

Create, Connect, Catalyze: YouthReach in FY23

YouthReach is the longest continually running support program for Creative Youth Development (CYD) work in the United States. Founded in 1994, the program has invested more than \$15 million across more than 100 organizations in its 29-year history. In FY24 the program will continue to extend funding to 85 Creative Youth Development programs focused on infusing youth development with creative experiences in the arts, humanities, and interpretive sciences. YouthReach funds primarily out of school time programs with a small cohort of in-school music programs.

This report describes the challenges and success that YouthReach organizations faced between July 1, 2022, and June 30, 2023, and the hopes they have for the coming year. **85 organizations** reported from across the Commonwealth representing a wide range of ages, disciplines, and environments.

YouthReach Participant Demographic Information

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on youth participation in Creative Youth Development programs, and in youth arts programs more broadly. An historical overview of the youth involved with Creative Youth Development programs in Massachusetts includes:

- # of youth served in FY21 (72 organizations reporting): **8,072**
- # of youth served in FY22 (69 organizations reporting): **8,780**
- # of youth served in FY23 (85 organizations reporting): **11,892**

In FY21, seventy-two programs reported a total of 8,072 youth participants, which was down over 20% from the year prior to the pandemic. Those numbers rebounded in FY22 with sixty-nine organizations reporting 8,780 youth participants, an increase of nearly 10% despite fewer programs reporting data.

In FY23, the number of youth participants rebounded past pre-pandemic levels to 11,892 youth participants with 85 programs. As mentioned prior, FY23 saw an influx of new programs as we began a new three-year grant cycle.

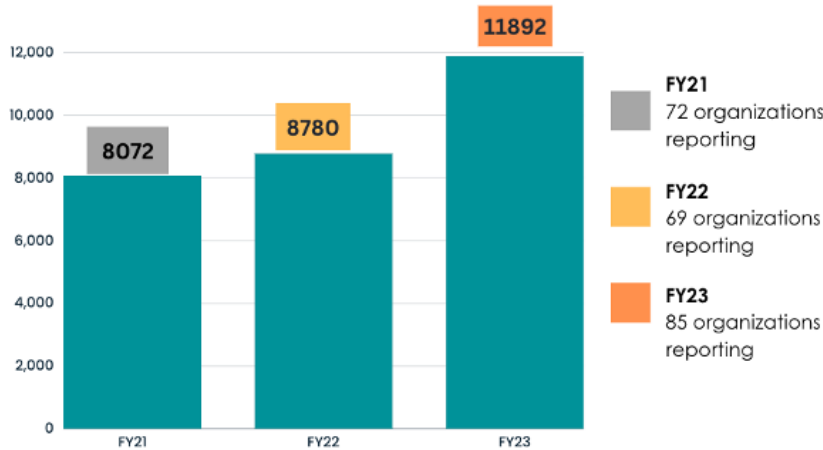
The average of the total number of young people across organizations increased from 112 per organization in FY21 to 138 young people in FY23.

The detailed breakdown for FY23 for our 85 organizations: 48% work with 6-50 young people. 27% work with 51-100 young people. 20% work with 101-500 young people. 5% work with 501-1506 young people.

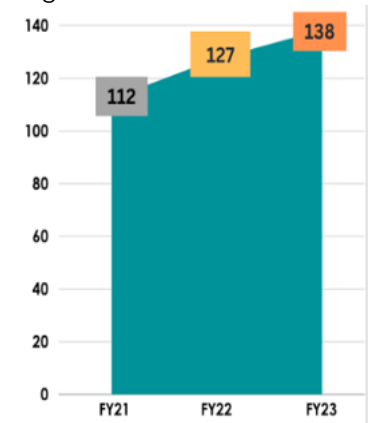
73% of the 85 organizations conducted activities at a location other than the grantee's address. 27% provided programming only at their location.

The 11,892 youth participants represent a broad range of young people in terms of gender and ethnicity, in addition to involvement with other state government services.

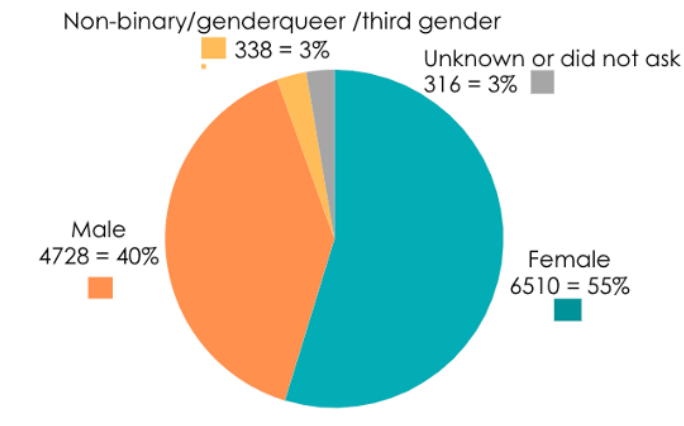
NUMBER OF YOUNG PEOPLE



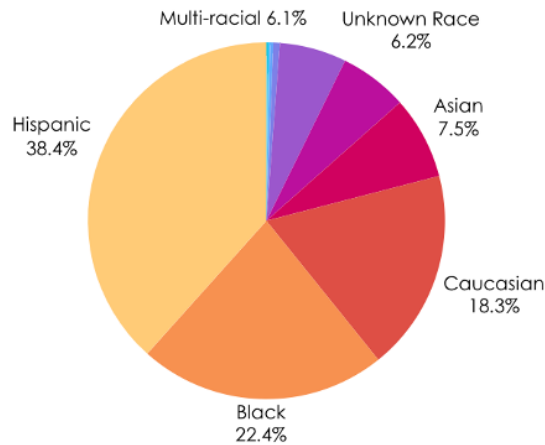
The average total number of young people per organization also increased.



