





### **About Algorhythm**

As an “impact science” company, we combine rigorous research and evaluation methods, next generation analytics, and real-time technologies to deliver accurate and actionable answers and solutions to social change agents. We work with philanthropies, nonprofits, social impact companies and government agencies to equip social change agents with the knowledge, tools, and learning processes that will help them meet their mission.

To learn more, visit [algorhythm.io](http://algorhythm.io)



### **About the Nellie Mae Education Foundation**

As the largest philanthropic organization in New England dedicated exclusively to education, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation has been committed to reshaping the high school learning experience by working with districts, schools and organizations to implement the principles of student-centered learning—learning that is personalized, engaging, competency-based and happens anytime, anywhere. We have been excited to see the scaling of student-centered practices and personalization through New England and nationwide. Yet too often the spread of such practices is not defined by rigorous or equitable distributions. We believe that high quality renditions of equitable, student-centered learning are critical to preparing students for college and career, and preparing New England communities for strong futures. Over the past year and half, the foundation has been engaged in an equity and strategy review and development process to examine our organization’s investments and culture through the lens of racial equity—looking at how power is operating through resource distribution, whose voices are heard, what rules are in place, and who has authority and influence.

To learn more, visit [nmeeducation.org](http://nmeeducation.org)



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# INTRODUCTION

In August 2016, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) commissioned Algorhythm to conduct an evaluation of eight (out of the twelve they were funding at the time) Amplifying Student Voice and Leadership (ASVL) grantees so they could learn more about their efforts supporting youth organizing work over a five-year period. While three of these organizations had been NMEF grantees for four years, the other five were just beginning their work with the foundation, having received grants less than one year prior. Through this study, the Foundation gained an even deeper understanding and commitment to this highly participatory grant-making strategy. But most importantly, they learned the value of truly listening to the voices of youth.

This brief tells the story of NMEF's journey of unexpected insights as they learned from their grantees about the issues most important to their lives. We have developed this issue brief for funders who support youth organizing groups or those considering doing so, and we hope the insights shared can help any donor trying to develop effective youth-adult partnerships. This brief is the second in a series about Foundation supported youth-organizing work. You can find the first brief, written for youth organizers, at [nmefoundation.org/resources](http://nmefoundation.org/resources).

## PROLOGUE

Over the past decade and a half, the disparity in access to quality schools and resources needed for all children to be academically successful has continued to be a persistent trend. According to the Schott Foundation's Opportunity to Learn Index<sup>1</sup>, students from historically disadvantaged families have just a 51 percent Opportunity to Learn when compared to White, non-Latino students. Correcting this course has become a matter of social justice. For example, among adults born between 1979 and 1982, nine percent of those in the lowest income quartile and 54 percent of those in the highest quartile completed college.<sup>2</sup> Black and Latino students have less access to academic preparation, lower high school graduation rates, lower postsecondary enrollment rates, and lower rates of persistence than their White peers.<sup>3</sup> There has been an ever-widening gap in college graduation rates between White students completing bachelor's degrees (41%) and Black (22%), and Latinos (18%)—a wider gap than existed in 1990 (NCES Fast Facts). Yet education beyond high school is increasingly crucial for overall well-being. For example, adults with bachelor's degrees will earn, on average, \$1 million more than high school graduates over their lifetimes,<sup>4</sup> and enjoy better health, longevity and quality of life outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> schottfoundation.org

<sup>2</sup> Bailey, M. J., & Dynarski, S. M. (2011). *Gains and gaps: Changing inequality in U.S. college entry and completion*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research

<sup>3</sup> Ross, T., Grace, K., Rathbun, A., KewalRamani, A., Zhang, J., Kristapovich, P., & Manning, E. (2012). *Higher education: Gaps in access and persistence study*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from /z-wcorg/

<sup>4</sup> Carnevale, A. P., Rose, S. J., & Cheah, B. (2011). *The college payoff: Education, occupations, lifetime earnings*. Washington, DC: The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce

<sup>5</sup> Bowen, W. G., Chingos, M. M., & McPherson, M. S. (2009). *Crossing the finish line: Completing college at America's public universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

## ABOUT STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

Student-Centered Learning (SCL) is at the heart of the NMEF's mission to increase equitable educational opportunities for secondary school students and prepare New England learners, especially and essentially the underserved, to earn post-secondary degrees or credentials. The 4 key tenets of SCL include:



**Learning is Personalized:** Students learn in different ways. Individually paced, targeted learning tasks start from where the student is, formatively assess existing skills and knowledge, and address student needs and interests.



