



STRENGTHENING YOUTH POLICY



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Positive Youth Development: State Strategies

By Thaddeus Ferber, Elizabeth Gaines and Christi Goodman*

A growing body of research shows that kids who feel safe, valued and connected to caring adults are more likely to be positive about life, engaged in school and emotionally healthy; they also are less likely to participate in destructive or delinquent behavior. This research, although it seems based upon common sense, has led to a dramatic shift in thinking about youth policy—from viewing some youth based on their risk factors or deficits versus viewing all youth as having certain strengths, assets and protective factors to build upon.

Policymakers across the country are responding to the research and increasing public awareness of what is necessary to change the odds for youth. They recognize that, too often, society has reacted with fragmented and disjointed responses to youth problems and that no real plan exists to address promotion of youth strengths. Although no one method may be perfect to address the challenges in creating effective youth policies, states are taking steps to find the best among a wide range of possible solutions. This issue brief shares supporting research and examples from states that are tackling these challenges and succeeding. It also includes examples of what can be done to align and coordinate youth policies to promote youth development in any state.

Research on Making a Difference for Youth

Over the years, researchers have learned why some young people in disadvantaged situations “beat the odds,” while others succumb to them. There is little magic involved—some young people make it because

From Beating the Odds to Changing the Odds

At 18, I was immersed in trying to answer the deeply troubling question of why some kids and cousins I grew up with had already taken detours off the road to success. I also wanted to understand why people—students and professors alike—were surprised at how well-educated, well-rounded and “well-adjusted” I was, given my demographics.

As a budding sociologist, I was already rejecting the theories that I had “beaten the odds.” True, I came to Oberlin with a diploma from the Washington, D.C., public schools, from an all-black community, co-raised by a widowed mother who worked long hours and a godmother who took me into her home during the week. But I did not feel that I had “beaten” anything. I felt that I was supposed to succeed and had been equipped to do so. The idea that luck had more than an incidental role was insulting. I wanted to, in sociologists’ terms, explain the variation.

Twenty-five years later, I can explain the source of my frustration with those who praised me and can label, if not prove, the source of the variation. I had not “beaten the odds.” Instead, others—family, neighbors, church members, teachers and youth workers—had changed the odds by offering me a path of supports and opportunities. In addition, a variety of institutions, most notably the schools, had offered me high-quality academic and nonacademic instruction.

Young people need environments that offer them nurturing, guidance, rules, structure, clear expectations and consistent limits. They need opportunities to explore, excel, contribute, earn, lead and join. They need high-quality instruction and access to basic care and services. While stern measures are certainly necessary for those young people who have already committed crimes, we will never fully address this country’s epidemic of violence without a full continuum of response that includes supports, opportunities and services in addition to sanctions. Only in this way can we truly change the odds for all youth.

Source: K. Pittman, “Changing the Odds,” *Youth Today* 4, no. 2 (March/April 1995).

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they had more help along the way. Kids need a well-coordinated array of people, places and possibilities to help them as they grow and develop.

Kids beating the odds isn't magic—it's the result of committed youth, parents, communities and policymakers who help to change the odds.

Young people who were sometimes expected to have dropped out of school or wound up dead, in jail, or pregnant, but instead managed to “beat the odds,” were studied to find out why they overcame the challenges in their lives. If a young person overcomes great adversity and thrives, experts thought, there must be something special about them. But research showed otherwise. “The most surprising conclusion emerging from studies of these children is the ordinariness of resilience. . . resilience is made of ordinary rather than extraordinary processes.”¹ Researchers discovered that the odds against those youth were not as bad as originally thought. More supports and opportunities were available to them than were apparent at first glance, and it was those supports and opportunities that made all the difference.

It's not a magic program model—but there are proven effective programmatic features.

High-quality youth programs can and do make a significant difference in many young people's lives. No single model works for all kids in all places, however. Summarizing a five-year study of effective programs in five major cities, researchers concluded, “We found no single focus, strategy or organizational type associated with success—no cookie cutter for policy. For each success, we can point to an apparently identical activity that inner-city youth scorned to attend.”² However, across the extraordinarily diverse universe of programs, they found effective approaches in all categories.

