State of Young People

“I don’t think I need to tell anyone today that the world is full of problems, full of issues that need to be solved. I think the heroes needed to solve them are sitting here. I don’t think the cavalry is coming, I think they’re in our presence. If we can empower young people across the country to recognize the hero inside of them, the world doesn’t stand a chance.”

Tony Weaver Jr.
Weird Enough Productions

“Just believe in yourself, even when things seem to be going downhill. Make sure you speak up and believe that you can do it, no matter what. Even when you don’t feel like doing anything, push through and make sure what you’re doing is making you happy.”

Jordan Reeves, Born Just Right
INTRODUCTION

From the response to the shootings at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School to the recent action on climate change, the nation has seen stirring leadership from young people on major issues of the day. Not only have those efforts brought attention to the questions of school safety, gun control, and climate change, they have also showcased the power of young people to identify critical issues and to lead the charge to forge a public and policy response.

Dedicated to creating the conditions of success for every young person, America’s Promise has a long-standing commitment to hearing and understanding the experiences and perspectives of young people. We have sought to be an ally in channeling and amplifying youth voice to our Alliance and the broader Public—insisting on making space for true youth leadership. Our research institute, the Center for Promise, is a well-recognized leader in youth-focused research. Its reports, based on in-depth inquiries with young people, have been highly influential in shaping the understanding of critical issues ranging from high school graduation to the impediments to good health. Moreover, since our founding America’s Promise has had full voting youth board members, including three young people currently serving on our Board of Directors.

We have been heartened by the recent rise in youth voice and leadership, but we also believe that, ironically, many youth-serving organizations are not hearing directly enough from young people, nor have they created the structures that give young people a voice in program designs, strategic plans, and other organizational and systemic efforts to improve their lives.

Long known for powerful events and recognizing that this moment calls for a special effort to lift up youth voices and leadership, America’s Promise tried something new—a large-scale event that was entirely designed and led by young people themselves. The result was the State of Young People, a remarkable three-day gathering with the explicit purpose of having leaders in youth-serving fields hear directly from young people and then work side by side with those young people on the issues raised to fashion avenues for ongoing youth input across a multitude of national and local youth-serving organizations.

This brief recap captures some of the ideas and energy of the State of Young People and charts a course for next steps to capitalize on the excitement generated over those three days.
AN EVENT DESIGNED AND LED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

Click the picture above to watch the video

We have seen authentic partnerships between youth and adults accomplish great things in the communities and networks with whom we work. Young people identify what is most urgent in their communities and based on their lived experiences, advance solutions that remove the barriers young people face in their lives.

Fully embracing a youth-adult partnership model, America’s Promise deployed three councils to inform the content of the discussions and the goals, themes, topics, and participants in the convening. The only guidance we gave was that the convening should explore issues related to the Five Promises that have always been the core of America’s Promise. Within the frame of the Five Promises, we focused on a deeper understanding of what the presence or absence of these promises looks like for young people today. Together, we created the space for youth and adults to explore and advance new solutions.

The heart of the convening was the Youth Executive Council, a diverse group of eleven young leaders from across the country who worked with the convening planners to determine the areas of focus and to lead the conversations, ensuring that the issues affecting their daily lives remained at the center of discussion.

Alan Cruz
Samuel Getachew
Nastassja Morton
Naomi Wadler
Clara Nevins
Will Powers
Tokata Iron Eyes
Jordan Reeves
Joseph Tuoma
Coy Walker
Elizabeth Zalianga
The Partner Council was comprised of youth representatives from twenty Alliance members who are exemplars of youth leadership and engagement in every aspect of their work. They provided guidance on what authentic youth-adult partnerships look like, what makes them work, and what gets in the way.

The Youth Leaders Council was composed of thirty established young leaders (ages eighteen and over), who were selected by the members of the Partner Council to help devise the “rules of engagement” at the convening and to facilitate the conversations at the Summit.

We charged these three councils with finding the best ways to:

1. support the formation of delegations to attend the convening and carry the work back home to their communities and organizations after the event;
2. create norms around how adults and young people should engage with each other during the convening; and
3. design how we engage after the convening and conceptualize what future success looks like.
HIGHLIGHTS

We held the State of Young People in June 2019 at Facebook Headquarters in Menlo Park, CA. Facebook Education was a cornerstone partner in this endeavor—providing the facility and all the event-related support. More than 300 leaders—over 200 young people (ages 11-24) and roughly 80 adults including leading education and positive youth development advocates as well as local, state, and national systems-level leaders—gathered to engage in courageous conversations, interactive experiences, and action-oriented opportunities.

