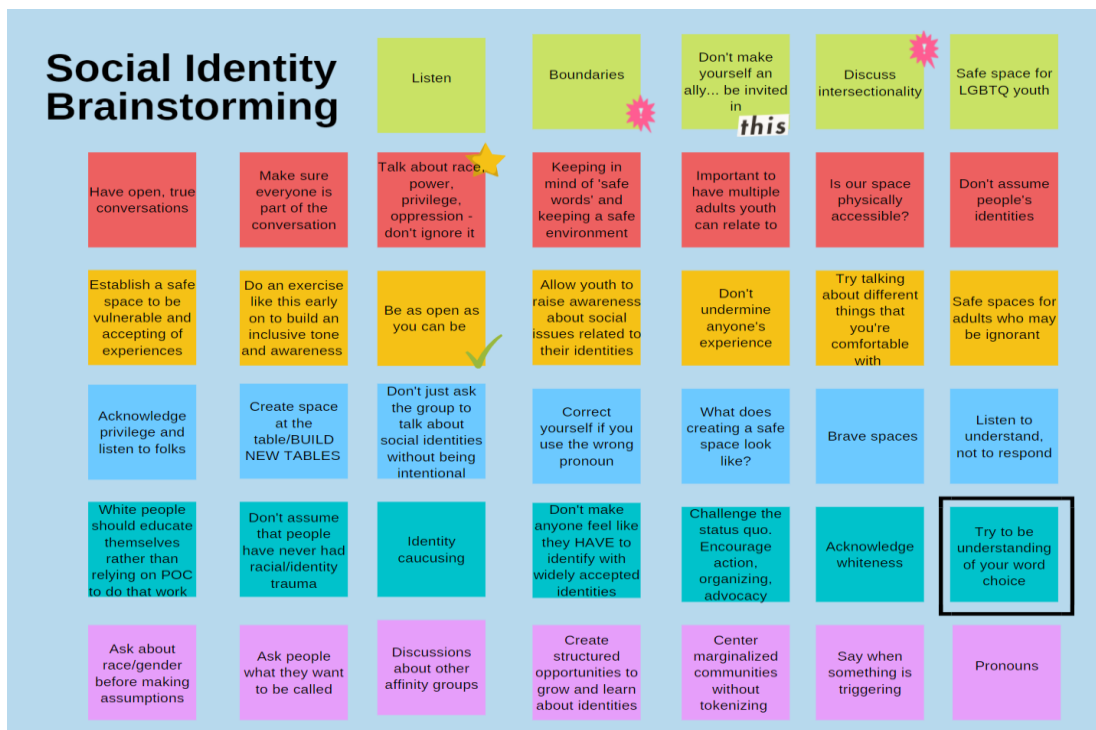
| What adults think youth think of them | What youth think adults think of them | Youth and adults come to a consensus about each other |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Side parts and skinny jeans,” out of touch • Don’t understand youth and unaware of their interests • Don’t want to share or give control to youth • Out of touch with what it feels like to be young • Topics shared are boring or irrelevant • Only there for the money • Have it all together | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less knowledgeable because of less life experience • Lazy • Untrustworthy • Unmotivated • Unable to make decisions • Don’t take things seriously • Disrespectful, irresponsible, dishonest • Rebellious | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone is still learning and growing • Everyone specializes in different areas/subjects • Both youth and adults will make mistakes • All experiences are valuable; youth are encouraged to challenge adults’ viewpoints/teach them new things • Youth are capable of success |

Social Identity Brainstorming

In an early training in which both youth and adults participated, Neutral Zone coaches led an exercise centered around the concept of personal and social identity. Personal identity, as defined in this presentation, is the self-concept a person develops over the course of their life. It includes, for example, where one grew up, how one spends time, and what one believes. Social identity, meanwhile, is the portion of an individual’s self-concept derived from membership in relevant social groups, including ethnicity, gender, and nationality.

Both adults and youth were asked to brainstorm answers to the question, “What are some norms and practices to better recognize and support social identities in our programs?” The responses, which were inserted in a MiroBoard by youth and adults, are illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Social Identity Brainstorming



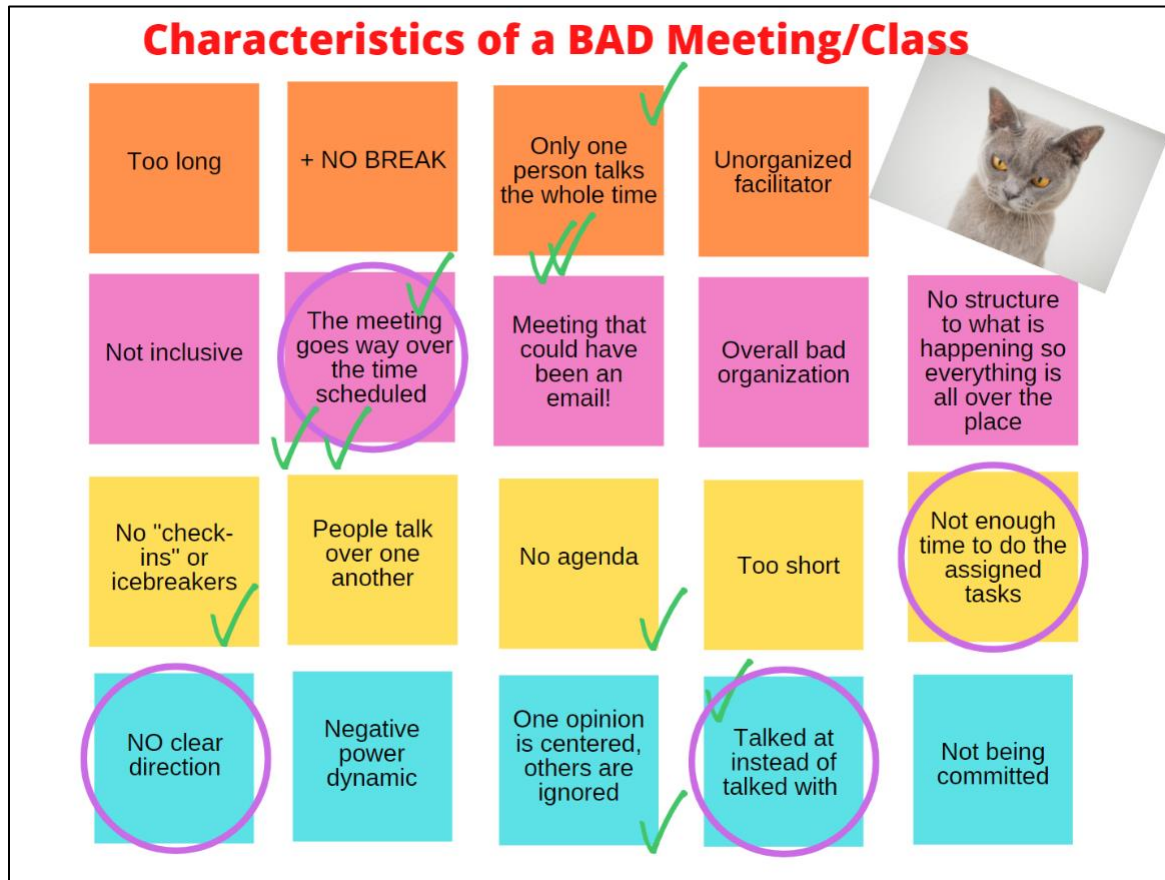
In order to better support and recognize the various social identities that youth represent in their programs, youth and adults participating in this training prioritized establishing a safe and inclusive space. Strategies uncovered in this brainstorm include respecting youth’s identities, centering the voices and experiences of marginalized youth, and working to challenge traditional youth programming and societal norms.