**Figure 1. National Academy of Sciences
Features of Positive Developmental Settings**

- Physical and psychological **safety**
- Appropriate **structure**
- Supportive **relationships**
- Opportunities to **belong**
- Positive **social norms**
- Support for **efficacy** and **mattering**
- Opportunities for **skill-building**
- **Integration** of family, school and community **efforts**

What do these effective places have in common?

A national panel of experts found a consistent set of features that reliably predict program effectiveness across settings—from effective parenting to schools to community organizations (see figure 1). These features contribute to young people's success across a range of goals, from preventing teen pregnancy, drug abuse, unemployment and youth violence to promoting academic, civic and vocational success.^{3, 4}

It's not a magic risk or protective factor—it's the overall number of risk and protective factors.

Researchers have sifted through data on the complexity of young people's lives and sought to identify one or two risk factors (negative influences on a young person's life) and protective factors (positive influences on a young person's life) so powerful that they can reliably direct a young person's life course. They found that there is no one factor—even a factor as traumatic as the death of a parent—that can predict a young person's success or failure.

“Investigators have learned that outcomes generally worsen as risk factors pile up in children's lives.”⁵ Similarly, researchers found that the overall number of protective factors—or assets—strongly correlate with young people's success.⁶ According to the Forum for Youth Investment, “The desired goals of youth development are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve within the bounds of a single intervention unless that intervention is, in reality, not a single program (even

a comprehensive one) but a reasonably complex strategy to change young people's environments and opportunity structures.”⁷

Challenges to Effective Youth Policy

As the research conclusions became clear, the Forum for Youth Investment dubbed it “footnoting common sense.”⁸ Hugh Price, former CEO of the National Urban League, summed up the research this way, “Youth development is what you'd do for your own kid on a good day.” Indeed, little is shown in the research that would surprise most parents. Unfortunately, however, the conclusions of this research create real challenges for policymakers. If the answer were to focus on a single trait in children, one program model to replicate, a key risk factor to prevent, or a particular protective factor to promote, clear and easy policy solutions would be indicated.

Instead, policymakers are left with a longer, more difficult road. Effective youth policy requires an overarching strategy to change lives—one that addresses a full range of risk and protective factors; promotes effective program elements that are more difficult to measure than a fixed model or curriculum; supports not only discrete programs but coherent pathways to success; and recognizes that children and youth do not grow up in programs, but in families and communities.

Many states are developing new strategies to address young people's positive growth and development to avoid specific problems. They are focusing on both program quality and supply. They are using a comprehensive approach to weave together myriad efforts across agency and committee lines. They also are working to make supports for children and youth more accessible and connected to families and communities.

Challenge 1: Focusing on Youth's Strengths and Assets, not only on Discrete Problems

Traditionally, officials have approached youth policy by tackling one “youth problem” at a time—youth violence one year, teen pregnancy another, drug abuse the next. Ultimately, seeking only to help youth avoid problems may not be enough—they also may need help to become fully prepared for adulthood. Policymakers and researchers have become sophisticated at measuring, tracking and preventing the behaviors we don't want young people to exhibit; however, they have not been in the habit of measuring, tracking and promoting the behaviors we do want youth to exhibit. By examining the full range of interrelated outcomes and setting developmental goals for youth, policymakers can be intentional about promoting positive outcomes and also preventing negative ones.

Research shows that the programs that are most effective at promoting positive outcomes for youth are framed in terms of the constructive assets they seek to build, rather than the negative behaviors they seek to avoid. Opportunities to participate in an acting troupe, sports team or artistic endeavor attract and retain youth because they build on their strengths and interests and provide them with an opportunity to develop deep relationships that can change their lives. Programs that focus solely on fixing or preventing problems such as teen pregnancy or gang involvement often have little appeal to young people.