GENDER

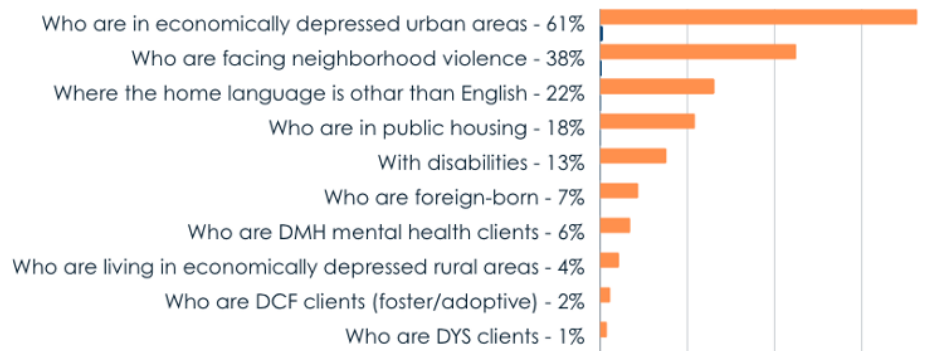


RACE and ETHNICITY



Other Aspects of the CYD Population

% OF CYD YOUNG PEOPLE ...



Seniors and Alums of CYD

- 806 high school seniors participated in CYD programs. (7% of total young people)
- 45% of CYD organizations have programs that have a formal process offering support graduates and another 36% offer some support.
- ~100% graduated high school.
- 80% of seniors have plans to attend college or a technical school next year.
- 2% of seniors are entering the military.

Overview of FY23 Narrative Findings (based on 85 reports)

Needs and Risk Factors

Organizations spoke to a wide net of interlocking needs that were amplified by the effects of the pandemic. The Community Art Center wrote of these wide-reaching needs:

"The Art Center's Port Family Advocate has been busy connecting families to resources in order to assist with rent assistance; negotiating utilities that are in arrears; job placement; emergency funds for basic needs like strollers, diapers, and clothing. Families are often frustrated that agencies they rely upon are frequently understaffed, and following-up with people can be difficult. All of these household stressors have led to heightened anxiety and depression among youth. We are witnessing more disassociation and more limited social engagement among young people."

In an effort to snapshot the evolving challenges facing Creative Youth Development programs at the end of FY23 (June 30, 2023), all 85 funded organizations were asked, "**What did your organization see that you were compelled to better understand and address?** Please check the top four needs and comment on what you have witnessed.

Of 85 organization reporting **the greatest issues** that their organization needed to take time to address this year:

1. **86% - Mental Health**
2. **59% - Recruitment**
3. **52% - Transportation**
4. **34% - Food Insecurity**
5. 33%, Staff retention
6. 26%, Technology
7. 24%, Housing Insecurity

Organizations went deeper by specifically commenting on the overlapping challenges with:

- The mental health and public health crisis
- Lack of accessible transportation and recruitment
- Food insecurity/financial instability and families in stress
- Homelessness/gentrification
- Racial Injustices and inequalities in gender
- Barriers in education
- Bullying, Violence and Drugs

- Stress from environmental injustice and climate change.

As trusted community partners, many organizations were faced with continually addressing these multiple interlocking needs for social services, community resources, and help in advocacy.

Mental Health

*“COVID-19 has exacted such a **mental health toll**. We have worked with young people who have experienced trauma and/or are struggling with their mental health for well over a decade, but the pandemic was a curveball that changed the landscape in ways that we are still learning and navigating. We have seen increased social anxiety and panic attacks; increased addiction to social media; and increased evidence of depression (including self-harm) in the teenagers with whom we work.” - Actors' Shakespeare Project*

According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#), more than a third of U.S. high school students reported they have experienced poor mental health during the pandemic and nearly half reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year. Nationally, 70% of public schools saw an increase of students seeking mental health services since the start of the pandemic.

Our CYD programs in Massachusetts also clearly spoke to this mental health crisis. **86% of YouthReach programs** identified Mental Health **at the top of the four greatest issues** that their organization needed to take time to address this year. Many noted an increase in stress levels for young people especially as they struggled with feeling overwhelmed with anxiety, depression, isolation and bullying. As one organization specified, *“Isolation during COVID created many issues for our youth, including a lack of self-confidence, poor grades, inability to concentrate, and phobias relating to unmasking.”*

In FY20, YouthReach recipients began to speak on the importance of addressing mental health in their programs and in the FY21 YouthReach final reports, **89%** of CYD organizations in MA clearly reported about their efforts to significantly address [mental health](#) needs among their young people.