**Learning is Competency-Based:** Students move ahead when they have demonstrated mastery of content, not when they've reached a certain birthday or endured the required hours in a classroom.



**Learning Happens Anytime, Anywhere:** Learning takes place beyond the traditional school day or school year. The school's walls are permeable; learning is not restricted to the classroom.



**Students Take Ownership of Their Learning:** Learning engages students in their own success and incorporates their interests and skills into the learning process. Students support each other's progress and celebrate success.

# CHAPTER 1: THE NMEF STRATEGY

With deep knowledge and understanding of the social implications of these statistics and their threat to students and their families, as well as to the health of New England as a whole, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) began an investment strategy in 2015 to ensure that 80 percent of the region’s students were college and career ready by 2030. Building upon an ever-growing body of evidence that shows that student-centered schools are “closing the opportunity gap”,<sup>5</sup> NMEF focused their efforts on increasing equitable SCL opportunities for secondary school students in New England, especially and essentially those who are underserved. The goal was to support these students to be ready for further education after high school and ultimately earning a post-secondary degree or credentials. To achieve this, NMEF took a holistic approach that focused on building the “engagement and support of the system ‘authorizers’—its participants, decision makers, and the public that sustains it”—through four key grant-making strategies:

<sup>5</sup> Friedlaender, et al., (June 2014) Student-Centered Schools: Closing the opportunity gap. Stanford center for opportunity policy and education - research brief; Levin, A. Datnow, and N. Carrier (March 2012). Changing School District Practices. The Students at the Center Series.

01  
Build Educator Ownership,  
Leadership and Capacity

02  
Advance Quality and Rigor  
of SCL Practices

03  
Develop Effective  
Systems Designs

04  
Build Public Understanding  
and Demand of SCL

## BUILDING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING AND DEMAND

The Public Understanding and Demand strategy was built upon a commitment to community participation and grassroots organizing. At the center was a firm belief that the combination of local/bottom-up engagement and broad-based/top-down initiatives would result in pressure from multiple sources, leading to increased support for systems change within school districts and among various key stakeholders at the state and local levels.<sup>6</sup> The goals were to:

- Change the conversation on education reform;
- Increase understanding, support and demand for SCL across the region;
- Connect decision makers with community stakeholders to sustain SCL change; and
- Make authentic engagement a permanent part of the district decision-making process.

This strategy necessitated genuine and meaningful engagement of students, teachers, school boards, and others at the local level to impact the way stakeholders think and talk about education reform. Since youth are the stakeholders most directly impacted by the education system, it was important to have avenues that promoted their engagement in improving the system. NMEF saw this as a critical opportunity to “walk their talk,” placing students at the center of the work, especially those who have been historically marginalized (e.g., low-income, youth of color, LGBTQ youth, transgender youth, recent immigrants, etc.) and are particularly impacted by the United States’ inequitable education system.

Therefore, in 2008 the Foundation started funding discrete youth organizing strategies. The ASVL portfolio was developed to provide longer-term funding to youth organizing groups to work independently and as part of a learning community, and to promote SCL in schools and at the district level. Through the ASVL fund, which supports 21 grantees, NMEF has provided slightly over \$3.5M to date. The Foundation also supported these organizations by providing technical assistance, an annual Youth Leadership Institute, visits to schools that practice SCL, and the development of the New England Youth Organizing Network (NEYON).”

