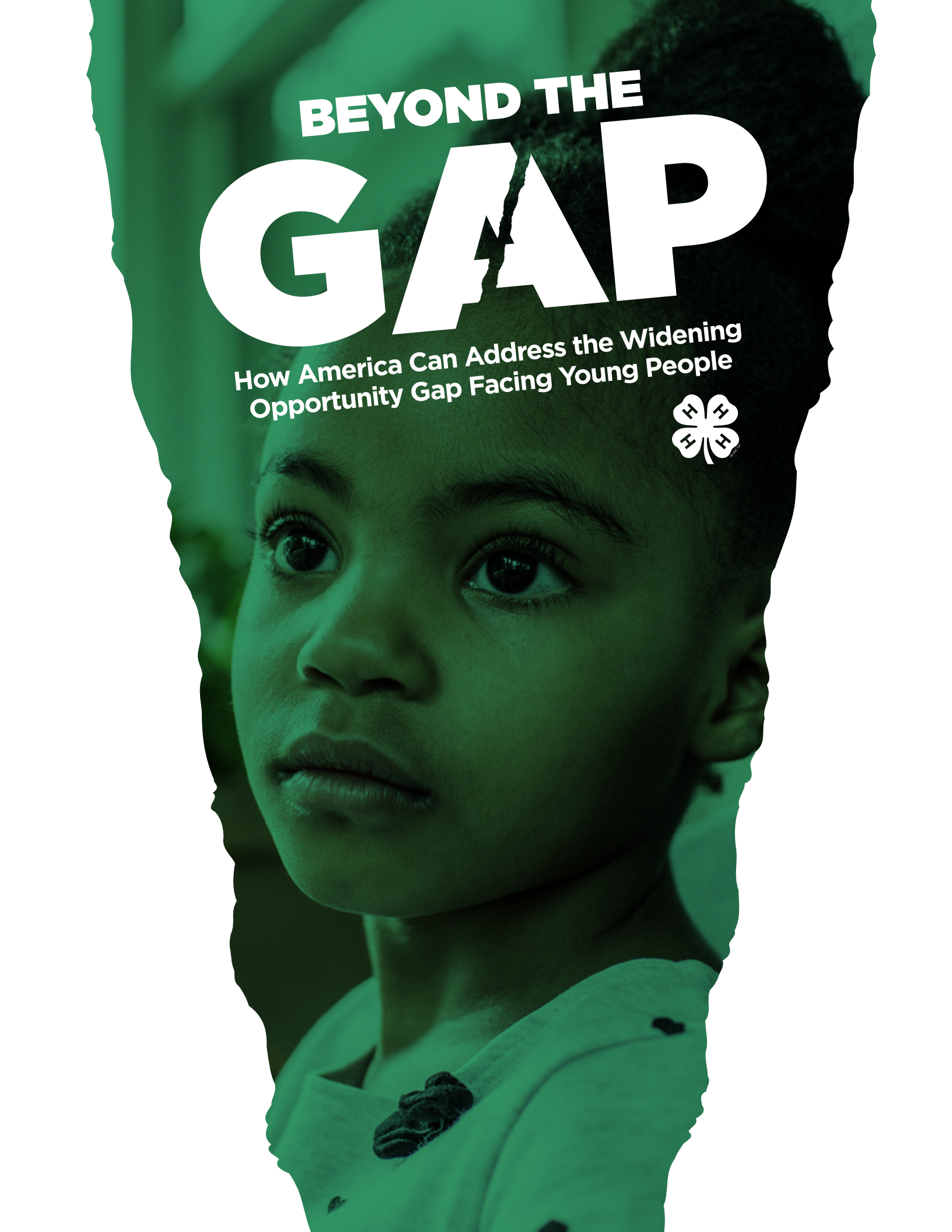



BEYOND THE GAP

How America Can Address the Widening
Opportunity Gap Facing Young People





“Programs that promote PYD and youth contributions to civil society empower young people to act in manners that elicit hope, for them and their families, that their lives will be marked by positive futures. As our nation strives to meet the challenges of COVID-19 and of the continuing systemic racism and inequities facing marginalized youth, families, and communities, PYD programs offer evidence-based means to provide opportunities for thriving among diverse youth.”

Richard M. Lerner

Bergstrom Chair in Applied Developmental Science, Director,
Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development
Tufts University

“Having had the good fortune to work with colleagues like Peter Benson, Richard Lerner, and Steve Hamilton to jump start the PYD movement in the late 1990s, I was delighted to be asked to review this paper. PYD is, as Steve Hamilton succinctly states, a natural developmental process, an approach to youth programming, and an intentional strategy used by youth programs to optimize youth development. This troika of goals is difficult to convey in an acronym, especially when there are other acronyms and terms (SEL, SEAD, SoLD, whole child) that nip at its heels. But, in the end, it is the intentionality of definition, the breadth of the academic and applied research, and the scale of implementation (international) that makes this paper important. My goal, and I hope our goal, as leaders committed to using our resources to help young people not only build competencies, but develop strong identities and build a sense of agency through the steady use of their skills, time, and voices, is not to see “PYD” overtake the other acronyms. My goal is to see that the richness of this approach, as this paper recommends, is infused into the DNA of the personnel, practices, programs, policies, and priorities of schools, after-school programs and youth development organizations, and the broader array of community organizations and systems that support young people’s learning and development.”

Karen Pittman

Co-Founder, President and CEO
Forum for Youth Investment

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“Community programs that embrace a positive youth development approach, like 4-H, play a vital role in providing meaningful opportunities for connection, learning, and development. This is what we do. In a time when families and schools are seeking creative new ways to ensure young people have opportunities to thrive, we must remember to band together and activate the existing assets of community partners in the system of supports we need to ensure young people are safe, supported, and engaged. We need to do more, and positive youth development offers an assets-based and relationship-driven approach that is worth reflecting in our solutions to address the persistent and unique challenges we face in communities and education systems.”