Although organizations have been sounding this alarm for the past three years, organizations increasingly responded to mental health needs in FY23 by forming partnerships to support young people, and to support and train staff so that they could create stronger programs to meet these needs. Examples include:

- *“BSA has partnered with Gardner Pilot Academy and Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center to offer mental, physical and social supports for youth and families to address barriers beyond our capacity. This collaboration ensures a holistic and intentional approach to our youth development practices.” – Boston String Academy*

- *“Per The Trevor Project’s survey, they reported nearly 1 in 3 LGBTQ young people said their mental health was poor due to anti-LGBTQ policies and legislation. At TTO, we are seeing a direct connection between the increase in hate on the national scale and the decline of mental wellness amongst QTPOC youth...Since our staff are not trained mental health counselors, we hired a drama arts therapist to come in and work with our full ensemble of youth. They focused on how to process these emotions in a healthy way through the creation of art. This led to us establishing a workshop centered on this exact work that is now built into our curriculum, so all youth who go through our program are provided with these tools for healing.” – The Theater Offensive*

Often the challenges of mental health, recruitment, and retention came as a package. Many noted that retaining staff had been difficult because staff who support young people often have increasingly found that they themselves need support. This pressure, along with other life factors, resulted in staff members choosing to leave their positions. They also noted that while their staff are all *“loving, compassionate mentors”* who work hard to connect youth and families with resources, they admitted to feeling, *“ill-equipped”* at times, in trying to work with the level of needs coming from young people. One organization noted, *“We are not mental health professionals, and are under-resourced to provide the amount of support required.”*

They spoke of the long-standing nature of the mental health crisis and to the fear that they have not yet seen the full ramifications of students losing so much in-person time during critical development ages.

Because of this, many reported on their need to hire licensed therapists, directly partner with mental health agencies, and/or find additional training and funding for staff to be educated further in trauma-informed care.

Organizations hired more staff specializing in mental health to meet the greater demand:

- *“We have been fortunate to have a full-time staff member dedicated to monitoring the social-emotional wellbeing of all youth, and we have seen the demand for this type of targeted support triple from FY22 to FY23.” – Hyde Square Task Force*
- *“We hired a social worker to help support the girls’ mental health and to work with staff so they can also support the girls. Our social worker has made difference for some of our members who were on the path to failing school and possibly dropping out.” – Girls Inc. of Lynn*
- *“As a result of the high level of need in the Mental Health area, our school has increased the number of staff to address these problems. We now have a Social Worker, a School Psychologist, two Guidance Counselors and two student counselors - one from Home for Little Wanderers and one from City Connects at Boston College. We also have Crew or Guidance three times a*

week to address some of the Social Emotional concerns of the students.” – Margarita Muñiz Academy

- “We have seen an increase in mental health challenges among our student population, and have added one additional full-time social worker to our staff - to bring the total to three full-time social workers - in order to provide more social-emotional support to our students.” – Boston Bridge Charter School
- “Having an in-house mental health counselor dedicated to the program means students can access mental health services while at MassArt during Artward Bound so that they do not need to take time elsewhere to receive the counseling and support they need.” – MassArt Artward Bound

Organizations implemented trainings that were delivered or collaboratively designed by mental health agencies, for both staff and young people.

- “In response to the mental health struggles expressed by the youth, we enlisted the expertise of professionals and experts ...We conducted workshops and sessions on self-advocacy and wellness, equipping young individuals with practical tools to navigate their mental health challenges.” – Boch Center
- “In 2023 nearly half of PYD youth reported having a mental health challenge, an increase of more than 10 percent from two years prior...PYD staff participated in three professional development trainings in the past fiscal year to support youth with potential mental health challenges: Question, Persuade, Refer training by The NAN Project, Youth Mental Health First Aid training from the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, and The Intersection of Disability & Trauma training.” – Partners for Youth with Disabilities (PYD)
- “We implement the wraparound model of behavioral health for all those we serve. With BRL, a program designed by social workers, led day-to-day by clinicians and behavioral health staff, mental health is a daily focus. We use hip-hop to break down stigma and engage young people and continue support mental health through other resources.” – Children’s Services of Roxbury (Beats, Rhymes, and Life)

Environmental factors have increased stress and have had developmental consequences.

- “Chelsea and East Boston are home to a myriad of environmental burdens which impact resident’s health extensively. In addition to these vulnerabilities, the neighborhood violence imposes a heavy toll on the mental well-being of the youth. Consequently, rates of anxiety, depression and other psychological issues soar among the youth. Constant exposure to the neighborhood/targeted violence creates a climate of fear and makes it difficult for young individuals to feel safe and secure. As a result, their academic focus is disrupted and social interactions are impeded. Recognizing the importance of specialized guidance, GreenRoots collaborates with a licensed social worker consultant to create a more

trauma informed program and ensure it caters the specific needs of those affected.” – GreenRoots

Other organizations responded by creating special programs to attend to the mental health needs of young people and spoke of their success. At the Community Music School of Springfield (CMSS), they saw the need for a “broader and deeper resiliency- informed, trauma-responsive community initiative.” Graduates of the Sonido Music Program struggled with mental health after leaving the program, because support systems from their high school years became more difficult to access after graduation. CMSS developed the “Bridge Leaders Program”, designed to specifically support BIPOC students ages 17-25 transitioning into adulthood and in need of resources. “Bridge Builders: Pathways to Healing through the Arts” utilizes a two-generational collaborative trauma responsive approach to promote a greater sense of belonging and healthier peer, family and community relationships for all participants to experience the performing arts as a pathway to healing.

The Conservatory Lab Charter School aimed to mitigate social isolation by prioritizing mental health and treating it as integral to education as academic skills.

“Every student participates in social-emotional learning programs called CREW throughout the week. Students in need of greater support meet regularly with specialists. Counselors have created new wellness resources, expanded hours, and increased coordination with wraparound services.”

Chelsea Collaborative spoke clearly about the success of these new programs when they wrote about the participation and impact:

“Our youth programs work with, on average 200 youth each year. This past year marked our first-time providing youth centered mental health supports through group and one-on-one sessions. These were offered to our youth in our year-round youth employment programs. One hundred and nine youth participated in weekly group sessions led by members of our MSW staff...A post survey found that 71.4% of the youth who attended weekly group sessions felt their mental health had improved.”