Effective Youth Program Training

Characteristics of a Bad Meeting

Using a Google Jamboard, both youth and adult participants brainstormed the characteristics of a bad meeting shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Characteristics of a Bad Meeting

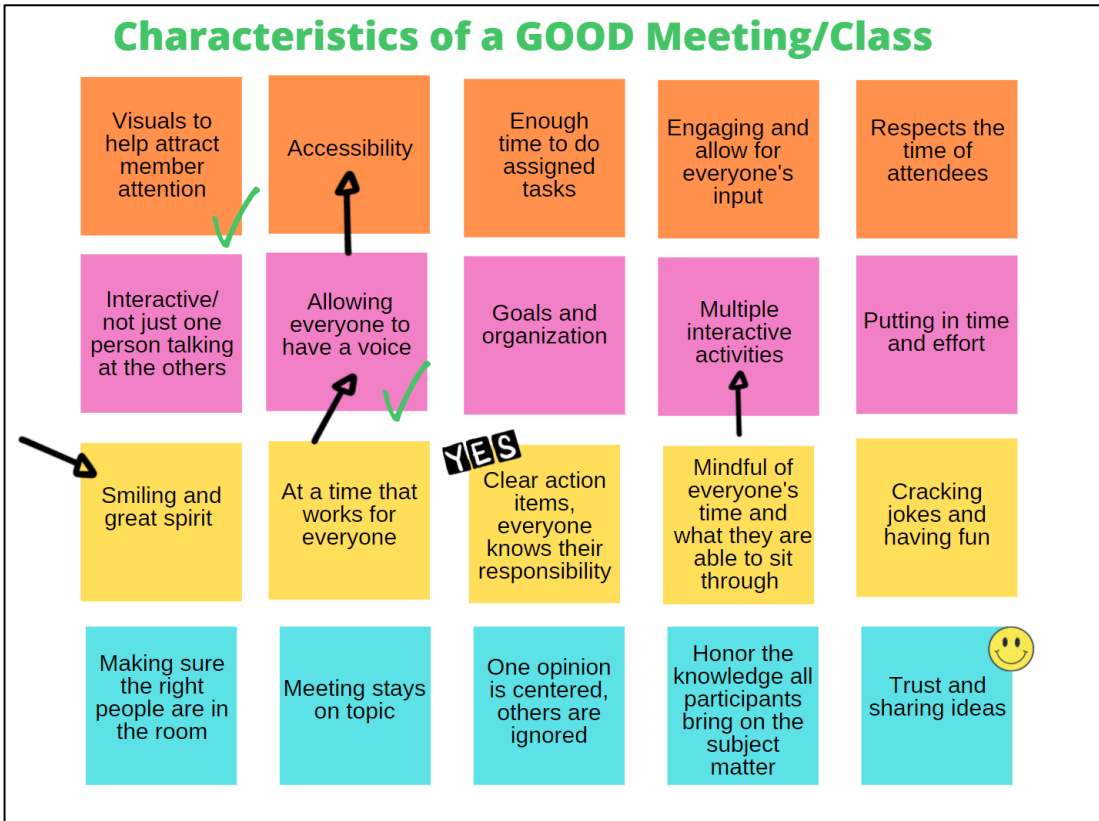


In the reflection following the brainstorm, youth and adult participants identified key themes. First, time management issues are prevalent in bad meetings, which can feel either rushed or lagged. Many participants had experienced meetings or classes that went over the time allotted or where they spent the entire time being talked at. Next, in meetings with no agenda or organization, participants don't feel like they're contributing. Many meetings could have just been an email. Participants inserted an image of an angry cat on their Jamboard to represent "when the vibes are off."

Characteristics of a Good Meeting

The second portion of the activity required participants to do another Jamboard brainstorm (Figure 6), this time regarding the characteristics of a good meeting or class.

Figure 6: Characteristics of a Good Meeting



During the reflection following the brainstorming, participants first highlighted the importance of facilitating meetings that are engaging and create a space for everyone to contribute in ways they're comfortable with, while also having fun and creating a strong group culture. Because youth spend seven hours a day in school being "talked at," they need to feel included in the conversation. As an adult participant said, "Youth are not less because they don't have a college degree."

Another prominent theme in the brainstorm was the importance of clarity and organization in a meeting. Furthermore, adults in particular stressed that youth need to be included in meetings related to youth programs, communities, neighborhoods, and residents.

"Youth learn how to make decisions by making decisions, not by being told what to do." ~ Staff participant

"When [outsiders] see youth members in authentic leadership roles, it helps the organization's reputation." ~ Staff participant

Youth Advisory Council: Benefits

Both youth and adults received resources and information regarding youth advisory councils: groups of youth – supported by adult advisor(s) – with genuine leadership roles to positively impact programs, organizations, and community-related activities. Such councils enable youth to exercise their voice, build a strong and social community or team, make a meaningful impact for change, and have fun. Youth advisory councils make an impact in their programs by giving youth the means to:

- Plan and lead programs and initiatives that promote the mission of the organization
- Conduct outreach to peers to build youth involvement in the organization or program
- Fundraise for youth-led projects
- Promote events and programs
- Advise the organization
- Evaluate programs
- Represent the broader community

Youth and adults were asked to brainstorm some of the benefits of having a youth advisory council for their program’s stakeholders: the youth, the organization, and the adults. Their responses are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6: Benefits of Youth Advisory Councils

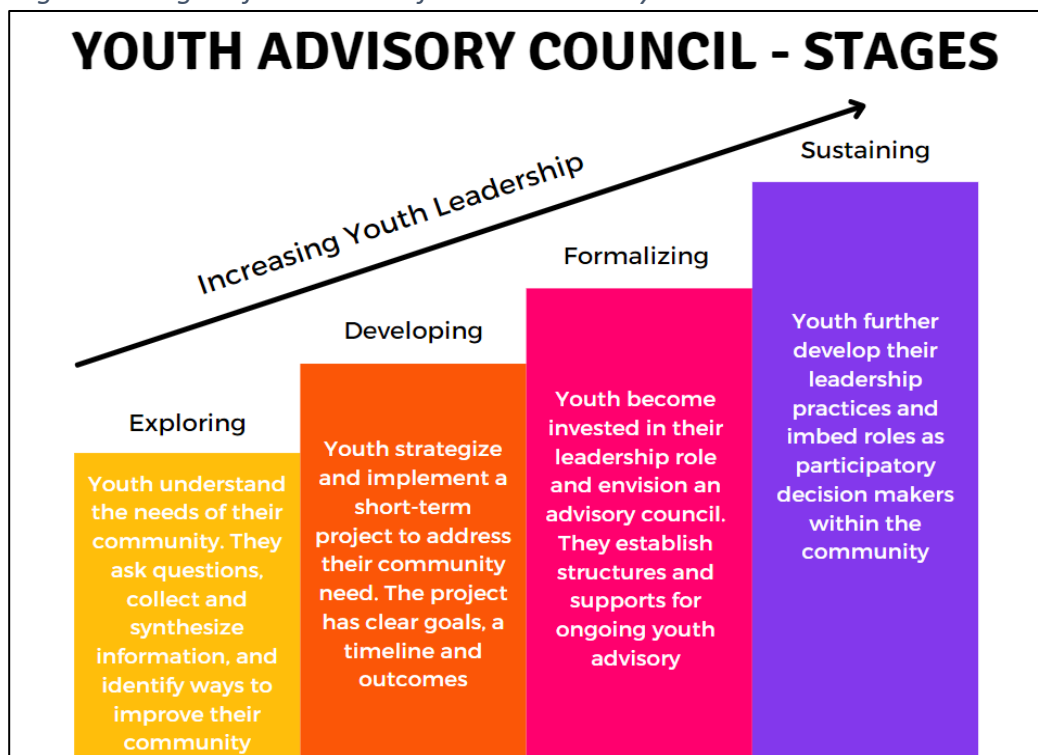
| Youth | Organization | Adults |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could help with the youths’ point of view • Can be good role models to youth and can inspire them • Sometimes as a student we can be better role models to our peers • Promotes everlasting relationships between the youths and the organizations • Having peer leaders creates a comfortable environment for other youth • Better understanding of how organizations function • Decision-making roles • Leadership development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More diverse bodies and ideas made • Becomes more appealing to other youth • Easier to identify issues that may be impacting some of the population • Best way to serve youth • New perspective on various topics • More youth involvement in projects, events • Increased capacity • More idea makers • Youth perspective on the work they do • Good impression on school and general public • Innovative and creative approaches, models, ideas, solutions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New perspectives • Temperature checks on work being done • Ability to listen to different generations • Become a teacher and learner • Learn things from different generations • Adult and youth engagement is important for trust and relationship building • Support on problem-solving and brainstorming • Teach other adults what they know about teens, since they work with us • Know more about teenagers and what they could be doing there |

