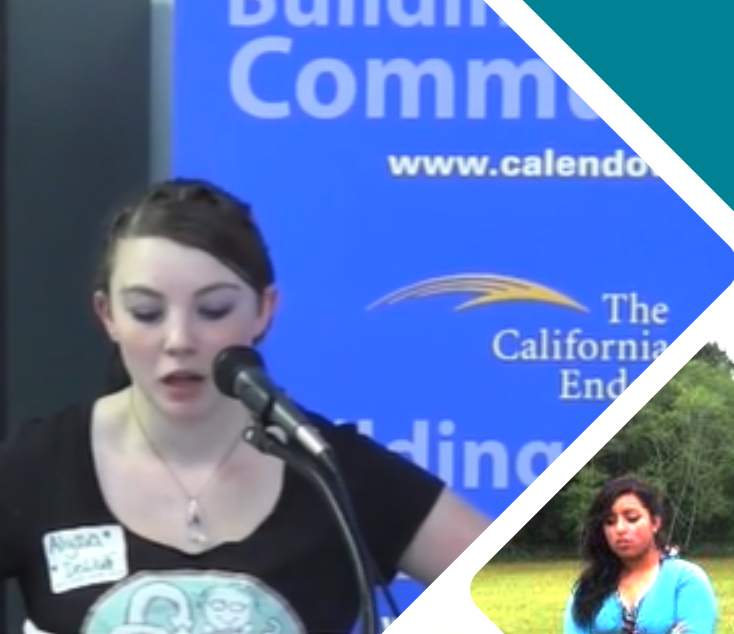


Case Study Empowering Youth Developing Leaders



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Del Norte and Tribal Lands (DNATL) Building Healthy Communities (BHC) Initiative Youth Campaign case study takes on the myth that youth can't be leaders or influence policies. Since the inception of the California Endowment's BHC initiative, youth have been essential in organizing communities throughout DNATL to improve the health of their community. Many adults who work with youth in the community have transformed the way they see youth—from having low expectations of what youth can accomplish to seeing them as leaders and equal partners.

Throughout the ten-year DNATL BHC Youth Initiative, youth learned to build skills and make positive changes in their communities with the support of meaningful relationships with caring adults. Youth and adult allies fought for racial and gender justice, LGBTQIA+ rights, safer neighborhoods, and

healthier food and activities in their schools. Local youth were nationally recognized for their advocacy and leadership skills, leading to more awards, career opportunities, and leadership positions in the community. This exploratory case study applies a retrospective, qualitative methodology and archival analysis to describe the effectiveness of a foundation-led, community-driven campaign and examines how policymakers and grant funders can better support youth living in remote and rural communities.

The overarching goal of the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative is to ensure that all (100%) of DNATL's youth are empowered to learn, build skills, and make positive changes in their community, while being connected to meaningful relationships and a resilient network of support by 2023.

The DNATL BHC Youth Initiative strove to meet its goal with four dynamic approaches:

1

Youth Organizing: Build a movement of young people around health equity in relationship with the community, creating a platform for their voices to be heard.

2

Trauma-Informed Healing: Cities, Counties, and Tribes recognize the toxic effect of trauma and prioritize youth development and resilience. Shift the balance of public investment from punishment and incarceration to health and prevention.

3

Youth Media: Use storytelling to build empathy and share community successes to spread hope and share community concerns through young people's voices.

4

Youth Workforce and Leadership: Develop workforce leadership training and career pathways for youth.

Qualitative research on the initiative generated the following key findings:

- Adults working in youth serving agencies wanted to provide appropriate services to youth but didn't have the resources or strategies to engage youth in leadership development. Youth felt discouraged, possibly impacting their potential academically and in the workforce.
- Programs designed to help at-risk youth need social workers' involvement. In addition, the right backbone to support a program that includes at-risk youth should come from the community, embedded within a social work network.
- Providing a platform for youth to tell their (often marginalized) stories was crucial in changing attitudes and narratives about youth in DNATL.
- When youth are given the support and opportunities they need, they can be powerful agents of change in the community.
- Demonstrate ethical standards and professional behaviors that deepen understanding, knowledge, and commitment to the Early Childhood Education profession.

The study concludes with policy recommendations for supporting youth living in remote and rural communities like DNATL.

INTRODUCTION



My voice is not valued here, I feel invisible, or when seen I feel judged by adults and peers. I don't feel like myself, my community or my culture are reflected in DNATL.

-DNATL youth

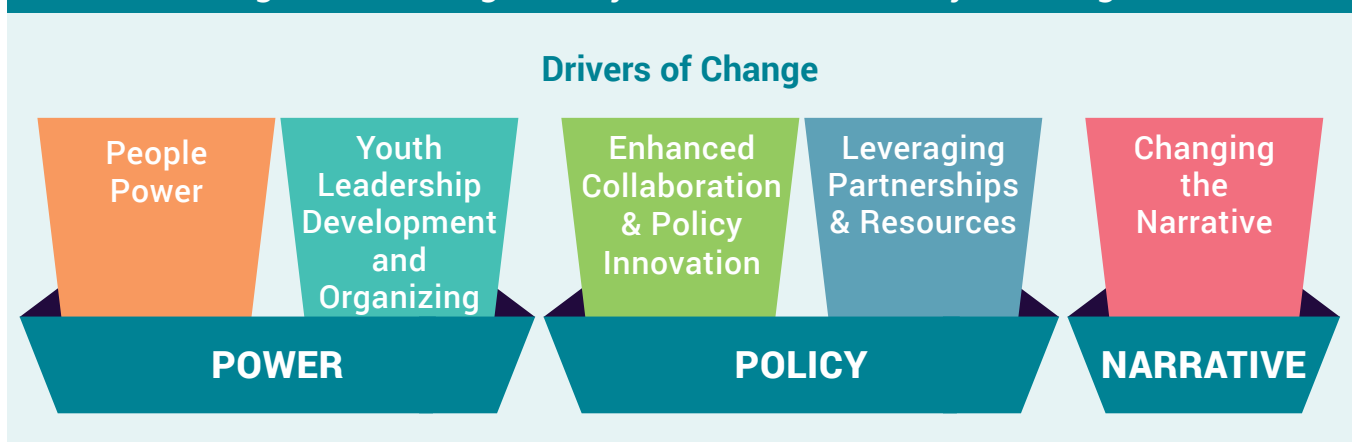


The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities (BHC) grant represents one of the largest investments in health and wellness in Del Norte and Tribal Lands (DNATL)'s history. One of the grant's primary goals was to support future generations by creating opportunities for youth to lead and succeed. It was up to each of the 14 BHC grantees and communities to manage a total of \$3,359,426 in youth work funding, and navigate ways to create long-lasting systemic change for youth during the ten year duration of the project.

Del Norte and Tribal Lands have not historically been characterized as a place that uplifts youth, nor did youth have adequate access to effective programs, services, or opportunities to learn how to become community leaders. At the beginning of the BHC initiative, leadership in the community was characterized as favoring a top-down approach for working with youth, and holding low expectations for what young people in their community could accomplish. Over ten years, many difficult lessons were learned. The salient lesson that came from the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative is that when youth are given the opportunity and support they need, they are a powerful force for change.

Within the BHC theory of change, the drivers of change are rooted in power, policy, and narrative. Figure 1 is a diagram showing the drivers of change within the theoretical perspective of the DNATL BHC Initiative. The drivers of change represent the consistent ways with which the Initiative approached building capacity among youth, policy innovation that benefits youth, and changing youth narratives.

Figure 1: Building Healthy Communities' Theory of Change



Community organizing, and specifically youth organizing, did not occupy a central place in the Building Healthy Communities initiative, at the onset. Over time, community partners across the statewide BHC network began to elevate the importance of “People Power” to the California Endowment, funders, and architects of BHC. In 2016, stocktaking and critical reflection shifted the Initiatives priorities and organizing was recognized as central to transforming community capacity to take control

of health and well-being for all its residents (The California Endowment, 2020).

The overarching goal of the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative was to ensure that 100% of local youth have access to educational opportunities, to build skills, and make positive changes in their community. The Initiative also sought to connect youth to meaningful relationships and a resilient network of support by 2023.

To achieve these goals, the Initiative used four dynamic approaches:

1

Youth Organizing: Build a movement of young people around health equity in relationship with the community, creating a platform for their voices to be heard.

2

Trauma-Informed Healing: Cities, Counties, and Tribes recognize the toxic effect of trauma and prioritize youth development and resilience. Shift the balance of public investment from punishment and incarceration to health and prevention.

3

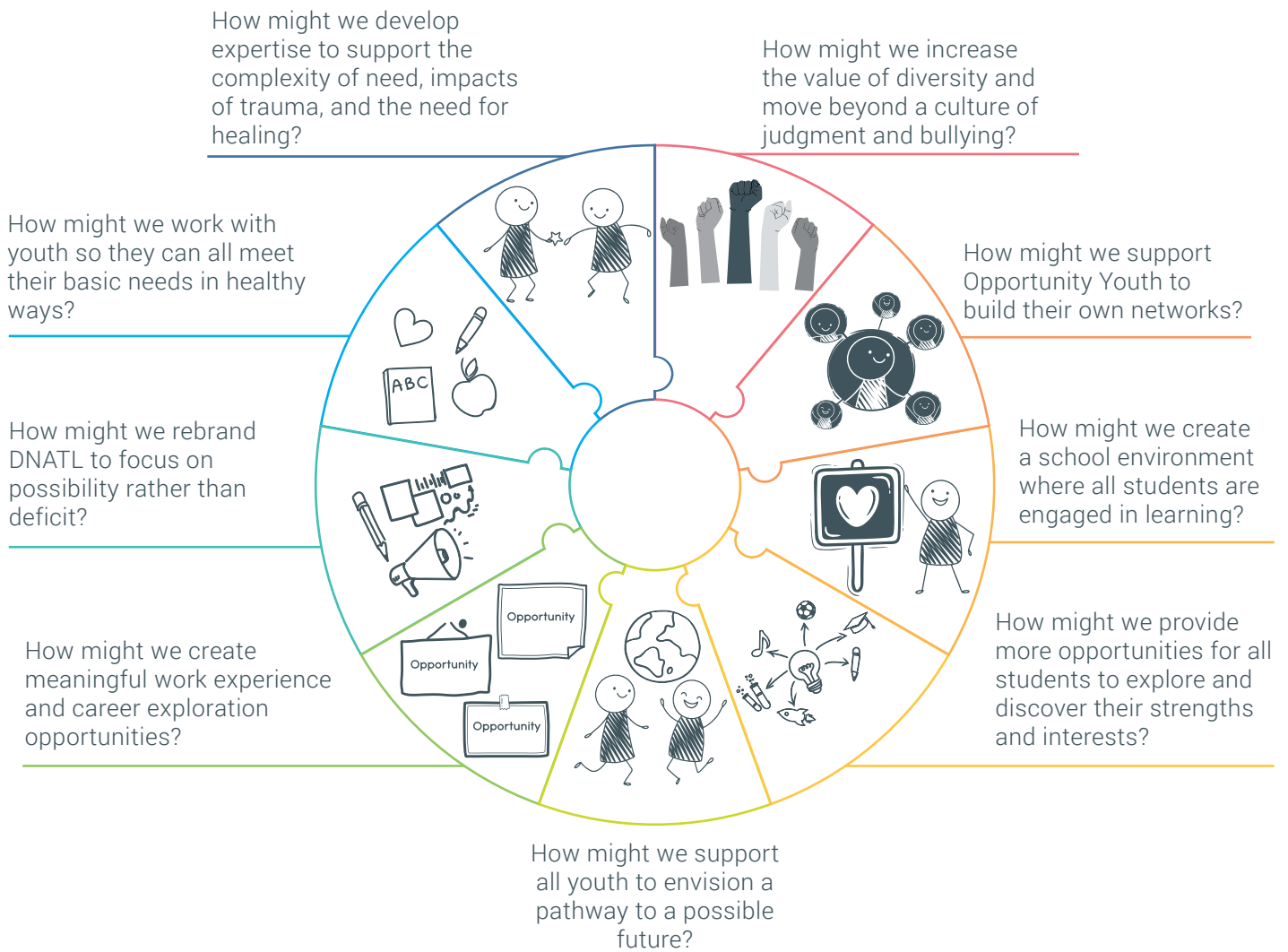
Youth Media: Use storytelling to build empathy and share community successes to spread hope and share community concerns through young people’s voices.

