



# YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

## THE THEORY AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

By Meredith King Ledford, MPP; Bronwyn Lucas, MPH; Jeanne Dairaghi, MS; and Parrish Ravelli

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Ledford** is a policy consultant at YES! with more than a decade of experience in the health policy and public health arenas at the local, state, and national levels. **Lucas** is the Executive Director and a co-founder of YES!. She has worked with youth on public health issues for more than 20 years. **Dairaghi** is the Assistant Director and co-founder of YES! She has been working in the prevention and empowerment field for 15 years. **Ravelli** is the Team Lead of the Access to Health Care initiative at YES! and works toward social justice in the health care field through youth empowerment.

### INTRODUCTION

The field of youth empowerment has a solid foundation of theory, at both process and outcomes levels. The process – or *empowering level* – provides opportunities for youth to develop skills and become problem solvers and decision makers. The outcomes – or the *empowered level* – refers to the result of the empowerment process, including the consequences of attempts to gain control in the community and the effects of interventions designed to empower participants.<sup>1</sup>

The theory of youth empowerment can be broken down even further into three components: individual empowerment, organizational empowerment, and community empowerment.

**Individual Empowerment:** youth or adults developing skills to exert control and improve competence, as well as developing critical awareness to effectively collaborate for the betterment of organizations and communities<sup>2</sup>

**Organizational Empowerment:** entities that provide, and benefit from, the opportunity for youth or adults to acquire the skills needed to gain control over their lives, provide alternatives to service provision, as well as entities that develop and influence policy decisions<sup>3</sup>

**Community Empowerment:** efforts to improve the community, respond to threats to quality of life, and provide for citizen participation at the local, state, and national level<sup>4</sup>

Marc Zimmerman, a renowned researcher in the field of empowerment theory, articulates the necessary distinction between *developing the individual* and *empowering youth* to become change agents in society.

*Youth development* is centered on developing the capacity of the individual youth. *Youth empowerment* is focused on creating greater community change that, in its methods, relies on the development of individual capacity. Therefore organizations operating with a youth development framework are not addressing social inequities, but rather developing the individual within an unjust society and not changing the source of the problem.

Youth Empowered Solutions (YES!) is a nonprofit organization based in North Carolina that empowers youth, in partnership with adults, to create community change. YES! focuses on providing trainings and consultation to youth, adults, and organizations on how to apply a youth empowerment framework for system changes. YES! provides these services by hiring high school students as employees and training them, in collaboration with adult staff, in acquiring critical awareness and skills to advocate for policy change. YES! uses an outcomes-based system of verification to ensure that its youth are becoming empowered change agents in society.

Zimmerman summarizes the theory simply: “Empowerment theory connects individual well-being with the larger social and political environment, and suggests that people need opportunities to become active in community decision making in order to improve their lives, organizations, and communities.”<sup>5</sup>

While various researchers have demonstrated that the theory is sound, there is little record of the implementation, effectiveness, and accountability of youth empowerment.<sup>6</sup> Some researchers say the reason for this lack of evidence is simple: It is difficult to implement a theory, one with an intrinsic challenge to include the voice, ideas, and experiences of young people at the tables where important decisions are made.<sup>7</sup> A further difficulty: youth empowerment implementation requires young people to be involved not only in the day-to-day programming decisions but also in organizational governance. It is only through this immersion that communities will be able to promote the development of all youth and adults.<sup>8</sup>

Others point to the inherent biases of traditional research methods, in which evaluating the effectiveness of youth empowerment is stymied due to cultural differences, diversity of communities where implemented, and a lack of trust between evaluators and communities.<sup>9</sup> As the reach of community-based participatory research methods expands, so too will the literature of the effectiveness of implementing the theory of youth empowerment.<sup>10</sup>

Youth Empowered Solutions (YES!), however, has found a means to successfully implement all aspects of the theory of youth empowerment. The empowerment theory approach was developed and piloted in a teen tobacco prevention program in North Carolina, which later became the basis for creating YES! as a nonprofit organization in 2008. Its focus is to empower youth between the ages of 13 to 21, in partnership with adults, to create community change. The organization has four initiatives: Access to Health Care, Substance Abuse Prevention, Obesity Prevention, Tobacco Use Prevention – plus a Custom Services initiative that includes contracted trainings, consulting and technical assistance.

