



CULTIVATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH TO FLOURISH IN FRANKLIN COUNTY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2020

A report by the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio
Supported by The Columbus Foundation



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The Children's Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

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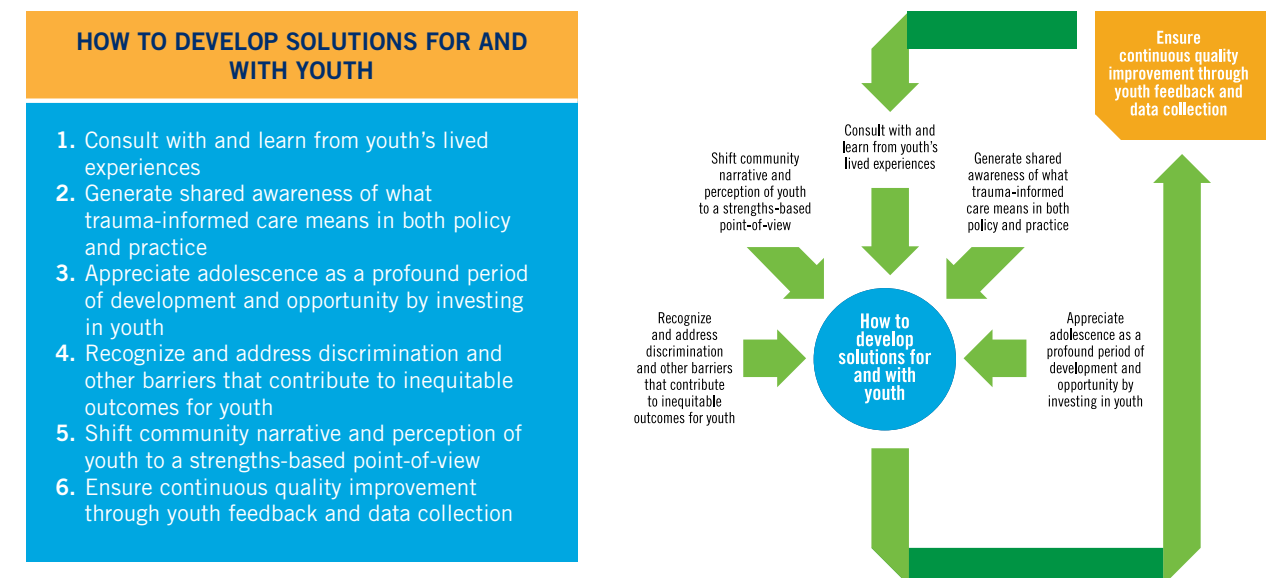
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every youth in Franklin County should have the opportunities they need to flourish. The Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-Ohio) partnered with The Columbus Foundation and the Opportunity Youth Steering Committee to examine the characteristics of our community's youth, the challenges they face, and recommendations for our community to support youth's transitions to adulthood.

Key Takeaways

- **Adolescence is a key time for our community to invest in our youth.** Unique changes in brain structure during adolescence make it an opportune time for learning and growth.
- **Discrimination and historical legacies of institutionalized racism continue to affect the accessibility of opportunities for youth in Franklin County.** Still, the designs of policies, programs, and practices do not address the circumstances of the youth who need them most.
- **Youth need policies, programs, and practices that are responsive to their life circumstances.** Significant training and resources have been invested in to elevate our community's awareness of trauma-informed care; however, youth report that this awareness must be translated into everyday practice.
- **Youth insights, perspectives, and lived experiences are integral to designing policies and programs aligned to their needs.** Franklin County has a rich ecosystem of programs, services, and resources and youth report the need for more integration of their perspectives and insights to improve offerings, delivery approaches, and outcomes.

This report emphasizes youth voice to fundamentally drive change and develop solutions to alter how youth are engaged and retained in services and programs. The following six steps are critical intermediate steps that must occur first in order to achieve the goals articulated from previous reports.



Opportunities for Intervention and Support

In previous reports and strategy documents from The Columbus Foundation and other organizations that work with Opportunity Youth, the outcomes or goals identified within the six focus areas—housing, health and wellness, education support systems, workforce, civic engagement—are valid and much needed in our community. Interventions to support our youth cannot focus on any single area of their needs in isolation. Youth voices and data demonstrate the need for support in all areas of wellbeing so that all youth can access opportunities they want for their futures.