4

Youth Workforce and Leadership: Develop workforce leadership training, and career pathways for youth.

The central focus of the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative was investing in youth by building capacity, equipping youth with the necessary skills and experiences to be involved in policy and systems. As community leaders began to see the impact of student organizing, they channeled their strategies via three campaigns: Health Happens in Our Schools, Our Neighborhoods, and in Prevention. Effective policy and systems change leads to environmental change with an overall outcome of healthier lives over time.

Figure 2

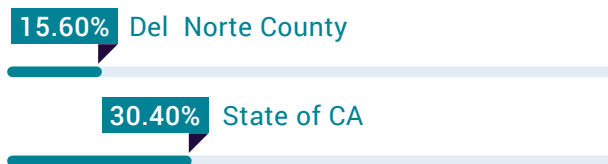


BACKGROUND

The challenges that come with DNATL's remote, rural geography offer unique insights on youth development and leadership in low-income communities. DNATL is underserved by state, federal, and local governments. The isolation and marginalization of DNATL's geography has critical impacts on its youth. Living in a rural community can exacerbate mental health crises among American youth due to a lack of access to basic amenities such as broadband, transportation, economic opportunities, parks, recreation centers, libraries, and mental health support services. To conduct health work in a county like DNATL, is important to recognize the disproportionate burden felt by its young people, and engage them as problem solvers in the space.

Childhood poverty is a significant crisis in rural communities like DNATL. There is a link between poverty and failure to thrive during childhood and adulthood, resulting in negative economic, educational, health, and behavioral outcomes. In DNATL, the percentage of youth living in poverty is disproportionately higher than in the state of California (See Figure 3 below).

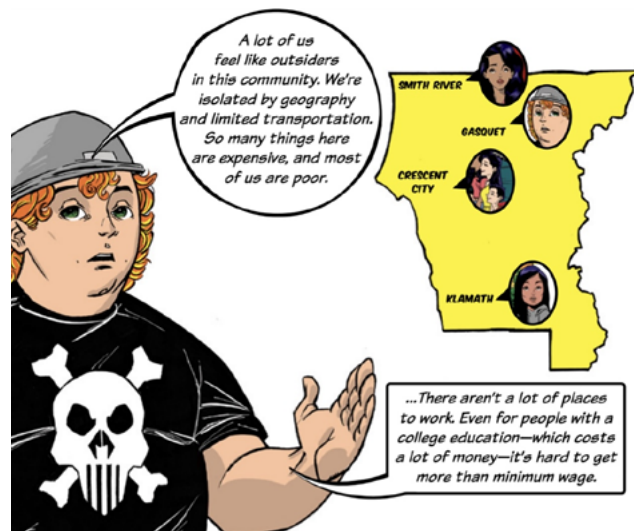
Figure 3: Children Living in Poverty (Age 18 and under)



Source: Kids-data.org

Youth risk factors is a general term used to describe a range of circumstances that place young people at greater vulnerability to health and behavioral problems. The term at-risk specifically describes the context in which youth are born into. Opportunity Youth refers to youth 16-24 who are out of school and out of work.

Figure 4: Youth expressing what it feels like to be young in DNATL



Source "How Did We Get Here" from the Graphic Novel produced by the True North Organizing Network.

Data from secondary sources and interviews with youth indicate that youth in DNATL acutely feel the challenges of their community. In 2019 focus groups sessions with students in Crescent City, Elk Valley, and families in Weitchpec, youth and families spoke about experiencing trauma from one generation to another and its impact on youth and their well-being.

“

“And it’s at a young age like I knew what meth and heroin were at the age of like six ... parents and family members just leave it out.” -DNATL Youth

”

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) refer to traumatic events or significant disturbances in a child’s life that affect their safety, security, and ability to function in healthy ways. These can include household dysfunction and all forms of child abuse. There are linkages between ACEs and mental and physical health outcomes- the more ACE’s a child experiences, the greater risk of chronic health conditions, stress, anxiety disorder, low life potential, and early death (CDC-Kaiser, 1998). ACEs show intergenerational continuity or similarity across parents and offspring (Schofeild & et al., 2018). Quotes from focus group participants illustrate how ACE’s are passed down from one generation to the next in DNATL:

“ Quotes from DNATL Youth focus groups

“I have seen things ... where you see parents, and all they do is, they keep their kids so that they can get money ... they’re just using it for themselves, for their addiction.”

“The kids that have a past of like their parents ... having, like, the drug life ... it can, as they say, trickle down into the next generation.”

“I know people that are young, in like 5th grade, smoking weed and drinking ... there needs to be more awareness.”



Figure 5: Risk factors for DNATL Youth vs. State Averages

Indicator	DNATL	State of CA	Year
Alcohol/Drug Use Among 11th Graders	39.1%	28.9%	2017-2018
Rate of Domestic Violence Calls for Assistance	43.9 per 1,000 adults	6.3 per 1,000 adults	2018
Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect	132.7 per 1,000	52.9 per 1,000	2018
11th Graders Reporting Suicidal Ideation	20.9%	16.4%	2017-2019
Teen Birth Rate	29.6 per 1,000	15.7 per 1,000	2016
7th Graders Experiencing Bullying/ Harassment	55.8%	33.6%	2015-2017
11th Graders Involved in Gangs	12%	4.7%	2015-2017
High School Graduates Completing College Prep Course	15.4 per 1,000	29.6 per 1,000	2016
11th Graders Reported Binge Drinking in the Past Month	7.7%	4.2%	2015-2017

Source: Kids-Data.org

“The level of trauma in our community is so pervasive.”

-School Counselor

Intergenerational trauma is a common experience for DNATL residents, meaning trauma experienced in one generation affects the health and well-being of the next. Secondary data also indicates that LGBTQIA+ youth in the county disproportionately suffer suicidal ideation and other mental health challenges in DNATL. Among the youth who reported feeling suicidal from 2013-2015, the majority (81.4%) were youth who identify as LGBTQIA+ (kidsdata.org).

“Growing up in DNATL is hard, especially for a queer kid.”

-DNATL Youth

Youth participants commonly reported that youth often feel that they do not have a voice, a safe place, or even a future in their community. Many young residents feel forced to look beyond the county to plan their futures:

“In Del Norte, most youth plan to take off after high school because they feel there is nothing here for them.”

-School Administrator

“It is a joke me and my friends kind of pass around ... how long do you have until this place “gets you”. Are you going to end up on drugs, homeless, broke and not able to support yourself?”

-DNATL Youth

Critical Shifts under the BHC Youth Initiative

While targeting interventions towards Youth as a critical and vulnerable population was always a focus of the BHC initiative, building their capacity as organizers happened almost incidentally, due to DNATL’s rural nature. The Initiative knew it needed to base its new cadre of organizers within accessible public institutions—to build trust, remain accountable to resident’s vision and priorities, and become a daily presence in the community. Local schools were really the only viable institutions within these remote communities.¹

Before the ten years’ of DNATL’s BHC Youth Initiative, community stakeholders would focus their efforts in youth development on awareness of job opportunities.

“The biggest coolest thing that we could come up with was a job board at the high school and guest speakers at Sunset High. Like that was as creative as we could come up with for how we were going to support young people.”

-Community Leader

“Business leaders would say that we have all these jobs for young people, but they don’t show up and they can’t fill out an application, they can’t show up every day or put sentences together, yet they have a high school diploma.”

-Community Leader

¹ Interviews with former and current Community Organizers who worked with youth as part of the DNATL BHC Initiative. For more on the origins of the youth organizing approach and strategic decisions that structured the early campaigns, see *“People Power: Empowering Rural Communities in Del Norte through Community Organizing”*, one of five case studies in this series.

Youth expressed feeling like adults in the community did not have so much confidence in them. Asked about creating more opportunities for youth employment, business leaders often cited the intensive need for training and improving work ethic as barriers to hiring more young people. The community was concerned about youth not being ready for real world responsibilities. The majority of high school students were attending alternative schools. As one community leader indicated

“At this time when Castle Rock had like 1600 students ... all these young people were not going to school ... like they were walking around the streets doing workbooks that ended at sixth grade.”

There appeared to be a lack of educational experiences that could adequately prepare young people to enter the workforce. This lack of confidence in, and opportunities for youth had a demoralizing effect. Notably, when one focus group participant was asked what possibilities existed for their future in the community, they responded *“Absolutely nothing.”*

“There was this real fear that young people were not actually being challenged and didn't actually have skills.”

