



## Nashville's Community-Centered, Community-Led Vision for Youth

by April Doner and Marielle Cummings

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**“What do children and youth need to thrive in education, work, and life?”** This is the question that over 200 Nashvillians have come together to discuss and collaboratively answer over the last 2 years in Nashville, Tennessee.

With the support of an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Community Catalyst grant awarded to the Nashville Public Library Foundation, Nashville Public Library's Nashville After Zone Alliance (NAZA) co-facilitated a process with Vanderbilt University's Peabody College to catalyze the energy, wisdom, and leadership of local residents, groups, and organizations around ways that youth can realize their full potential across Nashville.

Out of this process arose a community-developed, community-based vision for youth as well as a new ecosystem of relationships and fresh, collaborative energy centered on how to help Nashville youth thrive. Grounded in a focus on finding, connecting, and activating the gifts, talents, and good work that already exist across the community, this project has catalyzed a flood of contribution and energy from a broad spectrum of contributors and leaders including youth, parents and caregivers, families, youth development professionals, school teachers and leaders, business and government leaders, and other advocates and organizations. This robust infrastructure of engagement has enabled these diverse actors to co-create a collective vision for holistic youth development that they are now working to actualize across Nashville.



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*Marielle Cummings  
former NAZA Strategic Initiatives Director*

“Transitioning to a whole-child approach in our community is a moral mandate. We have been trying the same approach in public education for many years, and the current system often identifies the deficits in a child instead of their unique assets and potential and it doesn’t necessarily connect them to all the resources in the community, the relationships, and the experiences that can help them realize their potential,” explains Marielle Cummings, NAZA’s former strategic initiatives director.

The asset-based approach embedded over the course of the project mirrors the ethos of the whole-child movement. In pairing these approaches, a new vision developed—Nashville’s Vision for Holistic Youth Development (“the Vision”)—a whole-child, whole-community approach that centers both equity and the leadership and lived experiences of youth.

One of the most striking successes of the project has been the degree to which young people themselves have become a driving force, not only influencing but also designing and leading the project.

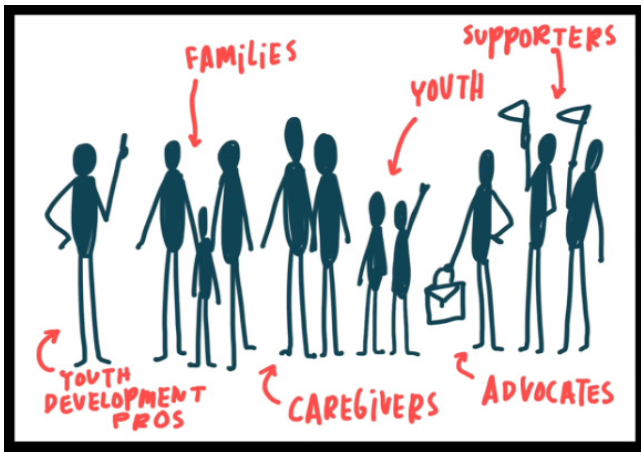
This was the result of intentional efforts among the project team, who used their grounding in community development and research as well as tools and thinking from the Asset-Based Community Development approach to find, support, and utilize the gifts and skills of young people to drive the initiative.



**IN THIS VIDEO**, lead project facilitators and supporters tell the story of the journey they took with their community to create the Vision while nurturing youth leadership.

## BACKGROUND

The project’s impetus came in part from a 2017 evaluation study conducted by Peabody College. Drawing from interviews and focus groups with over 100 community members, the study recommended that NAZA consider evaluating youth-level learning outcomes, with a particular focus on outcomes associated with social and emotional learning and life skill development.



NAZA, which is housed at the Nashville Public Library, funds afterschool and summer programs for middle school youth across Nashville and Davidson County. Annually, NAZA-funded programs engage around 1,500 public school youth from 26 middle schools in afterschool programming. These areas have some of the highest populations of children from economically disadvantaged families, immigrant and refugee families who have limited English proficiency, as well as schools where youth struggle to meet academic achievement benchmarks.