YES! implements the theory of youth empowerment within the structure of the YES! Youth Empowerment Model (© 2011 Youth Empowered Solutions), a three-pronged approach that effectively engages young people in work that challenges them to develop skills, gain critical awareness, and participate in opportunities that are necessary for creating community change. Youth become competent community advocates

by receiving training in such areas as public speaking, media literacy, community assessment, gathering community support and working with policymakers.<sup>11</sup> Intrinsic to the YES! Youth Empowerment Model is the theory of youth empowerment, not only aiding in the development of youth, but also helping to create generations of civically minded youth that take strategic actions to improve their communities.

This paper will further discuss the three levels of youth empowerment (individual, organizational, and community) and highlight the effectiveness of the YES! Youth Empowerment Model and its fidelity to the youth empowerment theory. In the process it will contribute to the best practice information that is currently missing from much of the literature. The purpose is to provide a better understanding of the implementation of youth empowerment theory through a case study of a successful organization's work with youth to effect change at the individual, community, and organizational levels.

## INDIVIDUAL LEVEL - YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

### Overview

Young people can have powerful and positive effects on adults, organizations, and communities.<sup>12</sup> Through empowering processes such as learning decision-making skills, critical awareness, managing resources, and working with others, both youth and adults become better equipped as change agents. On the other side, empowered outcomes allow individuals to gain a sense of control, critical awareness and participatory awareness.<sup>13</sup>

It is appropriate to include youth in community change initiatives. First, young people are disproportionately involved in and affected by the problems that beset communities and states.<sup>14</sup> Second, the developmental stage of young people make them integral for effective change in organizations and communities, particularly those in which they hold a stake, such as youth obesity, teen tobacco use, underage drinking, and access to health care. During adolescence, many young people are driven to explore issues of social justice where they are creating and experimenting with their own principles and political ideas, leading many to become involved in cause-based action.<sup>15</sup>

Third, youth can feel empowered through their relationships with adults, organizations, and communities. Involving youth in decision-making processes provides them with the potential opportunities and support of relevancy, voice, cause-based action, skill-building, and affirmation that the research shows to consistently help youth achieve mastery, compassion, and strong mental health.<sup>16</sup>

### YES! and Individual Empowerment

The YES! Youth Empowerment Model (Figure 1) was created as a practical application of the theory of youth empowerment. The YES! Youth Empowerment Model aims to aid youth in developing a sense of confidence and efficacy, a feeling of group solidarity, and an opportunity to participate in the collective process to impact the community. Youth also gain a sense of exercising power over one's life by being skilled, critically aware, and active in creating community change. The three-pronged approach includes the following areas:

**Skill Development:** the process of strengthening skills and knowledge to improve effective decision-making, positive peer interactions, and strategic community advocacy

**Critical Awareness:** the process of identifying the information and resources necessary for analyzing

issues that affect lives and environments as well as strategizing on ways to act as change agents in communities

**Opportunities:** the process of creating platforms for decision-making, participation, and taking action, which can result in community change<sup>17</sup>

## Effectiveness

Research has shown that not only do youth benefit by aiding in the achievement of compassion, health, and mastery of decision-making skills, but adults and organizations do as well.<sup>18</sup> For example, adults and organizations become more connected and responsive to youth in the community, thus leading to programming improvements.<sup>19</sup> Adults gain satisfaction in passing on their knowledge and guidance to the next generation. Adults have the opportunity to experience the competence of youth firsthand and begin to perceive young people as legitimate, crucial contributors. Furthermore, a synergy becomes possible between youth and adults who are in different stages of their lives, and consequently have different interests, skills, and experiences to bring to the decision-making process and enhance and improve programming.<sup>20</sup> For these reasons adults discover the utility of youth empowerment and its role in creating more functional organizations and a more just society. Organizations and communities also benefit from this new mind-set of creating collaborative change and fully participating in a democratic process.

Figure 1: YES! Youth Empowerment Model



## YES! Effectiveness

YES! plays an active role in empowering youth and creating pathways that ensure youth are empowered. In its five-year life span, YES! has effectively implemented the theory of youth empowerment at the individual, organizational and community levels – numerous entities now include youth in decision-making bodies and their input is vital to the sustainability of the organization, as well as having systemic impact in communities around policies addressing access to health care, substance abuse prevention, obesity prevention and tobacco prevention (See sections Organizational Level – Youth Empowerment and Community Level – Youth Empowerment for more details).

