

Youth Engagement in Policy Profile: The Center for Fair Futures

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The Fair Futures Youth Advisory Board, in partnership with a larger coalition, secured \$30.7 million in public funding for one-on-one coaching and tutoring for youth with foster care experience.

Executive Summary

From fiscal year (FY) 2020 to FY2023, the Fair Futures Youth Advisory Board (YAB) and a coalition of 100+ organizations worked together to secure public funding to implement and expand the Fair Futures coaching model in New York City (NYC). The Fair Futures model provides one-on-one support through full-time coaches and tutors trained to help youth reach their educational, career, and independent living/life goals. With the \$30.7 million in annual public funding secured by the YAB and advocacy coalition for FY2023 and each subsequent fiscal year, Fair Futures coaching is available at no cost to all youth with foster care experience in NYC from sixth grade to age 26.

The YAB, comprised of young people impacted by the foster care and other systems and led by a full-time YAB coordinator with lived experience in foster care, played a central role in advocating for the initial and increased public funding for the Fair Futures coaching model. The YAB participated in and planned a variety of policy advocacy activities, such as meeting with decision makers, leading a social media campaign, and testifying before government bodies. YAB members highlighted the importance of the support they received from staff and partners (e.g., the YAB coordinator, a lobbyist, and a communications firm), the deep bonds YAB members formed with one another, the youth-led philosophy core to the advocacy efforts, and the supports (e.g., stipends, transportation) that enabled their participation. Today, many of the original YAB members remain involved, supporting both the implementation of the Fair Futures model and ongoing advocacy on youth-identified priorities such as housing. The model has also been publicly funded to serve youth impacted by the juvenile justice system.

In addition to securing sustainable public funding, YAB members and their partners described a variety of other positive changes resulting from the YAB's advocacy. For example, these efforts led to new relationships between young people and policymakers; normalization of the involvement and compensation of young people in the policy process; greater public awareness of and cross-system coordination on foster care issues; enhanced youth-centered culture within the newly formed Center for Fair Futures; and skill development, healing, and self-efficacy among YAB members.

Introduction

In recent years, policy advocates and decision makers have increasingly turned to young people with lived experience navigating youth-serving systems (e.g., child welfare, employment) to inform policy.^{i,ii} The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation’s Foster Youth and Opportunity Youth Initiatives (“Initiatives”) have prioritized grantmaking to organizations that engage young people in their policy efforts. Child Trends partnered with the Initiatives and five of their grantee organizations—including The Center for Fair Futures—to explore the roles young people play in the policy process, factors that support or hinder authentic youth engagement, and the outcomes associated with authentic youth engagement. The Center for Fair Futures and the other four participating organizations each identified one youth and one adult representative to serve on the Research Group, which met regularly throughout this project to participate in the design of the study, data analysis, and dissemination of findings (see Methodology and Data).

Child Trends built on existing frameworks^{iii,iv} to refine the Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework (Framework), which was adapted based on the experiences of the Research Group and findings from this study. The Framework details (1) the roles youth play in the policy process, (2) the stages at which youth are engaged, (3) how organizations support and empower youth, (4) local contextual factors that influence authentic youth engagement, and (5) how authentic youth engagement influences outcomes. This Framework guided data collection and analysis and may serve as a tool for readers to examine their own work and opportunities to expand and support authentic youth engagement in the policy process.

This brief applies the Framework to The Center for Fair Futures’ experiences engaging youth to secure \$30.7 million in annual baselined funding in the New York City budget for the Fair Futures coaching program. Each section begins with a brief overview of the Framework; for a more detailed overview, see the [Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework](#).

Definitions:

- **Youth or young people:** These terms are used interchangeably to refer to youth and young adults with lived experience navigating the child welfare, education, employment, and other youth-serving systems. At The Center for Fair Futures, Youth Advisory Board members range in age from 16 to approximately 26; most have prior leadership experience.
- **Authentic youth engagement:** Youth are active partners in shaping decisions, policies, and programs. They are empowered and valued as contributors, co-creators, and decision makers in their communities and intentionally supported in these roles.
- **Policy process:** Policy identification, formulation, advocacy, and implementation. This study focused on local and state policies, including legislative and administrative policies.