| Youth | Organization | Adults |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentorship • Professional relationships with adults • Learning and growing hands-on • Learn about the field/type of work the organization does | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh energy • Possibly build a pipeline of future leaders/staff for the org • Programs are more relevant to young people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will build trust between students and adults • Can refer volunteers to the goals of actual youth • Can ask youth guiding question for partnerships and donor requests • Learning opportunities |

Youth Advisory Council: Stages

The coaches introduced the four stages of the development of a youth advisory council, shown in Figure 7: exploring, developing, formalizing, and sustaining. When developing a youth advisory council, organization leaders must consider where they are now in order to understand what is needed to move to each step. Additionally, these stages are not linear, but fluid, as organizations may lose members or go through other changes. Ultimately, these stages should be used by organizations as a reference to continue moving forward with their youth advisory council.

Figure 7: Stages of Formation of a Youth Advisory Council



“These stages aren’t necessarily hard and fast – they’re flexible. Things happen, they ebb and flow.... As the Neutral Zone was coming up with this and getting language around it, they found it helpful to differentiate how youth were taking more leadership roles and where adults were stepping back.” ~ Neutral Zone coach

Staff Participants' Reflections on the Virtual Training

During the final virtual training in May 2021, staff of participating organizations were asked to reflect on their experiences and update their cohort on the initiatives they had implemented in their programs, challenges they encountered, and their YDS goals for the next six to nine months.

Community Development Advocates of Detroit. As a new group, CDAD staff benefited from learning how to better engage with youth and from receiving tools and frameworks they can apply to build better relationships. In the next six to nine months, they hoped to implement a youth-facilitated agenda, involve youth more fully in planning, and increase youth participation in selecting the next group of youth council members.

Congress of Communities. The coach's trainings allowed CoC staff to figure out what needs to be adjusted in their organization, enabling them to look back and address what needed change and to see what youth and adult allies can do to increase support and provide a better space. In the near future, CoC staff hoped to apply the concepts they learned to future cohorts while integrating restorative practice rather than just talking about it at an initial training. Additionally, CoC staff believed that the activities on developmental needs gave new program facilitators a guide to follow when they are first starting off.

Cooking with a Purpose. The trainings enabled Cooking with a Purpose staff to start over, to rethink their goals and move forward. One major challenge they foresaw was taking what they learned back to their organization, concerned that members who weren't in the trainings would not be receptive. They also learned that not everything should be open to a conversation – for instance, when working with committees, members might question decisions, but staff need autonomy to make decisions without spillover. In the future, staff hope to celebrate everyone in their organization and have a full launch of their program.

Downtown Boxing Gym. DBG's biggest takeaway from the training was having an opportunity to dream about and rethink youth participation from a place of joy. One of the biggest challenges staff expected to encounter was getting stuck, because their group of youth is different every week. DBG staff hoped to have youth take control of their agenda and goals and keep things consistent in the program. In the next six to nine months, DBG staff wanted youth to set the agenda for program meetings and to keep moving forward, even if a youth leader isn't present that week.

InsideOut. As a result of the trainings, InsideOut increased youth participation and engagement in its youth advisory council. In the future, the organization's staff hopes to bring in recent alumni so youth can see leaders close to their own age.

Local Circles. Local Circles is made up of a small number of staff and young people, in addition to the board of directors, so staff originally had difficulty understanding how to help young people to see things from a YDS perspective. However, the trainings have shown them the kinds of responsibilities young people can have in an organization. In the next six to nine months, Local Circles staff hope to involve younger members in the organization’s leadership and give them more responsibilities.

Michigan Engineering Zone. As a newer program, the MEZ encountered many minor bugs and issues. The training gave staff what they needed to ensure that the program is successful and continues to expand in the future. In addition, the training helped mentors get a better understanding of what they can do to help students. Staff plan to host workshops to help students and mentors connect on a deeper level, while giving students a say in what workshops are presented. In the next six to nine months, MEZ staff hope to have mentor meetings with their student council to see how they can help close gaps between students and mentors.

Neutral Zone. Youth and staff from the Neutral Zone benefitted from materials on youth-adult partnerships and other activities to improve trust between youth and adults. Training participants plan to use their learning to actively engage with adults to improve communication and foster a more welcoming space as the Neutral Zone transitions back to in-person programming. Some challenges staff foresee include difficulties in integrating the practices they learned in person and potential pushback from peers. In the near future, the Neutral Zone staff hopes to use youth-adult partnerships to create a place for youth and adults to trust each other and to use new techniques to build community as people come back together in person.

Teen Grantmaking Initiative. Through the virtual training, Teen Grantmaking Initiative staff thought about ways to make their program more youth-led, enhance youth facilitation skills, improve meeting structures, and engage more with youth. In the next six to nine months, the staff hopes to provide youth with more leadership opportunities to increase engagement and participation.

Virtual Training Evaluation

The coaching and training was concluded by collecting evaluative data from participants. Using Mentee Meter, a live polling software package, participants responded to survey questions prepared by the Neutral Zone. To begin, both youth and adults were asked to supply one to three words that described their experience in the virtual trainings. MentiMeter compiled responses into a word cloud, which is displayed in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Virtual Training Word Cloud



Additionally, youth and adult participants were asked to complete a series of survey questions. Nearly 20 participants answered the questions. The responses were overwhelmingly positive, as illustrated in Figures 9 and 10.