Unlike a traditional conference, the State of Young People focused on providing young people a platform to share their real-talk, real-time perspective on their lived experiences. We literally “handed the mic” to the young people, placing them at center stage. The key assignment for the adult leaders we gathered: LISTEN!

The young leaders’ breadth of expertise and depth of commitment were on full display from the beginning and the eleven extraordinary Youth Executive Council members steered the event program to keep us true to our commitment that the event truly be by and for young people.

The first order of business was for young people to lay out—through mediums ranging from poetry, TED-style talks, panels, dance, and song—the challenges they face for the adult leaders to hear and understand. The young people also wanted those adult leaders to see their creativity and feel their strength.
Naomi Wadler, Alan Cruz, and Gabe Abdellatif led the Summit and guided all participants through the various activities, panels, and workshops as the event emcees.

Clara Nevins and Joseph Tuoma collaborated and opened the program up by defining courageous spaces and setting the tone for the rest of the Summit.

Samuel Getachew contributed to the program by delivering a brilliant and moving spoken word piece.

Tokata Iron Eyes paid tribute to the land and allowed us a glimpse into the beautiful traditions of the indigenous people local to where the Summit was held.

Naomi Wadler, Jordan Reeves, and Mari Copeny (a.k.a. Little Miss Flint) struck the participants with their young wisdom and powerful work during their panel on what inspired them to become civically engaged.
We heard about education, service opportunities, employment, mental health, and breaking down barriers. Across all these categories, themes emerged around self-identity/self-image, behaviors and relationships or interpersonal interactions, and structural concerns.

**Takeaways**

**Self-identity** comments spoke to the way young people see and feel about themselves, how young people define and measure “success,” and/or how narrowly adults define success. Whether comparing young people to other young people or creating unneeded pressure on young people’s performance, the idea of judging young people through a mostly negative or “deficit-based” lens emerged as a clear challenge.

**Behaviors & relationships** comments zeroed in on the ways others perceived, treated, and/or acted towards young people. Young people talked about what they experienced as the dismissive attitude of many adults and how those attitudes create negativity and undermine the young people’s confidence and desire to engage.

**Structural/socially constructed barriers** were described as social attitudes and values that show up in policies or structures that seem to exclude youth, youth voice, and youth concerns or devalue youth, youth voice and youth concerns. In many instances, the young leaders said that they felt that they often had to navigate and negotiate an environment that they perceived as fundamentally “anti-youth” or not “youth-friendly.”

Most important, young people want to reclaim and restore their narrative, and they want adult leaders to hear them. Young people see themselves as valuable, contributing, caring individuals but they think that adults and society writ large are saying otherwise and devalue young people’s ideas, voice, skills and talents. This is evidenced in the structures that create or perpetuate toxic environments (poor school funding, systemic racism, narrowly defined academic “success” outcomes), and also the daily interactions that leave youth feeling misunderstood and undervalued.
WORKING SESSIONS

In the wake of the youth presentations, the gathering turned to working side-by-side with adult leaders to create a shared-vision for what authentic youth leadership and engagement can look like going forward. The focus was on breaking down current leadership structures to inject youth voice and youth leadership opportunities. Youth Council members identified the challenges they wanted to address with their adult allies. The topics were:

1. Measuring Success
2. Forging Safe Places
3. Changing Culture
4. Sharing Power

The young leaders facilitated small group discussions that articulated the challenges and opportunities and offered solutions.

At the end of the working sessions, participants completed a “Commitment Card” on which they were asked to write down a pledge on how each would carry the work forward. Both youth and adults agreed to work collectively to break down historical positions of power, limitations of society and existing institutions, and barriers to authentic youth leadership and engagement.

Many of the commitments were structured around empowerment, advocacy, and accountability. Two emblematic examples:

- Youth representative Jenniah Michel of Year Up South Florida wrote, “I am committed to standing my ground as a young person and encouraging youth to find their voices in order to become fully engaged as a whole despite the gaps.”