<sup>6</sup> NMEF Website <https://www.nmefoundation.org/grants>

# CHAPTER 2: UNEXPECTED INSIGHTS

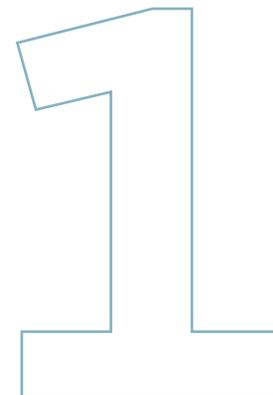
From the outset, NMEF took a highly participatory approach to working with the ASVL grantees because they wanted to learn more about the educational experiences of youth—particularly those of low-income youth of color, who typically find themselves excluded from conversations about education reform. This participatory approach included working closely with grantees to align the Foundation’s broad strategic goals with their particularly grant guidelines. NMEF listened to how youth groups interpreted SCL and how they were able to connect it to their lived experiences. However, upon reflection, NMEF has wondered if employing other strategies might have helped youth better understand SCL and its connection to their lives.

After more than six years, NMEF staff continue to learn how to effectively partner with youth and see this is an ongoing learning opportunity for the Foundation. However, they have also gained three key insights, many unexpected, that might support other grant makers as they consider how to support youth-led social change initiatives.

## INSIGHT #1: **BALANCING THE FOUNDATION'S SHIFTING GOALS WITH AUTHENTIC YOUTH VOICE**

“ *Supporting youth organizations means creating space for youth to name and advance their own agendas. I often think of these as what keeps them up at night.*”

— Delia Arellano-Weddleton, Senior Program Officer - NMEF



While the Foundation had a clear definition of SCL, they wanted to provide opportunities for ASVL grantees to create their own understandings of this complex concept and develop meaningful strategies to cultivate demand for change in their schools, districts and communities. However, in the beginning, NMEF believed that when youth organizers learned more about SCL they would immediately connect with the concept and begin creating advocacy campaigns to promote the four key pillars of SCL in the classroom. As NMEF staff worked alongside ASVL grantees, listening and learning, it became apparent that youth organizers had a very different view. From their vantage point, SCL could not occur in the classroom without laying the groundwork for more equitable educational opportunities. Therefore, over a five-year period, most actions and campaigns focused on:

- Creating positive learning environments, such as decreasing school push out policies, assuring that students are protected by school codes of conduct, that students have rights and know what they are, and that districts addressed disparities in education opportunities for Black and Latino students.
- Increasing access to learning opportunities, such as extended and higher-learning opportunities and shifting the testing requirements that have disproportionately impacted marginalized students' graduation rates.
- Meeting basic needs, such as assuring all students have access to bus passes to get to school, blocking school closures, improving the physical environment, and increasing access to healthy food.
- Increasing youth participation and representation within schools and districts. To some degree, all ASVL grantees focused on increasing youth voice within the 54+ schools in which they are collectively active. Some more advanced youth organizing groups have been able to create permanent, sustained youth voice within local school/district decision-making bodies.

CONTINUED INSIGHT #1:

## BALANCING THE FOUNDATION'S SHIFTING GOALS WITH AUTHENTIC YOUTH VOICE

In fact, only two campaigns and three workshops/events (out of 35 campaigns and 36 events) explicitly advocated for SCL practices in the classroom. In many ways, the direction in which ASVL grantees took NMEF's agenda should come as no surprise, given that the Foundation specifically chose to work with youth that are served poorly by our school systems. ASVL grantees represented the New England youth who were least likely to have access to SCL in their schools. For these youth, some teachers represented outsiders who did not understand or value their community and might even ask them to “check their culture at the door.” In most cases, youth organizers did not see a way to directly impact the practices of teachers in the classroom without addressing key issues of equity and respect. In fact, youth organizers reported that their greatest challenges to the work were “isms”—adultism, sexism, racism, and homophobia—held by the adults they interacted with.

While ASVL grantees made little progress on building public understanding and demand specifically for SCL in the classroom, they made exceptional progress on the other three goals of the Public Understanding and Demand strategy. Specifically, they:

- 1 **Changed the conversation on education reform.** More than 7,000 youth participated in improving education in New England over a five-year period. Grantees worked closely with more than 300 youth organizers per year, who engaged more than 7,000 peers in their local schools and communities and reached out to 8,000+ community members through social media. ASVL youth organizers had a notable impact on over 126 schools throughout New England and have changed critical aspects of students' school and/or educational experiences. **Purposefully funding youth organizing generated deeper conversations about the root causes underpinning the lack of quality education and SCL within New England schools both in the community and within the Foundation.** The very nature of this work—which engages marginalized youth in critical decision making about their education—in and of itself necessitated a change in the

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## **BALANCING THE FOUNDATION'S SHIFTING GOALS WITH AUTHENTIC YOUTH VOICE**

conversation on education reform. NMEF chose grantees that had the ability to reach some of the most marginalized youth in New England—those who would not otherwise be served by traditional programming—which helped to ensure that all types of youth had a voice in reimagining their education and advocating for high quality student-centered learning. Youth organizers understood that SCL could never occur in their schools until teachers valued all youth and their experiences.