Even serious intervention-focused programs can incorporate youth-centered, strength-based approaches that yield the desired rehabilitation results. Programs that use scare tactics to curb youth violence and delinquency not only are ineffective but also may exacerbate the problem,

whereas programs that include family involvement and social skill development have been proven effective at curbing problem behavior.⁹ Massachusetts, Missouri and Utah have decreased their recidivism rates by shutting down large juvenile institutions and developing small group homes and community-based programs that include opportunities for young people to have clear and consistent consequences, to be involved in decision making, and to have access to high-quality educational and vocational programming.¹⁰ This approach is as effective with juveniles who commit serious offenses—both in ensuring community safety and delivering positive youth outcomes—as it is with juveniles who commit minor offenses.

When efforts are crafted to “fix” youth and families, they miss valuable opportunities to engage youth as positive resources who are capable of transforming the lives of those around them. A youth development approach opens the door for policymakers, program directors and community leaders to engage young people and their families in taking action.

What can states do?

- **Set Positive Developmental Goals for Youth.** Louisiana, Maine and many other states have established positive, developmental results or outcomes they wish to promote across a range from academic to social to health. Louisiana, for example, has developed goals, objectives and strategies to achieve positive developmental outcomes and now collects the data to track results.
- **Track Data on Strengths as well as on Problems.** Many states are finding ways to track positive indicators of youth well-being. This allows policymakers to base public policy decisions on the outcomes they want to see—not only on the ones they do not want to see. In Vermont, two state agencies work as part of a public/private partnership to create a framework that focuses on developing, disseminating and using data on positive indicators such as the percent of youth who participate in youth programs and the percent of high school seniors who continue their education within six months. This framework includes outcomes of well-being, positive social indicators, a variety of measurement tools, legislation, community-based data, Web-based tracking systems and other resources.¹¹
- **Provide Funding to Programs that Focus on the Positive Development of Youth, not Just Preventing Specific Problems.** States can fund effective programs that are framed in terms of the constructive assets they seek to build, rather than on the negative behaviors they seek to avoid. The New York State Department of Health administers Assets Coming Together for Youth, an initiative that focuses on building youth assets and integrating prevention strategies. Funded projects must focus both on prevention of negative outcomes and on the promotion of positive ones.¹²

How can you get started?

- Hold hearings to establish overarching, positive developmental goals for young people in your state and to determine the balance of intervention, prevention and positive developmental opportunities that currently exist in your state.
- Ask for a detailed review of the indicators and benchmarks used in your state by age

group, outcome and focus (whether problem reduction, prevention or positive developmental outcomes) to ensure that the state is tracking both problems to prevent and positive outcomes to promote.

- Request a budget review that examines the balance of funding for prevention of youth problems compared with the promotion of positive outcomes.

Challenge 2: Building Program Quality and Supply

It is easier to document and understand an increase in the number of young people served than an increase in program quality. “Numbers served” is a concrete benchmark upon which to communicate and campaign. However, evidence shows that quality makes a real difference—low-quality programs simply do not achieve the desired outcomes. For example, programs that have untrained staff or operate in an unsafe environment do not have the same positive outcomes as those that have skilled, experienced staff and that operate in a stimulating environment. Improving quality, however, has costs. Youth workers need adequate training (or retraining), compensation and support. Managers and directors need a predictable flow of human, fiscal and material resources. Leaders need sufficient authority to effect change and external accountability to strive for improvements.

Ensuring program quality cannot necessarily be achieved by picking one successful model and replicating it across the state. The features of effective programs identified by the National Academy of Sciences cannot be created by a curriculum or program model alone. They require not only a sustained effort to build capacity, but also innovative assessment and accountability models. Outcomes for youth can be steadily improved by ensuring that programs focus on preparation and development rather than on problem reduction.

What can states do?