Figure 9: YDS Training Evaluation Ratings

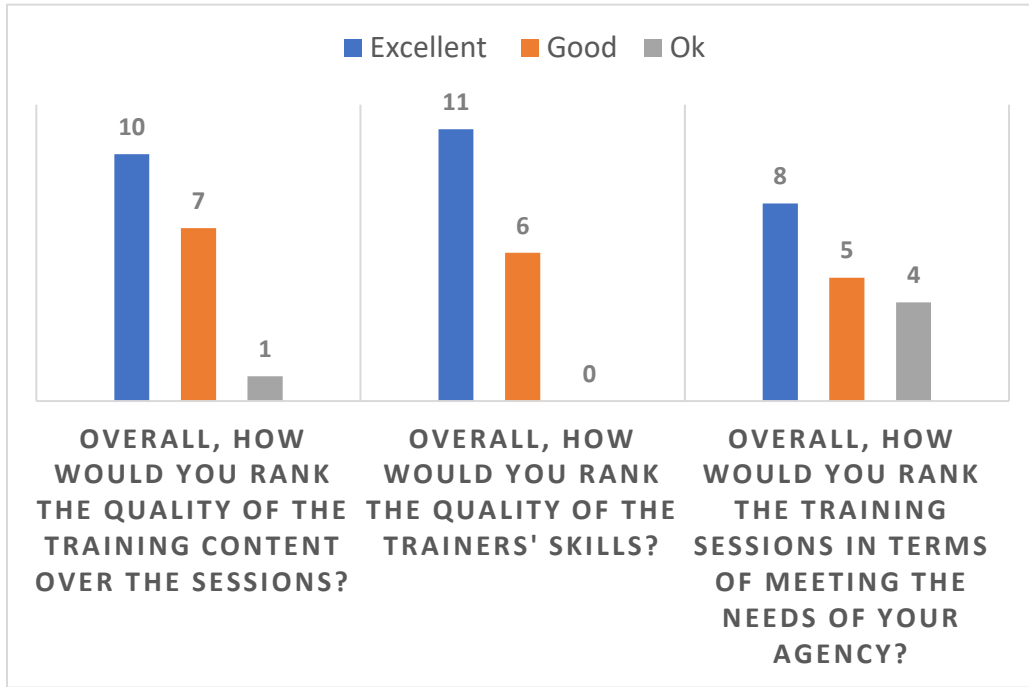
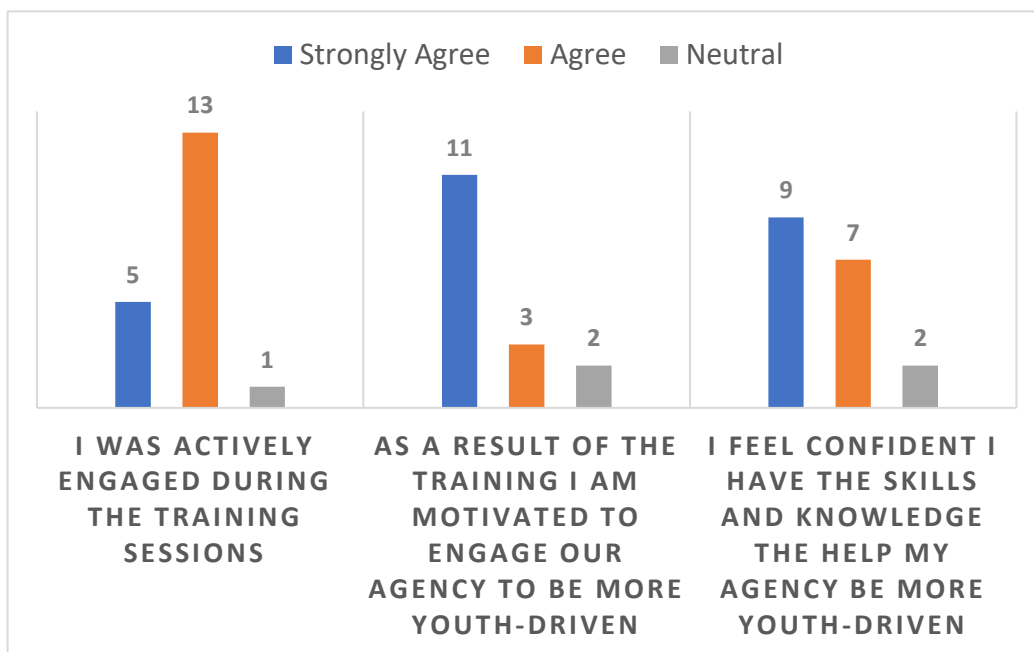


Figure 10: YDS Training Evaluation Responses About Effectiveness



YDS CONFERENCE

This year, the Neutral Zone invited teens from other youth-serving organizations in southeast Michigan to come together (virtually) to plan and organize its annual YDS conference. With nearly 70 people in attendance, the conference, held on April 10, 2021, featured funding pitches and YDS workshops.

Funding Pitches

Seven organizations had up to three minutes apiece to present their funding pitches, on which participants then voted. The Neutral Zone allocated a total of \$2,000 to be distributed; the ratio of votes for each pitch corresponded to the ratio of funding allocated.

Congress of Communities

The Congress of Communities Youth Council is working together to plan, record, promote, and produce a podcast mini-series focused on the intersection of race and gender (Figure 11). The youth have been working virtually since August, learning about racial and social justice, community organizing techniques, and the history of race and segregation in Detroit. They feel passionate about highlighting the effects of racism, sexism, and homophobia and transphobia on themselves and their peers.

In order to maintain safety during the pandemic, the youth decided to do a podcast rather than a workshop or other in-person event. The podcast episodes confirmed so far include “A Day in the Life of a Teenage Girl,” “Women in Politics,” “Healthy Relationships,” and “Inclusive Health Education in Schools.”

Figure 11: Pitch Presentation Slide, Congress of Communities



Detroit Area Youth Uniting Michigan

In summer 2021, DAYUM will host leaders from across Michigan to learn about the theory and practice of non-violent, disruptive direct action. Participants will discuss tactics and strategies for planning a safe and effective protest. DAYUM has three years of experience in youth-led protest; its past direct-action trainings have helped students organize strikes, marches, sit-ins, and walkouts across Michigan. Participants are excited to expand this tradition to other youth organizations as part of their summer training series.

Detroit Heals Detroit

Detroit Heals Detroit is sending out Healing Carekits to combat the negative mental health impacts of COVID-19 on Detroit teens. Carekits will contain stress-relieving items such as journals, stress balls, and art therapy supplies. The kits will be supplemented with youth-led healing circles in order to build community virtually during a time of isolation.

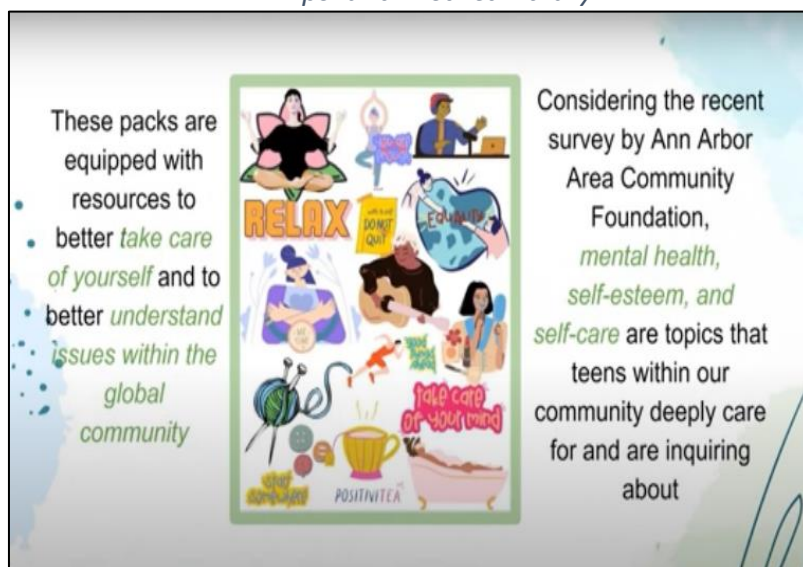
Arab American Community Center for Economic and Social Services

The Teen Grantmaking Initiative, a youth-led philanthropy program of the Center for Arab American Philanthropy, conducted a community needs assessment to determine the most pressing issues facing the community. Then it completed fundraising projects and pitches in order to award small grants to local non-profit organizations or school clubs. The YDS conference funding became part of the funding regranted to local organizations. The grant process gives youth the decision-making power to vet which organizations best serve the needs of other young people; in the process, they learn effective grantmaking skills.