Deborah Moroney

Director, Youth Development and Supportive Learning Environments
American Institute for Research

“*Beyond the Gap* is an eye-opening assessment of the challenges being faced by today’s young people based on the latest research and our changing environment. It also serves as a call to action for those who can make a difference in narrowing the gap by using a positive youth development approach that focuses on youth assets and strengthening those assets for the public good of all.”

Kathleen Lodi

Associate Dean; 4-H Program Administrator
University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension

“The growing disparities among the youth in the United States, and indeed worldwide, need immediate attention. Youth organizations employing Positive Youth Development, such as 4-H, are essential in addressing this critical issue.”

Edwin Jones

Associate Dean and Director, Virginia Cooperative Extension
Virginia Tech University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The term ‘opportunity gap’ is increasingly being used by organizations and educators to describe how the circumstances in which people are born and/or live determine their opportunities in life. This contrasts with the term ‘achievement gap,’ which refers to the disparity in outcomes between lower- and upper-income children. The achievement gap typically refers to outputs, where the onus for achieving is placed on individuals, whereas the opportunity gap refers to inputs, i.e. how the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities affects people’s ability to succeed.

The widening opportunity gap in America is affected by four key elements – race, ethnicity, ZIP code and socio-economic status – demanding that the playing field needs to be adjusted so all children have an equitable opportunity to succeed.

Research undertaken by youth development organizations such as 4-H shows that COVID-19 has exacerbated the inequities our young people face in terms of their mental health, their access to education and their employability – particularly amongst those who were already experiencing trauma, systemic social inequity and other disadvantages prior to the pandemic. As we see from the ongoing social unrest across the U.S., we are also still learning how the elevated discourse on race and racism in the U.S. will shape young people’s beliefs and actions, but there is no doubt it will have

a profound influence on their development. While there is a lot that we do not know yet about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the financial recession and the ongoing social unrest, we do know that the unprecedented situation presents us with a chance to create a multi-sector commitment to address the opportunity gap. One inequity that highlights the growing opportunity gap is the many children in America without access to technology and broadband – particularly those of color and those who live in rural areas. However this access is critical to academic development as distance learning is a reality in the near term.

As this paper explains, positive youth development (PYD) can play an important role in closing the opportunity gap. Given the economic, social and health context in which we live right now, our education, government, philanthropy and civil society institutions must support PYD to mitigate the three key areas that our young people are struggling with – mental health, education and employability. These three areas are discussed in this paper, with recommendations to maximize PYD as an asset to close the opportunity gap and lead young people to greater economic opportunities.


Positive youth development is a widely-used, research-based approach to supporting youth that builds an ecosystem of support incorporating caring adults, mentorship, the provision of services, and youth voice. By uplifting youth voices, we will enable young people to be part of the solution. A national investment in PYD, with its focus on building youth assets, opportunities and voice, rather than focusing on single problems such as substance abuse and teen pregnancy, can transform our country's social, economic and political imbalances, thereby creating a more equitable and just society.



The term ‘opportunity gap’ is increasingly being used by organizations and educators to describe how the circumstances in which people are born and/or live determine their opportunities in life.

INTRODUCTION



A young person with glasses is shown in profile, looking down and writing with a pencil. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter. The person's face and hand are visible on the left side of the page, while the right side is mostly obscured by the green overlay and text.

A persistent opportunity gap is threatening the social and economic future of our country, particularly as we battle the challenges of COVID-19 and the resultant recession. Our youth stand to lose significantly from this growing gap. Young people of color are particularly disadvantaged, given the long-standing social and economic inequities that are often determined by race, and the unequal impact they experience from COVID-19 infection rates, unemployment rates and community distress.

The benefits of investing in closing the opportunity gap are many and varied. A larger tax base, less pressure on benefit programs, equity and enhanced standards of living are just some of the advantages we would reap as a country were the opportunity gap to be addressed. By working together to harness youth voice with leaders in government, the private sector, philanthropy, local communities, higher education and the PYD field, our nation can avert the substantial social and financial problems threatening the futures of our young people.

“ A persistent opportunity gap is threatening the social and economic future of our country, particularly as we battle the challenges of COVID-19 and the resultant recession. ”

**THE WIDENING
OPPORTUNITY GAP
FOR AMERICA'S YOUTH**



While the current climate has magnified the sociopolitical and economic drivers of the opportunity gap, it has not revealed anything new about these inequities. Rather, it has shifted public awareness and raised the stakes if, as a country, we fail to reduce the gap. In addition, the move to online education, which required facing and attempting to solve inequities in online access, shows that we had the capacity to address inequities all along (Levinson, 2020).

Research has revealed the stark inequities among youth as their promise for success is derailed by social, economic and structural disadvantages, which often are accompanied by racism, bias and discrimination (National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2019). Youth who are unable to access opportunities that are provided to those of privilege slip further and further behind, resulting in dramatically different outcomes from youth with greater advantages.

Unsurprisingly, these negative developmental trajectories lead to poorer long-term economic and health outcomes in adulthood. A field report conducted by The Bridgespan Group and National 4-H Council (2018: 12) found that “nearly seven out of 10 Americans (compared to a third of White Americans) who are born into the middle-income quintile end up in the bottom two quintiles as adults.” Moreover, while urban young people of color have long struggled with upward mobility, economic advancement is also a challenge for young people in rural America, where opportunities vary significantly, even within counties.

Relying on remote learning and online classes in the time of COVID-19 is particularly challenging for Black and Latino households, as well as rural households. As of 2017, 75% of urban homes had broadband access compared to just 63% of rural homes, and 70% of Whites had access compared to 66% of Blacks and 61% of Hispanics – a statistically significant disparity (Pew Research Center, 2019). Black and Latino households are also more likely to rely on mobile devices for access rather than computers (Fishbane & Tomer, 2020). In the long run, children at risk academically could also be further disadvantaged if they do not have parents who can support their virtual learning at home (Yoshikawa, et al., 2020).