Many noted that strengthening direct partnerships with Community Health Centers and hospitals helped them attend to the mental health needs of their young people and staff:

- *“RAW is near the end of a two-year pilot with Lynn Community Health Center (LCHC) through which a counselor from LCHC provides 12 hours of 1:1 counseling services in the RAW building. This has been an excellent resource for RAW youth and we are looking for ways to expand the program at the end of the pilot and going forward. We hope to increase the hours of available counseling services, but the major barrier is availability of trained counselors.” – Raw Art Works*

- *“Mental health support is one of the most prevalent needs amongst the youth that participate in IBA’s Youth Development Program (YDP). Many of the youth that YDP serves struggle with mental health challenges and have expressed interest in receiving counseling services. To address this need, YDP has partnered with Boston Community Pediatrics to provide workshops surrounding mental health and health advocacy.” – Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA)*



*The Performance Project,
Photographer: Ed Cohen, 2022,
First Generation Ensemble
members Entsar "Star"
Abdelrahman and Montaser
Abdelrahman, performing
"Fatima's Story" from Mother
Tongue.*

Recruitment and Retention

In addition to mental health, CYD organizations reported on three common scenarios for recruitment issues.

1. Young people needed to financially support struggling families.
2. Young people were over-committed with many competing activities.
3. Young people were overwhelmed, apathetic and did not want to engage, except through social media, video games, and screens. Also noted was “teacher burnout” that often resulted from the increased demands, the mental health challenges in students, and the effects of the retention and recruitment issues.

Furthermore, the longevity of the COVID pandemic created both great challenges and opportunities for staff and young people to change locations, interests, jobs, and connections. Some organizations found that the disruption of classes during the pandemic led to a disruption in young people’s interest in their program. Others spoke of the additional challenge of recruiting and retaining employees, staff and volunteers.

- *“COVID had a significant impact on our membership, resulting in a 50% reduction.” – Boston City Singers*
- *“AFH has been experiencing challenges with teen recruitment, retention, and attendance. Our studios are seeing truancy rates of 20-25% on average*

recently, and recruitment staff struggle to fill teen job positions in a timely manner when youth leave.” – Artists for Humanity (AFH)

- “With a retention rate of 70%, we consistently need to fill 30% of our staff on an annual basis. In an ‘applicant’s market’, we have seen salary expectations that were \$10,000 over our recently revised salary scales. These issues resulted in vacancies that remained well into the start of the school year and general understaffing throughout.” – Bridge Boston Charter School
- “Volunteers no longer commute for work at the rates they used to, and people everywhere are using a different calculus to assess risk and effort when it comes to leaving the house or gathering in groups. This mismatch requires our organization to think creatively about volunteer recruitment and community engagement.” - 826 Boston

Some organizations delayed their start dates and hired staff or employed strategies to directly attend to the issues of recruitment and retention. Organizations prioritized dedicating more staff hours to in-person recruitment efforts and leveraging partnerships with teachers/schools. In supported of greater retention, organizations prioritized hiring staff who spoke Spanish, to work on building a more diverse staff to better align with the demographics of the young people and their communities. Placing a focus on the process, outreach, and networking, along with collecting stronger attendance data and providing clarity around expectations, also helped organizations better design programming to match needs of their communities.

To further address outreach challenges, organizations needed to “harness effective social media strategies” to better engage more youth and expand their reach beyond traditional channels. Others mentioned that involving youth in program outreach and design greatly helped their recruitment process.



Flying Cloud Institute, Photographer: Maria Rundle, 2022, Crosby students working with Flying Cloud Institute investigate pH chemistry to support a healthy environment.

Increasing stipends, adjusting requirements, and offering greater collaborations with other organizations to build a more robust youth community also proved helpful. To further retain staff, some organizations were able to revise salaries, compensate with bonuses, and apply for additional grants for professional development, especially to support and retain teachers who can represent their diverse students and communities.

Transportation and Gentrification

Many organizations stated that they felt limited in their ability to rectify transportation issues which impacted their recruitment outside of their direct area and noted, *“transportation to and from our organization can be a barrier, and we are working to find funders who can support transportation vouchers for public transport or rideshare programs.”* Although transportation challenges were spotlighted especially for rural communities, those in cities also reported that MBTA construction and delays were also quite challenging. Paying for Uber rides and providing transportation stipends was needed when programs were not able to be directly accessed by public transportation. Others kept a virtual component to their programming or organized ride shares. The following three different organizations speak to these needs:

- *“Transportation affects rural youth exponentially and contributes to isolation. Minimal public transportation impacts whether teens can or can't attend our program. Transportation and rural distances and a lack of mental health services in rural communities has a huge impact on everyone, but especially young people, who depend on others to get them to the services they need.”* – Art Garden
- *“Franklin County has essentially no Uber access and limited public transit ...most of our students are too young to ride a public bus alone. Last year, 17 of our students over the course of the year lacked transportation and were driven by volunteers or staff members. In addition to the obvious concerns about liability transporting students in private vehicles, this limited our enrollment capacity to the occupancy limit of staff and volunteer vehicles.”* – Musica Franklin

- *“Transportation has been a challenge for some students, in part because some families have multiple children with activities taking place in overlapping schedules. We provided support by offering remote lessons via video conferencing and telephone calls, as well as supporting communication amongst parents to organize carpooling.” – City Strings United*

Gentrification also was discussed as an issue for families, communities, and as creating an impact on arts organizations. Communities with a high cost of living that also resulted in unstable housing, and overcrowded, unsafe living conditions, noted having difficulties in accessing programs through public transportation for both students and staff:

- *“Cambridge has always been an expensive city to live in, but recent cost-of-living expenses have been rising exponentially faster than wages. Art Center families, as well as staff, are having difficulty keeping up. We have noticed key staff contemplate whether or not they can afford to continue working at a job they love and are good at. We have witnessed some staff leave because they are unable to manage the financial strain. More and more staff must live further out from Cambridge to find affordable housing, and commutes become untenable.” – Community Art Center*
- *“In the past year, due to gentrification of Boston neighborhoods and inconsistency in the MBTA, transportation to the program has become a major barrier for many Teen Bridge youth. ...Many youth and their families have moved further outside of Boston - affecting the young people’s ability to attend consistently. They have to take two trains and two buses to reach the program – and sometimes aren’t able to arrive at all because the MBTA has become unreliable.” – Eliot School of Fine and Applied Arts*



Chelsea Collaborative, Photographer: Armando Rivera 2023, Youth rehearse a scene from their original devised production, “Refined Fragments” in Chelsea. This play was written, produced and performed by La Colaborativa youth leaders and explores themes of identity, immigration and housing justice.

Food and Financial Instability

This year organizations increasingly spoke of the “downstream effects of economic inequality.” Specifically, organizations were needing to help families because of the effects of financial instability, food shortages, and increased rent and housing prices which impacted both mental and physical health of the young people. Five organization speak from five different lenses:

- *“Food and housing insecurity is ever-present. To address the food needs we have raised funds and partnered with the Holyoke Public Schools, Western Mass Food Bank and Rachel’s Table to provide healthy breakfast, lunch and snacks for all program participants and their children in our on-site day care 5 days a week. On the housing front we created 10 furnished subsidized apartments for our students and are in discussions with developers to do more. We could use help on the state level to prioritize the needs of young families and their housing needs.” – CARE Center*
- *“Many Youth Development Program (YDP) participants experienced significant food insecurity during the reporting period. To support these participants, YDP reallocated a portion of program funding to purchase snacks and meals for participants.” – Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción*
- *“Food insecurity continues to be an issue in the region, and our youth artists experience it as well. In addition to providing lunch every day, our youth artists and their families had access to our Food & Supply Pantry four days/week... Youth from the program are also able to take food home for themselves and their families, which happens quite often.” – Cambridge Community Center*
- *“Food insecurity has always been an issue in our community, and rising food prices are no help. We offer frequent community meals and feed students each program day. Housing proved to be a complex issue when some of our students were removed from their home, and there weren’t any appropriate foster parents to take them in.” – Musica Franklin*
- *“Many families in Book of Hope’s (BOH’s) immediate service area struggle with food insecurity, which is why offering free, locally made healthy meals during our open mics is a critical component to BOH’s mission of building community through young people’s creativity.” – Mystic Learning Center*

Many organizations, like the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Lowell, noted that their young people experience housing insecurity and often can’t access, rent or own an instrument, are unable to have reliable internet, and therefore, creating a “home studio” can feel completely out of reach. Organizations reported offering their own funds to help families create a place for creativity in their lives by sending “art kits”, “hotspots”, and cameras. For example, for families in need, Music Clubhouse provided “an audio interface, headphones, microphone and accessories to connect to a computer.”

Accomplishments

Three outcome areas identified by the [National Partnership for Creative Youth Development](#) are 1. Create 2. Connect and 3. Catalyze. In 2022 the Youth Arts Impact Network (YAIN) CYD Task Force offered [key indicators](#) to align with those outcome areas. We have organized the highlights and accomplishments of FY23 YouthReach through the lens of those outcome areas.



Boston Children's Chorus, 2023, Boston Children's Chorus performing at Symphony Hall, Martin Luther King Jr. concert

CREATE

"One thing I enjoyed about the project, Framing Our Heritage, was the constant flow of ideas thrown around, we all had creative and intelligent ideas, and how we express them is so unique, and this is the type of environment I think Apprentices thrive in." – New Bedford Whaling Museum



Apprentices and sisters, Suheylee and Sophia Rivera-Rosa, are seen in front of their displays for the museum's Framing Our Heritage exhibit, meant to celebrate the high school-age apprentices' stories and cultural backgrounds. The sisters both chose to submit original paintings symbolic of their heritage.

Young people, like the apprentices above, are often responsible for designing all aspects of exhibits, including creating original artwork, curating, and sharing their work with others as part of the creative process. By **centering creativity and craft, and youth voice and storytelling**, organizations worked with young people to express themselves and create community around them in three primary ways:

1. Young people received encouragement and support, access to high-quality tools, equipment, and supplies, investment in their creative process, and received opportunities to share their important and relevant work.

- Provincetown Art Association and Museum created opportunities for young people to collaborate with local businesses, meet other artist vendors, sell their own work, and “*gain real life insight into entrepreneurship.*”
- At the Institute of Contemporary Art, “...teens explored every stage of filmmaking from preproduction (script writing, storyboarding) to filming and postproduction. Along the way, they supported each other through events like the Pitch Dinner, a longstanding tradition of the program, when students pitch their projects, do table reads, and receive feedback from staff, mentors, and peers.”
- Young people involved with Teen Bridge at Eliot School of Fine and Applied Arts built a wide range of new creative skills. “They studied the work of Alex Merchange and Njidecka Akunyili Crosby and were challenged to incorporate collage and painting into a reductive diptych interpreting themes of duality, identity and language. They also created independent projects where they wrote proposals outlining their concept and the techniques/mediums they learned that they would like to expand on.”