In 2018, the Nashville Public Library Foundation was awarded a grant through the IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative, an innovative grant program designed to inspire and challenge museums, libraries, and their partners to transform how they collaborate with their communities.

Over two years, the project team from NAZA and a research team from Peabody College coordinated 20 focus group discussions and shepherded the process alongside a 58-member working group and a smaller team that engaged deeply in the development of the Vision. Fifty-nine percent of focus group participants were youth and caregivers, and 20% of participants spoke English as a second language. These are the central voices whose ideas shaped the eventual vision. Overall, more than 200 community members engaged in the process, including a core group of youth who have taken on significant leadership and contributive roles.

## CENTERING RESIDENTS AND YOUTH

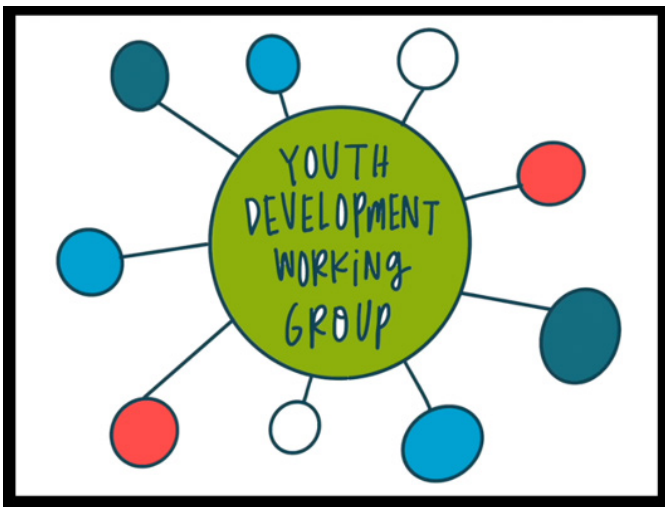
Project team staff Marielle Cummings and Rachel Ford worked with consultants from the ABCD Institute to integrate the principles of Asset-Based Community Development into the process with a focus on building from the existing strengths and resources within the community and centering residents and youth as leaders and contributors. Rachel notes, “Our whole community has been on this journey together—youth, caregivers, families, youth development professionals, advocators, elected officials, and other supporters were all part of the shared development of our Vision.”

In particular, the team and its leadership took great care to invite youth as well as community partners to lead multiple parts of the project.

Early on, project staff invited local stakeholders who were particularly energized and committed to this issue to join the Youth Development Working Group. This 58-member group met four times to dive into the research and focus group findings. The Youth Outcomes Team, a 19-member group, met five times to guide and deepen the work.

Young people shaped many key dimensions of the Vision, including how it was conceptualized and presented within the community. The Mayor’s Youth Council and Youth in Action!, NAZA’s youth-led initiative, provided many in-





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Allie Duke, NAZA Youth Advisor

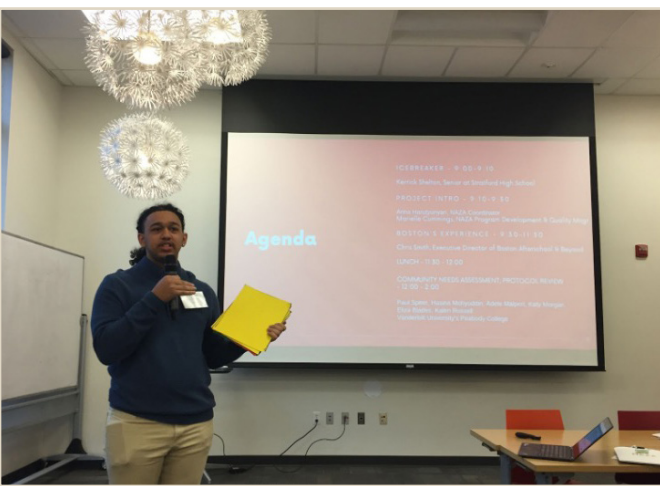
sights and feedback that were critical to the development of the Vision. As the project built momentum, these young people played increasingly central roles such as planning, promoting, and facilitating and presenting at the city-wide Transform Learning: Transform Community virtual events, during which the Vision was publicly launched. Originally planned to be an in-person gathering, these events were shifted to an online format due to COVID-19.