The opportunity gap exists not only between rural and urban areas – various studies have highlighted deep levels of inequity within metro areas as well. Research by Brandeis University shows that 84% of children in very low-opportunity neighborhoods need free or reduced-price lunches, compared to 22% of their peers in very high-opportunity neighborhoods. Access to green space, which is critical for children’s health and well-being, is also vastly different. In very low-opportunity neighborhoods, almost half of children (48%) lack access to parks and playgrounds, compared to 22% of kids in very high-opportunity neighborhoods (Acevedo-Garcia, et al., 2019).

Such statistics underscore the precarious capacity of many families of color to weather severe economic distress and highlight that the most vulnerable youth need the greatest investment. These calls for equity can no longer be ignored. Investing in young people of color and addressing the barriers that exacerbate the opportunity gap is fiscally responsible (Bird, 2016). In the face of the pandemic and ongoing calls for social justice, such investment is also our country’s moral obligation. Of concern is the negative impact on youth’s mental health, educational opportunities, and skills and employability.



MENTAL HEALTH & TRAUMA

Recent research from China investigating the effects of COVID-19 revealed that the pandemic has had a marked effect on the mental health of Chinese youth (Liang, et al., 2020). In Italy, another virus hotspot, concerted efforts are being made to protect children from the effects of potential post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to COVID-19 (Roccella, 2020).

In America, racial inequities affect families' ability to cope with stress, particularly during the severe economic upheaval during 2020. Black families, for example, have one-tenth of the net worth of White families, even with similar levels of education (Traub, et al., 2017). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 13.4% of Americans (42 million) lived below the poverty line in 2017, but this poverty was not evenly distributed amongst racial groups. Hispanics and Latinos account for 18.2% of the population yet make up 26.2% of the poor population. Similarly, Blacks account for 12.5% of the population, but make up 21.4% of the poor population (Sauter, 2018).



The impact of trauma and its resulting effects on youth have been well-documented, particularly when they occur at key developmental moments in a young person's journey to adulthood.

While the long-term effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth mental health in the U.S. is still unclear, a dawning recognition of the effects of the pandemic on youth is taking place across the country. Many are calling for action to ensure that schools and out-of-school time (OST) organizations are prepared to meet the needs of distressed youth as they return to school and the programs that serve them.

An additional concern is the increasing rate of domestic violence in the U.S. and other countries with pandemic stay-at-home orders. At the same time, reports of child abuse have gone down, which is likely due to reduced opportunities to spot child abuse or neglect as children are isolated at home, without interaction with teachers and other non-familial adults who ordinarily would identify and report concerns of child abuse and neglect (Campbell, 2020).

In this way, COVID-19 has brought into full relief the need to understand the effects of adversity, stress and trauma on young people, not only in this time of pandemic, but as a permanent part of the positive approach to youth development (Lerner, Geldhof, & Bowers, 2019). Adversity, which refers to the events in a young person's life that cause stress, does not necessarily lead to trauma, which results when a person's internal capacity to cope with stress is overwhelmed. The impact of trauma and its resulting epigenetic and neural effects on youth have been well-documented in recent years, particularly when they occur at key developmental moments in a young person's journey to adulthood (Cantor, et al., 2019). Beyond trauma, the effects of isolation and loss of daily routines have implications for youth mental health. Given that most mental health disorders begin in childhood, they pose a critical threat to the health and well-being of children and adolescents, particularly if left untreated (Golberstein, et al., 2020).



EDUCATION

Research undertaken by Stanford University shows that the most and least socio-economically advantaged school districts in the U.S. have average performance levels more than four grades levels apart. Average test scores of Black students are roughly two grade levels lower than those of White students in the same district, while the Hispanic-White difference is approximately one-and-a-half grade levels. The size of these gaps has little or no association with average class size, a district's per capital student spending or charter school enrollment (Rabinovitz, 2016). In regard to college attendance, only 49% of 2009 ninth graders from the lowest socio-economic quintile were in college in the fall after their scheduled high school graduation, versus 91% of those students from the highest quintile (Pell Institute & Pell AHEAD, 2019).

In addition to these long-standing inequities in education, the impact of the pandemic on academic learning, skill development and learning loss is still being determined in light of the unprecedented move to remote learning. Early estimates are that on average, students will lose approximately 30% of their reading gains and over 50% of the math skills they had learned in the 2019/20 school year (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). Even before the pandemic, 17% of teens were experiencing difficulty completing their work at home because of a lack of reliable internet or computer access, with the number rising to 25% for Black students (Anderson & Perrin, 2018).

A study by McKinsey & Company (2020) found that when just the pandemic is taken into account, the average student could fall seven months behind academically, however Hispanic students could fall behind by 9.2 months, Black children by 10.3 months and low-income students by a year. Rural students have also been hard hit- only 27% of rural districts required any instruction while schools were closed, according to the Center on Reinventing Public Education (Goldstein, 2020).

When schools are able to reopen, researchers predict that a wave of students will return with elevated needs, including addressing the traumatic effects of the pandemic and all of the associated issues. Addressing the social, emotional and cognitive needs of children returning to school will be a priority, for, as Cantor (2020) noted, learning can happen only when one has a "calm brain." For students impacted by worry, stress, and trauma due to the virus, recession and social unrest, learning may be difficult, if not impossible. More than ever, a whole child approach to learning will be required if youth are to benefit from formal learning (Cantor, et al., 2019).



When schools are able to reopen, researchers predict that a wave of students will return with elevated needs.



Young people need to develop skills, yet when it comes to skill-building, numerous studies have shown that inequities are strongly linked to socio-economic status.

SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY

Young people need to develop skills and competencies to perform successfully and advance in most careers, yet when it comes to skill-building, numerous studies have shown that inequities are strongly linked to socio-economic status. García (2015: 5) found that “cognitive and noncognitive skills are least developed among those with the lowest socioeconomic status and sharply increase as one ascends the socioeconomic ladder,” while poor education and less encouragement are seen as reasons for why Black and Hispanic youth are less likely to develop skills in subjects such as STEM (Funk & Parker, 2018).

