



creative youth
DEVELOPMENT

Local Peer Learning Networks

**Strengthening and Advancing Creative Youth
Development Practice**

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In collaboration with the CYD National Partnership's Field Building Action Team

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On the second Friday morning of every month, members of the San Diego Creative Youth Development Network meet together for several hours. They share evolving ideas and lessons learned, talk through challenging issues and solutions, develop supportive relationships, and set goals and priorities for the six-year-old network. In rural western Massachusetts, the Berkshire Cultural Assets Network (BCAN), founded in 2018, brings together staff from cultural organizations focused on education and community engagement. BCAN's leaders believe that working regionally can build awareness and communication around creative youth development.

Peer learning networks like these—focused fully or in part on creative youth development—are emerging across the country. They are part of a movement influenced by the Creative Youth Development National Partnership, which works with the broader field to drive collective action to advance creative youth development (CYD). Woven through the national partnership's agenda are three core values: racial equity and social justice, youth voice, and collective action. Field building—professional development, networking, and technical assistance—is a strategic priority.

Peer learning networks promote the sharing of knowledge, experiences, ideas, and promising practices among professionals. Whether formal or informal, they give people a chance to know others who are engaged in similar work with similar challenges. Close interaction with peers can be difficult to find in the nonprofit world, especially for those working in smaller organizations with limited resources. The mutual encouragement and professional growth that happens over time through a peer network can make a profound difference in individuals and their organizations, and ultimately in the youth they serve. Looking at the broader picture, as peer networks proliferate, collectively they will help to advance the creative youth development field as a whole, including the growth of cross-sector collaboration.

This paper describes the benefits of CYD peer learning networks, their structure and function, challenges they face, and attributes that contribute to success. Designed as a reference tool for practitioners, funders, and key stakeholders, it is based on interviews the CYD National Partnership conducted with 11 emergent and sustaining networks around the country. Short profiles of several networks illustrate the diversity and potential of peer learning as a catalyst to creative youth development.

IMPACT

Peer learning networks have a positive impact—immediate and over the long term—on practitioners, organizations, youth, and communities. Arts education leaders observe these outcomes:

Build rewarding relationships with others doing CYD work. Arts-related nonprofits often have similar missions, overlapping constituencies, and staff with compatible backgrounds and interests. But despite natural affinities and geographic proximity, CYD practitioners—and other arts educators—sometimes work on parallel tracks in relative isolation. A peer learning network gives practitioners in a community an accessible way to communicate, get to know each other, and enjoy time together. Deep connections emerge that benefit individuals, organizations, and stakeholders, extending to the regional and national levels. Peer networks can leverage resources for professional development and travel expenses for youth and adult members so can share their work at national and regional conferences and visit other CYD organizations to meet colleagues and exchange practices. The San Diego CYD Network, for example, has helped practitioners and youth attend national conferences every year since 2017, with support from the Clare Rose Foundation.

Share knowledge, information, and experience. Peer learning networks are brain trusts, idea incubators, and feedback mechanisms. Access to the collective expertise of colleagues and key stakeholders gives the capacity and incentive to avoid starting from scratch, minimize duplication of effort, identify funding sources, and allocate resources efficiently. Some networks develop and circulate programmatic resources, a concept the Chicago-based Ingenuity has used effectively with the guidance of a peer advisory panel. Members of the Boston Youth Arts Impact Network, which focuses on measuring and communicating CYD impact, post evaluation tools, templates, documents, and examples on a resource website. Other networks offer regular professional development opportunities featuring both peer exchange and outside experts. Ultimately, the collaborative learning that occurs strengthens CYD work throughout the field, as practitioners use collective expertise to better involve and serve youth.

Engage youth in decision making and practice. An essential pillar of creative youth development core values and practice is youth-centered leadership and decision making, which supports

personal, social, and intellectual growth. The same is true for youth engagement in peer learning networks. Youth find mentoring, leadership, and skill-building opportunities, while the multigenerational perspectives within the network benefit everyone. Existing networks are at different points on the spectrum of engagement, from having youth advisory groups to involving youth fully in core leadership. Youth-designed and -led gatherings such as the CYD National Partnership's National Youth Artists Summit led by the National Guild for Community Arts Education and the San Diego Creative Youth Development Summit are powerful experiences for organizers and participants of all ages. Some networks, like the San Diego CYD Network and RYSE West Contra Costa Network in Oakland, California, clearly identify youth as members and leaders. For others, deeper youth engagement is an aspiration. The New York City Arts in Education Roundtable has invited youth to its annual conference, and the board is now beginning to look intentionally at ways to involve them in decision making and programming.

Stimulate involvement in the national CYD movement. With their wealth of expertise, local networks can join together in a vibrant nationwide “network of networks,” sharing resources, stories, and lessons learned with the broader field and serving as models for networks in other communities. They can also be persuasive advocates for the value of CYD programs. By promoting cross-sector collaboration with organizations working in community development, education, social justice, and other fields, networks cultivate shared ownership of a movement to ensure young people’s academic, professional, and personal success. These positive outcomes for youth also translate into positive community outcomes.