-Educator

“As adults in the community we were failing them.” -Community Leader

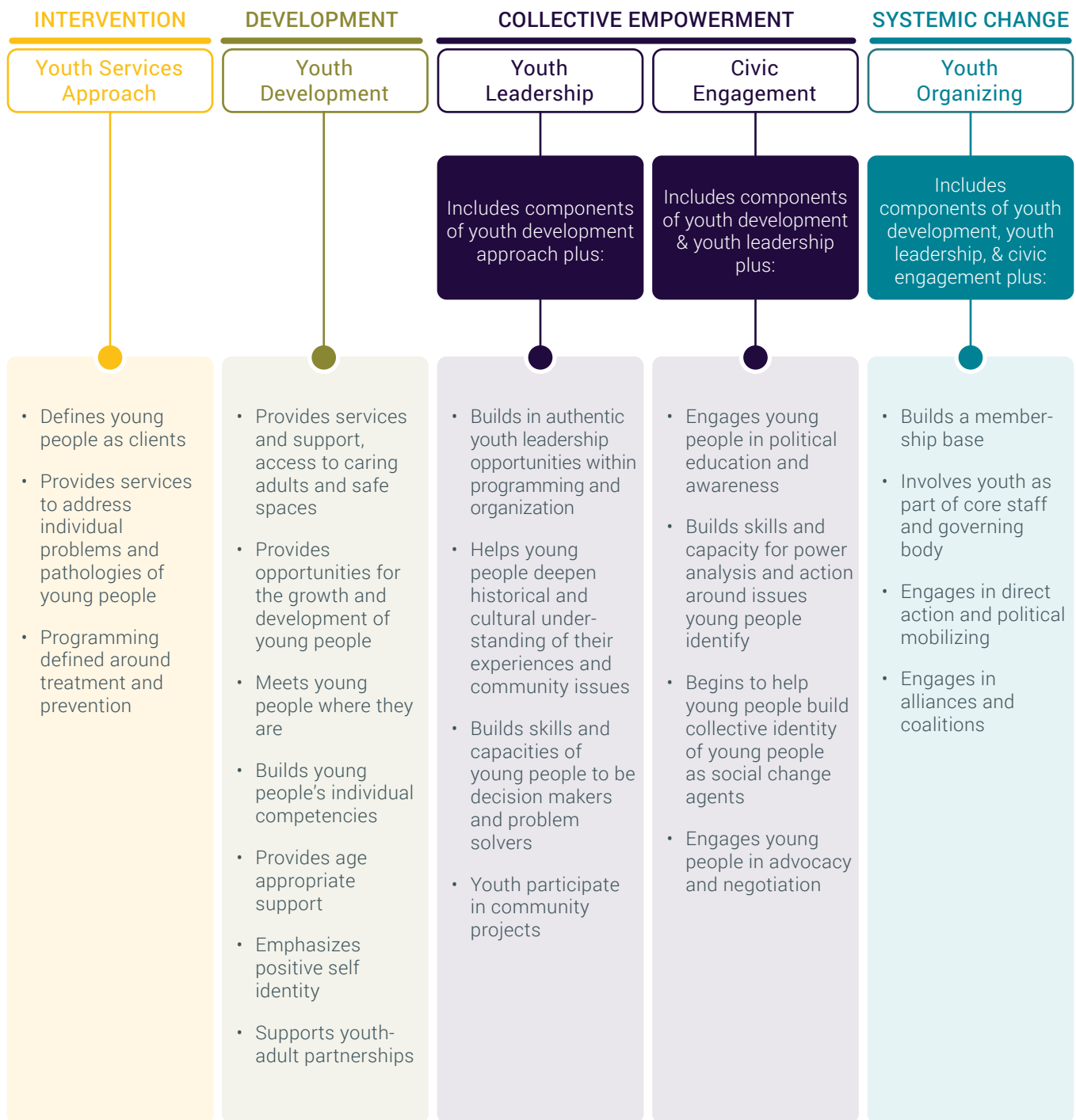
The DNATL BHC Youth Initiative represented a historic moment for DNATL. It was the first time in local history that a community-wide initiative worked to build capacity among youth to lead, create policy, and influence health outcomes for the whole community. In contrast to adult-led youth programming which in many ways continues to be the dominant model, Youth Led initiatives can be defined as:

- 01 A program or project where youth make all of the decisions and where they may or may not consult adults
- 02 All roles and responsibilities are developed and carried out by youth. Older youth may mentor younger ones.

Source: How to Guide for Creating Opportunities for Young People, Paul Lefkotitz

The DNATL BHC Youth Initiative drew from the Youth Engagement Continuum as they worked towards expanding opportunities for young people to become changemakers in their community. Developed in 2003, The Youth Engagement Continuum is a model that describes both forms and degrees of youth engagement on a developmental continuum that progresses towards authentic youth empowerment in educational, civic, and political participation. The model recognizes that for a community to thrive, it is essential to include the leadership, talent, energy, and collective vision of all young people when working towards community transformation. Figure 6 provides an overview of the Youth Engagement Continuum model.

Figure 6 - The Youth Engagement Continuum Model



Source: *The Forum* (2007, July). *Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community*

Why is this Work Important in DNATL?

In addition to pioneering youth-led approaches in DNATL, this initiative also represents the first wave of community-wide efforts on youth organizing, workforce and leadership development, youth-driven media, and trauma-informed healing.

METHODS

This exploratory case study applies a retrospective, qualitative methodology and archival analysis to describe the success of a foundation-supported, community-driven campaign, and examine how policymakers and grant funders can better support youth living in rural communities. Since 2010, the California Center for Rural Policy (CCRP) has been collaborating with the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative by conducting evaluations and supporting community-led programs' research needs. For this case study, CCRP analyzed 10 years' worth of qualitative and quantitative data collected from the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative and community members. Previous accounts which inform the study include:

In addition to an archival analysis, CCRP also conducted key informant interviews with former participants of the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative, from 2019 to 2021. These interviews invited participants to reflect on the past ten years, the changes observed, and lessons learned.

- Opportunity Youth Insights by the BHC DNATL Initiative-2016
- Empathy Research Insights Initiative Archive-2018
- DNATL BHC Initiative Annual Report by CCRP-2014
- Articles from Redwood Voice Media-2015 to 2020

FINDINGS

Finding 1

● Negative perceptions of youth and the community were self-realizing prophecies.

Finding 2

● Empowerment is the journey, not the destination.

Finding 3

● Youth work requires a trauma-informed approach, and the impact of trauma had been under-emphasized in previous work.

Finding 4

● The importance of designing from a place of empathy and engagement with youth issues.

Finding 5

● Empowering youth means challenging negative attitudes about DNATL.

Finding 6

● Increased collaboration grew youth opportunities exponentially—leveraging public funding and resources led to increased capital, opportunities for youth in the community.

Finding 7

● Providing a platform for youth to own their narratives and raise their voices was a powerful catalyst for change across other facets of the Initiative.

Finding 8

● Shifting the focus to health equity and prevention, and recognizing that youth are legitimate participants in community matters and care about the issues in the community, supported the success of the program. Learning that youth are the foremost experts on youth issues.

Finding 9

● When youth are given the support and opportunities they need, they can make a community change.

Finding 10

● The result of the ten-year initiative is hope for many DNATL youth. The transition in the participant's outlook on their community was not solely due to the training opportunities and resources; it also included how Youth Initiative staff interacted with youth.

Finding 11

● The groundwork done by the Initiative to support youth was a source of resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DISCUSSION

Learning to Overcome Generational Barriers

Finding 1

● Negative perceptions of youth and the community were self-realizing prophecies.

A collective stocktaking process was motivated and made urgent by new data on youth attitudes about their community and the occurrence of tragic events involving young people. The community realized that existing attitudes were toxic impediments to setting young people up for success.

In 2011, The Endowment (BHC funders) designed a survey to document the state of youth in DNATL, meant to inform and inspire a collective conversation on challenges and opportunities for lifting up the community's young people. The vision for this first step was inspired by The Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) Youth Truth survey, conducted in 2011. CEP was contracted to conduct the survey in DNATL with some context-specific adjustments. The survey asked students questions about areas such as:

- Their relationships with their teachers
- Their school's overall culture
- Their preparedness for their future goals
- The rigor of classes and instruction
- Their life outside of high school

At The Endowment's request, CEP also added customized questions on students' sense of well-being, lunch options, and exercise habits. All four high schools in the region were included in the survey, with a total of 1,415 student responses.

“What we needed was a common understanding of current conditions in schools ... You'd walk into a coffee shop and people would say the school system is failing. You would ask 'What about the system is failing?' But they didn't know. Business leaders didn't know why it was failing, just that they can't hire their workforce from local graduates. Nobody could really talk about it.”

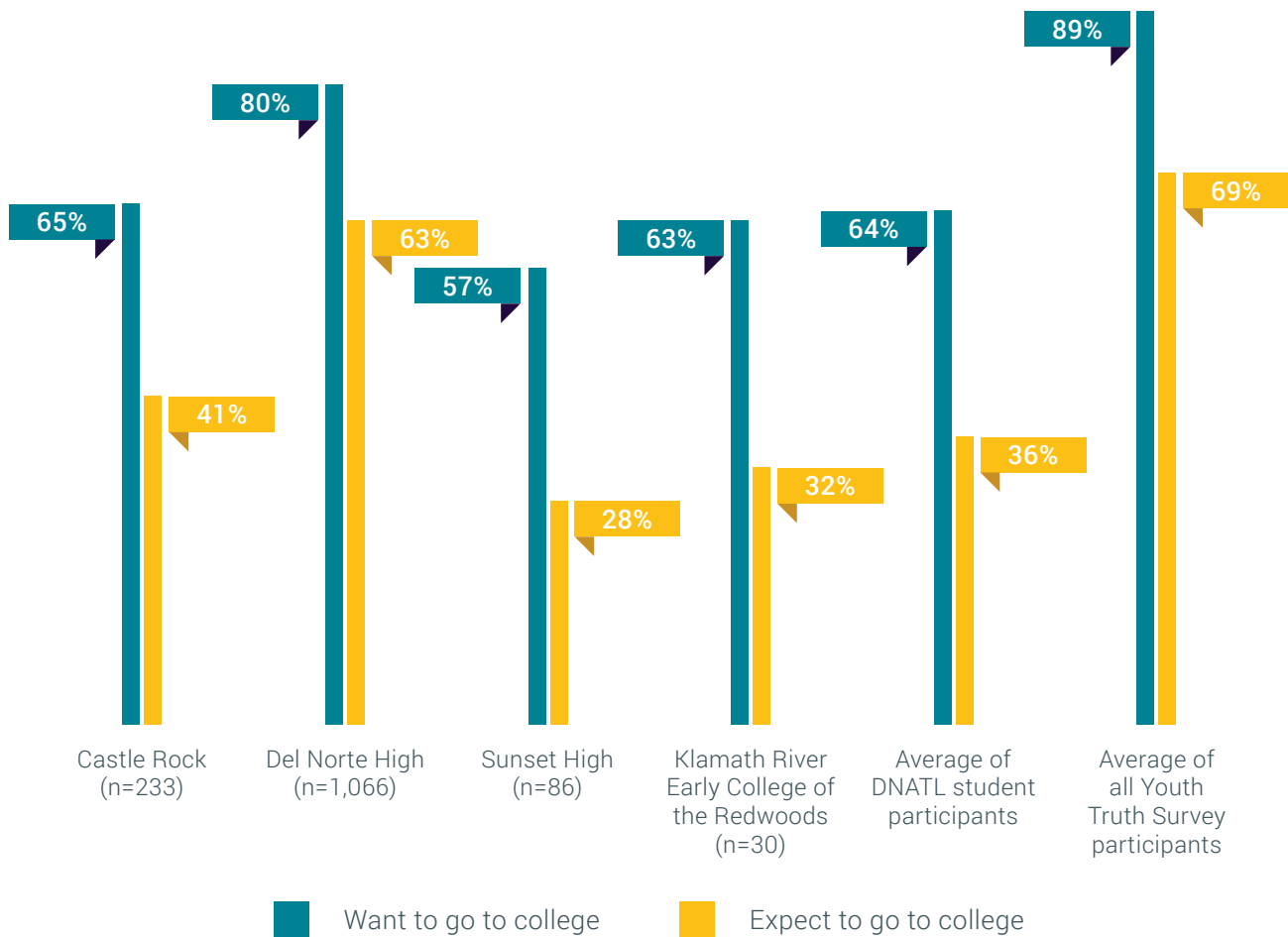
-Community Leader

“Youth mentioned that they did not feel supported or have a plan for their future ... the number of students indicating that they did not have a plan increased as they got older.”