- 2 Connected with decision makers to sustain SCL change.** In total, ASVL youth organizing groups have engaged youth in 35 campaigns/initiatives and 36 events that have increased their connection to decision makers in New England schools and districts. In fact, all ASVL grantees worked to create critical decision-making opportunities for youth within their schools and school districts. However, here again, their focus was not on sustaining SCL change, as the NMEF defined it. Rather, their goal was to sustain youth voice, assuring that students were at the center of decision making related to their learning.
- 3 Make authentic engagement a permanent part of the district decision-making process.** Several ASVL grantees have been able to secure permanent positions for student representatives at the district level, securing seats on the New London Board of Education's Policy Committee; establishing an ongoing, student-led working group in Providence, RI that meets monthly with district staff, teachers, and community members to develop annual curriculum content; and are working to win a campaign to secure student voice on Board and school committees in Manchester, NH. These positions are all sustainable in that they claim structural and/or systemic support that protects their existence beyond this mere moment in time, ensuring ongoing youth participation and engagement in these districts.

ASVL grantees' participation in conversations about education reform ensured even historically marginalized youth had a voice in reimagining their education, and grantees in turn instigated deep, community-wide conversations about the root causes underpinning the lack of quality student-centered education within New England schools. Moreover, ASVL grantees significantly increased the Foundation's understanding of how social inequities function as barriers to the successful implementation of SCL.

## INSIGHT #2: **RECOGNIZING THAT GRANTEES HAVE A BROAD RANGE OF CAPACITIES**

“ *[Youth organizing is] a youth development and social justice strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change in their communities.*”

— Shawn Ginwright, Associate Professor of Africana Studies,  
San Francisco State University



The first cohort of ASVL grantees were youth organizing groups—those who knew how to create long-term strategic campaigns and actions. The second cohort of ASVL grantees included larger youth serving programs, especially those with deep connections to populations that are difficult to reach. The idea was to broaden the reach and increase the amplification of youth voices by building, and in some cases growing organizing in communities throughout New England where it was not present, and connecting organizing groups through the New England Youth Organizing Network. However, these groups had little background or capacity in the areas of youth organizing or advocacy.

While the Foundation offered numerous capacity-building opportunities, they did not consider the implications of having two very different types of grantees. A key finding of the evaluation was that the depth and breadth of each grantee’s impact depended heavily on the developmental stage of their organizing model. In order to understand and describe the qualities of each grantee, Algorhythm applied a framework created by the Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) that clearly defined the distinctions between youth services, youth development, youth leadership, civic engagement, and youth organizing and placed each grantee on a continuum of learning—from nascent to advanced (see Table 1).

The greatest disparities were evident in the capacities specifically related to youth organizing. Grantees with *advanced* youth organizing models were uniquely able to:

- Continuously recruit and maintain a vibrant base that was prepared to engage in direct actions and political mobilizing;

CONTINUED INSIGHT #2:

## RECOGNIZING THAT GRANTEES HAVE A BROAD RANGE OF CAPACITIES

- Organize multi-pronged and multi-level campaigns that targeted schools, districts, and the broader community;
- Center youth as leaders internally (by having them take on roles including Lead Organizer, paid staff, and Board Member); and
- Engage youth as public representatives of the program or organization (in various networks and partnerships).

Grantees with *emerging* models were starting to advance in these areas and those with nascent models were just beginning to learn about organizing practices and how to incorporate them into their work. The sections below provide brief examples of how advanced youth organizing groups brought these practices to life.

