



# Benefits and Challenges in Building a Community Youth Development Coalition

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How can the field of youth development move from being an assortment of valuable but often disconnected programs to become a coordinated system or sector with greater policy relevance? One strategy for working toward this goal involves building a community youth development coalition. Successful coalitions can take various forms, but most are marked by shared goals, inclusive membership, community legitimacy and the ability to mobilize community assets and resources to create policy or institutional change. Through funding and technical assistance provided to grantees in seven Sacramento-area communities, REACH sought to create effective community youth development coalitions as part of a broader regional change strategy.

This issue brief examines what has been learned about the coalition-building process during the REACH youth development program. We first review benefits associated with the coalition development strategy, some realized concretely during REACH and others whose promise became apparent. Then we focus on the types of challenges that must be overcome if these benefits are to be more fully realized. The goal is to inform other funders or communities that wish to create vital, effective coalitions capable of advancing youth development goals.

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## About the REACH Issue Brief Series

In 2006, Sierra Health Foundation began the REACH youth development program, committing \$8 million to support the healthy development of youth in the Greater Sacramento, California, region. As a centerpiece of the larger program, seven communities in the region were awarded grants from 2006 to 2010 to assess community conditions, build community capacity for change and implement strategies that increase meaningful supports and opportunities for youth. Coalition development and direct, meaningful engagement of youth are key REACH objectives. Committed to making REACH a learning opportunity, Sierra Health Foundation asked an evaluation team from the University of California, Davis to assess the outcomes of the program and to document lessons learned. This issue brief is one of a series developed to share outcomes and lessons on topics of interest. For more information on the REACH program, visit Sierra Health Foundation's web site, [www.sierrahealth.org](http://www.sierrahealth.org). For information on the evaluation, visit the UC Cooperative Extension California Communities Program web site, <http://groups.ucanr.org/CCP/index.cfm>.



## Benefits from Having a Community Coalition

A range of benefits are made more likely when a community youth development coalition is in place. Though no single REACH coalition realized all these benefits, their collective experience is instructive. Among the promising benefits we observed are the following.

**Having a visible, recognized “place to go” for youth issues and concerns, thus helping put these issues on the agenda of community leaders.** In one community this resulted in the development of a youth master plan that built bridges between the city, schools and community organizations.

**Supporting better communication and cooperation.** The web sites and listservs of many coalitions become a common resource to spread the word about youth-related resources and opportunities. One coalition has become a hub for grant seeking and joint fundraising activities that benefit multiple youth-serving organizations.

**Establishing meaningful opportunities for youth to be involved in community service, policy advocacy or personal enrichment.** One coalition enlisted youth from throughout the community in efforts to pass a local tax for preventative youth development programs. Another worked to increase the number of area youth participating in community service related to environmental preservation.

**Providing a context in which meaningful youth-adult partnerships can flourish and youth exercise responsibility and leadership.** With appropriate support from adult allies, youth in coalitions have taken lead roles in running a teen council, organizing a talent show, mapping safe and unsafe places in their community and developing the agenda for a youth leadership conference.

**Spreading knowledge of quality youth development practices and modeling those practices in the coalition’s work and activities.** Coalition leaders have participated in joint training sessions offered by the foundation’s technical assistance providers, but also organized similar sessions in their respective communities.



The West Sacramento Youth Resource Coalition and its Sactown Heroes youth leadership group are regulars at city hall, gathering there for coalition, city council and youth commission meetings. Youth and adult members of the coalition work together and with community organizations to nurture youth leaders and promote policy changes that support young people in their community.



**Establishing the local community as one node in a set of broader youth development networks at the regional, state or national level.** Local coalitions benefit by learning more about the activities and resources of broader networks, but equally important is developing a local base to ensure that those networks are responsive to everyday realities and concerns.

### Challenges for Coalition Development

Our analysis identified five key challenges that have shaped coalition development outcomes during REACH:

- establishing a strategic focus;
- anchoring collaboration in institutions;
- developing a social mobilization strategy;
- dealing with conflict and emotions; and
- staffing the coalition.

### Establishing a Strategic Focus

The challenge REACH grantees faced was not a lack of activity or a dearth of good project ideas, but how to make strategic use of limited time and resources. As articulated by Gardner (2005, chapter 3), elements of local strategy include:

- developing a short list of priorities—things that matter more than others;
- forging more deliberate program connections rather than allowing fragmentation and isolated programs to be the norm;
- targeting resources and shaping budgets based on the identified priorities and the opportunities created by program connections; and
- setting in place outcomes that can be measured and gathering good data to inform decisions about what works and what needs to be changed.