-Community Leader

This survey not only provided a useful baseline for the community to track progress on youth issues, but also revealed some surprises that got people's attention. Of students who responded to the survey, 64% mentioned that they want to go to college after high school, but only 36% reported that they expected to go to college. Figure 7 demonstrates the percentage of students who want to go to college compared to the percentage of students who expect to go to college by school, alongside DNATL and Nationwide averages.

Figure 7 - DNATL Students Who Want to Go to College



Source: The California Center for Rural Policy and The Del Norte and Tribal Lands Building Healthy Communities Learning and Evaluation Advisory Committee. Community Wellness Vital Signs: Core Community Wellness Indicators for Del Norte and Tribal Lands. Version 1.2, May, 2012.

From these initial stock taking exercises, it was clear that there was a disconnect between what adults felt youth needed or were provided, and what their actual desires were, along with understanding of effective strategies that had been pursued in other communities to create opportunity for young people. The status quo emphasized providing recreational activities as the predominant way of engaging youth. The Initiative was bucking conventional wisdom when it argued that *“Though recreation activities like theater or sports are good, it is not youth leadership or civic engagement.”*

Finding 2

Empowerment is the journey, not the destination.

Opening spaces for youth to show leadership in solving community problems helped shift perspectives about those generations, and break cycles of negative self image and poor outcomes.

To meet the goals of the new grant, it was necessary to create leadership positions for youth to exercise real decision making power in. At this nascent stage, the community lacked a shared vision for what power-sharing with youth would look like. Further, some community partners were disgruntled that the Initiative was not providing funding support to their existing youth programs: *“And they would say ... I got evidence based best practices, why aren't you just funding my services? So they sent us a picture of the chief of police standing with a microphone and these young people were standing behind him with matching t-shirts.”*

To better communicate the gap between current services and those needed to manifest a positive vision for DNATL's youth, the Initiative created the picture of the “DNATL Girl,” shown in Figure 8. In this image, the DNATL Girl is standing on a platform built with the experiences she needs to succeed. These experiences include the following:

- Experiences turning a problem into a positive change in the community
- Experiences interacting in the public arena to make real community change
- Connection and real relationships with adult mentors
- Experiences in making healthy choices
- Experiences building leadership skills
- Real work experiences.

The DNATL Girl is also holding a toolbox of knowledge and skills, including public speaking, research, media and more. Along with a toolbox, the DNATL girl is holding a plan that maps out her pathway to obtaining a successful career in her home region. In a participatory research exercise conducted in 2010, the Initiative asked adult leaders to write the names of resources in place for community youth, and correlate it to some aspect of the DNATL Girl Vision. Out of the

hundreds of sticky notes collectively produced by the adult leaders, only five offered opportunities for youth that contributed to their higher needs.

“They made like 8 million posts ... so they said amazing things, so amazing, Now take the poster note that matched that girl that's gonna get us to that girl and walk it over, put it on there. And it was like five things.”

-DNATL BHC Initiative Backbone Team Member

Figure 8: Initial drawing of the “DNATL Girl”



The story of a local AmeriCorps VISTA program launched in 2012 at Rural Human Services illustrates another important lesson learned by community partners about the importance of acknowledging diverse backgrounds and experiences to overall success of youth work.

The program had the good intention of providing meaningful summer work opportunities to local youth. However, it only accepted 30 out of 60 youth applicants that represented the “best and brightest”. At the behest of the initiative, CCRP² became involved as partners, so the summer program could expand to include any young people who showed interest in participation. Their summer youth program took place at the local community college in Crescent City-College of the Redwoods (CR). This youth program, designed and piloted by CCRP and the VISTA volunteers, evolved over the years and eventually became part of a multi-pathway Summer Youth Training Academy (YTA).

“Every time we had a crisis, it meant we were hitting the right youth. So we were on track. We were looking for the C-F students, not the A-students ... they already had opportunities.”

-CCRP Staff Member

During the six-week program, youth were trained in leadership development, advocacy, soft skills, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and how to conduct surveys about local issues like neighborhood safety and food insecurity. Youth also learned about the diversity of health career educational opportunities that are available to them at both College of the Redwoods and Cal Poly Humboldt. The newly designed youth program brought a learning curve about the situations youth-at-risk endure daily. For example, it was apparent that the youth participants felt alienated from organizations like a community college:

“On the first day, youth participants were lined up in front of CR, waiting to enter an open building. Although CR has been in the community for decades, the youth did not feel comfortable entering the college that is right next to a high school.”

-CCRP Staff Member

The VISTA program at Rural Human Services provided some youth opportunities to engage in the community through a summer program with a stipend. Though CCRP could not offer stipends, they were able to hire youth as employees and pay them a minimum wage to support their participation: *“Being employees gave a little more leverage for youth to participate in the summer program.”*

Shortly after the program began, administrators realized that youth did not have access to banking. Community bankers came to train youth participants on setting up bank accounts and budgeting. There were additional challenges however. In some cases, the student’s wages were their families’ only income for the summer. Parents often called program administrators to demand information about their child’s paychecks. There were instances where foster youth were taken back by their parents to benefit from their child’s income. Since youth were considered employees, they had the autonomy to remain employed and receive the funds they earned.

Overall, the financial incentive made a big difference. Administrators attribute a host of positives to the wages provided, noting that it helped the children take the responsibility of attending the program seriously, stay engaged, and participate. That participation and engagement was a transformative experience, and for many youth it could never have happened without some way to first get them in the door (literally and figuratively!).

From day one when youth were introducing themselves to program staff, they were using self-destructive narratives. They described themselves as delinquents, troublemakers, outcasts, and criminals. These narratives reflected how they viewed themselves, what they believed, and how they experienced the way adults viewed them. One program administrator expressed shock that *“They competed with each other for a bad girl, bad boy status.”* Over time, the program proved transformative—when youth participants were seen as employees by their community, they changed their self-narratives. Every summer, youth were asked to provide feedback via focus groups and surveys. Participants often mentioned how proud they were of being seen as an employee, an intern, or a person working hard to create positive change in their community.

² The California Center for Rural Policy is the author of this case study.

Finding 3

Youth work requires a trauma-informed approach, and the impact of trauma had been under-emphasized in previous work.

Engagement should be facilitated with strong participation from social work and behavioral health professionals in support.

Youth are often overwhelmed by painful events and issues in their life and feel they need a “break from reality.” For some this is about getting away from their home environment as often as they can or they use a range of things to distract themselves—video games, drugs, alcohol, hanging out with friends, etc. Feelings of hopelessness can lead a young person to spiral down a path of disengagement and self-medication, which can ultimately lead to addiction. Drug and alcohol use, teen pregnancy, and mental health issues are disproportionately present amongst DNATL youth (see Figure 5).

Interviews with young people reported that in several cases, the trauma was so severe that they became singularly focused on getting through each day, maintaining basic needs like food and shelter. Parents who want to support their children often lack the knowledge and resources to do so, and for youth living in these circumstances it takes a high level of trust to seek support from an adult.

Many youth, even at a very young age, are the most responsible members of their family, and they can end up playing a parenting role with their siblings and even their parents. Some youth are growing up with belief systems that aren’t conducive to good health or success.

“I’ve faced so much trauma in my home life, I need others to understand what I’ve experienced and how it’s impacted me.”

-DNATL youth

“My focus is on surviving day-to-day. I don’t have the capacity to think about growing and thriving.”

-DNATL youth

A significant number of youth participating in the YTA had experienced, or were experiencing high levels of trauma that impacted their abilities to participate in the program, and required a higher level of social-emotional support than program staff were trained to handle. For example, some of the youth participants had family members that passed away or were convicted during the program, and participants were arrested for sexually harassing other youth participants. Others ran away from home, struggled immensely, and expressed suicidal ideation, or attempted to commit suicide during the program.

During the first few years of the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative efforts focused on empowering youth to advocate for healthy behaviors. And though the youth advocacy research program had a positive impact on many participants’ lives, it was difficult to teach youth organizing without aligning the program to social services. This was due in part to a critical shortage of licensed counselors and social workers in the county which continues to be a problem.

The fundamental challenge was that there was no social worker involved with the summer youth program. For many at-risk youth, the six-week program represented one of their first experiences to be recognized, guided, and closely supported by adults. Each year the CCRP team redesigned the summer program to meet the needs of the youth involved. In 2014, they implemented a “no child left behind” policy, and when they received 150 applicants, they accepted and hired every one of them. The program immediately ran into challenges however, as there was not enough community support or adult staff to run the over-enrolled program.

“Youth became attached to us, and then we were gone. It was hard for youth to lose relationships when we left. It was traumatic for staff and youth.”

-CCRP Staff Member

These experiences led the program administrators to recognize that though they were the backbone for the YTA, they did not have the critical competencies for serving the specific youth needs in that community. The youth training program was unable to sustain its benefits to participants beyond the summer program, and CCRP could not provide the social support the youth needed. The Initiative encouraged the community to develop its capacity to become the backbone of the YTA. A couple of

local entities and organizations began collaborating to establish a structure of support. Eventually, CCRP was able to step out of its role and shift focus to evaluating YTA programs and projects.

By working holistically, using empowerment and relationship building from the organizing skillset combined with trauma informed social work approaches, students and their allies found opportunities to turn traumatizing experiences into positive community change. Students learned how to use their voice and express their lived experience, research their collective pain points and identify courses of action, and connect with allies in their community to address some of the problems they were facing. The student-led campaign to take on underage drinking, detailed under Finding 8, is a powerful example of how this transformation took hold in DNATL.

The Impact of Community-Based Empathy Research

Finding 4 — The importance of designing from a place of empathy and engagement with youth issues.