HOUSING: Youth have equitable access to safe and decent shelter and housing

More than 3,000 Franklin County youth experience homelessness annually and an additional 1,400 youth are at imminent risk for homelessness.

“You cannot be successful if you do not know where you are going to sleep every night.”



HEALTH AND WELLNESS: Opportunity Youth have the tools to be and stay healthy

In Franklin County, 1 in 4 (24.2%) youth between the ages of 18–25 reported having mental health challenges in the past year.

“I wish caring adults knew that there are days when mental health is a struggle. I do suffer from depression, but it’s been better since I’ve come out, but there are still days when it’s hard to get out of bed, hard to have any initiative to do anything. It’s hard to even just eat.”



EDUCATION: All youth are supported and prepared to engage and navigate an ever-changing world

Between the 2010–2011 and 2016–2017 school years, 42,772 Franklin County students did not earn high school diplomas within 4 years of first entering 9th grade. These students are now likely between the ages of 18–24.

“I want to go back to school ... I want to go back to school to be a social worker, but I am scared of failure. I don’t want to feel like I wasted my time and my money.”



SUPPORT SYSTEMS: Our community ensures that all youth are connected, engaged, and supported

There are 40.3 per 1000 15–17 year-olds in Franklin County who are in foster care, which is nearly double the state rate. These youth are less likely to have support systems when they enter and navigate early adulthood.

“If you go to college and you don’t have a family, it can be difficult.”



WORKFORCE: Opportunity Youth will have meaningful and fulfilling career opportunities

In Franklin County, there are 15,000 (9.2%) youth between the ages of 16–24 not in school and not working. However, many more youth are in the workforce yet not earning living wages that meet their basic needs.

“It’s not fair,” said one young person in Franklin County, currently experiencing homelessness. “I make \$9 an hour, and I am still struggling.”



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: Opportunity Youth are actively engaged in our community

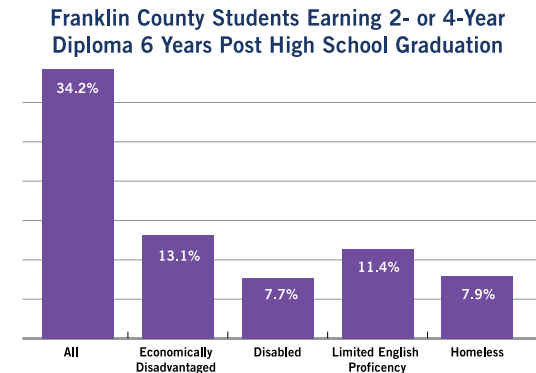
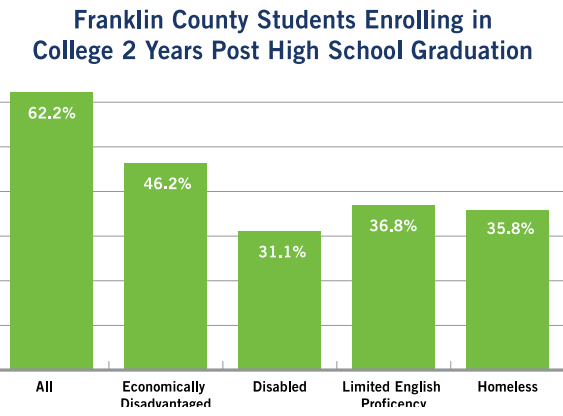
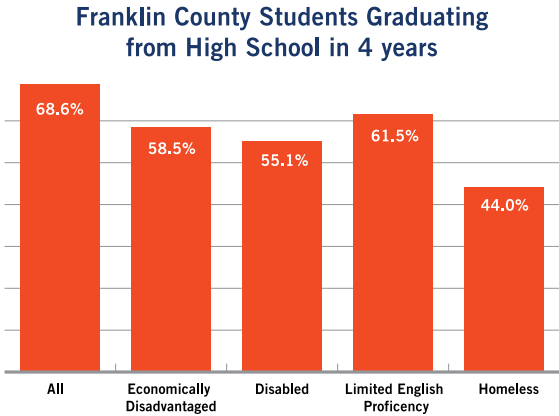
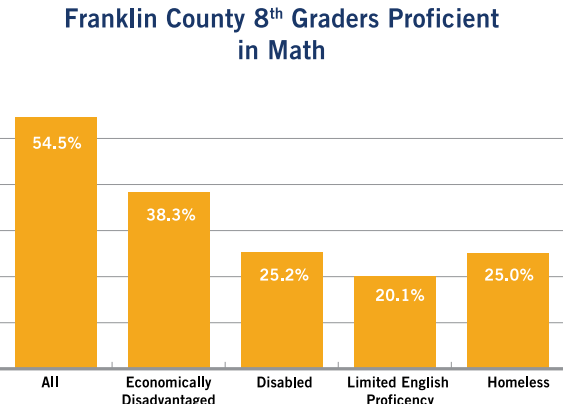
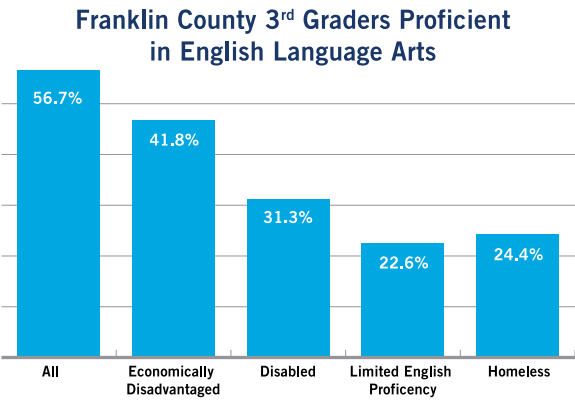
Youth shared with us their future goals, including being stable, professional, safe, nurturing as parents, healthy in their relationships, community leaders, and entrepreneurial.

