

Minnesota Alliance with Youth: Reflections and Analysis of the Journey

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In April of 1997 Minnesota sent a state delegation and several community delegations to the President's Summit for America's Future in Philadelphia. The experience challenged those present to re-think, re-focus, and renew their efforts on behalf of youth. The Summit, and the subsequent organization of *America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth*, sought to create ways to ensure that all youth would have access to five resources critical to their development—caring adults, safe places to learn and grow, a healthy start, marketable skills, and an opportunity to contribute through service—worthy and laudable goals that are widely desired but seldom fully realized in communities in this country. This article reflects on the experiences of the *Minnesota Alliance with Youth* since 1997 as it sought to advance this movement in the state of Minnesota.

The Vision of the Minnesota Alliance

Early on, the Alliance created a vision of how it would operate during its lifetime to advance the five resources youth need. That vision, shown below, is made up of statements about how it will organize and some non-negotiables that would drive its work.

The Alliance . . .

- Will transition in three years
- Will have a small infrastructure to allow for fluid movements
- Will be volunteer driven
- Will be totally inclusive
- Will be based on a diffused leadership model

While the Alliance will be flexible and fluid in many ways, the following are non-negotiables when it comes to the efforts of the Alliance:

- Youth leadership
- Partnership driven
- Honoring what communities are already doing

It must be noted that this vision is *not about what* the Alliance would do for youth or even with youth—unlike many visions that emerged out of the President's Summit. Rather *it is about how* the Alliance would operate together. Youth and adults alike commented on how “powerful” and “brilliant” this vision was. Furthermore, it became clear in our analysis that what emerges from the voices of those we interviewed is how each lived out the vision and how successes of the Alliance can be directly traced back to what became a truly shared vision. The focus of their

vision is especially noteworthy. The Alliance in many ways simply accepted the vision of what youth needed by way of the five resources (and their compatibility with the Search Institute set of 40 assets that were already widely known and used in communities). It recognized that while there were and are differences between communities and frameworks about what youth need, the real issues were about how individuals, organizations, sectors, and communities could work together. In short, the Alliance recognized the first essential principle in this type of community mobilization work—*not consuming a community's or an alliance's energy trying to reach agreement about what youth need (which are readily known strengths/assets based on research and common sense) but focusing on how they can work together to create those conditions.* This principle is

particularly important to remember for alliances and collaborations that operate at a level far removed from where real children and youth live due to the size of the population (e.g., major city or metropolitan efforts) or the scope of the geography (e.g., statewide efforts).

Signature Successes

Over the last four years the Alliance has had a series of what our analyses reveal as critical successes that are widely recognized by the participants and others in the community, including authentic youth engagement, authentic partner engagement, and engaged communities.

Authentic Youth Engagement

First and foremost among these successes has been *the ability of the Alliance early on and*

Photo by Don Breneman





Youth in the Minnesota Alliance were responsible for planning the Five Days of Promise at the Minnesota State Fair.

consistently to engage WITH youth, not FOR youth. The change in language, the openness of the staff to working with youth, the creation of an office that was run by youth and a place youth felt was theirs, the role and presence of young Promise Fellows, and the provision of meaningful roles in leadership by having youth actively (not ceremoniously) co-chair everything brought this part of the vision to life. Many interviewed not only saw this as the

biggest success but also saw youth engagement as the key to all their other successes. The youth we interviewed were emphatic about their support for the Alliance. Both youth and adults commented on the authentic nature of the peer-to-peer and youth-adult partnerships—they were real and more concrete than anything else these folks had experienced. There was open recognition that the youth had shaped the work of the Alliance as much as the adults. Maya Babu, a youth co-chair of the Alliance, said, “The Alliance sees us as true equals, true leaders. We take on decision-making roles and represent the organization in public.”

Perhaps equally important was the fact that nothing was hidden from the youth—they saw “the good, the bad and the ugly” of how organizations and collaborations work. Many youth noted they learned their best lessons by watching adults and youth deal with real world stresses. There was also recognition that one cannot ignore the roles of adults in successful youth engagement efforts. As the current Lt.