2. Young people communicated their own personal and collective stories and concerns through their art.

- Two common themes from the FY23 reports included the impact of school shootings and the impact of “othering” as young people struggled to find safe places to belong.
- Piti Theatre Company (PTC) and Berkshire Pulse’s “Young Choreographers Initiative (YCI)” responded to the impact of school shootings as a local and national concern. After Greenfield High School experienced a “lock down” due to a shooting threat, PTC students created a piece entitled, “A Day in Our Lives” that addressed the need for this issue to change and what might enable changes to happen (see min. 24-29:20 <https://vimeo.com/850015922>). In May 2023, the YCI students of Berkshire Pulse performed a powerful original piece of work addressing gun violence, entitled, “If Anything Happens” at the Creative Youth Development Teaching Artist Showcase and Community Day at Zumix in Boston. They also led a Q&A and artists’ talkback session to discuss their creative process and the social implications of their work. Another concern noted by organizations and young people was the increase of LGBTQ+ violence that young people were experiencing.
 - The young people in Barrington Stage Company addressed the bullying they experienced by producing a piece called “Are We Safe,” exploring the theme of psychological safety with peers, family, and at school. They asked the question, “What happens when one’s identity is challenged? and How can we make sure that everyone feels a sense of belonging?” Those in Actors Shakespeare Project (ASP) also remarked about the effects of working on their play, “Butch Ado”. A cast member spoke of how “refreshing and liberating it was to be part of a diverse LGBTQ+”

ensemble, rather than feeling like the 'odd person out'" which had been the result in other projects before their involvement in ASP.

3. Young people were encouraged to investigate and share the history, culture, region, and identities in art with their interests supported and celebrated.
 - Community Music School of Springfield's Sonido students from three schools were able to experience residencies in two Afro-descendant heritage arts: Traditional Ewe music/dance from Ghana and Afro-Puerto Rican Bomba (drumming and dance). They reported that *"students learned these traditions through weekly workshop intensives led by renowned teaching artists, Nani Agbeli and Brendaliz Cepeda, who are expert culture bearers in these forms. This culturally-responsive programming was designed to not only build artistic skills but to affirm the cultural identities of our students and fostering self-discovery."*
 - Performance Project's First Generation Ensemble created an original multilingual physical theater performance, *"Mother Tongue"* inspired by the experiences of the ensemble members, their families and communities (who are from Congo/Tanzania, Bhutan/Nepal, South Sudan/Darfur, Holyoke, and Springfield, Massachusetts). They performed at schools, colleges, conferences, festivals, and community venues.

CONNECT

"Weekly group sharing focuses on supporting one another's unique creative processes ...ARTEens create deeply personal art that often reflects processing of difficult experiences in their lives. Our non-judgmental approach and commitment to self-directed, artistic exploration informs how we develop and support each individual's voice, regardless of skill level." – Art Garden

CYD programs and activities create spaces that focus on **self-discovery, healing, connection, collaboration, and mutual learning**. CYD use the arts and interpretive sciences to help young people to develop their own artistic voice and go beyond their own comfort zone by connecting with others. There were many examples listed above that described how organizations attended to mental health needs of youth and families. Below describes a few specific examples in how organizations helped young people express emotions, concerns, life experiences, and listened in supportive spaces that welcomed creative responses.

1. **Young people co-created spaces where they felt a sense of belonging and where they were supported in talking about difficult issues affecting them and their community.** This year organization reported that they are often the place to go to after school for refuge because they create environments where students find a place to belong, where Teaching Artists *"look like me"* and have similar lived experiences. Themes embracing identities, debunking stereotypes, and gaining a wider understanding of bias, equity, gender, and

intersectionality were a focus of this year. Prioritizing re-creating spaces to belong, to be creative, and to safely share were a focus for many organizations returning to in-person programming this year. A middle school poet from East Boston participating in Mass Poetry clearly stated the importance of creation and connection when they said, *"Every space I walk into, I'm told I'm wrong. My body is wrong, my skin color is wrong. When I write poems, I'm alright."*

2. **Organizations bolstered their partnerships across sectors, between organizations, and between generations.** Organizations connected with mentors, other practicing artists, entrepreneurs, and local community members who came to visit and share knowledge and information.
 - **Organizations deepened community outreach efforts**, offered events honoring diverse leaders and mentors, created translation services to bridge gaps in communication, and worked on supplying transportation in order to engage with and build new audiences.
 - **Organizations cultivated long-lasting relationships including with mentors who shared their artistic visions and wisdom with younger people.** Older youth and younger youth also connected in mentorship pairings where they taught and shared their experiences. One example is from City Strings United who described how important these connections can be, *"Our longest-participating student (11 years of participation) is now an instructor in our program, encouraging students who struggle with motivation, encouraging them based on her experience."*
 - **Organizations offered broader cultural conversations about art forms with teaching artists and professionals currently working in the field.** This included famous play-writes, authors, artists and musical stars. For example, the young people of Boston Music Project had the incredible opportunity to play alongside Ed Sheeran in a surprise concert at the Tobin Community Center ([watch a clip](#)).



Follow Your Art Community,
 Photographer: Lydia Gyurina,
 2022. Leah worked with her
 mentor to organize a community
 art project at Melrose High
 School showcasing portraits of
 inspiring individuals from
 traditionally marginalized groups.

CATALYZE



Express Yourself, Photographer, Mike Dean, 2023. Youth and Ten31 Production Mermaid, Alicia White performing onstage in SPLASH.

Culminating events help to build confidence, increase a sense of belonging and cultivate leadership skills in young people when they perform and share what they have learned over the course of a program. Many organizations remarked that this was the first year since the pandemic that they had been able to host in-person classes and plan and deliver large community events. These events showcased artistic skills, musicianship, and performance skills to full audiences of family, friends, and community members.