Ypsilanti District Library

Funding will allow the Teen Advisory Group at the Ypsilanti District Library to expand their Teen Subscription Pack project (Figure 12). Each month, the advisory group curates, assembles, and distributes free take-home activities with unique themes that allow Ypsilanti teens to de-stress, learn a skill, get creative, and “be the change” while engaging with others through virtual hangouts. Themes range from social justice to environmental awareness to LGBTQ+ pride. Packs are currently available to teens who request them through the library, but the new funding will allow the library to distribute the supplies more broadly and equitably by partnering with other youth-serving organizations.

Figure 12: Pitch Presentation Slide, Ypsilanti District Library



MIStudentsDream

MIStudentsDream is a grassroots collective of educators, students, and community members organizing at the intersection of immigration and education justice. The MIStudentsDream Youth Organizing Campaign – led by students – recently launched a sanctuary school campaign. The goal of the campaign is for all Metro Detroit schools to adapt specific and public sanctuary school policies to support keeping immigrant and undocumented students and families safe. The funds received from the Neutral Zone will support their youth organizing in this work.

Urban Neighborhood Initiatives

The Urban Neighborhood Initiatives Youth Advisory Board will use its funding to host Movies in the Park events in the summer and early fall. The goal is to host three events, each with an expected turnout of 50 to 100 community members. This project will be planned, approved, and run by the youth advisory board. Everything from promoting and setting up to running the event and cleaning up will be youth-led, with support from adults. The planners believe that hosting a

series of events in compliance with COVID-19 safety guidelines will foster a sense of normalcy and positivity that is needed in their community.

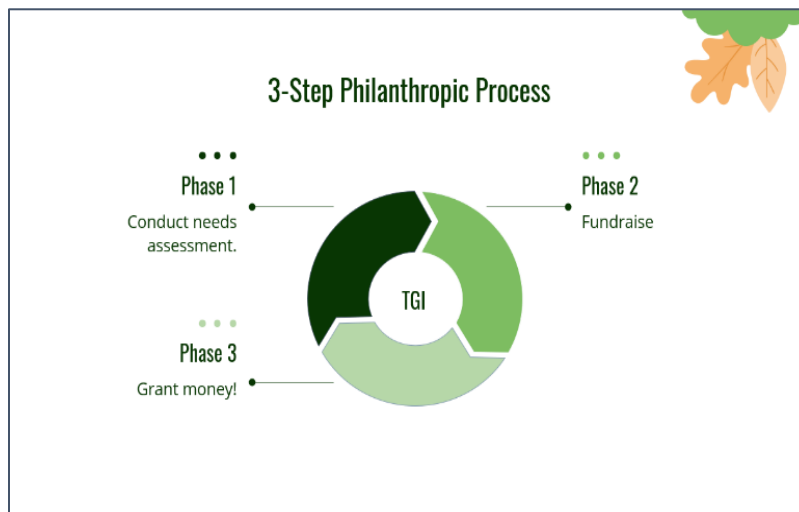
Workshops

For the second half of the conference, four youth-serving organizations hosted workshops. Participants who were not facilitating workshops pre-registered for workshops that interested them.

Making Change Through Youth-Led Philanthropy

This workshop, hosted by the Teen Grantmaking Initiative, informed its attendees of a three-step process for youth grantmaking (Figure 13). The first step is a community needs assessment, which “assesses the ‘needs’ or the current issues within one’s community.” Commonly

Figure 13: Three-Step Philanthropic Process, Teen Grantmaking Initiative



conducted through surveys, community needs assessments allow community members to tell grassroots organizations which issues are impacting them the most. The second step is to raise funds. Workshop facilitators presented beneficial fundraising tactics, including program membership fees, special events, and local sponsorships. The final step in the process is releasing a request for proposals. Organizations submit applications for funding, and youth from the grantmaking

organization read applications and determine which initiatives receive funding.

The Legacy of Me

This workshop, hosted by InsideOut, encouraged attendees to think about their impact on the world. Participants had five minutes to respond individually to each of the following prompts and were asked to share their thoughts.

Check-in question: If your life were a book, which character do you see yourself as?

Prompt 1: Spend 5 minutes writing a rant about that ONE person. It can be a poem, story, journal entry, whatever. Use this writing activity as catharsis.

Prompt 2: Claim your space in the world. How would you write your legacy? What mark do you want to leave in the world? What does the world look like through your lens?

Prompt 3: What are the things that make you love people as a whole (the small and yet beautiful parts of society)?

Youth-Led Activism: Tactics to Create Change

This workshop, hosted by Detroit Heals Detroit, was centered around community organizing, which facilitators defined as “taking collective action to solve the root cause of a problem by turning the resources you have into the power you need to win the change you want” (Figure 14). Organizing is the main tool Detroit Heals Detroit uses to harness collective power and engage masses of people. The organization works to organize to build

people’s power and dismantle systems of power and oppression. In addition to providing notable examples of youth-led activist movements, including the Baltimore Algebra Project and the Dream Defenders, this workshop provided attendees with tactics to bring people into a movement to disrupt, inspire, and agitate.

Conference Evaluation

Following the conference, an online evaluation survey was distributed to all participants, 42 of whom – 31 youth and 11 adults – responded. Figure 15 shows their ratings of the conference as a whole.

Figure 14: Elements of a Movement, Detroit Heals Detroit

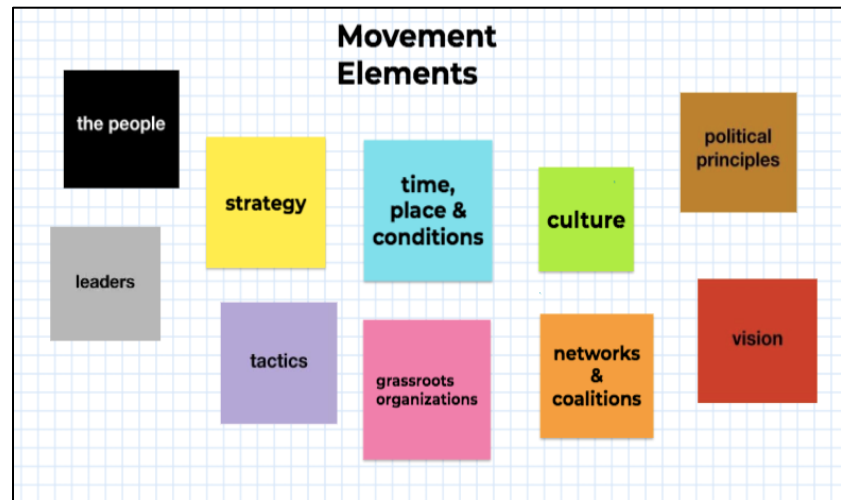
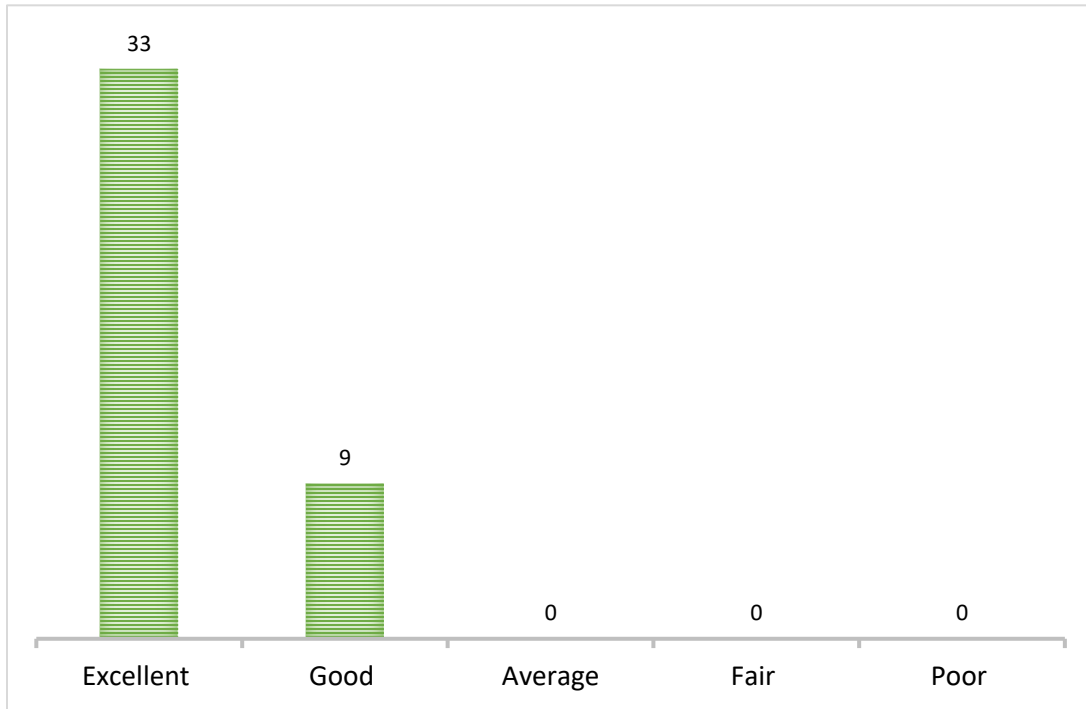