From the inception, program design should be driven from the experiences, stories, and voices of Opportunity Youth, their families, and youth serving providers. It is important to thoughtfully design qualitative data gathering exercises to capture these perspectives.

The BHC Initiative reached out to a trusted community leader for help. It was becoming apparent that there was no sense of ownership over the Initiative’s work in DNATL. Partners were dwindling, people felt stuck and confused on the overall goals of the work.

“People were feeling isolated. They were feeling disconnected from one another or anything bigger than themselves. They felt stuck between this funder who was sort of top-down.”

-BHC Initiative team member

The DNATL BHC Initiative refers to this moment as the “Pit Stop”. The reflections prompted a shift in perspective, towards focusing on the human experience rather than implementing a menu of programs and initiatives. Understanding what youth in the community were experiencing in their daily lives and how systems and policies were impacting them became the new model of change. The Initiative leaders sharpened their focus to form clear, measurable goals, based on the lived experience of residents, that could be broadly shared by the community. They also began equipping themselves with human-centered design tools.³ BHC collaborators employed these tools to develop knowledge and design strategies for youth leadership in food access, early childhood literacy, resiliency/community organizing, and health career pathways. This shift was critical for all projects, activities, and goals of the DNATL BHC Initiative (See Figure 9).

Figure 9 - Before and Current States

2015 (Before State)	2020 (Current State)
Lacked tools for collaborative goal setting and decision making.	Using human-centered design for radical collaboration and listening to community voices to help determine decisions and design solutions.
The number of agencies involved in BHC was shrinking, and agencies were working in silos.	Silos have been broken down, and community partners are working together and collaborating to reach shared goals again.
The weight and expectations of the large grants funding the work proved to be too much for some of the nonprofits’ infrastructures.	Implicit focus on increasing capacity, skills, and power building across various non-profit organizations, institutions (schools), and local youth and their families.

³ Human-centered design is an approach to problem-solving commonly used in design and management frameworks that develops solutions to problems by involving humans most impacted by the current situation.

During the “Pit Stop” the Initiative recognized the necessity of learning and empathizing with youth who are feeling alienated from work and educational opportunities. In 2016 members of the Initiative conducted key informant interviews with 18 Opportunity Youth and 11 adult allies (adults who work with or advocate for Opportunity Youth). This empathy research project pursued four goals:

- 01 Understand why a young person disengages from school and work
- 02 Understand the barriers Opportunity Youth⁴ experience
- 03 Understand the opportunities to prevent future young people from becoming disconnected
- 04 Understand the opportunities to assist Opportunity Youth in school or the workforce

The project reached out to youth who were at risk for being disconnected from school or work, already disengaged from school or work, and youth who were able to re-enter school or work. These interviews yielded important insights which transformed the Initiative’s approach to its work.

⁴ Youth aged 18-24 who are not engaged in educational activities or employed.

Finding 5

Empowering youth means challenging negative attitudes about DNATL.

Youth often internalize messages about their community, and Del Norte is all too frequently the subject of negative narratives. In order for youth to be able to thrive in the moment, adults must enforce positive messages for Del Norte's future as well, that it is a community capable of delivering healthy young people on to successful adult lives. Negative messages about the Del Norte community have only enforced a sense of hopelessness and lack of motivation amongst young people.

“We’re being held back by Del Norte and Tribal Lands’ poor self image, which is also becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy for us.”

-DNATL youth

“Del Norte County shouldn’t be a place where you do drugs and lose your life. It should be a fun place where you can be healthy and raise a family.”

-DNATL youth

“Adults who show up for youth on an individual basis can make a big collective difference.”

-School Counselor

Youth spoke about the need to have people in their lives that care about them as individuals. Being respected and treated like they have worth is paramount—they want to be treated like an adult, not spoken down to, or worse, treated as disposable. The youth expressed that when they are valued and validated they are better motivated as students and employees. Youth often need time to build trusting relationships with adults,

and being understood is critical to this. Many are craving love and belonging. If they don't have this in their own family they look for others to provide it, and in some instances they create their own family to fill this gap. If youth feel they aren't seen or valued, they feel invisible—which can lead to low self-esteem and negative self talk.

“[My teacher said to me] ... You’re a talented artist. You’re going to become successful. You’re going to do great at college. It was the first time that anyone said I can do what I dream to do.”

-DNATL youth

One of the main barriers the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative learned from youth serving providers, was that people working with youth often feel overwhelmed and unsupported. Often roles working with youth are not valued, or are entry level roles that are not paid well, which can result in high turnover. Strong relationships are not built with youth and there simply isn't enough time or staff to get this important work done.

To address these negative observations and help humanize and center young people in the work of the Initiative, the BHC team funded a variety of partners to learn how to conduct empathy research, via training with consultants ThinkPlace. Since receiving the training in 2016, the Initiative's partners have been able to utilize empathy research tools to fill the empathy gap observed in youth work. The DNATL BHC Youth Initiative collaborated with youth-serving providers to create a more robust and resilient system of care for foster youth and youth experiencing homelessness using empathy based research.

In 2018, DNATL BHC Youth Initiative along with youth serving providers conducted several empathy interviews with mental health service providers and families. This collaboration led to community partners recognizing a gap between mental health or service providers and the clients that they serve.

In a community with disproportionately high levels of trauma, youth service providers may not have the capacity to consider systematic gaps or policy gaps within their scope of work. Below are some of the barriers that youth service providers reported facing:

- “Burnout ... few that do all the work ... the few dedicated people.”
- “Hard to keep people motivated and pushing through the burnout.”
- “Second Hand trauma is a big barrier and piece of the work.”
- “So many organizations working in silos ... people focused on doing their jobs, and are doing the community a disservice.”
- “Old timer perspective ... new way isn't a bad way. Personalities can be barriers.”

The empathy research process shed light on the negative impact of silos and systematic barriers youth experience when trying to access services or care. For instance, youth or families expressed that they often feel judged and dehumanized by service providers.

“At the time Del Norte County wanted to institutionalize him, and it was like ‘I know my child.’”

-Parent

“I feel judged. I have an overwhelming experience of not being valued.”

-DNATL youth

Insights from the empathy research process brought educators, school officials, community members, youth service providers, and youth together. Youth serving providers started with trauma informed information and connections with people. As they moved forward it transitioned into resilience, and understanding that they would never be able to undo the level of trauma youth experience. In addition, youth providers learned that trauma is complex and youth have diverse needs. This collaboration also led to the expansion of Sources of Strength (SOS)-a suicide prevention and mental health well-being promotion program for students.

“We can't get rid of the trauma, but we can be more resilient in how we deal with the trauma.”

-Service Provider

SOS was originally funded by the United Indian Health Services. From 2016 to 2019, Crescent Elk Middle School and Sunset High students were able to participate in the SOS program. The SOS program was successful in creating critical and meaningful relationships between teachers, school staff, and students. But when the grant ended, many student participants and teachers expressed concern about being able to continue the SOS program.

“I remember hearing a student say that her grandmother had died and she was in a dark place and couldn't understand how to get out of it. She said she remembered lessons from SOS ... and it was the only reason she got out of it.”

-Educator

In 2020, a youth service provider who conducted empathy interviews was able to utilize the Title XI funding for the Indian Education Program for the continuation and expansion of the SOS program. Currently, SOS is being implemented in all of DNATL schools with more emphasis on connecting youth with their community.

Knowledge, understanding, and empathy are critical components of resilience. Future work with resiliency will involve empathy interviews with families from underrepresented communities to understand how to be racially equitable and inclusive.

“There's a lot more to do ... but we have the connections and the people to do it now.”

-BHC Backbone Team Member

The Impact of Collaboration and Leveraging Resources

Finding 6

Increased collaboration grew youth opportunities exponentially—leveraging public funding and resources led to increased capital, opportunities for youth in the community.

A scarcity mindset refers to the belief that there is never enough funding or resources to create a major positive lasting change in the community. This kind of thinking can pose a barrier to navigating solutions to complex community problems. It may cause people and organizations to view would-be collaborators and competitors for the same resources. In addition, collaboration is not easy to initiate because it requires trust, consistency, and open communication.

The Youth Training Academy (YTA) is an example of what is possible when communities shift from a scarcity mindset to being able to leverage public funding and resources to increase opportunities for the community. Community partners expressed that what the Initiative was able to accomplish with the YTA would have been unheard of in 2009. In other words, if someone were to travel back in time and simply ask about offering non-credit college courses as youth training pathways to local career opportunities, they would've been told that "there is just no way we could fund that."

Resource leveraging refers to systematically assessing the use of existing resources (ensuring there is no duplication of resources or unused funds for example), identifying additional needs, or creating new resources in the community. Resource leveraging is successful when there is an understanding of how to engage community partners, a way to identify mutual goals and establish a shared vision, and most importantly a collaboration between project leads, Initiative members, employers, government officials, Tribal governments, educators, youth workers, business owners, non-profit directors, etc.

In 2015 the Wild Rivers Community Foundation (WRCF) became the home for the work and backbone team for the entire BHC DNATL initiative. WRCF is an affiliate of the Humboldt Area Foundation, serving all of Del Norte and Curry Counties. WRCF promotes and encourages generosity, leadership, and inclusion to strengthen their communities. As a trusted community organization, WRCF provides a place where all of the BHC DNATL

projects can interact.

The YTA is an annual summer program that runs 4-6 weeks, depending on the year. YTA is a collaborative effort between CCRP, Cal Poly Humboldt, College of the Redwoods, WRCF, and BHC. The purpose of YTA is to develop young leaders and grow a future workforce with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace. The YTA encourages youth to work in local fields that need a qualified workforce.

Through the YTA, youth starting 10th grade through age 24 can participate in hands-on career exploration in one of seven local career pathways, including early childhood education, healthcare, food access, media, ecotourism, organizing, and leadership. YTA youth participants are paid for their time. Since the beginning of the YTA summer program, youth were either on payroll or given a stipend for their participation. Incentives motivate youth to come in, check it out, stay engaged and come back.

“Stipends worked ... they helped get the youth in the door. Once they show up and have a successful experience, then they stick around.”

-CCRP Staff Member



Clinic Tour-Source: Youth Training Academy, Health Career Pathway

These pathways have evolved over time depending on changes in the operating environment, feedback from evaluations, and the availability of resources and community partners.

Leaders from YTA pathways often met at the WRCF office to collaborate with Initiative paid staff. The program remains in tune with the needs of the community and creates real, accessible pathways for student opportunities. These pathways lead to ongoing community movements addressing major needs in DNATL. As examples:

The Health Careers Pathway is a critical component of a Grow Your Own Workforce movement for the DNATL healthcare system.

The Food Pathway is an opportunity for youth to engage in the DNATL BHC Food Initiative to increase food security and strengthen the food economy.

