

Oakland Puts Investment in Kids First: A Look at What It Takes

By Gregory Hodge

In November 1996, one California community voted to invest significantly in the future - its youth. Oakland voters passed Measure K, amending the city charter to create the "Kids First! Oakland Children's Trust Fund." The law requires that 2.5% of the city's unrestricted general funds be set aside every year for the next twelve years to be "used exclusively to provide services to children and youth less than 21 years old." The Fund will create a dedicated pool approaching \$5.8 million in its first year. This dramatic show of support for youth may be attributed to three factors: 1) a cross-section of Oakland's diverse community is involved in articulating issues and solutions pertaining to youth; 2) a wide array of organizations have partnered to work towards common goals for youth; and 3) young people are effectively planning and participating in important work around youth policy and programs.

Voter mandate for the Kids First! initiative, which passed by a two-to-one margin, shows that Oakland's youth are a high priority. Rather than buy into negative media portrayal of youth as problems to be solved, Oakland voters upheld the notion that youth must hold a central, positive place in the civic life of a healthy city. They decided that investment in the city's children and youth was much needed. That sentiment led voters to approve, in the same election, a \$7.5 million schools parcel tax which will help finance: classroom size reduction; after-school activities; technology; and much needed supplies and materials. Another bond measure to improve parks and recreation facilities also passed, showing voters' willingness to spend in every youth arena. Finally, the electorate demonstrated its commitment to youth by electing Jason Hodge, a 22-year old product of Oakland's public schools, to the school board. His election signals the public's growing trust and encouragement of youth leadership.

Public confidence in youth and a commitment to invest in youth development has been building in Oakland for some time. In June 1996, the City Council adopted an official youth policy and developed plans to support a city staff struc-

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ture for youth development programs. The Council's action was spurred by the release of *Call to Action: An Oakland Blueprint for Youth Development*, a report released by the diverse Oakland Youth Development Working Group and its convener, the Urban Strategies Council. A product of two years' inquiries, community conversations and analysis of out-

standing practices from across the country, the report described a vision as well as strategies that took into account reasons for concern about youth, but focused on the community's optimism.

Taken individually, each of these developments — finalization of the Call to Action, adoption of a city youth policy, and passage of the Kids First! Oakland Children's Trust Fund — are promising. But, because they have tremendous potential to operate in tandem, these achievements hold promise for a sea change in the future of Oakland's youth.



Youth and adult organizers walk along Broadway en route to Oakland City Hall to drop off an installment of thousands of signatures in support of Measure K, the local initiative to devote 2.5% of the city budget to youth service programs.

Getting to Youth Development Policy

The creation of Oakland's youth development policy can be traced back to the Urban Strategies Council's decision two years ago to convene local service providers, community organizations, parents and youth to frame a community inquiry and build consensus about needs and opportunities for youth in Oakland. The resulting Youth Development Working Group sought to learn from other communities and from the national perspective. The group's exploration gave rise to a focus that went beyond protecting young people from harm and preventing risky behaviors. The Working Group became convinced that Oakland must promote youth development by providing an abundant array of supports, protections and opportunities that can give youth hope and a sense of promise for the future.

The group's Call to Action report sets out a vision for what every young person should have, plus recommendations for securing youth development. In the short-term, the report recommends that youth development efforts focus on establishing places where young people can spend constructive time in the after-school and evening hours. Longer term goals should be improving student achievement in schools and involving young people in transforming their lives and their neighborhoods. To achieve these goals, Call to Action suggests creating a city-wide infrastructure to maximize the impact of resources for youth.

The report also calls for neighborhood-based strategies to support the aspirations of youth in a safe and healthy environment. Neighborhoods should build on the ideas, energies and talents of residents, including young people, to create a can-do spirit of community. Call to Action suggests creating a gathering place in communities, stressing that such “village centers” are a strategy — adapted from the experiences of the full-service/community schools efforts of the New York City Beacons and other school-linked services models — for building community.

Within days of the release of Call to Action, the Oakland City Council adopted the Oakland Youth Policy, a document developed in frequent consultation with drafters of the report. Again, youth working with adults and with the leadership of city council member Sheila Jordon, created an atmosphere of positive engagement to demand that the needs of youth be given highest priority. The city has since moved promptly to set in motion the youth policy. It has established a youth leadership and development team. With a dynamic young staff, the team will play a pivotal part in preparing and deploying young people to inform, assist, staff and lead efforts to establish “village centers” and other school- and community-based youth development opportunities.

Getting from Concept to Reality

The goal of Kids First! Oakland Children’s Trust Fund was to create the resources necessary to support effective and innovative youth work. The idea of a dedicated funding stream was not new. In developing the fund, Oakland studied examples from other communities around the country. Seattle has had a youth levy and an accompanying strategic plan in place for four years. In San Francisco, Proposition J created the Mayor’s Office of Children, Youth and Families and authorizes the city to spend \$160 million for youth services between the years 1993 and 2003.