- **Increase Supply by Increasing Funding for Successful Programs.** Increasing the supply of after-school programs has been a priority in California and Maryland; both have approved measures to raise the funding levels for after-school programs in the state.
- **Increase Supply by Creating Dedicated Children’s Trust Funds.** The New Mexico Legislature approved the Next Generation Fund in 2005 to secure state funds for youth development programs into the future. A small amount of seed money was put into this dedicated fund and initially supplemented by the New Mexico Community Foundation.¹³
- **Increase Quality by Partnering with Businesses, Community Groups and Faith-based Organizations.** The California Department of Education, the Foundation Consortium for California’s Children and Youth, and the Governor’s Office of the Secretary for Education formed a public/private partnership to develop a strategy to improve the quality of after-school programs in the state. In less than three years, the California Afterschool Partnership and its statewide System of Field Support has provided training and technical assistance to more than 2,600 after-school programs in California.¹⁴
- **Increase Quality through Training and Technical Assistance.** The Youth Development

Training and Resource Center in Connecticut is using a federal grant passed through the governor's office to increase the knowledge and skill of front-line youth workers, supervisors, statewide associations and funders in the youth work community. They provide training and workshops, technical assistance and consultation to those who work with youth. The training has led to a substantial increase in facilities that employ certified youth work practitioners.¹⁵

- **Increase Quality by Allocating Funding Based on Effective Program Features (Not Just on Specific Program Models).** Since research has shown that no one program model is perfect, grantmaking can, instead, be focused on the common features of programs that have been proven successful. Principle-based grantmaking is based on the principles of effective youth development and prevention programs such as those described by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). "Extensive research on prevention programs targeting substance use, tobacco, suicide, violence and early sexual activity has identified critical principles for successful outcomes. The more these principles are incorporated, the more likely the programs will be successful"¹⁶ (see figure 1). The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services has embedded the "Features of Positive Developmental Settings" list compiled by the National Academy of Sciences into its grant-making process to ensure that state-funded programs focus on positive strengths and also prevent negative outcomes.

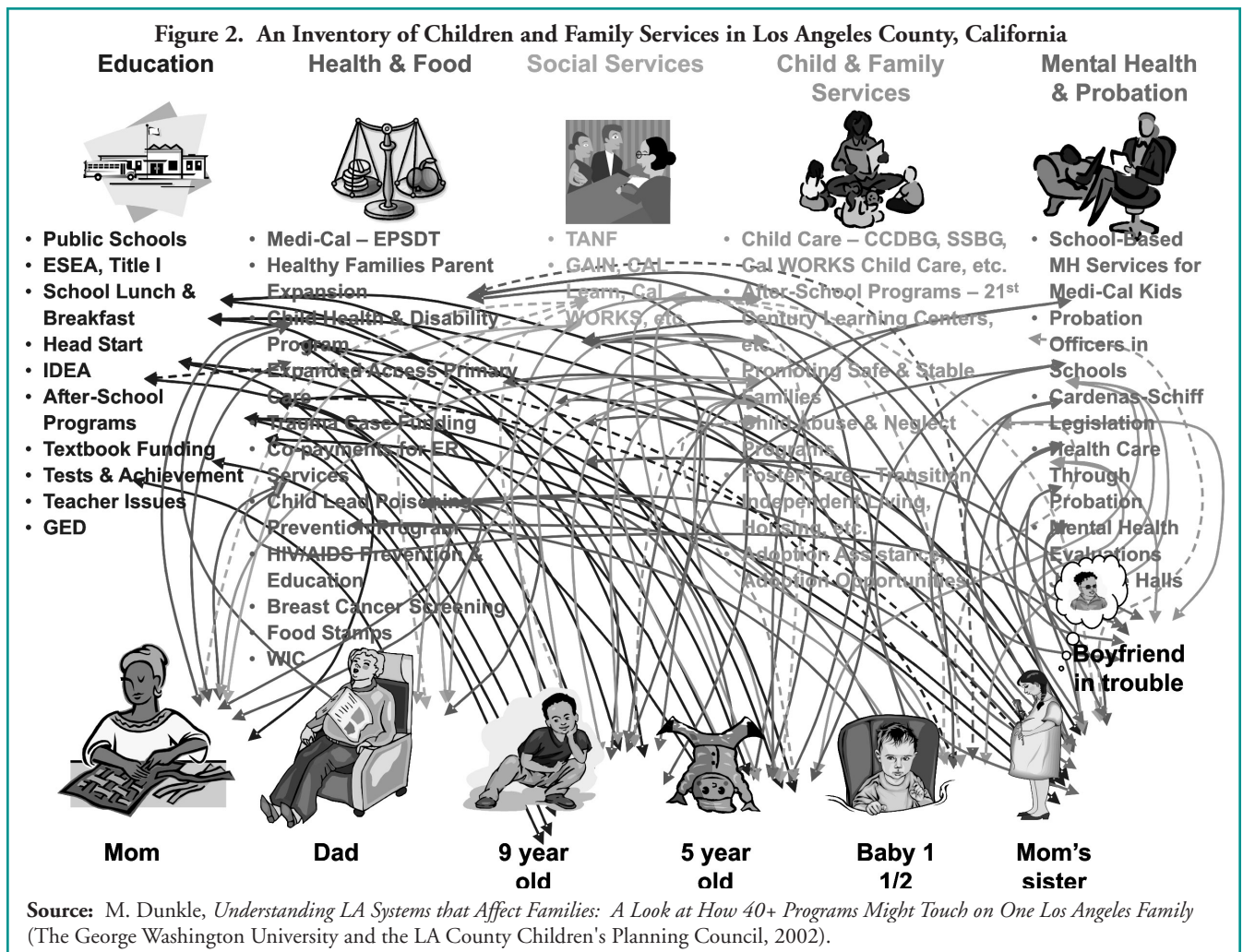
How can you get started?