1. **Young people co-designed, marketed, organized, and coordinated events where they performed and presented their creations.** Many organizations used these opportunities to showcase collaborations between youth, between programs, and with other organizations, including sharing their voices and talents with schools and their communities. Partnerships and projects also allowed organizations to preform and collaborate across cities, across state lines, and even included traveling outside of the country for Boston City Singers who completed a 16-day Global Voices Tour to Ireland.
2. **Organizations helped young people grow in their skills and abilities by providing opportunities and paths where they took on increasing amounts of leadership.**
 - At Save the Harbor/Save The Bay witnessed personal growth and increased confidence in their returning youth staff, who were able to take on leadership opportunities and new responsibilities. *“We were proud to rehire 10 youth staff, many of whom started out with us as Junior Program Assistants and worked their way up to Lead Harbor Educators.”*
 - The Speak Up program of SPOKE explained how the arts utilize these connections from creating, to connecting, to catalyzing leadership and change in their communities: *“Twenty youth have emerged as leaders and have by using art as a threshold to a more connected and engaged life, SPOKE connects youth to their creativity, opens ways for youth to find their voices, and change the narrative of their lives. It teaches youth how to collaborate and organize as a community, how to effect change, and develop skills focused on goal setting, relationship building, self-awareness, decision making, and other skills that build on their role as*

community leaders. Fifteen youth have emerged to form a youth council to represent youth voices at Boston Housing Authority meetings.”

- Roots Rising reported that 94% of their young people felt more prepared for the workforce and had a stronger work ethic and 100% had more pride in their community. As one Farm Crew member noted, “Roots Rising gave me hope for our society. I learned that it’s okay to ask for help.”



Photographer: Roots Rising Staff, 2022, Youth Crew member receiving guidance from a work site farmer.

3. **Young people accessed internships, fellowships, education opportunities with the help of their increased confidence, resources, and support of program staff.** Many organizations offered paid employment where young people learned important job skills. 45% of CYD organizations have programs that have a formal process offering support graduates in next steps including college and career access. Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Raw Art Works, SPOKE, ICA, Berklee College of Music, Mass Art, PROJECT STEP, all directly spoke about helping to garner post-graduate opportunities, with many remarking that 100% of their seniors graduated from high school with most having plans to attend college this fall. Young people, many who were first generation students, partnered with mentors (volunteers and in-house) to gain access to the world of applications. They applied to universities, earned scholarships, and navigated the cultural differences and challenges that are embedded in the application process. Organizations reported that seniors earned many outside scholarships, gift aid, and grants.
4. **Young people gained needed skills in arts administration and in work across sectors.** Artist for Humanities, for example, worked together with arts organizations in Boston, and helped to provide 180+ more teens with employment options. At Community Music Center of Boston (CMCB), 33 students participated in arts training, career development, and artistic work placements at 7 NGO’s city-wide. Not only did they help to design social events and team-building activities, they also co-led the design of educational frameworks, surveying, and observation tools. Young people were also able to sit on governance committees, edited and signed off on grant proposals, and represented CMCB in front of donors. As one CMCB young person noted, *“I was interested in the business/administrative aspect*

of music accessibility. I believe music is a tool that can change an individual, others, or even a society."

5. Young people saw how their creative and cultural understanding and pursuits could shape their communities. In co-learning with young people about a diversity of cultural identities with resources assuring accessibility and inclusivity, organizations created ripples of understanding and strong activism in many communities. Young people gained practice in speaking up when words, or actions felt hurtful or were discriminatory. This year there were many examples of young people who were part of important decision-making processes, including on a wider scale in their communities. Organizations reported on young people's direct involvement in space making, social justice, and city planning initiatives were effectively voiced by the youth. Six examples include:

- Actors' Shakespeare Project developed a "mobile theater" for juvenile justice facilities.
- Urbano created "Making Oasis," with Joseph Madres where young people transformed a neglected green space in Hyde Park. They collaborated to build site-specific art installations including mosaics, mobiles, found object and mixed media sculpture, and land art. Through this project they explored installation art, land art, placemaking, natural ecosystems, and community activism. They remarked that this project investigated "*...how humans can influence a place, and how a place can influence us. This culminated making a lasting, positive impact on a local neighborhood and its ecosystem!*"
- The city-wide initiative, "Creative Cities" in Lynn, includes Raw Art Works' teen leadership program who partnered with several other Lynn nonprofits and the City of Lynn Arts Planning Office to build Lynn's art and culture infrastructure.
- The young people of the Asian Community Development Corporation partnered with the Mystic River Watershed Association to develop a presentation on environmental racism, the legacy of redlining, air quality, heat islands and heat resilience, and green space. They authored a final report that was shared with partners, city council members, and other stakeholders.
- Greenroots' ECO youth crew addressed the issue of lack of youth spaces in Chelsea and explored the connections to physical and mental health. They developed and participated in coalition building with other organizations around their Youth Spaces Campaign and recognized the power of collective action in driving meaningful change.
- La Colaborativa created a youth jobs program that utilized ensemble theater-creation and muralism as methods for youth to explore their context and culture, connected with their community, and advocated for better conditions for young people through creative expression. They focused on the theme of housing justice because many of the

participants had first-hand experience of losing housing, being evicted or dealing with overcrowded or unsafe living conditions due to the housing crisis in Chelsea.

6. Young people felt the power of their collective efforts through awards for their work in community improvement and activism.

Whereas many organizations often end their year by acknowledging and awarding each student's unique success and growth, this year, organizations also reported on honors that they received due to their collective efforts.