REACH technical assistance efforts helped grantees become more strategic as the program proceeded. Examples of how strategic focus came to be framed include:

- In the Meadowview neighborhood in Sacramento, reducing school dropout rates is the community-scale goal that unites diverse project activities such as the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project, youth action

research within high schools, and efforts to make schools more relevant by infusing workforce development and career education into the curriculum.

- Spurred by federal grants, both El Dorado Hills and South Sacramento are committed to reducing youth drug and alcohol abuse. The Vision Coalition in El Dorado Hills provides an umbrella structure that complements the work of existing youth-serving organizations through grant writing, mini-grants, training, special events, media activity and relationship building.
- The Woodland Youth Council identified reducing teen pregnancy as a priority, and began working with schools and community-based organizations to implement policy changes such as providing family life classes in earlier grades.
- Rancho Cordova identified youth safety as a priority and conducted focus groups with youth and adults to inform action strategies.
- West Sacramento identified youth voice in policy as a priority and sought to establish a reinvigorated youth commission and a youth school board position as first steps.
- The Galt Area Youth Coalition helped bring stakeholders from schools and the city together to create a comprehensive youth master plan for the community, identifying priority issues for joint action on behalf of youth.

Coalition partners often have competing priorities, and pressures to take on too many goals are always present. While a wide range of specific activities can support overall youth development goals, successful coalitions have an overall strategy that focuses efforts and makes it possible to track outcomes over time, such as college matriculation rates, teen pregnancy statistics or drug and alcohol abuse indicators.

### Anchoring Collaboration in Institutions

Although they are frequently viewed as impenetrable bureaucracies that are hard to work with, schools were the most consistent REACH coalition partners, accounting for approximately one in four adult coalition participants (usually student services support staff such as a Healthy Start coordinator, director of family support services, school counselor, etc). In the majority of REACH communities, coalition funds were used to expand existing student services at schools.

Coalitions benefited by gaining access to youth and to school resources, including facilities, staff, data and community legitimacy. Schools gained partners to advocate for funding in the political arena, and community coalitions gain powerful institutional allies as they pursue more funding for youth development programs (for more on schools as coalition partners, see Fabionar and Campbell 2010).

The REACH experience also revealed tensions that are inherent in creating an institutional home for a community youth development coalition. These include:

- If the coalition tries to build from an existing organization, they face the reality that it is rare to find a single organization with experience and skills *both* in engaging youth creatively and in rallying adults from key community institutions.
- Where the coalition tries to make use of a pre-existing community collaborative, they benefit from established relationships, visibility and staff capacity for a quicker start-up. On the other hand, they face the potential of competing agendas and time demands.
- Where the coalition starts from scratch, they have more control over their agenda, but face a steep organizational development learning curve, a more uncertain path forward and greater difficulty in producing short-term results.
- In general, coalitions in which the lead agency is primarily oriented to deliver programs had an easier time accessing youth, but fared less well at developing effective community change strategies. The opposite was true in cases where the lead agency's core mission is community-scale organizing or collaboration.

By creating a separate youth council associated with the broader coalition, grantees found they could 1) engage youth who are looking for a venue to interact with friends, 2) create regular youth leadership opportunities, and 3) prepare youth to interact with adults in a meaningful fashion. However, unless explicit efforts are made, these groups can simply isolate youth from arenas where key coalition strategy decisions are made.

West Sacramento provides an example of a coalition that succeeded in overcoming a variety of challenges associated with anchoring collaboration. The REACH grantee was a health care service provider and no previous

community infrastructure could be drawn on to base the coalition. To build their coalition, they developed not only a strong youth organization—Sactown Heroes—but also ties to adult youth allies in key institutions like schools, city government, neighborhood associations and a teen center. This coalition development process took time, and proceeded unevenly, but has begun to raise the profile of youth development in the community and may lead to an invigorated city youth commission, to youth representation on civic boards and/or to a more permanent home for youth development work within a city agency.

### Developing a Social Mobilization Strategy

The absence of clear mechanisms for recruiting and orienting new members, both youth and adult, is a common challenge for community coalitions. There is a tendency to wait and see who shows up and let the coalition agenda emerge from them, rather than engaging in active outreach to particular youth/adult populations in light of a specific agenda. This makes it less likely that particularly disadvantaged youth will be engaged in the coalition, since it often takes special efforts to enable these youth to attend meetings, feel comfortable and develop confidence that their voice is respected. It also will make it less likely that individuals and organizations beyond those that are well-known to initiating staff and their existing networks will be engaged, which can result in the exclusion of potentially powerful resources for change (for more see Erbstein 2010).