- Meet with state and national think tanks and advocates to explore all possible ways to increase funding (e.g., identify an initial funding stream for a youth trust fund that increases in worth over time).
- Meet with intermediary organizations and public/private partnerships that focus on training and technical assistance to programs and ask how the state could support their work.
- Ask departments to provide data on youth-focused performance measures and quality standards; host a meeting to consider developing statewide, interdepartmental measures.
- Ask your governor's office or your budget committee for a children's budget showing targets for annual growth.
- In committee hearings, ask sponsors of youth-focused legislation to explain how it meets with national standards of quality, such as those established by the National Academy of Sciences.

Challenge 3: Building a Comprehensive, Coordinated, Aligned Effort across Department and Committee Lines

In 2004, the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth found that hundreds of federal youth programs were under the oversight of more than a dozen federal departments and agencies; it concluded that, "The complexity of problems faced by disadvantaged youth is

matched only by the complexity of the traditional federal response to those problems. Both are confusing, complicated, and costly.”¹⁷ This also is true at the state and local levels. A survey of state legislators found that, “Building a coherent message on children’s policy is challenging. . . because there is no clearly discernible legislative agenda for children and families; rather, a multitude of individuals and organizations with different agendas are sending mixed messages about what is best for children.”¹⁸ As one state official put it, “the legislature gets overwhelmed hearing from advocates and departments what the priorities are, so we are left with scrambled eggs.” An inventory of Los Angeles County’s existing policies for children, youth and families found a tangled mess (see figure 2). A similar picture could be drawn for many cities, counties and states in the nation, and for the country as a whole.



Such a “tangled mess” is an unfortunate and predictable result of many policymaking processes. Legislatures are organized into committees and executive branches into departments; each are responsible for specific policies and programs. In this environment, policymakers are asked to make decisions that may not include a clear view of the full range of programs and policies that are under way. Weaving the existing tangle of services into a seamless web of support requires working across departmental and committee lines.

This challenge is further compounded by fragmentation among the advocacy community. Advocates tend to be organized around specific issues and policies. A youth service coalition will advocate for increased spending for community service, a homeless shelter will request more funding for runaway and homeless youth, or a business group will suggest summer youth employment spending. Attempting to weave a strategic, multi-faceted approach can go against the grain of narrowly focused advocates.