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated these existing inequities, leading to a growing employment opportunity gap as historically marginalized communities are disproportionately affected in employment opportunities and stable employment during this time (Blustein, et al., 2020). In their recent study, Montenovo, et al. (2020: 1) found that, “The largest employment declines during the COVID-19 pandemic to date are among Hispanics, younger workers and workers who have a high school degree or some college education but have not completed a college degree.”

For young people, the pandemic has reduced access to many career-building opportunities, such as summer and after school jobs, internships and apprenticeships. According to Mathematica (2020), 32% of youth aged 16-19 and 26% of youth aged 20-24 were unemployed in April 2020 – a significant increase from January 2020. In addition to a loss of income, from summer and after school jobs, unemployment can have significant effects on the psychological, economic and social well-being of individuals and communities, including youth (Blustein, et al., 2020). Entering the labor market in a recession can also lead to significant and persistent earnings losses for young people that last their entire career, and the effects of COVID-19 could last for decades as a generation of talent, education and training waits in the wings for opportunities for economic success (Puerto & Kim, 2020). Despite this, the skills required for success in the workplace have not changed.

As high school students struggle to find summer jobs, and recent college graduates move back in with their parents rather than entering the workforce, there is also growing concern for their long-term physical health. A study that followed cohorts of youth who came of age in the recession of the early 1980s were found to suffer increased mortality rates in their 30s; a mortality rate that amplified as the cohort moved through their 50s (Schwandt & von Wachter, 2020).

THE POWER OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



An important part of the solution when it comes to closing the opportunity gap comes from PYD, which is defined in three ways: As a natural developmental process; as a philosophy or approach to youth programming; and as the intention of youth programs to optimize youth development (Hamilton, 1999).

A PYD approach to programming can help minimize the opportunity gap by addressing the youth disparities associated with race, class and gender, all of which are root causes of inequity (Pittman, 2017). As we saw from the protests that flared up in the aftermath of George Floyd's death, systemic racism continues to affect people of color across the nation. Built on the principles of inclusion and belonging, PYD programs provide relationship-rich opportunities for social, emotional and cognitive development, helping young people explore, understand and appreciate diversity, as well as develop the interpersonal skills needed to navigate differences in productive and civil ways. In this way, PYD programs promote important problem-solving and teamwork skills, as well as active listening, empathy and connections with others.



According to Lerner, et al. (2020), PYD is positively associated with beneficial outcomes, such as civic engagement and community contribution, and negatively associated with risk or problem behaviors, including depression, substance abuse and bullying. In short, a PYD approach helps youth develop and follow their own developmental pathways, which can enable them to navigate successfully from where they are now to where they want to be.

Until the early 1990s, youth services were largely focused on interventions for problems, such as teen smoking, pregnancy and juvenile justice. Scholars and policy makers, however, pushed the public to view youth not as problems to be solved, but as young talent to be developed; talent that requires support and opportunities to become successful, productive and engaged adult citizens.

Karen Pittman, co-founder of the Forum for Youth Investment, has long advocated for investment in the strengths-focused positive development of young people, rather than addressing youth deficits alone (Pittman & Benson, 2001). Since the early 1990s, the scholarly field and community practice of youth development has blossomed, recognizing that PYD in the form of OST efforts is an important part of the contextual make up of young people's daily lives, and a key to youth success. The National 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development conducted by Richard Lerner and colleagues at Tufts University in partnership with National 4-H Council (2010), revealed that children involved in 4-H's OST programs, for example, are four times more likely to give back to their communities, twice as likely to make healthier choices and twice as likely to participate in STEM activities

The PYD approach is based on an ecological systems understanding that youth grow and develop in multiple contexts: family, school, neighborhoods, communities and other social settings (Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015). PYD programs provide opportunities for young people to develop necessary technical, social, emotional and cognitive skills; experience supportive relationships with adults, referred to as developmental relationships (Pekal, et al., 2018); and participate in authentic leadership opportunities (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). When PYD programs are intentionally designed and conducted following research-based youth development program principles (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), youth are provided what they need to grow into productive, healthy and civically engaged young adults (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003).

The 5C's model of PYD, which was proposed by Pittman and colleagues in 2004, predicted the PYD outcomes of Confidence, Competence, Character, Caring and Connection (Pittman, et al., 2004). As the model was further developed through the research of Lerner and Lerner (2013), a sixth C, Contribution, was added, indicating that the cumulative impact of PYD results in young people's contribution to others through civic engagement and leadership.

This is key, given that today's America is marked by a lack of civil discourse, intolerance, name-calling, blaming and a general inability to communicate differences in a productive manner. Yet this lack of civil discourse undermines the very foundations of our freedom, allowing fear and hatred to gain momentum. In short, the breakdown of civil discourse is an imminent threat to our democracy as the nation grapples with the pandemic and the need to address inequality.

Youth development programs that emphasize civic engagement from an early age teach young people to navigate local governments and agencies, develop their knowledge of democratic principles, and encourage participation in leadership experiences at the state and federal levels.

Yet despite the evidence for the efficacy and impact of PYD, the history of public investment in youth development in America is inadequate. Of the charitable giving in 2019, only 14% went to education, while public-society benefit fared even worse, receiving only 8% of the total (Giving USA, 2020). Federal funding for youth development programs is spread across 21 different agencies, with efforts coordinated through the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP) (Youth.gov, 2020). The only federal funding source exclusively dedicated to supporting local after school and summer learning programs is the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) program, however the demand is such that only one-third of applications receive funding (Afterschool Alliance, 2020).



The call for robust investment in America's youth has been a persistent plea across the youth development field. Newman, et al. (2001) explained in their analysis of the real investment needed to ensure youth success that funding must match the level of any other major societal investment, and that such funding should not be borne by only one segment of the population.

While what lies ahead remains unknown, the need for increased student and family support in schools; the potential for youth development professionals to collaborate more closely with schools and families; the need to address the long-standing systemic inequities for youth that have been magnified by the current pandemic; and the moral imperative to close the opportunity gap, must all lead to a new way of supporting youth learning and development.

Research in developmental science supports that an effective solution to closing the opportunity gap must involve the whole child, which takes into account not only the different contexts in which children are brought up, but also their unique and particular strengths (Cantor, et al., 2019).