Design, advocacy, and implementation of the Fair Futures coaching model

[Fair Futures](#) is a manualized and publicly funded coaching model available to all youth with foster care experience in New York City from sixth grade to age 26. Fair Futures provides one-on-one support through full-time coaches and tutors trained to help youth reach their educational, career, and independent living/life goals. From 2018-2019, two consultants developed the Fair Futures model based on best practices from existing programs and in consultation with youth, staff, and cross-system partners (e.g., nonprofit organizations working on housing, education, and workforce issues). A steering committee comprised of the



consultants, foster care provider agency leaders, and representatives from the New York City funding community led the initial advocacy campaign to publicly fund the model. The steering committee engaged a lobbyist and communications firm and built a coalition of over 100 partner organizations (“[Fair Futures coalition](#)”).

In the second year of the advocacy campaign, youth engagement became a central strategy, after youth began speaking at rallies in support of the model. The steering committee hired a youth advocate into a full-time position to serve on the steering committee and develop and lead the [Fair Futures Youth Advisory Board \(YAB\)](#). The YAB was comprised of 7-8 active members. With the support of the steering committee, lobbyist, and communications firm, YAB members participated in and planned a variety of advocacy activities, such as meeting with decision makers, leading a social media campaign, and testifying before government bodies (see “Youth Roles & Activities below”). The YAB and Fair Futures coalition secured \$10 million in public funding for Fair Futures in FY 2020, \$12 million in FY 2021 (reversing plans to drastically cut the program’s budget), \$20 million in FY 2022 with \$12 million baselined, and \$30.7 million baselined in the city’s budget for FY 2023 and each subsequent year.^{v, vi} Baselined funding is automatically included in each subsequent fiscal year’s budget at the same level, creating a sustainable funding source. In FY 2024, over 4,350 youth received Fair Futures coaching.^{1, vii}

This profile focuses on the following policy win: In 2023, the Fair Futures advocacy coalition and Youth Advisory Board (YAB) secured \$30.7 million in annual baselined funding in the New York City budget for the Fair Futures coaching and tutoring program.

Once \$30.7 million in baselined funding for the model was attained in FY 2023, the YAB continued to support implementation of the Fair Futures model and began championing new causes such as housing. In FY 2023, funding for Fair Futures also expanded to support young people impacted by the juvenile justice system. The YAB is now housed under The Center for Fair Futures, a nonprofit organization founded to support ongoing implementation and advocacy of the Fair Futures model. The policy win and outcomes detailed below are the result of the YAB’s efforts within the overarching advocacy strategy and coalition developed by the steering committee and therefore represent the collective efforts of youth and adult advocates.

¹ Youth in both the foster care and juvenile justice system in NYC are eligible for Fair Futures coaching and included in these numbers. This brief focuses on funding the Fair Futures model for youth in foster care.

How Were Youth Involved?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework

There are many different roles that youth may play in the policy process as they share their lived expertise. Their roles may continuously shift over time and depending on the activity. In this study, youth roles were organized into:

- **Speaking:** Adults lead policy change, and youth share their ideas and opinions for policy change
- **Co-designing:** Youth and adults partner to lead policy change
- **Designing:** Youth lead policy change and adults assist

Youth often start in speaking roles and with scaffolding, support, and intentional organizational shifts in leadership from adults to youth, move into co-design and design roles over time.^{viii}

Youth may play these roles at different stages within the policy process, which we organized into four stages for the purposes of this study:

- **Policy identification:** Identifying the problem and gathering background information
- **Policy formulation:** Formulating policy solutions, including drafting policy
- **Policy advocacy:** Advocating for policy change through a variety of mechanisms such as building coalitions, educating decision makers, and building public awareness
- **Policy implementation:** Monitoring and supporting implementation of policy changes

In the example of the Fair Futures YAB, young people were involved in roles that spanned speaking, co-designing, and designing across multiple stages of the policy process. Prior to the creation of the YAB, youth helped to inform the initial identification and development of the Fair Futures coaching model by sharing their experiences navigating the transition to adulthood and the importance of supportive relationships.

Once the YAB was created, a core group of YAB members engaged in policy advocacy activities based on their interests. YAB members met with decision makers, testified before government bodies, and participated on panels. They also emceed, spoke at, and attended rallies, and organized virtual rallies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The YAB shared their experiences and raised awareness of the need for Fair Futures through news and social media. Over time, YAB members moved into greater co-design and design roles (e.g., developing their own relationships with decision makers which resulted in reduced reliance on adult supporters to make connections, and creating a youth-led social media campaign).