What can states do?

- **Create a Children’s Cabinet.** The Louisiana Legislature created the Children’s Cabinet in 1998. The mission of the Louisiana Children’s Cabinet’s is to produce measurable improvements for children and youth in health, education and family life. All facets of state government work together to this end. Members of the cabinet include the secretaries of more than seven departments, including Education, Social Services and Public Safety; a senator; a representative; and representatives of the Supreme Court and the state Board of Education. They produce one Children’s Budget each year and work across bodies to coordinate and improve services.¹⁹ The New Mexico Children’s Cabinet oversees and coordinates cross-departmental efforts that include promoting and establishing comprehensive child and youth policy; assessing and maximizing resource allocation; removing administrative barriers to obtaining services; tracking child and youth indicators; and encouraging partnerships that elevate efforts on behalf of New Mexico children and youth. With the cabinet’s attention, New Mexico has increased its second grade immunization rate to 64 percent—and no longer ranks last in the nation—because of an aggressive new campaign called “Done by One.” The state also has allocated federal tax relief money to child care assistance. This allowed the state to raise the eligibility standard to parents living at 150 percent of poverty and enroll an additional 3,500 families.²⁰
- **Create a Joint Legislative Committee on Children, Youth and Families or a Children’s Caucus.** Maryland created a Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families in 1999 (Chapter 362, Acts of 1999). The committee works to coordinate state efforts to improve the health, education, safety and economic well-being of children in Maryland, recommending new laws, regulations and budget priorities to improve children’s well-being. The committee also searches out and makes recommendations to remedy any interdepartmental gaps, inconsistencies or inefficiencies in services to children and their families; and works to inform the legislature and the general public of issues concerning the special needs of children, youth and families. Arizona legislators created a Children’s Caucus in 2003. This bipartisan group of Arizona House and Senate members works to protect state funding for children and families.
- **Coordinate at the Local Level.** Oregon passed legislation in 1999 that calls for locally driven planning for youth policy and for replacement of fragmented activities with a

comprehensive strategy. The 36 counties' results-driven planning then informs the work of the five state agencies that affect children and families. Targeted, flexible funding then is provided to counties to support best practices and meet the needs of the community.²¹ In this case, local coordination has promoted better delivery of state-funded programs and services. Louisiana passed legislation in 2004 to create Children and Youth Planning Boards in each judicial district, "to assist in the assessment, alignment, coordination, prioritization, and measurement of all available services and programs that address the needs of children and youth."²²

- **Create a Youth Budget and Report Card.** Many state examples exist of budgets and report cards. Such data collection allows for closer inspection of a state's investment in youth across a range of programs and outcomes. The Kentucky Youth Development Partnership recently completed a full analysis of the state's investment in young people.²³ Examining the funding in this way can inform policymakers of the balance of programs and services to support youth, from promoting positive outcomes to preventing negative ones. It also can provide guidance on how to fill in the gaps and better align investments. Pairing a youth budget with a report card highlighting trends and indicators can help policymakers with tough choices and focus on the areas of highest need.²⁴

How can you get started?

- Review legislation from other states that creates a children's cabinet or other similar coordinating body and consider introducing legislation to do the same.
- Create a joint committee for children, youth and families or a children's caucus to review legislative proposals that deal with children and enhance coordination on policies that affect children and families.
- Review report cards and children's budgets from other states; forward them to your state's governor and legislative finance committee, asking them to explore the feasibility of creating one for your state.
- Meet with the coordinators of city and county children's cabinets (and similar inter-agency efforts) and ask how the state could support their work.

Challenge 4: Bringing Youth Perspectives to the Table

Most services are designed with input from the people being served. However, young people are not allowed to vote and often are left out of the political process. As one 17-year-old said, "If you had a problem in the black community, and you brought together a group of white people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously. In fact there'd probably be a public outcry. But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us."