The REACH experience demonstrates that more effective coalitions have a social mobilization strategy that includes:

- a clear and culturally sensitive process for recruiting, orienting and supporting new adult and youth members;
- specific leadership roles for members;
- active outreach to particular youth/adult populations in light of a specific substantive agenda; and
- targeting particular groups for membership based on the resources that are needed to advance goals.

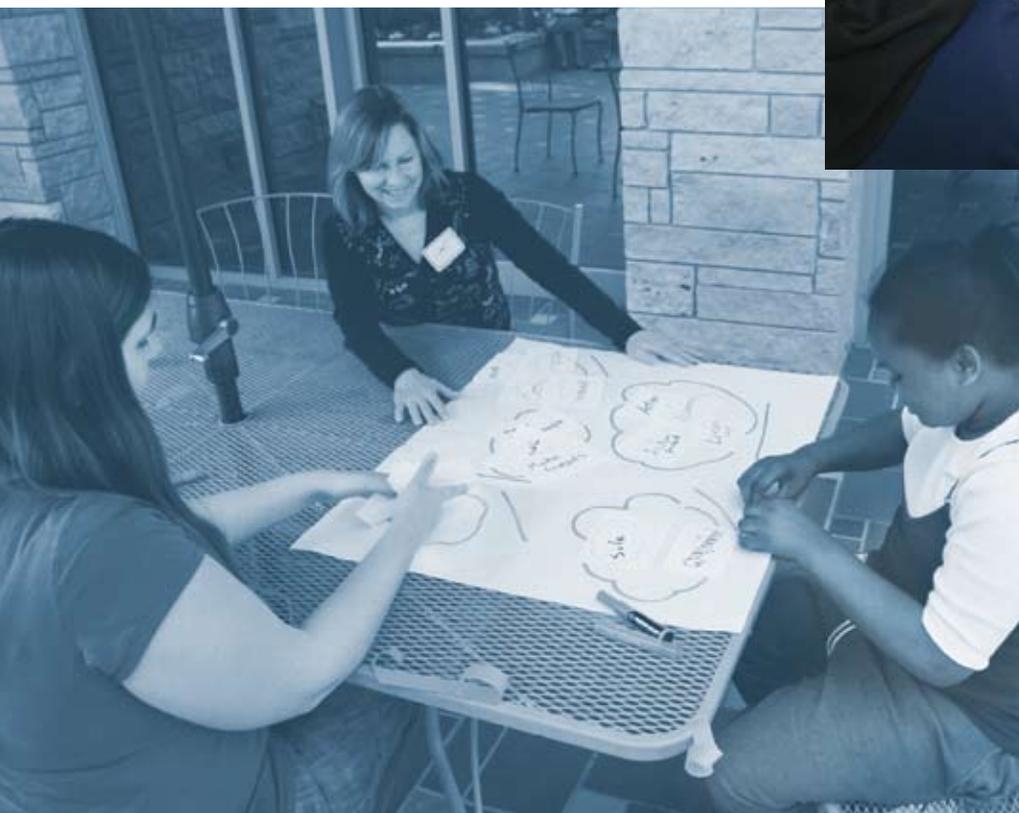
An example from REACH is the deliberate effort by the Galt coalition to gather representatives of major stakeholder groups together to create a youth master plan for the community. Targeted outreach and relationship development brought together school, city and community leaders, along with engaged youth. Youth played an important role in the outreach strategy, connecting with other youth to get them involved, as well as informing their parents about the effort. For example, Latino youth engaged with the coalition are able to inform their parents about the community effort, helping to decrease the sense of isolation from broader local initiatives experienced by many Latino families.

### Dealing with Conflict and Emotions

Listening for and attending to emotions is essential to public planning, much as it is to building relations among friends (see Forester 1999, chapter 7). This is particularly the case in social environments where inequality and cultural distinctions are prevalent, and thus the negotiation of social meanings, identities and emotions is part of the subtext in any public deliberation process. Some examples of how conflict and the resulting emotions can threaten coalition development include:

- disagreements over how grant funds have been spent or how staff supported by grant funds are allocating their time and effort;

- resentment caused by excessive burdens placed on a few coalition members who do most of the work;
- frustration over the pace at which the coalition is moving forward on its key objectives;
- anxiety over the fact that funding may run out before the coalition has established itself;
- conflict related to community ownership of the process, particularly when site coordinators or other coalition members are from outside the community and/or do not share the ethnicity and experience base of most residents; and
- a tendency to avoid difficult discussions because members lack the communication skills or group processes to deal with conflict.



Throughout the REACH Program, youth and adults from all of the coalitions participated in interactive group workshops, training sessions and planning meetings.