Governor and Alliance Co-Chair Mae Schunk noted, youth-adult partnerships worked so well with the Alliance because “there were adults who were willing to fail or succeed with youth.” Julie Burke, an AmeriCorps Promise Fellow, said that for success “it means changing schedules, meeting them (youth) where they are, shifts in thinking, being part of their lives outside of the Alliance.” A key to the Alliance’s success in this area was the role Donna Gillen played as the central Alliance staff person. She worked to ensure youth-friendly times and places for meetings, picked youth up and drove them to where they needed to be, met with them outside the Alliance office “just to chat,” worked to prepare youth for their roles in meetings, workshops, and celebrations. But perhaps most importantly according to Donna, she processed with youth *every* experience they had with the Alliance. She also helped others recognize that youth are busy and need opportunities that are not unreasonable or overburdening. This leads to a second essential principle, *youth engagement cannot just be left to each partner as their separate responsibility but must always be at the core of the collective effort.*

Also noteworthy in the success in engaging youth was the presence of *both* youth-adult partnerships around leadership of the Alliance and the emergence of a youth task force that had youth representatives from Communities of Promise around the state. The youth task force assumed and was given real and full responsibility for important tasks such as planning the Five Days of Promise events at the State Fair. As another example, the youth task force played a key role in planning for the transition away from a staffed Alliance organization. The youth task force evaluated and either accepted or rejected the plans submitted by different organizations to play specific roles after the transition. Furthermore, the decisions by the youth were respected and are being implemented.

Authentic Partner Engagement

A second signature success has been *the extent to which “the partners are the Alliance.”* The Alliance did not exist outside the partners and thus, it was only as successful as how well the partners worked together. As Becky Jarvis, former youth co-chair of the Alliance noted, “The Alliance got people to the table who are committed, rather than because they had money, or because of who they are.” There was surprising agreement about the characteristics of these partners and the individuals who represented the partners. In particular, they were passionate about youth issues, brought high levels of energy and commitment, were able to be flexible, not overly ego-involved, and learned to go beyond territorial boundaries. Paula Beugen, the representative of Avodah B’Yachad—Service Together—Jewish Community Relations Council, summarized it well when she said, “We were able to retain our own organizational identity while working with the Alliance. Our identity was strengthened, but at the same time, we were building a collective identity of the Alliance.” This was not easy. As someone once noted, “collaboration is an unnatural act between non-consenting adults.” Time was critical to getting to success—time to trust the movement and other partners, time to understand each other and become comfortable with different personalities and organizational traditions. Also critical was the availability of multiple projects, workshops, summits, and events that people could jump into with various levels of involvement—from light to intensive to full bore. This highlights a third essential principle of success— *keeping the balance of action and planning deliberately adjusted to the mix of players you have at the table.* Too much planning can kill even the best-intentioned efforts and even the best plan cannot succeed without adequate action. A collective identity emerged for the Alliance not from efforts to develop a comprehensive plan

but from working together on multiple projects often in a more chaotic rather than planned fashion. The activities forced the collaboration, and while this was at times uncomfortable and even less than fully successful for specific activities, it worked well in developing a shared commitment and willingness to do and not just talk about things. Part of recognizing how to adjust this balance of action and planning is understanding the

Organizational Partners Found Innovative Ways to Participate

Dave Ellis from the Department of Corrections (DOC) provides a good example of how flexibility in participation kept his organization connected. Initially, his organization gave money but other than that was not involved in major projects or activities. However, he continued to attend meetings as a steering committee member and tried to figure out how the DOC could be more involved.

This year, an opportunity arose for the DOC to become more involved. When the Alliance needed a place to keep the house being built at the State Fair, the DOC offered to put it on the grounds of one of their correctional facilities and also agreed to help with various stages in the house production.

Ellis noted that not only did the Alliance benefit, but the residents at these facilities also benefited from a chance to “give back” to the community.

Since then, the correctional facility has become a Community of Promise and is working with staff and residents to put on a Day of Peace for all 180 male residents (ages 17-19). They are also working on a network to connect young men leaving the facility to the Five Promises in their home communities.

Communities Experience Success Through Their Own Efforts

Lynn Haglin, a point of contact for the Duluth Community of Promise, discussed a success story from their community.

The Duluth Community of Promise held a summit to explore key barriers for youth opportunities. At the summit, transportation emerged as a major barrier. Partnering with the Duluth Transit Authority, they mapped youth transportation needs. They also conducted a survey of 1,000 youth and 200 adults regarding access issues and transportation needs. With the results in hand, they began a youth rider campaign.

Through the efforts of 80 youth, they got the transit authority to lower rates for youth and give youth a summer pass for \$30; pulled together a color riding guide; developed logos; got parents involved; and partnered with bowling alleys, food places, arcade places, and other businesses that provided reduced or free things for youth who rode buses to their establishments. As a result they were able to increase ridership of youth by 300% and had over 1,500 youth riding buses.

readiness of different partners and using the readiness of some to start and implement activities that will help increase the readiness of others (rather than exclude them from the partnership).