“For me, in 10 years, I would like to run a LGBTQIA+ foster home.”

Our youth encounter significant barriers to opportunities—oftentimes at no fault of their own. Our youth experience disconnection because of:

- Poverty and concentrated poverty;
- Differences in ability;
- Out-of-home placement (foster care);
- Educational system inequities;
- Formal court involvement;
- Status as immigrants and challenges as new Americans;
- Homelessness;
- Mental health challenges;
- Pregnancy or parenting; and
- Enduring impacts of historically pervasive, intentionally discriminatory policies and actions that affect many youth based upon their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other factors.

Overall, data show that youth from these groups face many barriers to achieving key milestones.



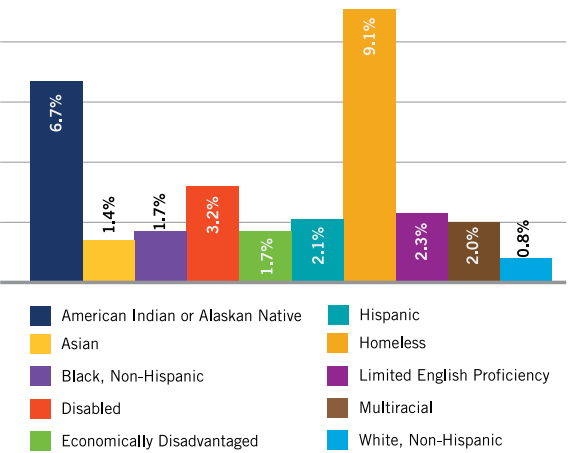
DATA NOTE: The third and eighth grade data are from the 2017–2018 academic year; the graduation data are from the 2016–2017 academic year; two years post- graduation data correspond to the 2015 graduating class; six years post-graduation data correspond to the 2011 graduating class.

Many policies, programs, and practices are not designed to respond to youth trauma and do not address lasting effects of racism and discrimination. These further distance already marginalized youth in our community from pathways to success:

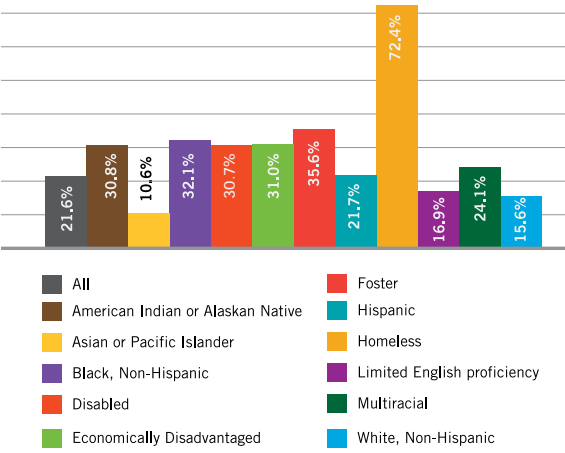
Current disciplinary policies and practices do not properly respond to behavior that arises due to youth trauma. In addition, national research suggests that youth of color face more and harsher disciplinary practices even though they do not commit more disciplinary infractions than their White peers.