The Media Pathway is a major training component for Redwood Voice. The Redwood Voice is a youth media hub that develops youth journalists, tackling important topics and filling a void.

The Organizing Pathway teaches youth how to address systemic inequities and disparities that disproportionately affects them and other youth in the community.

The Ecotourism Pathway offers an opportunity for youth to learn a way to engage with the natural environment that surrounds them. During the Ecotourism Pathway, youth learn how small businesses work with public land managers such as Redwood National and State Parks and the U.S. Forest Service to provide kayak, bike, and hiking tours for visitors and locals.

The YTA began by working with local businesses and educators renting space at CR. During this time, community partners felt as though there was a disconnect between youth, the YTA, and the community college.

“The fact that none of the youth mentioned college during their presentations about their experience with YTA was a lost opportunity.”

-CCRP Staff Member

In 2017, the YTA collaborated with CR and used a different model for the program. A significant change was for CR to take the helm—paying qualified instructors and maintaining a high-quality curriculum. Since the program became part of the college, there were additional requirements, policies and expectations for staff to follow, including offering youth non-credit college courses. From 2017 to 2019, the collaboration between the college and YTA programs was critical in sustaining the YTA and other BHC-funded programs.

Not only were over 450 youth formally introduced to the local community college, the collaboration between YTA and the College of the Redwoods generated additional state funding of \$20,000 to sustain the leadership and career pathway courses including youth organizing. Apart from the College of the Redwoods, YTA has worked with over 100 community partners from 2010 to 2020.

Additionally, 227 YTA participants received one college credit between 2017 to 2019, and 78 of those youth (an average of 34%) registered for college after participating in YTA. Figure 10 is a summary of the number of youth who registered for college courses at CR after completing the credited YTA summer program.

Figure 10 - YTA Youth Enrolled in Credit Courses at College of the Redwoods

Term	Enrolled	Enrolled in Credit Course
2017	54	25 (46%)
2018	79	28 (35%)
2019	94	25 (27%)
Total:	227	78 (34%)

Source: College of the Redwoods

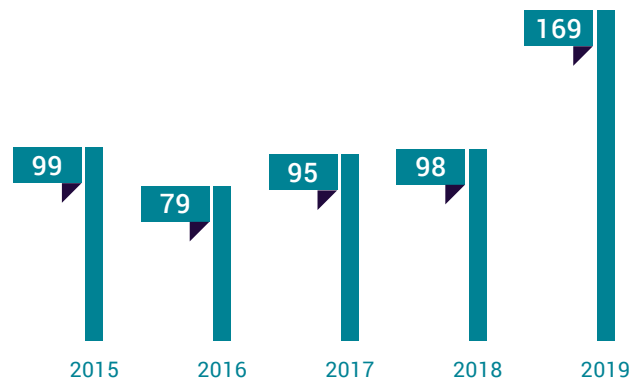
Youth were offered about 200 training sessions from 2010-2015; the academy transitioned to a pathway model in 2016.

Trainings offered to youth during the Summer YTA from 2010-2015:	Pathways offered from 2016-2019
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Community-Based Research Methods ▶ Leadership ▶ Money Management ▶ Momentum, Job Skills, and Career Exploration ▶ Public Speaking ▶ CPR Certification ▶ Cultural Competency ▶ Time Management ▶ Mindfulness ▶ Empowering Healthy Relationships ▶ Personal Hygiene ▶ Rethink Your Drink ▶ Gender Talk ▶ Real Power is Often Hidden: Civic Engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Health Career Pathways ▶ Health and Human Services ▶ Community Organizing ▶ Ecotourism 101 ▶ Early Childhood Education ▶ New Media ▶ Food and Regenerative Agriculture ▶ Social Entrepreneurship



Youth Taking Blood Pressure-Source: Youth Training Academy, Health Career Pathway

Figure 11: YTA Participants (2015 to 2019)



In addition to youth leadership opportunities driven by the YTA, the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative leveraged state and national networks including:

- Opportunity Youth Initiative
- Sons and Brothers
- Sisterhood Rising
- YO! Cali, & the California Native Vote Project
- FUSION

The purpose of leveraging state and national networks was to engage new partners to create pathways for increased youth leadership opportunities across DNATL. Some of DNATL youth participants were recognized and won fellowships through state and nation-wide programs. Others had the opportunity to participate in trips to Sacramento to engage with youth leaders from across the state, speak with the regional policymakers, and attend rallies and conferences.

At the end of every YTA, CCRP conducted evaluations to understand what youth participants valued the most and the least. During the evaluation, CCRP facilitated focus groups and surveys with YTA youth participants and adult YTA leaders/instructors. Figure 12 is a word cloud⁵ from the YTA 2017 evaluation report by CCRP.

Figure 12: Valued Aspects of YTA



Figure 12 demonstrates the most valued aspects of YTA 2017. The quotes in Figure 13 represent what youth valued most of their experience during the summer of 2017.

Figure 13: Youth Quotes from 2017 YTA

Organizing and Leadership

- “Very youth-led this year”
- “We are power”
- “Connecting with other pathways and talking about indigenous rights”
- “Diverse conversations”
- “Power-mapping with decision makers”
- “Research meetings”
- “Writing impactful pieces”

Health Careers

- “Acquiring interpersonal skills”
- “Learning about different career pathways within the health field”
- “CPR and First Aid training”
- “Blood draw and blood pressure activities”
- “Tours and job shadowing”
- “Working with children”
- “Doing the yoga and fitness project with kids and elders”

⁵ A word cloud is a visualization method that displays how frequently the words or “themes” are mentioned by study participants. Larger words indicate a higher frequency.

Early Childhood Education

“Learning about mandated reporting”

“Learning about playground safety”

“Support of the Del Norte Childcare Council”

“Learning how to improve public speaking skills”

“CPR and First Aid training”

“We-Read’ Program”

“Earning 3 college credits in Early Childhood Education”

“Observation of childcare centers”

“Interacting with children at daycares”

Food and Regenerative Agriculture

“Rewarding work”

“Learning about native plants”

“Overall hands-on experience and rewarding to see a project through from the beginning to end”

Ecotourism 101

“Learning life skills and survival skills”

“Hands-on experience working in the industry with a local business”

“Planning and coordinating an event for the summer kids program”

During interviews, local employers were asked to reflect on challenges and opportunities presented by working with youth. A common view employers expressed was that youth did not have the basic skills required for entry-level positions. From this identified need, the Employment, Experience, Education (E3) Summer Workforce program was born. E3 is a collaboration between local business owners, the Del Norte County Office of Education, Sunset High School, Del Norte County Workforce Center, and the BHC Initiative. The E3 Summer Workforce Program first began in 2017 for high school juniors and seniors interested in working and receiving mentorship from local businesses. This collaborative approach to fund the E3 program made it possible to pay youth to participate in the program, as well as providing transportation to youth living in remote areas such as Klamath or Hiouchi.

Through the E3 program, youth received a week of classroom training on a variety of soft skills, interviewing techniques, and public speaking, and then worked with local businesses for four weeks of hands-on job experience. The purpose of the E3 Summer Workforce program was to:

- ▶ Address the gap between local job opportunities and eligible local potential employees
- ▶ Address the competition between youth and adults to obtain an entry-level position
- ▶ Grow a local workforce by offering training opportunities and resources to youth
- ▶ Teach youth how to navigate the job market
- ▶ Expose youth to job and training opportunities
- ▶ Offer youth the support and guidance they may not receive at home

By 2019, 83 youth participated in the E3 bootcamp, and 74 youth were employed by 25 businesses in the community. Providing some foundational support to youth to prepare them for opportunities helped break the unhealthy disconnect between local business leaders and young people in DNATL.

Investing in Youth Leadership and Connecting Youth to Adult Allies

Finding 7

Providing a platform for youth to own their narratives and raise their voices was a powerful catalyst for change across other facets of the Initiative.



2019 E3 Participants-Source: Education, Experience, Employment

The DNATL BHC Youth Initiative recognizes the power of storytelling and utilizes storytelling to create change. During the ten year initiative, the community developed a pipeline of youth opportunities to engage in media production beginning in middle school, continuing through high school, and beyond. Media skills require students to build an extensive range of technical expertise and master the art of storytelling and all the components that go along with it.

The DNATL BHC Youth Initiative recognized that youth are interested in creating media pieces using the necessary technology that they may access, such as smartphones and tablets. The tools, connections, and resources provided enabled the creation of a youth-led media organization, "Redwood Voice." This youth-led leadership network in Del Norte County helps young people develop skills in media and storytelling. It is also a platform for youth to bring awareness to the barriers and trauma they experience to create a better future for themselves and generations to come.



“The first step in changing the narratives of our community is to tell the untold stories and raise the voices that are not heard through traditional communication outlets.”

-Redwood Voice Adult Leader

Redwood Voice did not originate as a social justice movement. The primary focus of Redwood Voice was to engage youth in a potential career pathway in journalism, media, video, and editing skills. The first attempt at engaging youth was unsuccessful until Redwood Voice pivoted their focus from being strictly a journalism program to a creative outlet for youth to tell their stories. The Initiative's efforts helped youth see media production as a tool, and motivated them to engage, organize, and be involved in community change. These safe community spaces are essential for youth to be healthy and enact change in their community.

The DNATL BHC Initiative funded Redwood Voice and the support offered Redwood Voice a unique opportunity to build partnerships with youth media programs from Del Norte to San Diego, and beyond. The program now has a significant presence in the local community and on several social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other popular social media networks. Redwood Voice is not just a station where youth recite community events. Redwood Voice consists of young journalists who are declaring a sense of agency, leadership, and ownership in the community.

“Working at Redwood Voice was more than just a job—it was an education. Before I started, my knowledge of filming and editing was extremely limited. I had never used a DSLR camera before, and my experience with editing software was very limited ... I studied with experts in the craft, and with each project that I worked on, I could practice and apply what I had learned. This process ensured true learning instead of mere memorization.”

-Redwood Voice Intern

“Journalism has the power to motivate. It can make people angry and it can inspire them to change. What I hope to do is to make people here who feel marginalized, who feel victimized, who feel the system and its status quo level of operation are not serving them; I want to give these people a voice and I want them to feel like someone out there is listening and that they are heard.”

-Redwood Voice Intern

In 2016, an LGBTQIA+ youth used the network to publish a strong message to the community—there is a dire need for LGBTQIA+ Inclusive Sex Ed in Del Norte's Schools. The author shared her personal experience to show the harmful consequences of not providing support for LGBTQIA+ youth in DNATL.

“Growing up queer in a remote Northern California town of just 7,500 people, I experienced firsthand how a rural school can fail to meet the needs of LGBTQ students. It's a failure with dire consequences.”

-Redwood Voice Intern

California took a positive step toward addressing the problem by amending AB 329, otherwise known as the California Healthy Youth Act. The bill expanded on existing law to ensure that students will receive “comprehensive” sex education, including “affirmative” examples of same-sex relationships and education about gender identity.