Figure 15: Conference Ratings



In total, 33 participants (79%) rated the conference as excellent, while 9 participants (21%) rated the conference as good. No participants rated the conference as average, fair, or poor. Table 7 shows participants’ ratings of specific questions; responses were overwhelmingly positive. No aspect received “disagree” or “strongly disagree” responses.

Table 7: YDS Conference Evaluation Responses

| # | Question | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither Agree nor Disagree |
|---|---|----------------|-------|----------------------------|
| 1 | I was actively engaged throughout the conference. | 22 | 16 | 3 |
| 2 | I believe my time was well spent. | 30 | 10 | 0 |
| 3 | I am motivated to apply the knowledge I learned today. | 28 | 12 | 1 |
| 4 | I learned things that will help me improve my own leadership. | 28 | 10 | 1 |
| 5 | I learned things that will help me improve my agency/program. | 30 | 10 | 1 |
| 6 | I am interested in getting more involved in collaboration with other groups in YDS. | 25 | 11 | 4 |
| 7 | These trainings meet my needs. | 23 | 15 | 2 |

UNDERSTANDING THE VIRTUAL COACHING EXPERIENCE

To understand the effects of the one-on-one coaching and virtual training sessions, we asked our staff and coach interview subjects about their preference for in-person or virtual coaching, the benefits and challenges of virtual coaching, potential improvements, and future training topics.

YDS Program Staff Feedback

In-Person vs. Virtual Coaching

Program staff we interviewed acknowledged that in-person and virtual YDS coaching each had both benefits and challenges. They felt that virtual training sessions had better attendance from youth and were more accessible to programs, especially those located farther from the Neutral Zone.

“Youth had less things they needed to hop through to be present for virtual trainings.”
(Staff 1)

“While virtual [coaching] is less effective because it’s a different interaction, you save on mileage, overall time spent, and you can connect with people you’d never be in the same room with.” (Staff 4)

Staff respondents believed that virtual coaching is better for short one-off engagements but that longer events are more effective in person. When a large cohort of programs comes together for trainings including youth, virtual sessions are not as effective for community building.

Participants in such trainings didn’t always feel connected to one another.

Staff also expressed interest in continuing virtual coaching after the COVID-19 pandemic ends, even though they would love to be present in person. Transporting youth to meetings can be difficult, so virtual training increases opportunities for youth to be in the room. Ultimately, staff agreed that a hybrid model of coaching would be the most effective; they would appreciate both virtual and in-person options in the future.

“Certain parts of coaching, like check-ins, could be virtual, but meeting with teens and community partners would be better in person because it would bring better vibes and conversation.” (Staff 2)

The Benefits of Virtual Coaching

As staff were working to host their usual programming while responding to the needs of their youth, the Neutral Zone provided a diverse array of activities and resources that made virtual coaching experiences successful. In particular, the Neutral Zone coaches were resourceful in enhancing youth engagement and energizing teens in their programs, while also providing an outsider’s perspective during difficult times. Staff respondents were impressed by the multitude of professional development opportunities for both youth and adults presented by the Neutral

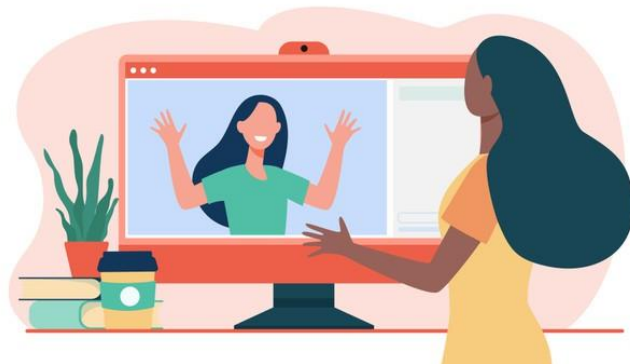
Zone. Coaches were also very personable, a factor that led to buy-in from youth members. Adults and youth who participated in the virtual trainings benefitted from the opportunity to network with others and learn more about organizations in the area.

“When we were getting stuck during the transition from in-person to virtual, reaching out and talking one-on-one with our coach was helpful, since their ‘outside perspective’ allowed them to see things objectively.” (Staff 2)

“The support, help, and encouragement from YDS staff made [virtual coaching] successful.” (Staff 3)

The Challenges of Virtual Coaching

However, virtual coaching was not without its challenges. Program staff said that the time commitment was difficult, as sessions were held on Saturdays. Staff expressed that the length of the sessions could have been shortened to make the program more successful. Additionally, staff discussed difficulties with communication.



“It was difficult to work during the week and then commit to an all-day training on Saturday.” (Staff 3)

“As the pandemic started, everyone’s communication abilities dropped. People were struggling, so it was easier for things to fall through the cracks.” (Staff 4)

Potential Improvements

One potential improvement addressed by staff who participated in one-on-one coaching involves cohort calls. Staff thought they would be working more with other partners in the coaching program; they said they would enjoy more time to collaborate with others and to introduce their youth to other organizations. Staff respondents who were involved in large cohort trainings towards the beginning of the pandemic, which featured several Neutral Zone facilitators who complimented one another well, suggested that these trainings could be continued in other contexts. Some staff suggested that it would be helpful in the future to set priorities and goals with coaches and have regular check-ins involving those specific goals.

“It would be beneficial hearing from other organizations trying to do this work.” (Staff 2)

Staff respondents involved in the virtual training expressed that the timelines could be improved. Participants signed up for training months in advance, and they were strongly encouraged to attend all sessions. As the pandemic wore on, some suffered Zoom fatigue. They wished for flexibility either in signing up or in feeling able to step away when attending a session would be difficult. Some also stated that the trainings generally assumed programs had consistent and stable youth attendance during meetings. Some staff said they would benefit from learning how to sustain youth participation and continue to progress without attendance acting as a barrier.

They could use this skill set not only for meeting with youth but also as they worked to establish a youth advisory council.