Missing more than 10% of the school year, or chronic absenteeism, affects some students at higher rates than others. In 2017–2018, 72.4% of youth who were homeless were chronically absent from school compared to 21.6% of all youth in Franklin County and 16.0% of all youth in Ohio.

Students Receiving Out-of-School Suspensions in Franklin County



Students Chronically Absent from School in Franklin County



Youth insights and experiences are key to understanding how to create best practices for the future that address historical disparities and encompass the needs of all youth in our community.

Youth want to see more data that represent their lives and their needs:

CDF-Ohio asked youth what data they would like to see collected that share a fuller picture of their experiences.

- Data on how children in single-parent families take on responsibility for helping to provide for their families.
- Data that show how affordable college tuition and other costs of attending college are for economically disadvantaged students, even with Pell grants and financial aid.
- Data on children placed into the foster system because their parents are unable to support them or similar types of economic information.
- Data on access to services for youth who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community and are differently abled.
- Data on how well employers treat their employees and prospective employees who adhere to religious and cultural beliefs (e.g., wearing a hijab, fasting, etc.).

Developing Solutions to Help All Youth Thrive

1. Elevate youth voice to inform programs, policies, and practices.

By involving youth in the planning and decision-making for the services they need to grow and develop, program design and service delivery can be improved. Involving youth will also increase the likelihood that they will participate and stay engaged. Service providers, policymakers, and employers must build trust and engagement by listening to and responding to youth. This is essential because Opportunity Youth are often their only advocate and must take on adult responsibilities earlier than other youth.

2. Break down system and program silos to better meet youth’s comprehensive basic needs.

Youth seeking housing, nutrition, health, and education services must often navigate multiple organizations, processes, program rules, and eligibility criteria. Youth will benefit from funding initiatives that support and incentivize organizational collaboration that focuses on holding all entities accountable for holistic outcomes of youth.

3. Change the narrative about adolescence to ensure youth are viewed as community strengths.

Develop a shared understanding amongst stakeholders, funders, service providers, parents, and families about the profound brain development that occurs in adolescence so our community can focus on how best to support youth as they grow healthy and flourish.

4. Improve our understanding and treatment of youth mental health.

Many youth who encounter barriers to success have faced a multitude of traumatic events. The coping and survival strategies youth use to overcome traumatic situations may be inappropriate or disruptive in everyday circumstances. Every individual who makes decisions about or works directly with youth must understand these behaviors and create trauma-sensitive cultures and strategies to address them. As a result, youth will feel more welcome and engaged when seeking out and accessing programs and services, and will be better able to focus on acquiring the skills they need to flourish.

5. Ensure that programs serving youth are inclusive, individualized, and accommodate youth with different abilities.

All services and programs must accommodate differently abled youth, especially those with limited literacy or numeracy skills. Service providers and stakeholders have opportunities to redesign and rethink services and programs when taking youth voice and needs into consideration. Stronger program design with an equity lens allowing for more inclusivity will improve outcomes.

6. Help youth by helping their parents, families, and neighborhoods.

Youth live in families. Service providers and stakeholders can respond to and prevent trauma by building on the strengths of youth and their families to ensure our neighborhoods are safe, healthy, and thriving places to call home.

7. Consider and address discrimination and other disparate actions that affect youth as they transition through school and into the workforce.

Many policies in our communities were built upon legacies that disproportionately harmed groups of individuals based on race, ethnicity, economic status, religion, gender identification, sexual preference, and ability. Data on school discipline, chronic absenteeism, high school graduation, and juvenile justice involvement represent an opportunity to reconsider and redesign programs, policies, and practices with an equity lens to close opportunity gaps, support youth, and improve their life outcomes.



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We all have a role to play in making sure our youth enter adulthood prepared to pursue opportunities to live well. It begins with treating youth as valued community assets.