As this generation of young people confronts the societal events that are dramatically impacting their coming of age, youth have a right to express their voice, share their experience and be part of the decisions and solutions that affect them (Blustein, et al., 2020). As Efuribe, et al. (2020: 17) stated in their commentary on coping with COVID-19: "Let's not wait for adolescents and young adults to protest for their voices to be heard."

Rather than relying on adult interpretations of youth experience, youth voice is needed to ensure that development efforts are aligned with their priorities and needs. Given the perception amongst many youth that there is a lack of leadership by adults on the critical issues that affect them, such as climate change (Rowling, 2019), gun violence (Prothero & Ujifusa, 2018) and mental health (National 4-H Council, 2020), it is important to engage this generation to avoid them feeling hopeless, disinterested and distrustful of civic engagement. By participating in defining solutions to the problems that affect them, youth have the power to positively influence their outcomes, while developing resilience, civic engagement and feelings of agency and empowerment (Martinez, et al., 2019).

For youth development organizations that need to move online given the current pandemic, it is important to consider how PYD can take place virtually. Little research has been conducted on virtual PYD programs in the COVID-19 era, however as youth endure social isolation, it is now more important than ever to provide them with a sense of belonging. While virtual PYD can never replicate the many benefits of in-person PYD, it can be an interim solution and pipeline to high-quality, in-person PYD. Virtual PYD can also offer young people access to content that is developed beyond their own communities, particularly in a world where in-person interactions are so limited.

Fortunately, research shows remarkable youth resilience in the face of stress and trauma if provided enough resources and support (Margolis, et al., 2020), particularly when stress can be buffered by the presence of caring adults and supportive environments that provide

developmental experiences that support youth thriving (Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010). Fostering and sustaining developmental relationships with youth is a hallmark of PYD, and an aspect of youth development practice that should be emphasized at this moment in time (Arnold & Rennekamp, 2020).

As an approach to youth development, PYD continues to undergo refinement in definition and theory, especially in articulating the central role that equity plays in the definition of youth success. Advances in developmental science have elucidated the intersection of learning, equity, development and youth thriving. These advances have pointed to a new understanding of “robust equity” that intentionally counters systemic inequality and promotes thriving across multiple domains for youth who experience inequity and injustice (Osher, et al., 2020).





Research has shown that three of the key areas in which systemic inequity affects youth in America are mental health, education, and employability opportunities, which are discussed in further detail below:

STRENGTHENING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH & RESPONDING TO TRAUMA

As youth mental health concerns grow, PYD programs provide opportunities for young people to build the resilience they need to navigate the world around them. Of particular importance is the presence of a caring adult who can buffer stress for young people, and support their growth and resilience through the formation of developmental relationships (Pekal, et al., 2018). PYD programs provide a place for youth to experience psychological and physical safety, to belong and matter, to develop supportive peer relationships, and to experience positive social norms and boundaries (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) – all important ingredients for alleviating youth stress and building resilient mindsets and skills.

As students continue their studies in the context of COVID-19 this fall, youth development professionals will be called on to play a critical supportive role alongside formal education to

support their social, emotional and cognitive needs, and enhance learning through structured enrichment opportunities. One of the key roles that youth development professionals will play is serving as youth mentors, rather than as evaluators of learning. In this role, PYD professionals will be able to develop deeper relationships with young people, supporting their non-academic interests and activities, while encouraging growth and skill development. Additionally, PYD professionals working in school-based OST programs are often more closely connected to a young person's home life and can provide information to teachers to help them support the emotional well-being of the child (Noam & Bernstein, 2013). This will be especially important as schools and communities navigate the effects of COVID-19 on youths' school engagement and success.



PYD programs provide a place for youth to experience psychological and physical safety, to belong and matter, to develop supportive peer relationships, and to experience positive social norms and boundaries.

BRIDGING THE EDUCATIONAL DIVIDE

With the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015), PYD programming has expanded from “community-based and out-of-school programming to in-school programming that calls for intentional learning activities promoting youth voice, especially for youth of color. ESSA regulates meaningful inclusion of key stakeholders in school reform at the district and building levels,” which includes youth voice (Ward, Carter & Siddiq, 2019: 21).

Ultimately, any effort at reforming schools must focus on youth as custodians of their own futures. Research shows that youth engaged in PYD programs can increase school commitment and academic achievement (Jekielek, et al., 2002). In addition, while PYD approaches are beneficial to all youth, there is evidence that PYD is particularly advantageous for vulnerable and marginalized youth (Eichas, et al., 2017; Pittman, 2017).

Given the urgent need to elevate the social, emotional and cognitive needs of students, schools will not be able to do this alone (Education Now, 2020). Collaborations with out-of-school time providers to support the whole child in order to meet the socio-emotional needs of youth, as well as support for formal learning, will be required. More than ever, schools will need to operate as places of care, support and connection first, before formal learning can happen (Education Now, 2020).



The need for increased student and family support in schools, the potential for youth development professionals to collaborate more closely with schools and families, the need to address the systemic inequities for youth exposed by the pandemic, and the moral imperative to close the opportunity gap, all lead to a new way of supporting youth learning and development. The whole child approach has underscored the need to approach youth learning and development through an individual lens that considers the multiple contexts, experiences, strengths and adversities a child brings to a learning environment. The Sciences of Learning and Development (SoLD) research, though primarily focused on reforming K-12 education, holds great promise and value to PYD practice (Lerner, et al., 2019).

SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY

PYD programs support youth-to-work pipelines by focusing on career development, often in the context of their own communities (Bakshi & Jahnvee, 2014), and provide a holistic approach to developing attitudes and skills important to workforce success. PYD programs further support youth workforce development through social, emotional and cognitive learning by building positive relationships, by improving skills and competencies through linking youth to opportunities, and by promoting a sense of youth mattering and worthy contribution, all within a safe and supportive developmental context (Moore, et al., 2018). PYD programs can serve to develop an intentional pathway that leads a young person from nascent interest in a topic to a career, such as STEM programs that promote science and technology skills, critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork on a purposeful pathway to careers in a STEM-related field. The same is true of pathways to careers in education, business, arts, sports, entertainment and elected office.