- The Access to Theater program of Partners for Youth with Disabilities were internationally recognized with the Zero Project Award (The Zero Project's mission is working for a world with zero barriers and they find and share solutions that improve the daily lives and legal rights of all persons with disabilities).
- Empowered as a community of individuals with unique strengths and talents, Springfield Public Schools students were asked to represent all of Western Massachusetts and perform at the Governor's Inauguration Celebration at the TD Garden Arena in Boston.
- Acknowledged for their work and advocacy for a healthier climate, EYTF students from Mass Audubon received a Youth Climate Action Award from the Lowell Sustainability Summit, hosted by the Lowell Sustainability Council.
- Along with six other youth delegates from across the US, New England Aquarium Corporation and two ClimaTeens attended Capitol Hill Ocean Week and the CHOW conference in Washington D.C. There, they met with representatives, and offered a youth voice to the Biden-Harris Administration's Ocean Climate Action Plan. The ClimaTeens left this experience with a strong appreciation for the impact that their own climate justice advocacy work can have on the world at large.



Partners for Youth with Disabilities, Photographer: Jim Hunt, 2022, Access to Theater participants perform a group dance with scarves at the Summer Institute showcase.

Conclusions

The organization musiConnects, summarized how the arts connect to community wellness, "...our students designed and delivered a week-long

performance festival that successfully connected with and impacted the wellness of their community." Responses included how it provided a "complete reset of my mood," "brought me a sense of hope and contentment," and "gave me hope for the future."



musiConnects, photographer: Leise Jones, 2023, Josue warming up for Spring Recital at the Mattapan BPL

YouthReach FY23 reports showcased how important it is for young people to develop creative practices of self-expression, storytelling, and risk taking as they connect with a community of other creatives where they can feel heard and appreciated as they catalyze change in their own lives and in their communities. These collaborations help young people develop skills such as empathy, leadership, and confidence while also gaining insight into the systemic inequities faced by those of different races, sexes, identities, abilities, religion, age, and family circumstances.

Strong Creative Youth Development organizations foster not only the growth of creative skills in young people but also the co-building of brave spaces where young people can find trusted adults for emotional support, gain understandings of systemic issues, and access resources for their present and future. CYD organizations this year clearly articulated how important partnerships were to address the much broader issues and needs felt in their communities. As Actors' Shakespeare Project noted,

"Prior to the pandemic, creative youth development organizations in Boston were largely siloed, and that needs to change: if we operate in the fashion above, we can offer even deeper artistic opportunities, work collaboratively on recruitment, and provide a bigger safety net for young people's increased mental health needs post-COVID."

Collective partnerships and collective action were extremely valuable in FY23 and will be further needed in FY24.

The Surgeon General's 2023 [national report](#) offers both a deeper understanding of the crisis and an opportunity for CYD organizations. Loneliness is increasingly recognized as the most significant [preventable risk factor for depression, addiction, and suicidality](#). In calling on the nation to develop critical ways to address loneliness and isolation, the arts, culture, and Creative Youth Development in particular, have an important opportunity to be recognized as

a crucial part of the solution. When social connection increases one's odds of survival by 50%, the keys to prevention are helping young people focus on identity, connection, community and belonging while identifying causes of harm. In working together to break down silos, we can further build cross sector partnerships, center youth voice, and strengthen our work across communities against injustices.

By prioritizing cross-sector collaborations and supporting networks, opportunities, and trainings for young people, staff, and communities, young people not only will have the opportunity to connect but also to mobilize and change the systems that cause so much disconnection and unequal access in the first place. Policies and systems need to hear the amplified voices and visions of our young people who can design a more equitable and just system that centers the well-being of young people and our communities. We must dare to keep expanding our reach.

“The arts are intrinsically important (full stop). The arts are most impactful when they exist not in a bubble, in isolation, but in connection to other dimensions of our lives, our communities, towns, and cities—at the intersections of other areas of policy and practice like health, education, community and economic development, transportation, the environment, and more.” – In [Celebration of Artful Lives](#), National Endowment for the Arts Director María Rosario Jackson

Recommendations

For cross-sector partners and other funders

When we increase the amplification and integration of the arts as essential in the fabric of community care, we strengthen the health of our communities.

- Provide scholarships and funding for organizations and teaching artists to further their training.
- Co-design and publicize trainings, scholarships, and incentives with, by, and for under-resourced communities.
- Adapt trainings and certification programs to fit with organizational and community needs (see examples of [Problem Management Plus](#), [I Deserve It](#), [Williams James College](#), [healing-centered engagement](#)).
- Convene across sectors and advocate for CYD in behavioral health spaces.

For programs and organizations

When we increase community-based approaches to care, we can show the variety of roles that arts/culture can play as essential partners.

- Continue to identify and build partnerships behavioral health.

- Continue to collect data, stories, and recommendations for advocacy.
- Prioritize and advocate for certifications, trainings, incentives.

Impact

With the above recommendations, CYD organizations may be able to better prevent burnout of teaching staff, provide paths to great education/certification, and increase youth retention. Their work will also bolster family and community access to resources with stronger bridges to culturally appropriate mental health services.

The Behavioral Health sector has the double challenge of a critical shortage of licensed clinicians and a workforce that does not adequately represent the communities with whom they work. By providing our CYD organizations (as non-clinical care providers) access to further education/interventions, supports, and cross-sector partnerships, we can expand pathways to care through low-barrier access points of our CYD organizations in communities (ex: [Community Initiated Care](#)). CYD organizations can be an important part of the solution in helping to [diversify the behavioral health workforce](#), to reduce mental health stigma, and to increase equity by representing their communities, in spoken language, culture, community, and shared history.