But questions still remained on how LGBTQIA+ inclusive sex education would play out in a DNATL classroom. To follow up on these questions, the young journalist went to her local high school, Del Norte High, to interview queer students on what they would like to see covered in their new “comprehensive” sex education classes. These insights were then compiled into a guideline for educators titled: ‘This is What Queer-Friendly Sex Ed Should Look Like’. The guide’s five sections are:

- 1 Healthy relationships are learned, so teach us.**
- 2 We need to talk about gender identity and preferred pronouns.**
- 3 We need a truly LGBTQ inclusive curriculum.**
- 4 Let’s talk about sexual identities. All of them.**
- 5 Can we get some gender equality?**

In 2020, Redwood Voice started a podcast called “The Accountability Corner.” The Accountability Corner is a show where youth take on local public officials who promote and engage in harmful ideologies or actions, and hold them accountable. The first episode discussed former First District Supervisor Roger Gitlin, his sharing and incitement of hate speech—and the turbulence that followed. The author investigated and explained why the ideas spread are wrong, the community backlash, how Roger Gitlin’s actions inspired further harm, and showcased community voices from a rally that took place in front of the Del Norte County office, the Flynn Center, during the summer of 2020.

Redwood Voice is youth media where both youth and adults can tune in, listen and learn from young leaders in DNATL. Below are some of the articles and podcasts that showcase how young local journalists bring awareness to injustice in the community and the nation, in addition to providing recommendations for equitable action and for listeners to engage in activism.

- ▶ **Elijah Brynson:** A Talk of Division, Racism, and Ignored Issues
- ▶ **The American Rockwellian Devastation of Roger Gitlin:** The Accountability Corner
- ▶ **News Now:** COVID Numbers, Talk with the Sheriff (#Defund the Police) and the Flynn Center Protestors
- ▶ **Black Lives STILL Matter:** How to Support the Movement
- ▶ **Defund the Police:** Effect on a Rural Town Like Ours?
- ▶ **Transgender Awareness Month:** Transcending Ignorance
- ▶ **Native American Inclusion in Del Norte County Schools**
- ▶ **Del Norte Youth Get Loud for Local Candidates Forum**
- ▶ **This is What Queer-Friendly Sex Ed Should Look Like**

Finding 8

Shifting the focus to health equity and prevention, and recognizing that youth are legitimate participants in community matters and care about the issues in the community, supported the success of the program. Learning that youth are the foremost experts on youth issues.

Throughout the course of the Initiative, youth leaders were, with some support, able to assert themselves as legitimate contributors in issues that matter in their community. They demonstrated that they care about the issues, can research the problems and thoughtfully work with decision-makers to develop solutions for healthier environments in which they can thrive.

In 2013, Redwood Voice youth participants created a short documentary, speaking with residents and experts about the issue of underage drinking in their DNATL community. Youth spoke about their experiences, their concerns about underage drinking, and how it was affecting them personally to see their classmates and friends be harmed and risk death from alcohol poisoning due to ease of access. Local law enforcement had assumed that students were accessing alcohol from their parent's liquor cabinets. Students knew this wasn't the case, that most problematic drinking was occurring because students could easily shoplift from the local grocery stores. However, "At this time, people were reluctant to hold the manager accountable because he was a beloved community member," and there needed to be a space to bring awareness to the manager without making accusations and creating community tension.

In 2013, a group of youth organized under Coastal Connections, a federally funded prevention and youth resource center, worked with a local grocery store manager and the police chief to consider and implement preventive measures to reduce alcohol theft from retail outlets as an effective strategy to reduce underage alcohol use. The youth raised the profile of underage drinking's devastating effects by hosting a public forum on underage drinking, sharing personal stories of the impact of alcohol use on their lives.

The youth also demonstrated for the store manager and police chief how someone could easily steal alcohol from the nonsecure shelving and conceal alcohol using the store restroom. The youth hosted a public action meeting in August of 2013 and brought it to the store manager's attention, who consequently put keyed locks on store restrooms.

The fact that youth leaders brought the key decision-makers into the conversation was an effective change strategy because they demonstrated that they were the youth 'experts' on what youth are doing, and should be taken seriously. There were immediate outcomes from the youth resident organizing—the store manager increased security measures, putting 'locking bottle caps' (which can't be removed without a special tool) on alcohol and keyed access to store restrooms. The manager stated that by implementing these controls, the "bottle caps have paid for themselves" due to reduced stolen bottles. Thus, the organized youth leaders were already beginning to change the narrative on many levels. Their actions led to reduced alcohol theft (which apparently could be on the order of \$2,000 in stolen goods per week).



Coastal Connections Community Action-Source: Redwood Voice

Finding 9

When youth are given the support and opportunities they need, they can make a community change.

In 2014, after hearing about sightings of salmon beginning to die again on the Klamath River (upriver), a group of Yurok youth took part in a digital storytelling workshop hosted by the Initiative, the Seventh Generation Fund Media Department, and the Yurok Social Services Youth Program. For the Yurok Tribe, salmon is life and a crucial part of the local Native American tribes' diet and spirituality.



Youth Interviewing Community Members-Source: Yurok Youth Fish Kill Video

In 2002, the Yurok Tribe experienced significant losses to the local food system. Drought and the diversion of water from the Klamath River to industrial farms in Central California led to the largest fish kill in the U.S and Yurok history. The fish kill continues to be a community issue.

The youth workshop participants decided to document their community response to the ongoing fish kill and explore the 2002 fish kill history. Their goal was to seek answers to prevent another disaster on their river.

The Initiative provided support to youth to lead this project. Youth sought to bring awareness to climate change, warm water in the rivers, and the damage that it has caused. They started by making a video that consisted of interviews with tribal elders, other youth, community leaders, and residents. The video production gave the youth and the communities they interviewed a vehicle to remember the fish kill, educate the public about its cultural significance, and the harm caused.

“Our community members have individual stories of that devastating event, but we had never collected those stories for our younger community members to hear. They would have a real understanding of the devastation that it brought to us as individuals and as a community.”

-Yurok Tribal Member

Youth were able to document the importance of this event and the sadness they felt, and the worry that it could happen again. Youth wanted to get it out for the public so that thousands could see and hopefully prevent it from happening again. This video also helped bring awareness of the shortage of water in the local rivers and the devastation that low and warm waters can cause to a species. The video has since been viewed over 11,000 times on YouTube. It made all the local newspapers online and had (at last count) over 50 shares on Facebook. It has been shown on the news from Native California as well as Indian Country Today and FNX (a native media channel).

Another example of student power at play has been the positive change in school food over the project period. In 2014, a listening session at Sunset High revealed that students were frustrated by the pre-packaged and processed food options, and that fresh fruit and vegetables were only available once a week. Students passionate about changing school lunches recruited their friends, and those friends recruited their friends. Shortly after, the students planned an all-student assembly, and that's where the Student Organizing Committee was born.

The Sunset High Student Organizing Committee decided that talking to experts is the best way to

figure out how to get healthier food and lunches. Students met with community members such as a pediatrician, a school superintendent, and the school district head of nutrition. Students had the opportunity to learn about the adverse health impacts of unhealthy school lunches. They learned about how malnutrition is the result of consuming too much processed unhealthy foods.

Their school lunches became so unhealthy due to failing to update a policy after a major transformation of the school's infrastructure. Sunset High used to be more of a drop-in center without a set schedule, which offered snacks for students who happened to be there during lunchtime. Over the years the school adopted a set schedule giving it more of an informal public high school environment, but not all necessary changes were made. The students learned the power of knowledge when they realized that some leaders and members of the school community had no idea about the unhealthy food at their school, and healthy food in Sunset High was not prioritized due to lack of awareness.



Sunset High Local Organizing Committee-Source: True North Organizing Network

The students also learned the business side of school lunches such as USDA reimbursements, unions, food distribution, and food safety laws. Youth figured out that if they could give up the unpopular frozen pizzas and hamburgers, the school district could add fresh fruits and vegetables without breaking the budget. The students came up with the following four requests:

- 1 A hot entree and salad bar 3 days a week
- 2 Keep the spicy chicken sandwich once a week
- 3 Implement these changes by May 21st
- 4 Have a follow-up meeting with the deputy superintendent in June

The students hosted a meeting at their school. They brought teachers, parents, policymakers, community members, and other students into the same room. Students gave speeches and testimonies, offered solutions, and held the primary policy makers accountable by stating their four requests, all of which were ultimately granted.

The change began about a week after the meeting, but the story didn't end there. Students continued to navigate through implementation issues and sustain policy changes. Students learned the vital lesson that change does not last with a simple yes or no response; instead, the change is a process that must be continually tweaked, modified and reworked.



Sunset High Local Organizing Committee-Source: True North Organizing Network

The Student Organizing Committee did not stop with just healthier lunches. At Sunset High, this committee continues to fight for a more beneficial school. Within the last decade, students upgraded their gym and weight room, and abolished Styrofoam trays.

From 2010-2020 there were numerous projects where youth received heightened support from adult community leaders and learned the skills they need to create community change. Youth-driven projects led to policy changes, better amenities, and healthy and sustainable reforms; these include the Sunset High weight room upgrade, a healthy lunches initiative, abolishing styrofoam trays, and bringing in better food trucks options.

“You often hear people say ‘If only I could change this.’ This opportunity lets us get behind the steering wheel and get to choose what work we want to see create those changes in our community.”

-Sunset High Student

Finding 10

The result of the ten-year initiative is hope for many DNATL youth. The transition in the participant's outlook on their community was not solely due to the training opportunities and resources; it also included how Youth Initiative staff interacted with youth.

Youth often described themselves as being equipped to succeed due to the education, training, and resources that the DNATL BHC Initiative created. One of the tangible outcomes of the Initiative was establishing career pathways for youth. The activities, funding, and support that the Initiative offered to forge career pathways for youth profoundly impacted the way youth view themselves and their community.

Youth mentioned the feeling of being supported, valued, respected, and taken seriously by Initiative staff as one of the most positive impacts on their lives. When youth participants were asked what their most significant achievements and transformative moments were with the Initiative, they described scenarios where they could dialogue and work with adult leaders in the community. The DNATL BHC Youth Initiative invited and included the youth in a movement to improve health equity in their community.



DNATL Youth Celebrating-Source: Wild Rivers Community Foundation

The feeling of being valued and supported by a community motivates youth to engage in social justice work for themselves, their peers, and the next generation. The youth participants indicated that the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative inspired them to succeed and continue what the initiative started.

“Never did I ever feel alienated or left out of the conversation just because I was young.”

-DNATL Youth

“We didn't feel devalued or tokenized.”