In order to effectively see these changes make an impact in organizations across various communities, the state, and the country, YES! conducts adult and youth trainings on various public health issues, media and advocacy, and offers technical assistance around youth empowerment (Figure 2).

YES! conducted a study of youth employees. The study found that the vast majority continued to not only be engaged in using their skills and critical awareness but also using them for civically-minded purposes (Figure 3). Additionally, youth who participated in youth empowerment up to nine years ago reported a

sustainable change in their behavior, whether serving as a board member, confidently performing public speaking, or shifting the focus of their collegiate or post-collegiate careers (Figure 4).

One YES! graduate said, “YES! has also brought me from thinking I would resign myself to an office job of some sort, to actually implementing my vision and *being the change* I wish to see.” In fact, 100% of graduated youth leaders said that being a part of an *empowered* and *empowering* organization affected decisions they were making about the future and that they continue to feel empowered to this day.

Figure 2: YES! Individual Level – Youth Empowerment in FY12  
(July 1, 2011 through June 30, 2012)

FY12 YES! Activity	Description	Youth Impact	Adult Impact	Total Impact
Youth Training	Develops skills and enhance critical awareness to be an effective youth advocate. Led by YES! youth staff.	856 youth trained	120 adults trained	976 individuals trained
Adult Training	Teaches adults techniques to help them work more effectively with youth. Led by YES! adult staff		204 trained	204 individuals trained
YES! Youth Staff	Part-time high school-aged employees of YES! who lead trainings, develop resources, and provide technical assistance	18 youth staff		18 youth staff

### Overview of YES! Outcomes Methodology

In order to track the impact of YES! trainings and technical assistance, YES! collects immediate evaluation information from participants to assess if new skills have been learned; a 30-60 day follow-up in order to track actions taken; and a one-year follow-up to measure policy, system and environmental changes. For staff members, YES! conducts 90-day and annual reviews and gathers annual assessment data on youth staff who have graduated.

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL - YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

### Overview

The role of an organization in youth empowerment can serve a dual purpose – one of *empowering* and one of *being empowered*. Some organizations provide opportunities for people to gain control of their lives, i.e. *empowering* organizations, while others may develop policies, influence policy decisions, or offer effective alternatives for service provision, i.e. *empowered* organizations.<sup>21</sup> And then some organizations, like YES!, may do both, which is truly implementing the theory of youth empowerment.

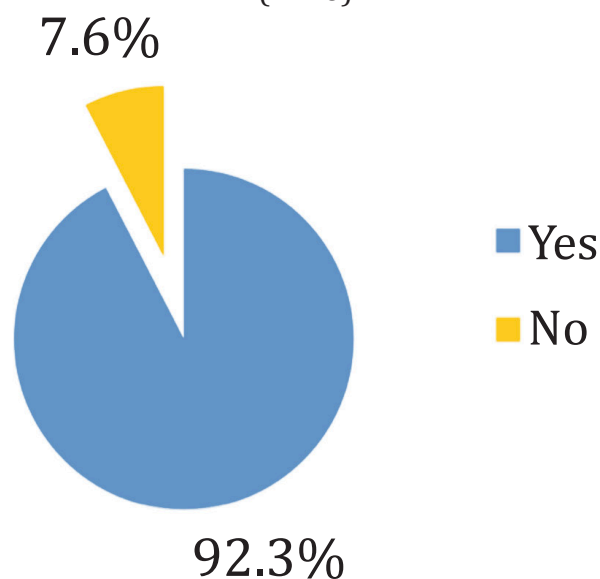
Further illustrations of the differences of *empowering* and *empowered* organizations can be seen through

the lens of entities that practice *youth development* and those that practice *youth empowerment*. Entities that foster a sense of control over individual lives are *empowering*, for they provide opportunities for leadership, character-building, and decision-making skills that may not be found at other entities. These organizations focus primarily on youth development.