These types of issues are not unusual in coalition development, which has been said to follow a trajectory from *forming* to *storming*, then on to *norming* and *performing* (Tuckman, 1965). Yet foundation technical assistance efforts often stress the rational side of community planning (e.g. logic models, work plans, evaluation instruments) at the expense of providing more context-specific coaching and troubleshooting advice during the “storming” and “norming” part of this cycle.

REACH provided some promising examples of what works in dealing with conflict and emotions. One coalition used a technical assistance provider as a neutral facilitator at a difficult coalition meeting where emotions ran high. Another coalition that found itself stuck with internal conflict took a step back and carved out time in which its members engaged in one-on-one conversations in order to increase empathy for other views and build relationships in a non-threatening setting. The foundation found that it could also play a key role simply by providing a safe space for leaders from the seven different communities to come together, share their concerns and difficulties and brainstorm ideas.



The Youth Action Team at Luther Burbank High School is a diverse group of students who meet regularly to research, identify and advocate for positive changes in their school. The team is supported by the Sacramento ACT Meadowview Partnership.

### Staffing the Coalition

Both youth development and coalition development are staff intensive enterprises, so it was no surprise that approximately 80 percent of the REACH grant funds went to support salaries and benefits. These staff, hired by the local fiscal agents, were the key liaisons between the foundation and the community. They also were the focus of technical assistance efforts. These arrangements proved beneficial in many ways, including:

- streamlining communication between the sites and foundation staff;
- providing a focal point for technical assistance efforts; and
- developing a support system among coordinators at different sites marked by supportive relationships and an ability to learn from each other’s experiences.

But the arrangements also posed challenges, for two primary reasons. The first was staff turnover. Within the first 18 months of implementation, five of the seven grantees had experienced turnover in one or more key REACH staff members. After that point there was greater stability, with only one coordinator position turning over. Turnover is not atypical in the field of youth development, and has been linked in the literature to a range of factors including low salary, job satisfaction, efficacy in the position and lack of professional growth opportunities (Benson & Pittman, 2001, p.223). A clear lesson is the need to expect turnover and have plans in place to minimize its negative impacts. For example, it may be important to make sure that work plan development and technical assistance efforts reach beyond project staff to include key community partners who can then provide continuity when staff members depart.

The second reason was that paid project staff brought very different skills, experience and community relationships. In cases where staff members were already well known and trusted among key partners and well informed about community issues and concerns, coalitions tended to prosper more quickly. For funders a paradox arises: If they leave staffing decisions to grantees they lose control over a key driver of outcomes, but if they exert more control they risk taking on new burdens and restricting community autonomy.

At a minimum, the REACH experience suggests that funders should help grantee staff gain access to professional development opportunities, including not just formal training but hands-on coaching that helps them think through their day-to-day challenges. Community youth development work requires a daunting range of competencies or capacities. Key factors identified during REACH include:

- core staff rootedness, experience and reputation in the community;
- staff with experience in community organizing and with targeted youth populations;
- meeting facilitation skills (especially how to facilitate meetings with youth);
- basic concepts in systems/policy change and in asset-based community development;
- knowledge of strategies for youth engagement/youth voice;
- ability to plan for organizational/fiscal sustainability;
- ability to engage with parents and caretakers;
- evaluation and data gathering for results-based accountability; and
- knowledge of the broader field, including the substance of successful approaches used in other communities.

## Conclusion

Coalition development is a promising strategy for advancing youth development priorities, but does not come easily. Communities should be very intentional in deciding whether to pursue the coalition development approach. Having a coalition in place can lead to many positive outcomes, and may be critical to particular types of outcomes, but it comes at a substantial cost of time and resources. It may be that other strategies can be equally effective in realizing some key objectives that expand the broad menu of opportunities that support youth development in communities. For example, if the goal is simply to expand inter-organizational networking (local and regional), or provide training in youth development principles, working partnerships are needed but not necessarily an integrated coalition with staff, a recruitment process, regular meetings, a coordinated agenda or strategy, etc.

For communities that choose the coalition development strategy, lessons learned from the REACH community coalitions can help in anticipating likely difficulties and staying focused on what they most want to achieve.

## Key Recommendations:

- Anchor the effort in individuals and institutions with the requisite skills, experience and community legitimacy;
- Focus the effort on changing one or two key community-scale outcomes, rather than attempting to do too many things or spreading resources thinly;
- Be intentional about getting the right people involved, and devote the time needed to engage underrepresented youth and adult populations;
- Seek out adults who are good at supporting local youth while allowing them to exercise independent responsibility and leadership;
- Pay attention to the emotions generated by the work, dealing directly with conflict while gaining energy from the emotions that motivate people to act and to stay committed—including the widespread desire to support young people;
- Learn from others by becoming part of broader networks;
- Keep in mind that with patience, resolve and a clear strategy, significant gains are within reach.

## For More Information

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