-DNATL youth

The Continued Investment in Youth During COVID-19

Finding 11

The groundwork done by the Initiative to support youth was a source of resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During 2020 it became difficult to support DNATL youth as all services, schools, and programs went online. The Initiative continued to invest in the well-being of youth by funding a local non-profit organization to provide safe activities and opportunities for youth to socialize and learn new skills.

Gateway Education provided a safe space for youth (12-24) to socialize and participate in fun outdoor recreational activities while following COVID-19 safety guidelines. Parents often mentioned that their child's positive experience in the Gateway Education Program was critical to their well-being during the pandemic.

COVID-19 created various challenges for youth. Adolescent's well-being severely declined as most of their schools went virtual and their social life dwindled. As one parent mentioned, "With this whole pandemic, my kids had almost gone into depression." The opportunity for youth to leave their homes to explore, have fun and socialize transformed their mental well-being. Their transformation positively impacted their home environments. Gateway Education is a 501c(3) nonprofit organization located in Del Norte County. Gateway Education focuses on creating self-awareness and healthy relationships through educational, recreational, and artistic activities out in nature. They provide a variety of programs, workshops, and activities for youth. Gateway Education also offers a wide selection of summer and fall experiences each year, focused on survival skills and self-awareness. They partner with local organizations such as Redwood Rides and other agencies committed to supporting youth to offer unique experiences each year.

During the summer and fall of 2020, Gateway Education offered the following camps/activities:

- ▶ Gateway Summer Day Camps
- ▶ Adventure Camp
- ▶ Advanced Camp

- ▶ Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA)
 - Ocean/River Kayaking Lessons
 - Ocean Kayak Fishing
 - Making Fire from Nothing
 - The Hunt in the Dark
 - Flowga (Yoga)
 - Dungeons and Dragons
 - Disc Golf
 - SCREEM (Small Company Re-Experiencing Entrepreneurial Movement)
 - It's Your Move
 - Seize the Clay
 - And Sew it Begins!
 - Redwood Stories—A Dance Adventure
- ▶ Hero's Quest Rites of Passage
- ▶ Harvest Season Adventure

Del Norte County is internationally famous for its scenic and wild landscapes. Despite the abundance of beautiful natural environments, Del Norte County outdoor activities can be inaccessible for many families for a variety of reasons. Gateway Education transforms Del Norte County's natural environment into a creative, nurturing and safe space to learn, explore, and have fun. Youth were challenged to try new things while learning critical outdoor skills such as building shelters, making a fire from scratch, organic food preparation, camouflaging, and more. Gateway education brought in a new perspective by building new relationships between families and the outdoors. One of the more frequently mentioned activities was "Hunt in the Dark," during which youth explore a local forest at night under the supervision of Gateway staff. One parent indicated though she was nervous about her children being out late, she was happy they got to experience a safe and fun adventure with trusted staff.



Fire Building From Scratch-Source: Gateway Education 2018

One of the most valuable aspects of Gateway Education is that parents witnessed their children become more confident in themselves. Parents often mentioned that their children have shown a growth in confidence and improvements in the way they communicate their emotions, stress, and anxiety. In addition, parents mentioned how the structure and activities of Gateway Education allow youth to learn about themselves, how to work with their peers, and how to communicate their feelings with people around them.

“She has really gotten better with her communication. She mostly internalizes and then kind of shuts down a lot.”

-Parent

“I saw a lot of confidence when she came back.”

-Parent

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The DNATL BHC Youth Initiative provided useful insights on success factors for supporting young people in rural areas. The team discovered that creating a strong core of engaged organizations (“the backbone”) was important to sustaining momentum over the ten year course of the program. Without this backbone, the lack of communication between local organizations, and lack of tangible pathways for youth to follow was hindering the creation of effective youth programming. To build on this key achievement, it will be important to link new programs and organizations to these existing, successful initiatives, to sustain and evolve the work into the future. The increased collaboration and dialogue which resulted from the DNATL BHC Youth Initiative has led to an improvement in youth opportunities. Of particular importance moving forward will be to lean into the new skills gained and translate them into programs that encourage disengaged (Opportunity) youth—those between 18 and 24 years of age who are not engaged in educational activities or employed. For example, training youth to use empathy interviews with their peers could be an effective way to reach this critical population in DNATL.

The role that trauma plays in outcomes for DNATL youth can not be understated. Creating more mechanisms for social workers to support at-risk youth and advise adult allies on approaches and strategies to engage youth that may be affected by trauma was key to improving effectiveness.

Experiences of organizations working with youth suggest that programs should ideally be year-round to provide the resources and support youth need to succeed and sustain positive development. Youth mentioned that sharing their experiences about trauma and giving back to others helps them grow and heal from trauma. Continuing to expand opportunities for youth to heal from trauma and support their peers should be a priority moving forward.

Expanding the partnership between the Youth Training Academy and College of the Redwoods to provide tangible pathways to meaningful careers is another facet of this work the Initiative hopes will be carried forward into the future. Community partners remain committed to uplifting at-risk youth by meeting them “where they are” and guiding them towards career pathways. Finally, the crucial shift that this work brought on—having youth participate in shaping and driving youth work—is a message that needs to be actively centered in all youth work moving forward. Revitalizing a Youth Council could be a strong signal to the community of the importance of this value. Messaging that reinforces that Del Norte is a place of opportunity, where youth are valued and needed, helps the community to see the potential of its young people and partner effectively with them to create a healthier environment where they can thrive.

APPENDIX

Over the course of the BHC DNATL Initiative, collaborative partners saw youth participants grow in confidence, discover new possibilities within their community, and ultimately engage themselves in creating positive change on issues that impact their lives. Below is a timeline of some of the achievements youth and their supporters logged during the Initiative:

Tangible Wins and Benefits

- 2011**
 - S.H. Cowell funds educational improvements with Del Norte Unified School District, including support for Coalition Building Institute to work with District on issues raised in ACLU lawsuit for racial discrimination against Native American students.
- 2012**
 - School District receives C-3 Federal Grant to support psychological counseling services in schools.
 - The Smith River Gym at Smith River Elementary School is established through a community-led joint-use agreement involving the County Parks and Recreation Department and the Del Norte County Schools.
- 2013**
 - School environment improvements are implemented through adoption of Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS).
 - Hydration stations are installed at three schools and a healthy food service program is implemented in all schools including salad bars, increased scratch cooking, local farm to school strategies (vendor contracts), and Harvest of the Month.
 - Del Norte Unified School District Board adopts the Del Norte Engaged Learning Model including Social Emotional Learning and restorative justice components.
- 2014**
 - School District adopts new school discipline policy and eliminates willful defiance suspensions.
 - School Budget includes additional funding to support school gardens, local produce vendors, salad bars at all schools, and a higher percentage of from scratch meals.
 - Del Norte Unified School District enters into agreement with Yurok Tribe to share Yurok student data, particularly on absenteeism, so Tribal Court liaisons can provide intervention with Tribal families when students are absent.
 - Youth with True North Organizing Network organizes first-ever, non-partisan Del Norte School Board candidate forum.

2015

- School Wellness Policy is created and adopted.
- Del Norte Unified School District adopts a budget that allocates Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) funding to support foster student well-being, which included implementing a prevention and whole-child focused collaboration model. During the first year of implementation foster student academic performance improves.
- Sunset High School students organize to improve their weight room and create a safe place for youth to increase their physical activity.
- The Department of Health and Human Services, non-governmental organizations, and youth-serving organizations partner to deliver Youth Training Academy summer 2015 with a focus on development of youth leadership, advocacy skills, job training, soft skills development, data/research, media, and community service.

2016

- Crescent City Council votes to adopt a youth-driven policy to expand food trucks' service areas and hours as a result of the growing local, healthy food economy.
- True North Organizing Network youth lead Del Norte County Board of Supervisors non-partisan candidate forum.
- Del Norte Unified School District commits to purchasing local, organic meat and produce for its school nutrition program, increasing its local institutional purchasing by \$30,000 in its first year.
- Del Norte Unified School District adopts policy recognizing Native American students' absences from school to attend biannual Tribal ceremonies by offering an independent study option, rather than marking the students absent or truant.
- Del Norte Unified School District designs and makes available a new course that focuses on Native American Studies to students at Del Norte High School.
- After Klamath residents raise concerns about low test scores at Margaret Keating Elementary School, the Del Norte Unified School District votes to allocate funding for an additional full-time teacher at the school.
- As a result of youth organizing, Del Norte Unified School District vote to replace Styrofoam with compostable cafeteria trays. The DNUSD allocates \$4,000 to support this effort.

2017

- College of the Redwoods creates youth leadership and career development community education courses. This generates \$20,000 in state funding to sustain the leadership and career pathway courses, including youth organizing.

2017

- Del Norte Unified School District successfully implements a Student Information System that connects student wellness indicators and school climate goals to daily student assessment. The system can now create early warning signs that provide daily data about how well students are meeting academic and social-emotional goals, including the school's Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports (PBIS) goals.
- Del Norte Unified School District changes its Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) process from a punishment to a restorative model. Partner agencies realign services to support preventative practices with students and families facing truancy charges.
- Del Norte Unified School District wins state funding to implement educational equity as the center of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) implementation to better align initiatives and resources within the district to address the needs of all students.
- Del Norte County prevention program and Del Norte Unified School District partner to deliver a leadership development class taught every day with middle school students at Crescent Elk in Crescent City.

2018

- Del Norte Unified School District makes training on secondary trauma, restorative justice, and youth mental health first aid available to all staff.
- Del Norte Unified School District in partnership with the "Whose Schools? Our Schools!" group expands its family and community engagement process for gathering input for the Local Control Accountability Plan by hosting a series of input sessions in Smith River, Klamath, Crescent City, and through student focus groups.
- Health career employers join the E3 initiative to offer youth paid jobs while they earn high school credits.
- Del Norte County recreation department partners with local community theater companies to offer performing arts camps as part of their summer prevention and youth leadership recreation initiatives.
- The Wautec Meeting Hall restoration project is helping to build hope and reestablish a shared community space in a very isolated, remote reservation village that has no electricity, telephones, or nearby markets. The project, conducted in partnership with Yurok Tribe, is identified by residents as necessary after a state of emergency was declared when seven young Tribal members between 16-31 in this small upriver community of 150 people took their own lives in a span of 18 months.

2019

- Redwood Coast Transit Authority changes bus route to accommodate youth participants in Youth Training Academy at College of the Redwoods Del Norte.
- Youth with True North Organizing Network successfully organizes and wins an improved Anti-Bullying policy focused on equity with the Del Norte Unified School District Board.
- Del Norte Unified School District, BHC DNATL, and True North Organizing Network conduct collaborative LCAP community engagement meetings, engaging with 200 families, students, and community members about what they see as the highest needs for their students. The results are presented back to the DNUSD Cabinet and School Board to be included as they draft the 2019-2021 LCAP.

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