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

CYD networks share a commitment to creative youth development, but their origins, structures, and function vary. Nicole Upton of Ingenuity’s Partnerships and Professional Learning program cautions that effective networks are “created intentionally and not overnight.” What works in one community may not necessarily be feasible or desirable in another. Networks can be initiated in multiple ways, including:

- By a group of practitioners, organizations, or young artists that perceives a need for peer learning and collaboration

- Within an existing arts education network or as a program of a larger arts education or arts advocacy organization
- As a result of a collaborative CYD initiative that brings organizations and individuals together
- In collaboration with a funder to support capacity building in creative youth development

Some networks are conveners and connectors of organizations and people working in creative youth development. Others are service providers offering learning and professional development based on stakeholders' needs. Or they may have a combination of purposes. (See page 10 for examples of these different structures.) Within this varied universe, peer learning networks have some common features:

- Membership includes some combination of organizations, individual practitioners, youth, and partners (such as funders, civic leaders, and leaders in allied sectors). Organizations can be providers whose sole mission is creative youth development, or providers that offer CYD programming as part of a broader purpose. Individual practitioners include art educators, teaching artists, classroom teachers, and others who work directly with youth. Networks identify members in a number of ways, including by invitation, through local or regional outreach, and word of mouth. Networks clarify their rules of engagement with policies that define the qualifications and responsibilities of membership.
- A lead facilitator or convener, either an individual or an organization, that serves as the network's administrative and programmatic hub. Some networks have their own staff, which may consist of volunteers, full- or part-time professionals, or a combination, depending on the network's size and funding. Staff roles vary, but can include some combination of program design and facilitation, internal and external communication, membership outreach, and fundraising. Some networks are independent nonprofit entities with governing boards, while others are housed in larger, backbone organizations that provide staffing and sometimes funding.
- Funding sources. Networks seek resources from traditional sources: federal, state, and local government; foundations; individuals; and nonprofit organizations that host the network.

CHALLENGES

Peer learning networks face challenges that are familiar to anyone involved as a staff or board member in a small or emergent nonprofit—or even in an established organization.

Developing resources. Finding resources is a persistent challenge. To complicate the problem, members and board members can be wary of competing with their own organizations for funding. In networks with staff, fundraising may require training to strengthen skills. Even then, generating resources can consume a disproportionate amount of staff time.

Creating other infrastructure. Peer learning networks may emerge as informal groups, but eventually their impact depends on having a viable organizational structure. In addition to resource development, networks need to address governance, staffing, planning, financial management, administration, communication, and other basic issues.

Cultivating inclusivity. Intentional membership development and outreach does not always happen in networks that grow by word of mouth. As a result, diverse perspectives are missing from important conversations, and the valuable peer learning that a network provides will not be accessible to everyone who should benefit. Seeking and welcoming members from a diverse group of organizations within a community or region is becoming a priority in growing inclusive peer learning networks.

Sharing power. Part of the inclusivity challenge is the potential for large, well-resourced organizations, however well-intentioned, to dominate network activities. All network members--especially young artists--should share internal and external opportunities to create resources, plan programs, facilitate conversations, attend conferences, and contribute to national storytelling about creative youth development.

Dealing with trust and candor issues. Network members may be apprehensive about exposing problems, weaknesses, or failures in frank conversations with their peers, especially when they are new to the peer learning concept and haven't yet established a foundation of trust. For staff from organizations with proprietary rules about ideas and programs that they develop, open

information sharing is challenging, if not impossible. Unfortunately, sometimes peer learning networks are not a good fit for these organizations.

Stimulating member and board participation. Though joining a peer network may sound like an ideal opportunity, in practice, adding a regular commitment to already-demanding schedules can be complicated. Those who agree to serve on a network's board or advisory group may find that the responsibilities are more complex and time consuming than they anticipated, and so their commitment and participation may lag as a result.

Understanding of creative youth development issues and practices. CYD peer learning often happens in networks and organizations that have a broader focus on arts education or in arts and cultural institutions. It may be difficult to find network members whose work is intentionally aligned with CYD core values, and the learning curve for others can be steep.

ATTRIBUTES OF EFFECTIVE PEER LEARNING NETWORKS

Peer learning networks that center on creative youth development tend to share principles and practices that make them effective.

1. A culture of trust and transparency. Effective networks welcome members from diverse organizations that provide creative youth development programming. They create a sense of community with space for deep listening and open dialogue while taking a collaborative approach to decisions about network purposes, planning, and program design. Members value personal interaction, enjoying the time spent together as colleagues with a shared commitment.
2. Dedicated resources. Adequate, ongoing financial and human resources are in place to maximize the network's impact on youth, communities, and the CYD field as a whole. If a funder serves a backbone role, the network remains fully responsible for setting its own direction.
3. Clarity of purpose. Members understand and value the network's purpose and are attuned to changing needs. Program delivery models match what members and stakeholders identify as common interests and challenges

4. Youth involvement. Some networks are intentional about engaging young people in leadership, decisionmaking, and program development and delivery. But in practice, most youth engagement often focuses on mentoring by practitioners from member organizations, youth summits, and similar programs. It is still an aspiration in many peer learning networks, and some do not think of it as a goal.