- Adult representative Jazmyne Owens of the National Urban League wrote, “I am committed to trusting, listening to, and engaging with youth. I commit to checking my privilege and biases daily and following through with creating the safe spaces discussed today.”
Throughout the State of Young People, the interactions of youth and adult leaders operated at two intersecting and complementary levels. At the personal level, the event was structured to foster partnerships, conversation, and networking among youth participants and caring adults to help to create new, positive, meaningful, and helpful relationships. At the organizational level, the goal was to inspire organizations and communities across the country to create more authentic opportunities for youth leadership and engagement to advance better policy and practice.

The State of Young People convening was a powerful start on both levels.
SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

We worked in partnership with both national and local (Bay Area) youth activists and artists to engage and activate their digital communities. Working with Youth Executive Council and Youth Leader members, we supported the implementation of a digital media plan, including but not limited to, Twitter threads and Instagram platform takeovers. Social media influencers who Lifted up the event and its themes included the following individuals and organizations:

**INSTAGRAM**
(followers)

Mari Copeny - 52K
We Vote Next - 24.1K
Naomi Wadler - 8.6K
Jordan Reeves - 3.2K
The People's Conservatory - 2.9K
Bridge the Divide - 996

**TWITTER**
(followers)

Haven Coleman - 7.8K
We Vote Next - 6.1K
Samuel Getachew - 1.3K
Emanuel “Boo Milton” - 5.2k
ACTIVATION HIGHLIGHTS

Thanks to our partnership with Communities In Schools, Facebook EDU, and the People’s Conservatory, participants at the State of Young People had the opportunity to interact with installations highlighting the issues young people care about. Five activations for attendees to engage with throughout the day included:

1. **Dialogue and Commitment Wall**
   This encouraged conversation about youth concerns and leadership, allowed attendees to give and receive letters of affirmation, and provided them with a place to make and share commitments.

2. **The People’s Conservatory Live Art Piece**
   An interactive art piece where attendees contributed various elements throughout the day (photos, color, etc.) so, together, their pieces of the story all contributed to the larger end result.

3. **Communities In Schools Mosaics & Scavenger Hunt**
   This partner’s mosaics featured young people who are thriving in the face of challenges. An associated scavenger hunt encouraged attendees to find artifacts in the displayed art pieces, resulting in the winner of a brand-new iPad.

4. **Facebook EDU Wall**
   A “Write Something...” wall, where attendees could contribute their thoughts throughout the day and take photos with the inspirational messages.

5. **Photobooth**
   A branded photo opportunity for attendees to commemorate their participation and spread the word across social media channels.
The State of Young People Summit was just the beginning of an ongoing initiative to increase youth engagement throughout our Alliance and beyond. America’s Promise Alliance is working to:

**Develop a Youth Consultancy Program**

The Youth Consultancy program is intended to ensure youth voice leads the way to achieving America’s Promise’s mission. Youth consultants will consist of a group of individuals aged 16-24 who will provide their input on America’s Promise different projects and ensure that campaigns are accurately serving the youth population. America’s Promise engages with youth leaders on an ad hoc or opportunistic basis, and this consultancy program will encourage a more strategic approach to lifting up youth voice across our initiatives. This will give us insights on exactly what young people care about and inform our strategies and next steps. This program will also directly benefit the youth consultants by allowing them to gain skills, networking experiences, and references they can use in their future professional endeavors.

**Formalize an America’s Promise Youth Community**

Through our youth engagement activities over the last year, including the State of Young People, we have built relationships with over 500 young people around the country. America’s Promise will work to activate those young people by establishing a formal online community and inviting those members to:

- Lead webinars and other learning sessions
- Participate in America’s Promise events
- Participate in social media campaigns
- Author opinion pieces and blogs

**Facilitate Authentic Youth Engagement Among Partners**

Organizations within the Alliance have expressed a commitment to authentic youth engagement but often do not have the tools to implement a strategy that is beneficial to the organization and the young people. America’s Promise will provide support for organizations that are committed to authentically engaging youth, including advising on the organization’s planning for youth engagement and facilitating sessions and providing technical assistance from our youth engagement experts at the Center for Promise.

We are excited to explore these opportunities in the coming year as well as other possibilities including regional States of Young People and an annual report on the State of Young People by the Center for Promise. It is important that we continue to build on the momentum of the State of Young People and make sure that we and our partners walk the walk on true youth voice and leadership.