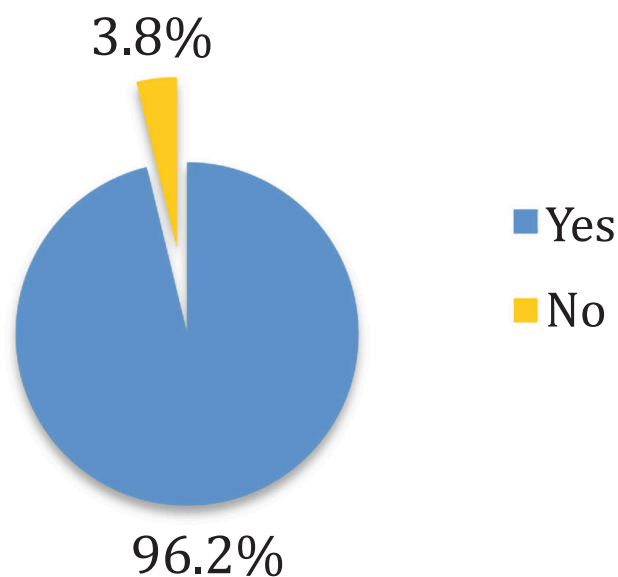
Figure 3:

Figure 4:

% of Graduated YES! Youth Still Using Skills & Awareness in Meaningful Opportunities (n=26)



% of Graduated YES! Youth Who Feel YES! Impacted Their Life (n=26)



### Overview of Graduated Youth Staff Survey Methodology

In September 2012, five questions were sent to 52 graduated youth staff via email and Facebook. A graduated youth staff is a youth that has been employed at YES! for at least a year and has graduated from high school. These questions focused on current activities, advocacy efforts, impact of YES!, and rating of self-empowerment. Twenty-six graduated youth staff responded for a return rate of 50%.

Other entities that facilitate youth in becoming key brokers in the policy decision-making process – and therefore, potentially extending youth influence to wider geographical and more diverse audiences – ultimately impact the greater community. These entities are *empowered*.<sup>22</sup> If these organizations also focus on developing individual skills and decision-making processes, they are considered to subscribe to the theory of youth empowerment.

Organizations that practice the youth empowerment theory also typically adhere to the principle of participatory decision-making.<sup>23</sup> The decision-making authority and power held by youth and adults provides a greater sense of control and greater satisfaction, therefore, more commitment to the organization and the change the entity is trying to make within the community and society.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, organizational empowerment not only benefits the organization, but the individual (both youth