Oakland organizers contacted Coleman Advocates to learn about the successes, challenges and pitfalls experienced by organizers of San Francisco’s Proposition J. Organizers considered whether to propose a new tax or a set-aside of existing funds. (The answer--a set-aside--was inferred from voter rejection in the primary of a seniors tax initiative.) Many wondered whether a youth measure would cause other constituencies to come after their own piece of a shrinking resource pie. Elected officials expressed reservations about a policy that could limit flexibility in budget decisions. Oakland’s youth advocates concluded that voters

should be asked to consider a youth set-aside based on the unprecedented need for investment in youth.

Leaders in the effort to pass Kids First! included David Kakishiba, the executive director of East Bay Asian Youth Center. He and other youth service providers asked political consultants to assess voter support for a ballot measure on resources for youth and the feasibility of giving community-based organizations greater influence over public expenditures. Kakishiba recalls the atmosphere in which his organization and its youth geared up to assume leadership in the campaign for the ballot initiative. "We did it out of frustration and faith. We saw lots of programs in schools and elsewhere, but our kids were getting killed at the same time. We jumped into Kids First! because we were tired of relying on other institutions to meet youth needs. If we could get it on the ballot, we knew people would respond."

Youth Taking the Lead

Youth leadership in the Kids First! campaign proved invaluable. Their participation in early youth development initiatives laid much of the organizing groundwork for the campaign well before the Kids First! ballot measure came to a vote. One of these youth development programs was Youth in Oakland (YOU), an initiative launched by People United for a Better Oakland (PUEBLO) in 1990 to provide opportunities for young people to organize around issues affecting students and youth. Over the last six years, YOU has been extremely effective.

In the summer of 1995, eleven YOU members completed a successful pilot leadership development program funded by The California Wellness Foundation. The group surveyed hundreds of youth and determined that one of the biggest issues facing youth is the lack of meaningful educational, vocational and recreational programs during after-school hours. Participants researched the city budget and interviewed city council members, recreation directors and staff, and dozens of youth about policy options. The YOU members documented their work in three products: a series of silk screen images; a video; and a policy proposal. Concurrent with the YOU project, youth members of the Oakland Youth Development Working Group produced a video for policy-makers that highlighted the need for relevant education, leadership development and mentoring opportunities.

When youth advocates decided to pursue a ballot initiative for Kids First!, Oakland's youth stepped up to the challenge. At least 35,000 signatures were required to qualify for the November 1996 general election ballot. Youth were trained to collect voter signatures. A core group of 70 young people was engaged on the weekends, after school, and at countless local events to explain the initiative and get signatures. On June 6, 1996, after six months of intense petitioning, the campaign submitted 50,000 signatures.

Dozens of diverse organizations participated in the signature-gathering and election campaign. Kids First! backers sponsored a summer leadership development program to build public support and publicity tools for the initiative. The summer program produced a promotional video, a youth magazine, two large donated billboards, a web site and a music and dance anthem for performance at large meetings and rallies. With no organized opposition and a wide array of endorsements, Kids First! passed by a two-to-one margin. The next phase of work had begun.

Through these experiences and more, Oakland youth became their own best advocates in the public arena. Whether engaged in the debate over youth curfews, efforts to reduce the availability of handguns, public demonstrations such as Stand for Children, or mapping the community to create safety plans in West Oakland, youth have been active planners and participants. The initiative shown by Oakland youth is rooted in a deep commitment from community-based organizations — including PUEBLO, East Bay Asian Youth Center, Centro de Juventud, the West Oakland Mental Health Center and the American Friends Service Committee — to Oakland's youth and their future.

Demonstrating the broad support for Kids First! initiative, Asian- and African- American community organizers and youth from the campaign gather in front of Oakland City Hall with wagons full of signatures they collected to qualify Measure K for the local ballot. 31,000 signatures were required to meet this goal; in the course of the campaign nearly 50,000 were collected.

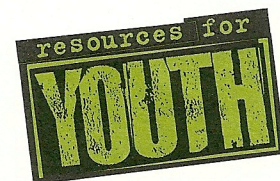


Implementing the Children's Trust Fund

The Kids First! charter amendment provided three major implementation activities: 1) a youth service audit which would determine exactly how much of the 1995-1996 city's general budget was allocated to youth services (the baseline expenditures); 2) creation of a planning and oversight committee to govern implementation of the initiative; and 3) development of a four-year strategic plan to outline guiding principles for allocation of Kids First! dollars. Youth continue to play a key role in the implementation of the charter amendment. Half of the 19-member oversight committee must be under the age of 21, according to the new law.

The implementation phase will likely draw upon the lessons learned during the education and election campaign, including: recognizing the value of partnerships between youth, service providers, activists and elected allies; using an infrastructure for trained youth who can advocate for themselves; tapping the experiences of others who have tried to keep the process honest and consistent; and engaging youth and other advocates in the process and explaining it to them in terms they understand.

The Kids First! effort will be successful if community-based organizations, government agencies and youth can work together to craft meaningful relationships and solutions that reflect sound priorities and commitment to youth development principles and practice. Millie Cleveland, activist and Program Director at the West Oakland Mental Health Center Violence Prevention Project, summed up the need for cooperation: "There is a lot of skepticism about how resources are prioritized by elected officials. The average citizen can't cite facts and figures but they are doubtful about whether government is using the resources in the best ways. Most people have kids and they know, in an intimate way, what support services are needed. The community really feels that kids should come first."



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