Imagine Science is one such collaboration that implements PYD by delivering STEM programs to historically under-represented youth through a coalition of national youth organizations, including Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Girls Inc., National 4-H Council and Y-USA. Their research found that prolonged exposure to STEM increases interest and builds a foundation for STEM proficiency, which is critical given that by 2022, the U.S. will be short one million scientists (Imagine Science, 2018).



CALL TO ACTION: EXPANDING THE PYD MOVEMENT





Closing the opportunity gap through PYD may not solve all the challenges facing our country at this time, but it will enable us to make significant progress in furthering the economic and social well-being of young people, and, in turn, society as a whole. Closing the gap for youth means creating a world where all young people are viewed first as assets; where their strengths are recognized and supported. In this world, youth will have the opportunities and skills they need for resilience and thriving. Closing the opportunity gap through PYD means the health, well-being and success of any young person will not be determined by their zip code or the color of their skin, and that the current generation of youth will gain the necessary support and experiences to navigate the unprecedented social realities that we face as a nation. As their voice is elevated, youth will be empowered to engage with democracy as leaders and problem solvers, giving them hope for a better future for all, and a sense of purpose to make that future a reality.

As we seek to champion PYD as a solution, we still have much to learn about how the effects of the pandemic and the movement for social reform will impact youth, their families and their communities. Even though program activities and delivery may look different in the future, the research-based theory of PYD is the bedrock beneath the path forward – providing youth safe and structured contexts, where belonging and mattering are emphasized, developmental relationships with caring adults are fostered, skill building opportunities are provided, socio-emotional development is promoted, and youth voice for authentic leadership is elevated.

As we continue to understand more about the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, some factors will remain prevalent:

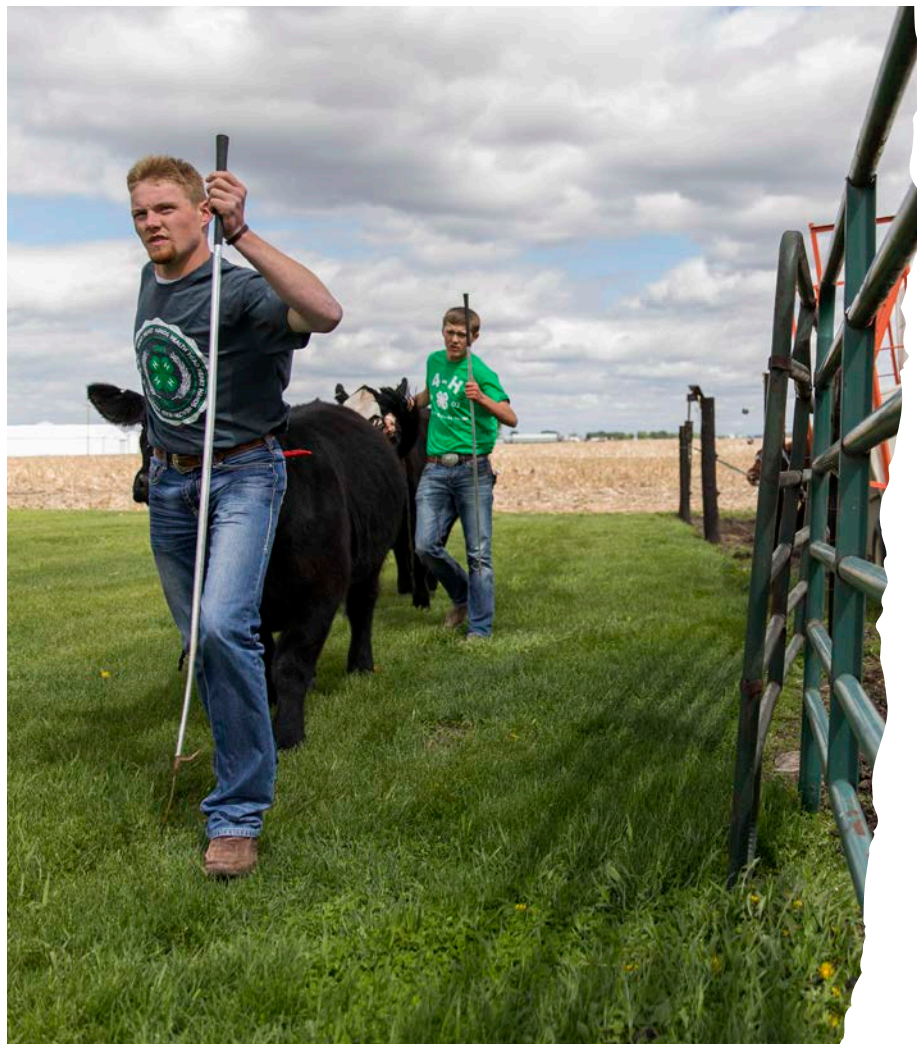
Social Inequities

Social Inequities will persist as the effects of the pandemic disproportionately impact our most vulnerable citizens because of their health status, race, ZIP code and employment status.



Distance Learning

Distance Learning will become the new normal for many young people, in the coming school year and potentially beyond. As distance learning and remote access to social opportunities become more common, the critical need to ensure internet access, sufficient equipment and family support for learning will grow stronger.



The Sciences of Learning and Development (SoLD)

The Sciences of Learning and Development (SoLD) will gain momentum and visibility as the whole child approach is validated as the best approach for education and youth development. SoLD will guide the development of best practices in PYD as youth professionals enhance their skills to serve youth where they are and address the individual ways in which youth are impacted by current social realities.



The PYD Approach

The PYD Approach will continue to demonstrate the benefits to the design and implementation of youth programs. Through advances in developmental science, the enhanced professional development of youth program workers, improved program designs and a focus on program implementation principles, the PYD approach will be refined and strengthened, leading to a greater positive impact on the lives of all youth.