It is relatively easy to bring in a single young person to consult on a policy decision, but involving large numbers of young people is more difficult. Significant training and support are needed so the young people are well-versed on the issues and the policymaking process and so the adults

are prepared to fully engage the young people. Recruiting young people who reflect the diversity of the state is an important consideration. Giving them resources to build a constituency allows them to present the views of a wide range of young people.

What can states do?

- **Develop a Statewide Youth Council.** Maine and New Mexico have passed legislation to create statewide youth advisory bodies to provide young people with a meaningful role in shaping policies that affect them.²⁵ Maine's Legislative Youth Advisory Council offers a unique opportunity for its youth members to conduct public hearings, draft bills, and make recommendations on pending proposals under consideration by the Legislature. Senator John Martin thinks that Maine is probably the first state in the country to have someone under age 18 chairing a committee with a legislator. He says, "The purpose of the Council is to get student input on things that concern them, and to involve them in the process. It is working very well, I encourage other states to look at what we are doing in Maine and implement something like it." The New Mexico Legislature passed a bill in 2003 that created the New Mexico Youth Alliance to advise the governor, lieutenant governor and the Legislature on policy issues that matter to young people. The Youth Alliance, which consists of 112 youth from across the state, meets at least four times a year. In addition, each member of the Youth Alliance partners with an adult mentor to act as advocates of change in their communities.
- **Create Public/Private Partnerships to Engage Youth.** States also have forged public/private partnerships to increase capacity and sustainability for engaging young people and communities. For example, youth-focused intermediaries have the potential to provide the necessary infrastructure to support youth involvement in policy. Intermediary groups can help to facilitate opportunities that connect young people to policymakers, act as convener of key stakeholders around youth issues, and promote best practices to increase the quality and quantity of programs and services for youth. This is the case in New Mexico, where the Forum for Youth in Community, a community-based organization, provides staff support to the legislatively created Youth Alliance.
- **Establish Civic Education Initiatives.** Investments in civic education provide an avenue for youth to share their perspectives and also can encourage lifetime civic involvement. Louisiana passed legislation in 2004 to create a Commission on Civic Education to educate students about the importance of citizen involvement and to promote communication and collaboration among organizations in the state that conduct civic education programs.²⁶

How can you get started?

- Consider legislation that promotes the positive development of young people.
- Be accessible and reach out to young people in your legislative district. Invite them to talk with you about issues that are important to them. Visit the places where young people spend time in your district. Visit classrooms and meet with students through initiatives such as America's Legislators Back to School Week.

- Inform young people of opportunities for involvement in your decision-making process by providing: 1) access to timely information such as upcoming hearings and meetings on youth-related issues; 2) background information about specific policy issues; and 3) names of staff people in your office with whom they can discuss specific policy issues. Respond to young people when they contact your office with a policy suggestion or question.
- Institutionalize youth voices in the policymaking process by creating a state-level youth advisory structure.
- Consider legislation that requires the involvement of young people and their families in local collaboratives that establish youth development programs.

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**Strengthening Youth Policy in the States:
A Joint Initiative between the National Conference of State Legislatures
and the Forum for Youth Investment**

The Forum for Youth Investment and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) have launched a two-year partnership to provide state legislators and other policymakers the tools and supports necessary to strengthen their youth policies and programs. This issue brief is the first in a series that addresses the difficult questions with which state policymakers are grappling as they attempt to craft sound youth policy.

This joint initiative will help policymakers address such questions as:

- How can state efforts be better aligned, more effective and more efficient?
- How can states effectively involve young people in decision making?
- How can states balance concerns about youth problems (gang violence, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, etc.) with a focus on youth's positive potential (volunteering, succeeding in school, preparing for employment, etc.)?

Activities include: Policymaker institutes, publications, issue briefs, audio conferences and technical assistance on the phone and in your state.

To find out more about ongoing opportunities to strengthen youth policy in your state, contact: Stephanie Walton, NCSL, (303) 856-1552, stephanie.walton@ncsl.org; or Elizabeth Gaines; Forum for Youth Investment, (202) 207-3714, Elizabeth@forumforyouthinvestment.org.



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