Table 1: ASVL Grantees Continuum of Development in Youth Organizing<sup>7</sup>

“NASCENT” GROUPS	“EMERGING” GROUPS	“ADVANCED” GROUPS
<p><b>Base building</b> – Has not developed a base of youth that can be ignited around campaigns and/or issues.</p>	<p><b>Base building</b> – Beginning to build a base.</p>	<p><b>Base building</b> – Has a strong member base that is constantly cultivated.</p>
<p><b>Youth leading</b> – Engages youth in some decision making related to specific activities or actions.</p>	<p><b>Youth leading</b> – Engages youth in core leadership roles, making decisions either within the organization or as part of governing bodies. However, the number and types of roles – and the decisions they make – are limited due to the scope of young people’s roles and/or the breadth of the group’s organizing work.</p>	<p><b>Youth leading</b> – Engages youth internally in core leadership roles across multiple organizational levels (e.g., as youth organizers, paid staff, and/or board members), and externally as individual and organizational representatives in various networks and partnerships (e.g., school, district, and/or community decision-making bodies).</p>
<p><b>Youth taking action</b> – Engages youth in ad hoc or episodic actions, generally targeting only one level of change (e.g., community, school, or district).</p>	<p><b>Youth taking action</b> – Engages youth in episodic actions, generally targeting only one level of change (e.g., community, school, or district). Working toward a more multi-level approach.</p>	<p><b>Youth taking action in multi-prong and multi-level campaigns</b> – Engages youth in direct action and political mobilizing at multiple levels (e.g., community, school, and district).</p>
<p><b>Partnerships &amp; networks</b> – Does not yet engage in alliances and coalitions.</p>	<p><b>Partnerships &amp; networks</b> – Engages in one or two alliances and coalitions.</p>	<p><b>Partnerships &amp; networks</b> – Engages in many alliances and coalitions.</p>

<sup>7</sup> Ginwright, Shawn. *Youth Organizing: Expanding possibilities for youth development*. Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing: Occasional Paper Series on Youth Organizing (2013).

## CONTINUED INSIGHT #2:

### RECOGNIZING THAT GRANTEES HAVE A BROAD RANGE OF CAPACITIES

While *nascent* and *emerging* groups were able to increase awareness and advocate for youth voice in programs, communities, and schools, it was grantees with advanced organizing models that:

- Produced 100% of campaigns and thus were responsible for all systems-level change (grantees with emerging or nascent models focused more on awareness-raising and advocacy);
- Coordinated the majority (75%) of events that increased community awareness of key education issues and built community members' organizing capacity (grantees with emerging or nascent models were more likely to focus on building their internal capacity); and
- Created—or were working to create—permanent seats for youth on district-level committees (whereas only one of the other grantees has been able to position youth on school-level committees).

These findings have led to a deep conversation within NMEF about how to better support grantees to evolve their youth organizing capacities to deepen and sustain change.

To do this, the Foundation recognizes that they will need to both take a strengths-based perspective that honors grantees' existing abilities and have frank conversations with youth organizers and adult allies about their strengths and struggles. And to do that, they understand that they must prioritize building respectful, trusting relationships with youth organizers and adult allies so that they feel safe enough to openly discuss challenges. They have also recognized that capacity building is an ongoing process: it takes time.

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## INSIGHT #3: **BUILDING YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS**

“ *[We must] be willing to learn from youth organizers. We need youth to name their truth and learn to advocate effectively, to build experiences of successful advocacy. This is true as they advocate for their communities, and it is true when they give feedback to foundation officers.*”

— Delia Arellano-Weddleton, Senior Program Officer - NMEF



Funding authentic youth voice required a keen ability to balance the Foundation’s goals with the often conflicting direction of young people. Luckily, the foundation understood the importance of listening to and learning from youth. Staff were able to navigate the innate conflicts between these two agendas and held space for grantees to experiment with grant guidelines and forge their own directions. NMEF also created a unique space in which grantees began to trust the staff—gently challenging them to address the key goals of the Foundation and supporting them to speak frankly about their concerns with their program officer. In other words, the program officer understood how to effectively and respectfully “partner” with ASVL grantee youth organizers.