Allie Duke, NAZA’s youth advisor, who stepped into increasing leadership roles throughout the project, observed, “It was clear from the beginning how they really wanted to incorporate youth in a vision that is going to be made for youth. So when I hear ‘youth as catalysts for change,’ it’s something that is not started by adults and then pushed forward by the youth. It really can be youth as catalysts for change. This doesn’t exclude adults from the equation. I think the youth have been the ones at the forefront and adults are supporting, which is what NAZA has done. They are a support system.”

The Youth Development Working Group and Youth Outcomes Team also prioritized creating space and opportunities for everyday community members like caretakers and parents to join the effort, as well as other nontraditional actors including smaller grassroots groups and organizations.

Having everyday residents along with diverse other stakeholders has had a clear impact on the Vision. “It’s not surprising looking back, but we started with a community-based process and what we ended up with is a community-based vision,” Rachel reflects. “Which seems obvious now, but it was something that really emerged for us.” One key contribution of young people was to reframe the focus on “skills” needed for this to “practices” as a more accessible, realistic way of naming what’s needed to help young people thrive.

It also became evident throughout the journey that it was crucial to present these practices as something anyone can do. Rachel notes, “It was really important for us to have these community growth practices. What are those things we can all be doing as a community to support young people? We wanted everyone to feel they had an entry point to this work. So it’s not just caregivers. We all have a role to play so we can support youth in their learning ecosystems.”





# NASHVILLE'S -VISION-

FOR HOLISTIC YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

# COMMUNITY GROWTH PRACTICES

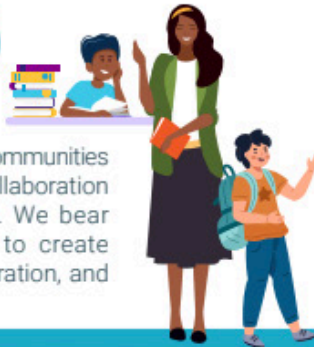
Communities develop and sustain growth practices that are essential in supporting youth thriving and readiness in education, work & life. These practices support all youth on the path from childhood to adulthood, and also support adults in ongoing journeys to develop & improve.



## INTERCONNECTION

### We Grow Together in Community

Interconnection highlights the importance of communities and the ways in which mutual care and collaboration support youth growth and development. We bear a mutual responsibility to one another to create environments where belonging, care, cooperation, and collaboration are essential.



### We do this by:

- ▶ Supporting programs that focus on children, youth, caregivers and youth development professionals.
- ▶ Providing opportunities for intergenerational and intercultural engagement.
- ▶ Connecting and developing social networks virtually and in real life.
- ▶ Valuing the knowledge and experiences of all.

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

-Helen Keller

## STORYTELLING

### We Share Stories to Connect and Transform Community

Storytelling is about listening to each other, fostering connections, and learning to communicate effectively. Stories cultivate worldviews that recognize and value people, things and ideas, and help us understand experiences outside our own individual or community context.



"Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize."

- Chimamanda Adichie

### We do this by:

- ▶ Sharing and amplifying individual and community narratives.
- ▶ Honoring the voices and varied stories of marginalized communities.



## YOUTH LEADERSHIP

### We Support Youth as Catalysts for Change

Youth are visionaries and have the ability to make a difference in the world around them. Youth have a powerful voice and can impact the systems that affect their lives.



### We do this by:

- ▶ Advocating for and with youth and supporting their leadership, especially in policy-making and civic engagement.
- ▶ Engaging youth in collaborative problem solving.
- ▶ Creating space for youth to lead and make choices.

"Youth have the power to do anything. They have the power to be leaders, activists, role models, change-makers, and numerous other things. We elevate youth voice by giving them a platform to share their ideas and promote a positive change in their communities."

- Anisa, Youth Community Leader, NAZA Youth In Action!