Another effective strategy supporting partner engagement was the way in which partnering organizations could be and were involved in the Steering Committee and offered opportunities for leadership on subcommittees. These roles, according to those we interviewed, were both empowering and gave them a sense of ownership for the Alliance. There were always events or activities on the burner. If one did not play to your organizations' strengths, perhaps another did. If one had people you didn't

want to work with, perhaps another offered an opportunity to work with a friend or make a relationship with someone you felt could help you or your organization. The Alliance also worked to ensure that no one force dominated. This illustrates a fourth essential principle—*providing multiple opportunities for involvement with flexibility on what is needed, how people can contribute, who leads, and who is involved so that even self-centered choices help build the collective effort and thus create a win-win situation for all those involved.*

The Minnesota Alliance, the Corporation for National Service, and America's Promise (more broadly) also used a strategy of sharing AmeriCorps Promise Fellows deliberately and effectively. Promise Fellows were engaged both in efforts within their partner organizations and also in linking their work with the efforts of the collective. Thus, these fellows were able to advance the collective movement as well as bring perspectives and approaches from that effort and their contact with other fellows to their work inside of their partner organization. All these efforts, both within their organization and as part of the Alliance, were focused on the five resources youth need to succeed.

Interestingly, these strong, engaged partnerships also created a freedom from the Alliance. As Kristie Probst from Search Institute observed, "Organizations know each other better, work together, and share resources—all without having to have the Alliance continue to act as an intermediary." The true test of success here will come as the Alliance transitions to the next phase which is not independently staffed but rather the sum of Alliance members contributions to shared leadership. It is clear that the staff, and specifically Donna Gillen, were initially critical to nurturing relationships with, and ironing out difficulties between, partners.

Finally, the partners in the Alliance widely agreed they were better off after being a part of

the Alliance movement than they had been before. Some of the benefit was personal, some professional, and some organizational. In fact, the scope of how people and partners benefited was impressive. Communications, new relationships with other organizations, and help in transforming their organization were all included as outcomes of participation.

Engaged Communities

A third signature success was *the number and diversity of communities that became, and are still becoming, engaged in the “promise movement” in Minnesota*. Over 110 communities across Minnesota have become engaged in some way and more are doing so even as the Alliance prepares for a major transition this summer. In many cases these communities have each accomplished major outcomes such as building youth community centers, getting more parent volunteers, holding cultural days to celebrate diversity, addressing transportation issues, engaging youth in trouble with the law, creating community youth resource directories, starting youth newspapers, holding asset fairs, and helping businesses and organizations to think more intentionally about what they are doing with youth. It was important for communities to experience success by their own efforts, not by Alliance facilitation.

Communities that shared success stories had several things in common. First, their points of contact shared the qualities noted earlier for partners—passion for youth issues, energetic and active participation based on a strengths approach, and already being an integral part of youth efforts in their community. Second, these communities were high on a readiness scale due to the number and types of youth efforts already going on (e.g., Search Institute-related Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth asset-building initiatives or Character Counts efforts). The

Alliance became a way to get to a new level, find a burst of new energy, or connect to a larger purpose that was consistent with what was already started. Third, a network between communities was already evolving and they could see the benefits of becoming connected to a larger state and national effort—especially one that stimulated peer-to-peer and community-to-community sharing which so many of the Alliance summits and events were geared toward. Finally, most community efforts were based in small towns or cities or in small neighborhoods within larger cities where success was easier to see and experience.

“We were able to retain our own organizational identity while working with the Alliance. Our identity was strengthened, but at the same time, we were building a collective identity of the Alliance.”

— Paula Beugen, Avodah B’Yachad

Important to the success of these factors is the non-negotiable part of the shared vision noted above which said that the Alliance will honor what communities are already doing. This meant communities did not have to restructure and could “just join” the Alliance. Central to this was the basic compatibility between the Five Promises and the 40-asset framework as well as the greater simplicity and immediacy of the Five Promises. This simplicity helped address some of the difficulties communities were having with the breadth and complexity of the 40-asset model without giving up on its richness.

Another factor was the ability of the Alliance to bring small but significant amounts of resources to the table. Small grant opportunities, local events communities could participate

in, and the ability to leverage resources through participation all helped.

Last, but certainly not least, the Alliance modeled authentic youth engagement at a time when many communities were struggling to do it. The Alliance helped communities address a highly valued but hard to implement part of a positive youth development approach—namely to engage youth in authentic, meaningful ways. As Kerry Stone from Bloomington’s Community of Promise effort notes “we have had on-going youth efforts for a long time, traditionally, the adults tended to lead and either tried to fix things in young people or organize them. . . . [T]he power and growth that comes from young people being the leaders and planners in their community is something that the Alliance has done particularly well . . . and they sock me between the eyes with it regularly.” Thus, the centrality of youth engagement to the Alliance also gave it something of great value to offer communities. Not coincidentally, the Alliance also brought new models for partner engagement that, while less visible, were also helpful.