A Focus on the Whole Child

A Focus on the Whole Child will come about through greater collaboration between in-school and out-of-school time programs. By uniting the leadership of K-12 schools and youth development programs, young people will benefit

from seamless wraparound experiences that nurture their educational attainment, critical skills development and mental and physical health, amongst other tangible supports.



In this complicated landscape of social, political and economic distress, youth are trying to navigate a precarious balance between hope and possibility, and devastation and despair. As youth look for the chance to be recognized for their strengths, to be given equal opportunities to develop their talents and to have their voice elevated as part of the solution, now is the time to ensure the opportunity gap is closed. If we do not seize this opportunity, we risk losing the talent, vision and future of our young people, and with it, our chance of a vibrant, healthy, just, civil and democratic America.

Now is the time to take innovative and bold steps in order to ensure the prosperity of young people, and to prepare them to take on the many challenges we face. Based on extant research, we recommend bold and immediate action:

RECOGNIZE PYD AS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF K-12 AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMMING

PYD programs that incorporate the SoLD principles and the whole child approach must be recognized as an essential connection between formal and non-formal education. Federal, state and local investments in education and out-of-school time programming must advocate for the inclusion of PYD approaches and practices, as well as meaningful and impactful collaborations between in- and out-of-school time efforts. It is also key for superintendents and school boards to be aware of the value of PYD, as well as the value of meaningfully incorporating youth voice in decision-making. By ensuring that all education and youth development professionals are trained based on SoLD principles, the divisions between in- and out-of-school time will diminish.



“PYD programs that incorporate the SoLD principles and the whole child approach must be positioned as an essential connection between formal and non-formal education.”



INSTITUTIONALIZE CORPORATE AND FOUNDATION INVESTMENT IN YOUTH

Young people are the ultimate sustainability initiative. Any investment in PYD is an investment in workforce development, yet in 2019, only 5% (\$21.09 billion) of the total philanthropic contribution in the U.S. came from corporations (Giving USA, 2020).

Addressing the opportunity gap through corporate and foundation investment in youth will ensure that young people

are equipped with a diversity of talent, experience and perspectives, and are prepared to step into the workforce to lead the innovations, designs and solutions required for the future. Investing across a broad range of disciplines will help place youth on a pathway to success, where they possess the knowledge; problem solving skills; and social, emotional and cognitive tools necessary for knowledge production

and leadership. We encourage every company to make a five-year financial commitment to PYD as a percentage of their budgets, in the same way that many companies have made commitments to sustainability and conservation. More internships for youth from disadvantaged circumstances are an additional way for U.S. companies to build skills and reduce the opportunity gap.

ESTABLISH A PYD CABINET POSITION

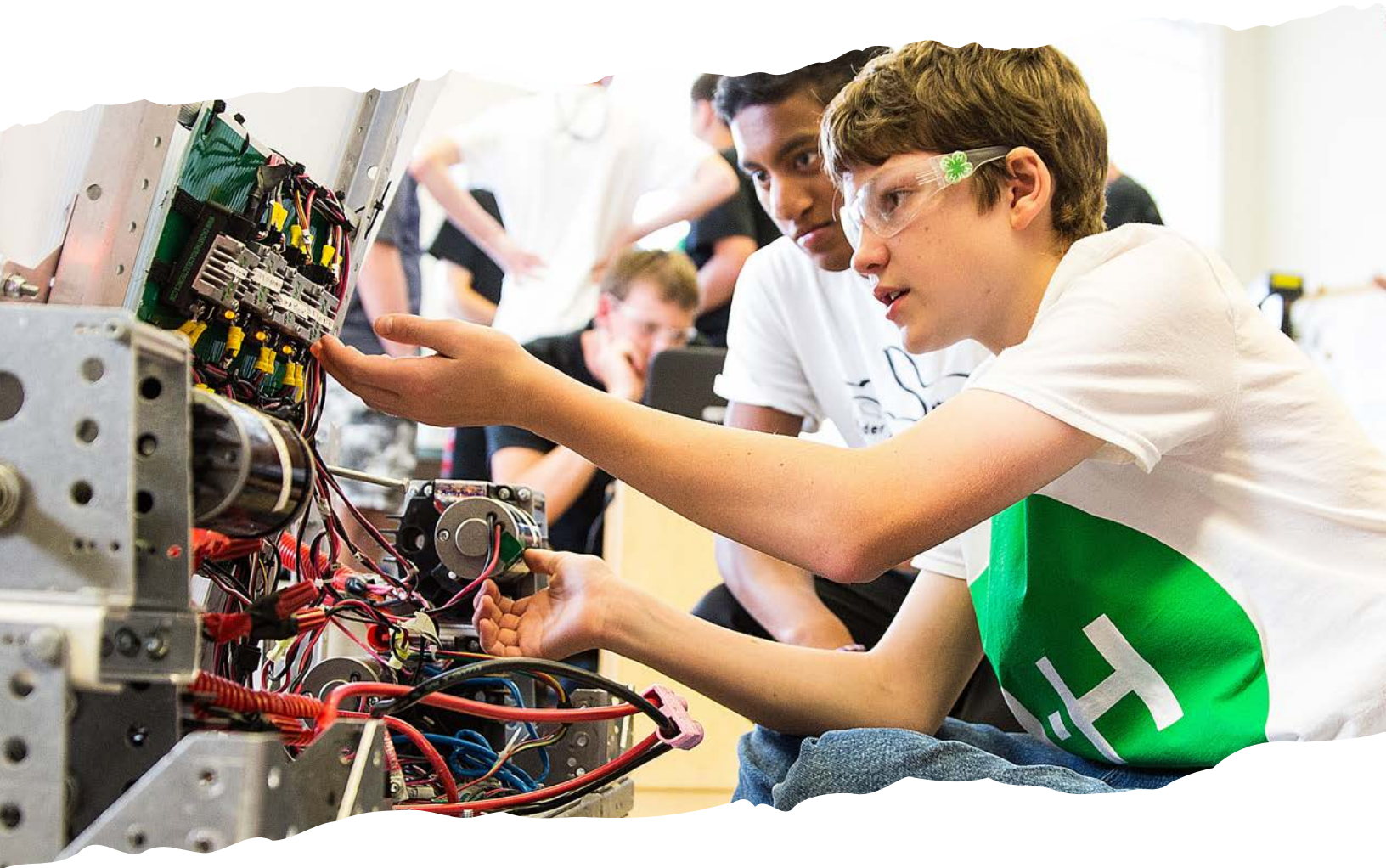
The widening opportunity gap threatens America's future workforce and citizenry, creating an urgent need to coordinate the efforts of Education, Labor, Health and PYD organizations at the federal level to support the healthy development of America's youth for the challenges ahead.