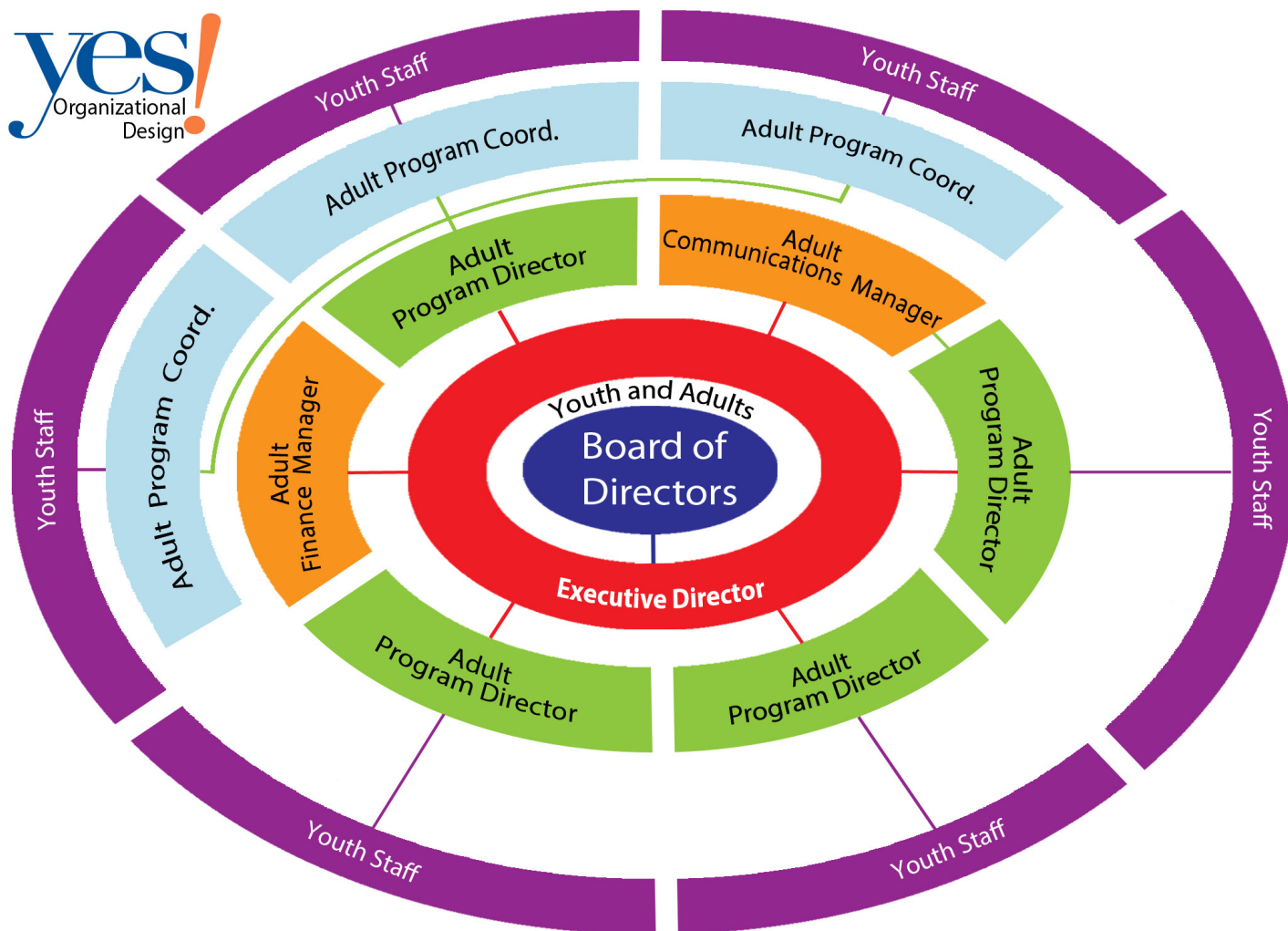


and adults), the community in which it operates, and ultimately, society.

### YES! and Organizational Empowerment

YES! is one of the rare entities that serves the dual role of being an *empowered* and *empowering* organization, one that is effectively implementing the youth empowerment theory. YES!, at the individual level, serves as an empowering entity for its youth and adult staff. At the organization level, the YES! Youth Empowerment Model aims to create an environment of shared decision-making, cooperative planning and implementation, and respect (see Figure 5). Simultaneously, the staff (both adult and youth) are able to implement a culture, vision, and strategy that supports youth empowerment at the individual and community levels, illustrating its role as an empowered organization.

Figure 5: YES! Organizational Design





### **Youth Empowered Solutions Organizational Design**

Youth Empowered Solutions (YES!) envisions communities where the valued standard is empowered youth leaders working alongside adults to create positive change. The philosophy necessitates the reworking of the traditional depiction of an organizational structure by balancing the lower appendages of a standard chart, reflecting adult staff power-sharing efforts with youth staff. The primary purpose of the YES! Organizational Design, therefore, is to exemplify a more balanced attitude about integrating youth contributions.

The YES! Organizational Design is entirely functional, accurately representing the YES! chain of command. Although youth staff members report upwards to program directors, they are not situated at the bottom of the organization (as in standard organizational charts). The YES! Organizational Design is not intended to represent a flat management flow, or a cyclical managerial process. Instead, like standard charts, YES!'s diagram includes both lateral and layered, subordinate positions as well as departmental segments thereby acknowledging the role of supervision while concurrently promoting decision-making processes that rely on the feedback from baseline youth employees.

This novel diagram illustrates YES's appreciation of youth work and the fact that youth are an essential part of the organizational structure. It could be used to encourage a more positive perception of youth, to elevate the priority, rank and responsibility of youth in organization, and to challenge traditional assumptions about the quality, nature and usefulness of youth in a community.

### **Effectiveness**

The research literature, as mentioned, is sparse on the effectiveness of youth empowerment at the organizational level.<sup>25</sup> However, Zeldin's research points to six benefits of youth empowerment and including youth in organizational decision-making processes:

1. The principles and practices of youth involvement and empowerment become embedded within the organizational culture.
2. Young people help clarify and bring focus to an organization's mission.
3. Programming improvements occurred as the adults and the organizations, as a whole, became more connected and responsive to youth in the community.
4. Organizations placed a greater value on inclusivity and representation. They saw the benefit of including multiple and diverse community voices in decision-making processes and the impact it has on programming.
5. Having youth as decision-makers helped convince foundations and other funding agencies that the organization was serious about promoting youth development, as well as, adhering to the principle of youth as change agents and the theory of youth empowerment.