5. Informative and engaging meetings. Members have regularly_scheduled meetings and other opportunities for interaction that combine practical information, support, and problem solving. Much of the relationship building that happens through peer networks begins here.

6. Ongoing assessment. Assessment is integral to the network's structure and programming. Done consistently, it informs decisionmaking, stimulates improvement, and helps the network meet members' expectations. Assessment is also an essential mechanism for demonstrating impact to members, stakeholders, partners, and funders.

7. Deep member engagement. Peer learning networks have the greatest impact on members—and ultimately on youth and communities—when members are actively involved. Effective networks seek and expect consistent participation. They promote collective thinking and decisionmaking so that members influence the network's purpose and direction.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the creative youth development field, there's an unequivocal passion for the work. But many people work with small budgets and limited infrastructure. Some organizations have the will and the potential to do CYD work, but not the resources. Others lack connections to organizations and colleagues in other communities or regions who can share practices, challenges, and solutions. The people interviewed for this issue brief confirm that their networks give them valuable access to learning how others do it.

What about the big picture? How could a strong, nationwide, interconnected group of CYD peer learning networks affect the field, young people, and communities? Among the possibilities:

- A consistent youth voice in shaping their own experiences and futures
- Stronger, better-organized networks with more extensive resources, including access to funding
- More genuine collaboration and less competition among organizations with common values, visions, and stakeholders
- Better public understanding of the principles, practices, and impact of creative youth development
- A commitment to racial equity that amplifies historically oppressed voices and helps create positive social change
- More opportunities for advocacy and greater potential for policy change
- Higher visibility among funders, elected officials, and school systems

This list is just the beginning. As the saying goes, “A rising tide lifts all boats.” Imagine the landscape—and the impact on youth—as peer learning networks dedicated to creative youth development multiply and galvanize around core values of racial equity and social justice, youth voice, and collective action.

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Established and emergent peer learning networks across the country strengthen practitioners, organizations, and the growing creative youth development movement. Here are some examples:

[Berkshire Cultural Assets Network \(BCAN\)](#)

Research shows that networks have an especially important function in rural areas because they connect people who may otherwise have limited communication. A new peer learning network in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, grew out of a nonprofit summit that attracted more than 200 organizations and stimulated an interest in more cross-sector conversations. BCAN's members come from cultural organizations that work in education and community engagement, but it is not dedicated to creative youth development. CYD activity is diffuse in Berkshire County, and interest is growing. One of BCAN's goals is to promote knowledge sharing about innovative work that relates to CYD criteria. BCAN is supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

[Boston Youth Arts Impact Network](#)

The Boston Youth Arts Impact Network, a group of 75 youth arts organizations in the greater Boston area, grew out of the desire to do better at measuring and communicating the impact of youth arts programs. Founded in 2014, it provides technical support, professional development, and peer learning, along with a resource-rich website, so that organizations can maximize their impact and serve youth better. A readiness assessment by the education nonprofit EdVestors, Boston Public Schools, and researcher and evaluator Julia Gittleman grounded the network in

community needs. The Barr Foundation provides full funding as part of its support for Boston Public Schools Arts Expansion, a public-private partnership to increase quality arts education for all students.

[92nd Street Y/Center for Arts Learning and Leadership](#), New York City

The Center's emergent peer learning network is a new and promising concept that expands on the ongoing commitment to youth programs, mentorship, and partnership within the 92nd Street Y, a large, established nonprofit cultural and community center. The first annual New York City Teen Arts Week, organized in 2019 with more than 30 arts and cultural organization partners, led to the formation of a citywide network of arts educators. Active participation during the first year indicates an enthusiasm for information sharing and mutual support among peers, some of whom had never met. Research and evaluation, an integral practice for all Center for Arts Learning and Leadership programs, will help guide network planning and program development going forward.

[San Diego Creative Youth Development Network](#) (SC-CYD)

This active coalition of young people, providers, and partners is dedicated to harnessing members' collective strength to build and support the field of creative youth development in the San Diego region. Launched in 2013 as an informal group of six like-minded peers, its membership has grown to more than 20 cross-sector organizations. It has become a vibrant presence in the field, offering a blueprint for the development of other networks. The convener and funder is the Clare Rose Foundation Creative Youth Initiative, which published a report on early lessons for funders, regional networks, and CYD stakeholders in spring 2019.

[RYSE West Contra Costa Arts Network](#), California

In 2019 [RYSE Center](#) led the creation of this emergent CYD network, which grew out of [Arts Now](#), a California Alliance for Arts Education campaign to increase access and equity to arts education for all students. It soon became a collective of four groups with aligned values: RYSE, [Richmond Art Center](#), [East Bay Center for the Performing Arts](#), and the Visual and Performing Arts department ([VAPA](#)), West Contra Costa Unified School District. Youth empowerment is the central focus, as the group explores ways to stimulate youth leadership and participation in its work with educators and schools.