Future Coaching Opportunities

When asked about subjects on which they would like to receive training or support in the future, staff suggested several topics:

- Restorative practices
- Youth board member trainings
- Structuring group projects with young people
- Individualized coaching on creating a youth advisory council
- Trauma-informed practice, specifically mental health, resources, and what to do when students are in crisis
- “Baby steps” trainings detailing how to get youth involved and how to establish a youth council or similar group

Neutral Zone Coach Feedback

In-Person vs. Virtual Coaching

Because the Neutral Zone’s typical programming is very hands-on, active, and collaborative, coaches initially struggled to imagine what coaching could be like virtually. Coaches we interviewed were surprised by the positive response to the virtual coaching and felt they did a good job, but all four coaches said that they were not quite able to match the in-person coaching experience.

Throughout the interview process, three of the four Neutral Zone coaches expressed a preference for in-person coaching. In-person coaching allows coaches to get the “lay of the land” and better understand program nuances like what time youth start to arrive. Coaches also said that in-person trainings are more satisfying for both trainers and participants because of the relationship- and community-building component. Virtual trainings can be hard, especially for people who have been on screen all week long.

“The efficacy [of in-person coaching] is higher, and we can better read people’s facial and body language to see when people are getting it or might need extra support, and we can feel more strongly confident that people are engaged.” (Coach 2)

“For young people and adults, [virtual] can be fatiguing. As we saw with the [training], everyone’s on Zoom for eight or nine hours a day and then spent their Saturday on Zoom.” (Coach 3)



Although most coaches we interviewed favored in-person work, the last year demonstrated that virtual coaching not only is a possibility but even can enable great accomplishments. The benefits of virtual coaching cited by the Neutral Zone coaches include higher attendance, strong engagement, and the ability to continue active work with web-based tools. The only coach who preferred virtual to in-person trainings said that it is easier for participants to show up, particularly when those participants include at-risk youth.

“Virtual coaching broke down barriers. There’s more access in virtual coaching, and we were able to have conversations that were different than what we had in-person – we were able to dive really deep.” (Coach 1)

“Youth have lives outside [their program] so it can be really difficult physically being somewhere, but virtually it’s a lot easier to be, like, ‘Well, I have my phone on me, so I can just hop on.’ It’s really valuable to have that access even though in-person can be a lot more enriching sometimes.” (Coach 4)

In light of these pros and cons, coaches stated that virtual coaching is a supplemental tool they could continue to use after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Virtual Coaching Successes

One aspect of virtual coaching that made the experience successful is accessibility. Without the barrier of transportation, coaches could more easily get in touch with site administrators, staff, and young people. Additionally, the conversations on the phone or on Zoom seemed to be more focused, and there was more flexibility with the agenda.

“I think that’s the value of virtual coaching. We can continue to stay connected through space barriers or time constraints. We can always find 30 minutes, but if you’re traveling 45 minutes each way, it’s sometimes harder to find that time.” (Coach 1)

Coaches were able to use virtual breakout rooms to replicate some in-person activities, including debriefs, roleplaying, and small-group work, that have proven effective in getting people to engage with one another. Coaches also used digital tools, such as the Circle App, MiroBoard, MentiMeter, and others, to keep their coaching interactive.

Another component that made this intervention successful for coaches was strong communication with program staff. When staff articulated what they needed in early coaching sessions, coaches could listen to what the program needed. Coaches regularly checked in on the organizations and offered options and resources to make sure they were working towards their goals, while also collaborating with organizational leadership. Virtual coaching was more laid back and comfortable, factors that helped newer coaches.

“It was a lot easier to open up in a space where I didn’t necessarily have to watch all of my body language. I was only seen from the shoulders up on Zoom, so I could just hang out and build community in a less awkward way.” (Coach 4)

The Challenges of Virtual Coaching

Because the pandemic was an unprecedented situation, the Neutral Zone Coaches endured a number of challenges. They had to switch gears for some meetings and coaching sessions because the organizations were pivoting. Adding to the universally felt difficulty of going virtual, programs also had to shift their goals and needs frequently. Additionally, not being able to see the program space and get the full feel of the program, activities that are possible only in person, was difficult for coaches.

“During the beginning of the pandemic and the first several months as we were switching, while I was eager to do it, it was a bit of a stretch. While I learned a lot and was grateful for it, it was a challenge, since I would personally rather pick up a phone and call someone than send an email.” (Coach 1)



Roleplaying – a commonly used tactic in Neutral Zone trainings – was more difficult to conduct in a virtual space. Large-group discussions were also harder because people lost focus more easily. Coaches also found that handling conflict was more challenging in a virtual space. In person, if a participant was being difficult, coaches would pull that participant aside to address their concerns. That intervention is not possible in a virtual

space. It was also difficult to keep people in breakout rooms on task or give them clarification if needed. Furthermore, coaches were challenged to manage the technology while simultaneously managing people’s energy and presence. Coaches struggled to keep participants engaged and present, especially in the middle of transitions.

“In some of the [interventions] where we would have multiple meetings...some of the meetings went really well and were almost magical. Then there was another one where the weather was nice and the cameras kept going off, so I couldn’t tell if people were on the call, and people would drop off, which would mess up the breakout rooms.” (Coach 2)

Zoom fatigue also was a major challenge; it was difficult to maintain young people’s engagement after they had already spent six or seven hours in school online prior to coming to their program. Keeping their attention, coaches felt, took significantly more time and effort than when they could do community building in person and move around a physical room. Coaches also encountered some difficulties in communicating with program staff.

“Everyone was struggling with the pandemic, so when I tried to check in, [program staff] would say, ‘Oh, we’re fine,’ but the next time they would need significantly more support.” (Coach 4)

Coaching Post-Pandemic

After the pandemic, all Neutral Zone coaches expressed interest in continuing virtual coaching in some capacity. Even though they largely preferred face-to-face, they expected virtual trainings to supplement in-person trainings, depending on the content being covered. For planning, coaches and program staff don’t have to be side by side and can be productive remotely. For quarterly coaching visits, coaches explained that they could conduct more visits virtually; they anticipated that virtual visits would be better received when people aren’t doing both work and school over Zoom. Instead of checking in through a phone call, Neutral Zone coaches and program staff could utilize Zoom and MiroBoard or Google Docs for collaborative brainstorming. Ultimately, trainings with multiple organizations where people are learning new content, or meetings that involve significant strategic planning, work better in person, according to coaches. However, coaches could intersperse larger and more intensive in-person trainings with virtual coaching visits.

Because most program staff and youth are comfortable with Zoom, the tool can easily be integrated into the Neutral Zone’s practices. Coaches hope to continue utilizing online tools, as well as community-building activities developed for virtual spaces. They emphasized that in-person coaching and training should be continued, because it is more enriching for group work and participants can have side conversations and reflections.

“It’s definitely valuable to be in the physical space that programs are held, but it’s easy to hop on a Zoom call if there’s something quick to take care of instead of traveling.” (Coach 4)

Continuing virtual coaching further enables the Neutral Zone to provide programming and coaching to organizations outside of southeast Michigan.

“A lot of YDS work has been limited to organizations within driving distance, and so we can do work with out-of-state organizations. While it won’t be as good as in-person, it can still serve the needs of other communities that can’t be driven to.” (Coach 2)

Potential Improvements

Neutral Zone coaches stated that they would love to see more large-group training sessions, because they are a great way to bring people together. Towards the beginning of the pandemic, the Neutral Zone hosted monthly large-group sessions with organizations that were receiving one-on-one coaching, but they haven’t done so since.

Zoom fatigue was a significant challenge for the Neutral Zone coaches. Especially during the large-group trainings, they would sometimes have to rush activities in order to give participants more organization-specific planning time. The Neutral Zone coaches said that they hoped to enhance the tools they regularly use and to freshen some frequently used activities with ideas from new colleagues.