6. Including youth in decision-making led organizations to reach out to the community in more diverse ways (e.g. community advocacy, policy-making, and service).<sup>26</sup>

### **YES! Effectiveness**

Besides providing the training that not only contributes to youth development, YES! works along with youth to ensure organizational empowerment. Various agencies and boards at the state and local levels now include youth positions, national associations and conference conveners include youth at the decision-making table, and youth have taken the skills learned and applied them to improving various programs impacting youth in a community. Most notably, youth – whether staff of YES! or trained by YES! – have contributed to the following organizational changes:

- YouTHRIVE, a Wake County Coalition, changed how they were operating on multiple levels to be more inclusive of youth: involving youth in planning meetings, adjusting recruitment and retention strategies because of youth input, and modifying the type of information used to train adults.
- North Carolina statewide substance abuse group Cooperative Agreement Advisory Board (CAAB) instituted a youth empowerment subcommittee.
- National Assembly on School-Based Health Care created two youth positions, including one to a YES! youth on their national convention planning committee.
- The 6th Annual Southern Obesity Summit, a conference hosted by the Texas Health Institute and YES! – included a youth track with the goal of 25% of participants being youth from across the South.
- The Alice Aycock Poe Center for Health Education in Raleigh, N.C. developed a system to pay stipends to youth for their work on projects.
- Young Moms Connect applied the YES! Youth Empowerment Model within their program.

## **COMMUNITY LEVEL - YOUTH EMPOWERMENT**

### **Overview**

An empowered community initiates efforts to improve the community, responds to threats to quality of life, and provides opportunities for citizen (both youth and adults) participation.<sup>27</sup> Similar to individuals and organizations, communities can be *empowering* and *empowered*. *Empowering* communities have the characteristics of access to resources, open government structure, and a tolerance for diversity. Alternatively, an *empowered* community has the characteristic of organizational coalitions, pluralistic leadership, and residents with participatory skills.<sup>28</sup>

A community that is both *empowering* and *empowered* has interdependent components that collaborate to effectively identify community needs, develop strategies to address those needs, and find resources and perform actions to meet those needs.<sup>29</sup> Through its organizations (and the decision-makers of those organizations), an empowered community will have resources, funding, coalitions, and networks that provide opportunities for the citizenry to effectively bring about change through media, policy advocacy, and grassroots organizing.

Furthermore, in an empowered community, youth empowerment becomes an institutionalized expectation in which decision-makers look to youth as valuable constituents to gauge and garner input regarding all issues impacting a community.<sup>30</sup> As a result, civic agendas begin to reflect the collective concerns, priorities, and voice of youth.<sup>31</sup>

These characteristics collectively allow for an empowered community to actively strive for systemic change through policy advocacy, where empowered individuals and organizations are at the forefront of a more just and fair society.

### **YES! and Community Empowerment**

To implement youth empowerment with fidelity, the ultimate goal is to create empowered and empowering communities; communities that are responsive to processes that embrace the input of young people in shaping them to represent all constituents. In essence, these types of communities practice all three levels of empowerment.

The YES! Youth Empowerment Model – through providing skill development for youth and adults, identifying resources and strategies that build critical awareness, and aiding youth in creating platforms of opportunity for youth empowered decision-making – is able to create empowered communities. These communities where YES! has made an impact have embraced the theory of youth empowerment. They are intrinsically *empowering* in that organizations help youth to develop those needed skills to become efficient and productive decision-makers. In Asheville, N.C., YES! youth staff worked in partnership with the Buncombe County ASSIST Coalition to pass a policy forbidding tobacco sponsorship at the Bele Chere Festival. Youth worked in partnership with adults to research facts, present to policymakers, and earn media attention. Through this process organizations become *empowered* by creating a critical mass of youth who provide valuable input to organizations. In Charlotte, N.C., YES! was integral in recruiting and training youth to become The Core, a group of local high school students who effectively advocate for policy change related to childhood obesity. The Core is a component of the Healthy Weight, Healthy Child Initiative, a community-wide effort to increase daily activity and improve nutrition. In turn, these organizations foster a community that welcomes empowered youth who work for social change for the betterment of society.