That said, just because you invite grantees to provide constructive feedback, doesn’t mean they’ll feel safe enough to do so—especially if they fear that doing so could put their funding at risk. In order to create a safe learning space, the ASVL program officer began bringing grantees together in learning cohorts—for capacity-building and also via Algorhythm’s participatory evaluation. These were led by a Technical Assistance provider, who also played a key role in partnering with groups. This allowed grantees to form a collective voice with which they could challenge NMEF staff in mutually productive ways. In short, the Foundation learned that when you fund historically disempowered people, providing space for them to give you the critical and constructive feedback you need to improve your funding practice. This also allowed groups to build strong relationships amongst themselves.

Throughout this study the youth organizers talked a lot about the importance of youth-adult partnership (Y-AP)—it was both a wonderful attribute of the grantees’ work and a key area of challenge for youth within the schools. In fact, as a part of the evaluation process the youth developed their own definition of Y-AP that included guidelines for youth and adults interested in this type of collaboration. These became the Youth-Adult Partnership Manifesto presented in Table 2. All grantees felt that the NMEF staff really listened to youth and were respectful of the process necessary to build effective youth adult partnerships—indeed they lived the values of the manifesto.

## BUILDING YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

Table 2: Youth-Adult Partnership Manifesto

What Is Youth-Adult Partnership?	
<p>A SAFE, EQUITABLE SPACE • TRUE COLLABORATION • POSITIVE COMMUNICATION + ACTION • YOUTH-LED • EXPERIMENTATION • OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH</p>	
How Can Youth & Adult Allies Co-Create This Vision?	
BEST PRACTICES FOR YOUTH PARTNERS	BEST PRACTICES FOR ADULT PARTNERS
<p><b>1. KEEP YOURSELF SAFE:</b> Assess [whether] the program space is safe.</p>	<p><b>1. OFFER GUIDANCE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Provide guidance and support for youth goals.</li> <li>b. Give youth skills/tools to “check” adults.</li> <li>c. Push youth to do things vs. expecting adults to do everything. Don’t enable.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. COMMUNICATE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Maintain open communication.</li> <li>b. Remember that it’s NOT ABOUT shutting out the adults, just making sure youth are heard.</li> </ul>	<p><b>2. ENGAGE IN ACTIVE LISTENING:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Ask, don’t assume!</li> <li>b. Listen, don’t judge.</li> <li>c. Use reflective language (e.g., “I hear that…”).</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. BE CONFIDENT:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Represent yourself/be you!</li> <li>b. We [youth] need to see ourselves as experts!</li> <li>c. Remember that you are doing real/meaningful work.</li> <li>d. Believe in yourself, “don’t put a limit on yourself!”</li> </ul>	<p><b>3. EDUCATE YOURSELF &amp; BE WILLING TO BE EDUCATED:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Love/know youth organizing and development.</li> <li>b. Build awareness of systems/structures youth face.</li> <li>c. Be open to learning from youth, listening to youth.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT:</b> Be comfortable presenting/leading [trainings and actions], know the information yourself.</p>	<p><b>4. PRACTICE EQUITY:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Be aware of and challenge power dynamics.</li> <li>b. Take youth seriously.</li> <li>c. Balance youth; don’t expect youth to behave like you.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. RESPECT YOUR PEERS:</b> [Youth] peers are your best and strongest allies, respect your peers.</p>	<p><b>5. STEP UP, TAKE ACTION:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Put youth ideas into action.</li> <li>b. Change how you act based on what you learn.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>6. STEP BACK, FOLLOW:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Actually give youth power to make big decisions.</li> <li>b. Ensure youth are leading partnerships with adults.</li> <li>c. Hold space for young people’s agenda.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>7. BE TRANSPARENT:</b> Recognize your youth partnership approach (e.g., acknowledge your rung on Hart’s Ladder).</p>

CONTINUED INSIGHT #3:

## BUILDING YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

When the ASVL program officer’s approach to working with the grantees is compared to the *Youth-Adult Partnership Manifesto*, it quickly becomes clear that she was enacting many of the best practices that youth organizers recommended for adults. She understood the importance of being transparent about the Foundation’s goals and offering guidance to grantees, while still actively listening to youth and remaining open to their views. She understood how to “step back” and give youth the space to define SCL for themselves, and how to “step up” and put youth ideas into action by adapting the Foundation’s own understanding of SCL to include practices like restorative justice. She was able to advocate on behalf of grantees/youth voice internally at the Foundation and highlight the need for the Foundation to learn from ASVL grantees about the systems and structures of oppression that they experienced at school and in their communities. And each of these practices served to build trust with grantees: the bedrock of an effective partnership.