“Going forward, and as people are coming back in-person, we won’t have to be as sensitive to Zoom fatigue since it won’t be constantly used for school or work. Now it’s more concerning.” (Coach 2)

Future Coaching Opportunities

When asked what subjects they would like to cover in future trainings, the Neutral Zone coaches responded with the following:

- Expanded LGBTQ+ content
- Continued trainings on YDS work, amplifying youth voice while using an equity lens
- Social identity and diversity, equity, and inclusion work
- Restorative practice
- Food justice, food access, and the culture surrounding food

The Neutral Zone coaches are also in the midst of piloting a new training called Leading a Healing/Support Circle, with the goal of helping teachers or youth workers plan dialogue and conversations with youth when they come back in-person to better enable them to process what happened over the last year.

LOOKING BACK: EXPANDING YOUTH-DRIVEN SPACE IN SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN, 2018–2021

The final section of the report summarizes our experiences with this multi-year initiative and incorporates personal reflections from the Neutral Zone coaches, with a focus on their visions for the future of the work.

Why This Work Is Valuable

As evaluators, our involvement in the process reinforced our belief that the work is valuable because it provides essential opportunities – which would otherwise be unavailable – for youth to grow as leaders. The YDS initiative presents youth with opportunities to lead, to make decisions, to engage in fundraising or outreach, and to participate on a board of directors or in higher-level organizational roles. It gives youth the ability to develop skills and try on adult roles.

“[YDS training] provides them with skills and opportunities, when an organization works in a youth-driven methodology, that they don’t have with traditional youth programming.”
(Coach 2)

The coaches’ abundant field experiences with programming and relationship building with young people and youth development professionals truly became a great asset to help participating organizations navigate the complexities and difficulties that emerge as the work evolves, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the years, participating organizations from different cohorts overwhelmingly expressed their appreciation of the support they received from the Neutral Zone. Our findings suggest that one of the key success factors was the coaches’ own values and beliefs in the importance of the work.

“As adults, we have a commitment to supporting and being accountable to young people. In their experience, schools teach young people to listen and sit down and be quiet and do what they’re told. However, these young people have graduated or have aged out of high school. They could have been given adult expectations but haven’t been properly trained. It is our duty to help them, to train them to learn to succeed safely and fail safely.” (Coach 1)

Beyond the benefits to youth, the initiative also has enhanced the organizations’ ability to reach out and connect with their staff, participating young people, and the larger community. The organizations’ efforts to involve stakeholders and to encourage youth and staff to work together as partners helped create a sense of democracy and program ownership. These factors in turn enhanced staff job satisfaction and youth engagement.

“When you involve youth in higher-order ways, you’re able to achieve your missions better.” (Coach 2)

The YDS initiative often entails youth and adults working on projects that contribute to the larger community, and each cohort involves multiple organizations modeling and learning from

each other at the same time. Participating organizations often expressed their appreciation of the networking and community bonding opportunities that the initiative provided and of the sense of giving back, especially to the southeast Michigan community.

“YDS has allowed me to be a part of the community that raised me and has given me an opportunity to give back to southeast Michigan.... [S]upporting youth development and being a mentor, the kind of mentor I wished I had when I were younger, is something I have found very fulfilling.” (Coach 4)

The Important Components of YDS

Our observations over the last three years have demonstrated that bringing several organizations together as a cohort was central to the success of the YDS initiative. The combinations of in-person and virtual gatherings, as well as small- and large-group functions, were all important components.

“We know, developmentally, youth have to have a lot of mixed groups and opportunities, so to have a full-sized group, smaller individual groups, and coaching the staff and teens in order to bring them together in the middle to go back and do individual work and then come back together at the end is super important.” (Coach 1)

Among all the important components, the experiences coming from the YDS Institute and overnight retreat, a main event in the immersion program, has left a significant impact on its participants. We have received overwhelmingly positive feedback from adult and youth participants in the previous years when the retreat was held, and from coaches’ reflections. If youth haven’t had an overnight experience before, it really sticks with them.

“The retreat [sets] people on a path to be youth-driven or more youth-driven, and to foster connections and relationships, especially youth.” (Coach 2)

As a part of the strategy for the YDS immersion program, the Neutral Zone provided one-on-one coaching to participating organizations. Even as the Neutral Zone transitioned to virtual programming in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, coaches were able to assess the goals of organizations and provide training and resources. Because of this individualized support, organizations were able to develop fundraising strategies, improve their curriculum, create new program spaces designed by youth, and even add youth members to boards of directors. Additionally, the coaches’ training, which acted as a train-the-trainer platform, whether in person or online, was effective in helping staff and youth who already understood YDS to push their organizations to a higher level.

“In terms of coaching, it’s about simply being a support and a resource to organizations to help them figure out what their goals are and to help them to get there, whether it’s through training, conversations, workshops, strategy sessions, or brainstorming.”
(Coach 1)

Trainings focused on restorative practice provided a solid foundation for the YDS framework, because this practice is well aligned with the three pillars of YDS. Restorative practice provides an opportunity for participants to reflect on their motivations, respects the developmental needs

of youth, and is facilitated through youth-adult partnerships. In turn, the quality of these practices enhance youths' and adults' YDS experiences. In fact, we have seen demand for further training on and application of restorative practice.

The Neutral Zone's support to participating organizations, not only through sharing knowledge but also through providing small grants, was a nice bonus for local organizations. It created opportunities for youth across southeast Michigan to make a meaningful impact in their community.

"[The Neutral Zone] still being able to give \$2,000 in mini-grants really bolstered the organizations' morale...because people are still willing to fund [their] projects and [they] can still help [their] youth out in this way. [They're] still a part of this great network, and we can lean on each other during these times." (Coach 4)

Challenges

Coaches stated that the logistical component of the YDS initiative was the most challenging. Coordinating participants' schedules was difficult because the Neutral Zone and the other participating organizations were out-of-school programs. Additionally, coaches found that, after the overnight retreat, when the Neutral Zone began doing quarterly coaching visits and monthly calls, some organizations would get so caught up in their work that they were difficult to engage, whether in person or virtually. One coach stated that "trying to keep engagement after the initial launch has been hard for about one-third of the agencies." Coaches had to do a lot of follow-up and had to press adults about when to schedule coaching visits and other supports they needed.

The Future of YDS

Although this specific project has generally involved community-based organizations, the Neutral Zone has worked in the past with many other entities, such as libraries, art organizations, adolescent health centers, high schools, and municipalities. The components of the YDS initiative can be widely applicable in other youth-focused settings, including schools.

"As much as we implement [YDS] in out-of-school situations, these are all components that can be really beneficial for all humans, especially in a school day. If we approach school-day learning with this YDS lens, it will shift it in such a positive way." (Coach 1)

Neutral Zone staff have told us that they aim to continue their work in southeast Michigan. Coaches have stated that they have grown a network and a movement in the area. Although the Neutral Zone has served a lot of agencies, there are still more to serve. At the same time, the organization is also on a path to identify other communities to work with in other regions, especially because coaches are comfortable with a hybrid approach to the work. They can travel to other locations to do in-person trainings and follow up with the remote sites virtually.

"Because of the presence of virtual space and the fact that so many people are familiar with Zoom, you could easily ask someone in California to do community building and coach sites there. It wasn't a disaster doing virtual coaching, so [Neutral Zone] could branch out in the future and be more widespread than just southeast Michigan." (Coach 4)

With the efforts to expand the network across regions, the Neutral Zone might benefit from having a strategic plan to develop resources, training modules, and materials for organizations outside southeast Michigan. Coaches have expressed the desire both to work towards capacity building to build more hard-copy and virtual tools and to evaluate services and supports that can be made a regular component of the Neutral Zone's work.

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