### **Effectiveness**

While there is plenty of research that illustrates the effectiveness of *empowered* and *empowering* organizations, of the three levels of the youth empowerment theory, the community level is the most sparse.<sup>32</sup> Little evidence exists regarding the impact that can readily demonstrate at the community level of having empowered youth at decision-making tables within a society.<sup>33</sup> This may explain why there is a prevalence of regulations and policies at the local, state, and federal levels that can be seen as unjust as they relate to youth. These policies are most evident, for example, in the civic or community engagement arenas. Case in point: The voting age is 18 years old, yet youth are required to pay income tax on their earnings as soon as they are permitted to work (age 16 in most states without certain permits). Also related to voting is the past and recent efforts to implement voter identification laws at the state level which could create a barrier for youth who do not drive and therefore do not have a driver's license.

## YES! Effectiveness

Societal change is not easy. Yet YES!, through its implementation of youth empowerment theory, has seen numerous successes at the community level that have systemically changed areas of public health, especially as it relates to tobacco use prevention. Examples include the following:

- Fifty-four Georgia school districts trained by YES! adopted 100% tobacco-free school policies since 2008.
- In 2010, Savannah, Ga. adopted a smoke-free ordinance that eliminated smoking in all public places in the city.
- In 2012, the City of Asheville, N.C. banned tobacco sponsorship at Bele Chere, its annual arts and music festival.
- Buncombe County, N.C. passed a smoke-free policy in public parks in 2010.
- From 2009 to 2012, seven Georgia counties adopted 100% tobacco-free policies at parks and recreation facilities.
- In North Carolina tobacco use was banned in public schools in 2008 and in restaurants and bars in 2010.

Other community-level successes have been brought to fruition in the areas of obesity prevention, substance-abuse prevention, and health access, including:

- Many faith-based communities in North Carolina adopted five Eat Smart, Move More North Carolina nutrition and physical activity policies, resulting in the creation of community gardens on church grounds during 2009 and 2010.
- North Carolina Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Commission denied the City of Raleigh's request to give naming rights of its amphitheater to Bud Light (2010).
- Southeast Raleigh High School in Raleigh, N.C., is working with YES! youth to open a school-based health center that will increase health care access to 1,650 students who might otherwise not have access to the health care system.

## CONCLUSION

Youth empowerment is a multi-level construct that requires an understanding of individual adaptation, organizational development, and community life evolution – representing the individual, organizational, and community levels of empowerment.<sup>34</sup> Youth empowerment can also be both process and outcomes oriented, *empowering* youth with skill development and opportunities, and creating *empowered* youth who have greater control in organizational and community decision-making.

The natural fit of public health with the practice of community-based participation makes this arena especially receptive to the influence of youth empowerment. This intrinsic fit between public health and youth

empowerment has contributed to the focus and many successes of Youth Empowered Solutions! (YES!) in the areas of health care access, obesity prevention, substance abuse prevention and tobacco use prevention.

And while YES! has been able to identify and quantify its youth empowerment impact at all three levels of the theory – individual, organizational, and community – the understanding and appreciation of the effectiveness of the theory is missing from much of the research literature. Researchers hypothesize, however, that as more organizations adopt youth empowerment into their culture and operating philosophy, a critical mass of research and expertise will develop.<sup>35</sup>

It is through this knowledge that those interested in youth empowerment can understand the context and settings in which the theory flourishes, expanding the reach beyond public health and incorporating it into other spheres of society where the public is civically engaged such as education policy, environmental policy, and economic systems. This process will result in the creation of youth as change agents and ultimately a more just and empowered society.

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<sup>5</sup> Zimmerman, *Handbook*, 2000.

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<sup>13</sup> Zimmerman, *Handbook*, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Zeldin, *Youth-Adult Partnerships*, 2008 and Zimmerman, *Handbook*, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Zeldin, *Youth-Adult Partnerships*, 2008.

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<sup>24</sup> Zeldin, *Youth-Adult Partnerships*, 2008 and Zimmerman, *Handbook*, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Zeldin, *Youth in Decision-Making*, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Zimmerman, *Handbook*, 2000 and Minkler, *Health Behavior*, 1990.

<sup>28</sup> Zimmerman, *Handbook*, 2000.



<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Zeldin, *Youth in Decision-Making*, 2000.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Zeldin, *Youth-Adult Partnerships*, 2008

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Zimmerman, *Citizenship Participation*, 1988.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid; Zeldin, *Youth-Adult Partnerships*, 2008; and Zeldin, *Youth In Decision-Making*, 2000.



Empowering youth,  
in partnership with adults,  
to create community change

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