In the wake of 9/11, the Department of Homeland Security was created to address the urgent need for coordination at the federal level between agencies to protect American safety and security from terrorist threats. On an even larger scale, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the mental health threat and educational inequities that exist in America today. Creating a children, youth and families cabinet position with a PYD focus will elevate the need for a whole child approach, while establishing national support for the idea that formal education alone is not enough to ensure equitable learning and development for the country's youth. This position will ensure that cross-sector investments and partnerships for education and youth development are collaborative and based on PYD and the whole child approach, while ensuring accountability for effective and equitable youth development efforts.



CREATE A HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY PIPELINE

America's public colleges and universities have the ability to create powerful pathways for youth success through the development of pre-college outreach programs for youth. The focus of these programs should be on continuous and scaffolded learning opportunities throughout school-aged years. In this way, youth will feel connected to tertiary education, be exposed to possibilities for education and career, be inspired to work hard in school, and be assisted in creating a realistic plan for achieving their pathway goals.



America's public colleges and universities have the ability to create powerful pathways for youth success through the development of pre-college outreach programs for youth.



INCREASE PYD KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

The effects of the pandemic and calls for social justice and equity continue to shape our knowledge and practice of PYD in new ways. As these societal changes continue, there is an urgent need for knowledge, research and innovative PYD practice. Investment in research to uncover the longer-term effects of the current social situation on young people, as well as to determine effective practices for building PYD through virtual and non-contact methods, is paramount.

Support for ensuring equity in program development and access is critical if we are to close the opportunity gap. A research and innovation fund would enable PYD organizations to test new practices, discover the latest trends and insights to drive solutions, and create practices and professional experiences for more youth development professionals.



Investment in research to uncover effects of the current social situation on young people, as well as to determine effective practices for building PYD through virtual and non-contact methods, is paramount.

ELEVATE AND TRAIN PYD PRACTITIONERS

As children return to school and OST programs in the fall – whether in-person, virtually, or a hybrid of these – collaborations with OST providers to support the whole child in order to meet the social, emotional and cognitive needs of youth, as well as support for formal learning, will be required.

Today’s social drivers, situated alongside advances in

developmental science, mean that PYD professionals who are working with youth and families in communities are now in great need of quality professional development. Without a trained workforce that knows and understands SoLD principles, closing the opportunity gap through PYD will not be possible. PYD professionals need the technological and practical ability to conduct PYD programs remotely, as well as

the ability to build intentional connections with schools and other community-based youth organizations to support a whole child approach to youth well-being. Elevating PYD practitioners as a principal link in closing the opportunity gap, and providing them with much needed professional development, is now more critical than ever.



PROMOTE AND FACILITATE YOUTH VOICE AND ENGAGEMENT

From the classroom to the boardroom, the inclusion of youth voice is the most important aspect of PYD and must be prioritized by all stakeholders. Engaging youth in defining their experiences of equity and opportunity, and authentically including them in creating solutions for the problems that affect them, is the most powerful demonstration of PYD in action. Elevating youth voice and facilitating its expression through creative innovation and leadership will ensure that youth remain engaged and part of society as we work through the concerns and solutions together. Youth whose voices are recognized and who see themselves as active agents for a better future, both for themselves and society, will be civically engaged, and will be empowered and emboldened to use their voice and passion for transformation.



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Without investment in youth development we are a nation at risk of losing the momentum of the PYD approach.

CONCLUSION

As we work together to ensure the positive development and thriving of all of America's youth, 4-H is committed to reducing the opportunity gap by promoting robust equity. Through partnership with the nation's land-grant universities, 4-H is creating and building authentic opportunities for leadership development to promote equity. One such example is the True Leaders in Equity Institute, which will engage 20 youth and adult teams from the Cooperative Extension's 4-H program to become change agents to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment.

As noted by Osher, et al. (2020), ensuring robust equity, providing transformative learning experiences and fostering developmental relationships leads to thriving youth. This process, informed by SoLD, will continue to shape research and practice in youth development. It is the same process that will help close America's opportunity gap, yet doing so will take investment.

Today, in the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic, America is facing what Dr. Paul Reville, the Francis Keppel Professor of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has called our "Sputnik Moment" – a moment where we as a nation fully recognize that a generation of young people are going to be lost, their talent and contributions unrealized and their future success jeopardized, unless we rally as a country and gain the public and political will that is needed to realize that it is in the best interests of everyone to ensure the health, positive development and education of all young people in America (Education Now, 2020).

According to the United Nations (n.d.), investing in youth is not only smart, but recognizes that youth success is critical to a nation's society, economy and democracy. Failure to invest in youth triggers substantial social problems, leading to negative youth outcomes. Some of these negative outcomes are sure to be increased because of COVID-19, including a lack of workforce opportunity and entry, school disengagement, poor mental health, violence and substance abuse. Furthermore, the UN notes that economic shocks, such as the one we are currently experiencing, can impact healthy adolescent development and require targeted programs and policies to prevent negative long-term consequences. Without investment in youth development we are a nation at risk of losing the momentum of the PYD approach that has been gained in the past 30 years, and forgetting that youth develop in the context of healthy families and the communities, schools and programs that support them.

By investing in a PYD approach, we can upend America's persistent social, economic and political imbalances. Our intentional approach will bring together communities, organizations, government, educators and young people to promote positive outcomes for youth, thereby eliminating the opportunity gap and creating a more equitable and just society.

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