## EQUITY, ACCESS, JUSTICE

### We Create a Just Community

Not all youth have the same opportunities. Communities must transform systems and provide resources to ensure that the inherent potential of all youth is realized. By creating liberated spaces, we can have honest conversations with others about structural inequities and their impacts on individuals and communities.



"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

### We do this by:

- ▶ Connecting across systems.
- ▶ Fostering equitable access to educational, academic and social resources in culturally competent and sustainable ways.
- ▶ Centering restorative justice mindsets and practices.

## LEARNINGS AND NEXT STEPS

To date, the community-produced vision has been presented to the Nashville Public Library and Library Foundation boards, Alignment Nashville's board and operating board, the Tennessee Afterschool Network, NAZA partners, Opportunity NOW, the Museum Advocates, NAZA's youth development trainers, Grantmakers for Thriving Youth, America's Promise Alliance, and hundreds of local and national stakeholders at NAZA's Transform Learning: Transform Community virtual events as well as other meetings.

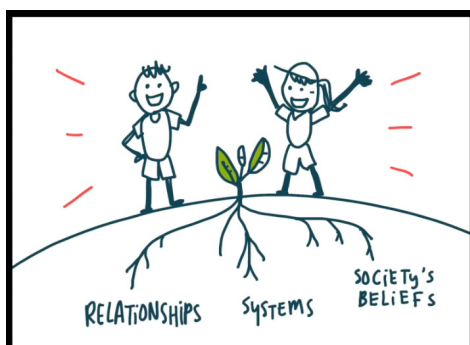


The process has yielded other rich learnings about how communities can co-create the conditions that support youth in thriving. As shared by Rachel in Nashville these conditions include the following:

- “to be able to honor interconnection as a community”
- “to do storytelling both as a way to connect with one another but also to storytell about what we want in the future and what we want our community to look like”
- “to honor youth leadership—to really get out of the way and let our youth lead”
- “as a community to do what we can to support equity, access, and justice to really support our young people as they go through life and progress in our community”

The team and their diverse partners are committed to carrying this orientation forward. Marielle adds, “We have learned so much from this work. We are investing in youth-led and adult-supported work. We are invested in partner leadership. We’re centering those voices as we look at our next strategic plan, the next 5 years thinking about, ‘How do we center and invest in youth-led and partner-led work? How do we center equity and asset-based approaches?’ And honestly it’s a weekly conversation.”

The innovations and learning that took place through NAZA's work were possible in part due to the innovative structure and focus of IMLS's Community Catalyst Initiative, which challenged grant recipients to put aside more traditional, outside-in approaches to local change and instead seek to spark momentum from multiple levels of the community while centering on residents.



Marielle reflects, “We have changed so much and we are growing so much and we are grateful to [the CCI grantee cohort], to the ABCD Institute, and Joe Erpenbeck in particular, and IMLS for this incredible work that is like no other grant I’ve ever had!”

Grant recipients were encouraged not only to follow the community's lead as much as possible, but also to connect and exchange learnings frequently with other CCI grant recipients across the country in regular calls and learning opportunities hosted by the ABCD consulting team. As a result, museum and library innovators have been able to support one another in their growth and learnings while also producing important learnings for the larger field.

Allie Duke observes, "I haven't been involved in a work project like this before. And it was really interesting to see all of the different pieces and people that were involved in creating something like this, and that's also why I feel it makes it so special to Nashville's Vision, because all these various community members are kind of all bringing these bricks to build this amazing piece."

Allie adds, "I'm just really excited to be able to share this. I hope that it's discussed. I hope that it's even debated. I believe we really want people to do some deep thinking about how it relates to their own life because everyone, everyone can contribute to some piece of the Vision."



Prepared by the ABCD Evaluation Team with the NAZA Community Catalyst Grantee Team for the IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative.

***For more information, visit:***

[Nashville After Zone Alliance \(NAZA\)](#)

[Nashville's Vision for Holistic Youth Development Resources](#)

[Video: NAZA Team's Story](#)

[IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative](#)

[The Asset-Based Community Development Institute](#)