Youth Adult Partnerships are not easy. Indeed, this is the most advanced—and challenging—form of youth participation identified in Roger Hart’s book *Children’s Participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship*.<sup>8</sup> However, the benefits to both youth organizing groups and the adult institutions that ally with them are clear. In the words of one ASVL Youth Organizer: “Adults often have varied and valuable experiences, means, and knowledge, which naturally complement the abilities of youth. Youth alone can push society forward, [but] the involved participation of adults in this society is critical to its forward motion.”

“Adults often have varied and valuable experiences, means, and knowledge, which naturally complement the abilities of youth. Youth alone can push society forward, [but] the involved participation of adults in this society is critical to its forward motion.”

<sup>8</sup> Hart, R (1997). *Children’s Participation: The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*. UNICEF.

# EPILOGUE

As NMEF commits to living and breathing its values of placing youth at the center of educational reform, it is coming to terms with the fact that while the ASVL project missed a key target outcome, it influenced the Foundation's understanding of how the inequities experienced by youth in New England relate to its mission. Thanks to the Algorhythm study—and several other simultaneous studies it commissioned, in which racial equity emerged as a core theme—NMEF is realizing that it will need to address equity more directly. This realization is igniting a critical dialogue internally that will help inform the Foundation's future. This lesson also provokes an important internal discernment about when and how the Foundation should take the lead on advancing ideas, engage community stakeholder groups and organizations, and begin and sustain authentic partnerships in the context of community.

The ASVL study also made the Foundation very aware that youth organizing groups need more than funding to succeed. They need funders who are willing to work with them in an open, nonjudgmental way. They need funders who are committed to helping them develop their capacities. And—to build the trust necessary to accomplish all of that—they need funders who approach the work with a spirit of true youth-adult partnership. It is our hope that this brief has provided useful direction for other funders who are considering taking the leap to engage in this work: how to embrace the challenge, take risks, keep an open mind, and recognize that sometimes it's better to miss a key performance target if this leads to other unexpected-but-valuable outcomes. NMEF has embarked on this learning process, and it encourages more of its peers in the funding community to do the same. Foundation staff are happy to share and collaborate with other funders who are interested in learning more.

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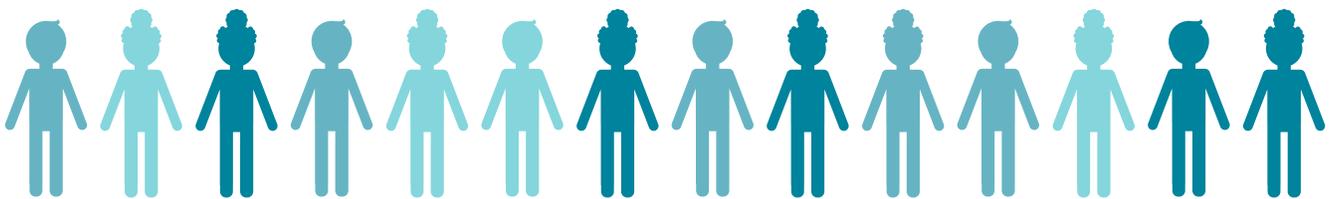
# ADVANCING STUDENT VOICE AND LEADERSHIP IN NEW ENGLAND

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# 300+ youth organizers

PER YEAR

organized 35 campaigns/initiatives and 36 events



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**MORE THAN 7,000 YOUTH**  
ENGAGED IN IMPROVING  
EDUCATION IN NEW ENGLAND

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# AWARENESS BUILT

among  
**8,000+**



# SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS

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Representative of 8 youth organization groups who participated in this evaluation. 5 had been funded by NMEF for about a year when the evaluation started. This evaluation covers the work of these organizing groups over the period of 2010-2017.