In short, the Alliance-community connection was a win-win partnership for everyone—and one that communities felt they were able to get more out of than they had to put in. Communities feel they will likely continue to use the promises as a rallying point. These factors can be summed up as a fifth essential principle—*collaborative efforts and alliances geared to community mobilization must offer both simplicity and value above and beyond the costs of participation as well as offering leadership that gives away rather than concentrates power*. In some ways and in some places, this may be one reason the Promise effort has helped take asset work in Healthy Community, Healthy Youth sites to new levels.

Lessons to Be Learned

While the efforts of the Alliance in Minnesota were widely agreed to be a success by those

we interviewed, there were at least three areas where the Alliance has lessons to be learned.

The first of these has to do with the level of staffing or, more accurately, the chronic levels of understaffing that persisted throughout the last four years. The Alliance’s efforts simply would not have been possible without exceptional efforts and time commitments by Donna Gillen, key partners, the Promise Fellows, and the youth. The level of chaos that was encouraged by the high level of activities at times came close to being something that would have led to failure rather than success. A transition in the staffing pattern will occur as the Alliance shifts to a non-independently staffed Alliance where partners donate staff time. Thus, it is fair to say that how to best staff alliances and community mobilization efforts for the long term is less than clear. However, the importance of the type, nature, enthusiasm, and flexibility of such staff and alliance leadership is abundantly clear.

A second serious area of concern has to do with engaging youth and adults who come from different cultures, live in highly at-risk environments, or lack even minimal asset levels to be likely to participate. While there were individual signs of success at times in the Alliance’s efforts, the overall focus on and ability to be successful with diverse audiences, communities of color, and youth at risk is lower than needed for ultimate success. In short, some of the very factors such as high mobility, distrust of others who are different, community disintegration, and the majority’s lack of understanding of cultural, racial, and ethnic traditions continue to be significant barriers to effectively mobilizing community efforts on behalf of all youth. Success for all youth remains a key objective for the Alliance both locally and nationally but renewed efforts will be needed to build upon the limited successes to date. Indeed, the Alliance, given its success in engaging youth, part-

ners, and communities, is feeling more prepared to make deeper commitments in this direction. For example, a juvenile facility is becoming a Community of Promise supported by several partners.

A third concern is the need for stronger and more appropriate evaluations of both community mobilization efforts around youth development and the impact of such efforts on individual children and youth. We need a more sophisticated model of community youth development's role and the contributions and impact of specific organizational and programmatic efforts if we are to better understand and shape the next generation of efforts. This will likely mean continuing to move away from a medical model to one based on the daily diet of developmentally enhancing experiences youth have and how such diets can be explicitly enriched for all youth in a community.

Final Reflections

The Minnesota Alliance with Youth is entering a new phase in the summer of 2001. It will be transitioning from a staffed partnership of many organizations to an unstaffed alliance of lead partners with designated roles and many members. Based on the journey thus far and the lessons learned, we offer the following final reflections.

First, remember that the promise effort is a movement, not a program. It exists to be a catalyst for change and an advocate with youth. It cannot be managed, but must be led. It is not designed to deeply impact large numbers of youth, but rather to influence and assist large numbers of organizations and communities to improve the way they work with and impact children and youth.

Second, the leadership of the Alliance, whether staff or partner organizations, must recognize and utilize the five essential principles

that have led to earlier success. This means focusing on:

- working together, not fighting about what youth need,
- keeping authentic youth engagement central to collective efforts,
- keeping the balance of action and planning right for the stakeholders involved or needed,
- providing multiple opportunities for involvement that meet self-interest goals as well as advance the collective cause, and
- offering simplicity and value to community and partner efforts.

To these we would now add a sixth essential principle—*monitor the alignment of expectations, goals, and outcomes so that one is not emphasized at the cost of the others*. Movements that claim impossible outcomes are likely to soon lose energy and momentum. Expectations that exceed by too much the realistic goals of a movement lead to frustration and can undermine efforts. Balancing these as the movement grows becomes an important function of leadership.

The Alliance must remain connected to larger efforts to build the five resources into every youth's life. Its strength lies in mobilizing people around a simple, focused strengths-oriented approach that has credibility and can earn commitments.

Finally, deliberately work to overcome obstacles that limit the reach and scope of the Alliance work with the diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural groups in Minnesota. In essence, the Alliance must work hard to connect all Minnesota communities to the Five Promises.