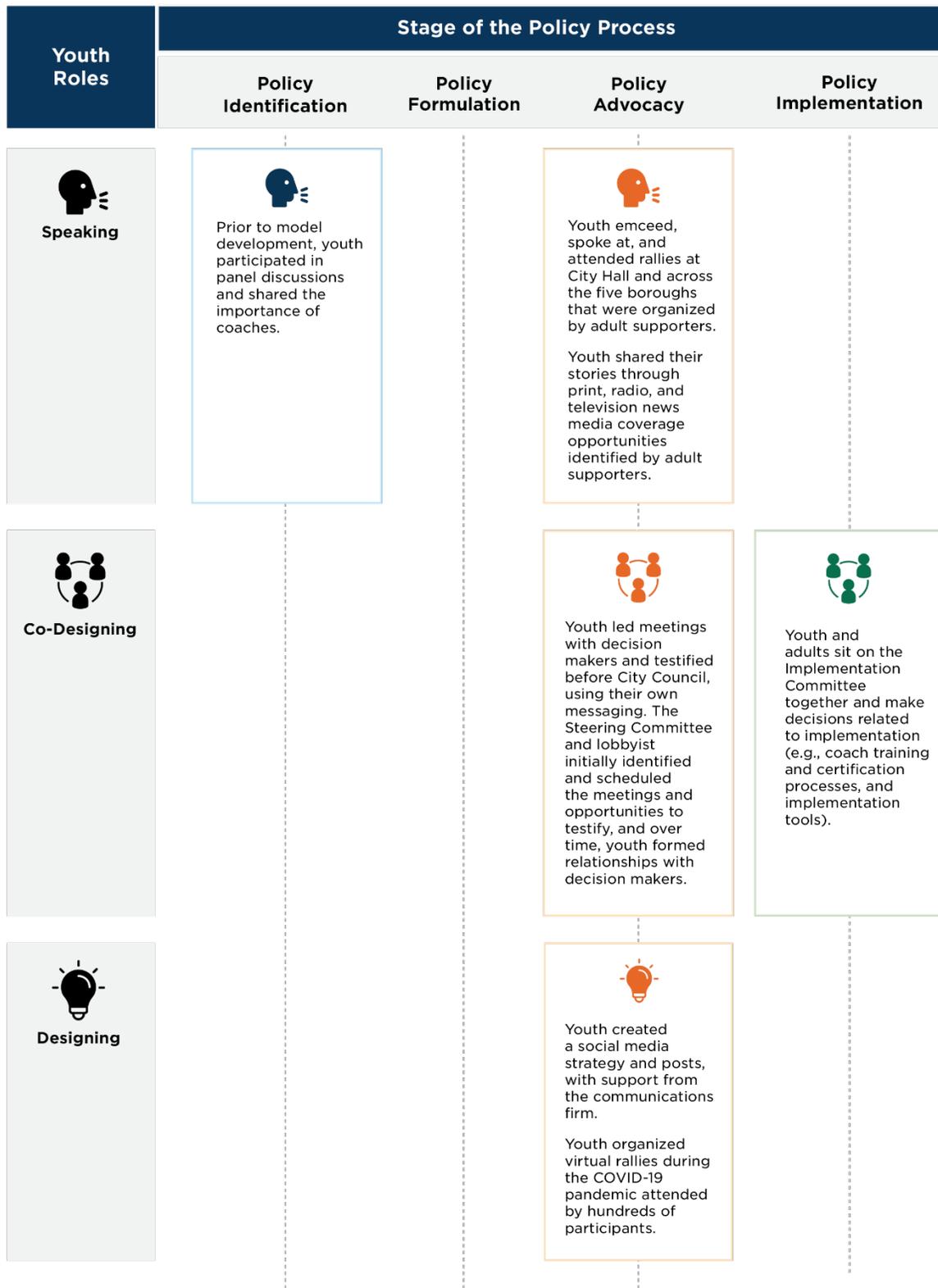
“We always had like a video or some sort of platform that was pushing the message forward. And we did that from the beginning. [...] I think that gave us the exposure it needed to become the movement it did.”
– YAB Member

“I think a lot of times when we talk to elected officials, there's like a certain narrative or a certain way that you wanna share your story. But I think it was just nice being able to like have that freedom to just, kind of share what was really on your mind.”
– YAB Member

Once baseline funding was secured for the Fair Futures model, YAB members have supported implementation as members of the Implementation Committee. The Implementation Committee brings YAB members, The Center for Fair Futures staff, and community partners together monthly to support implementation (e.g., developing training materials, developing implementation tools, discussing challenges, and supporting the roll out of new initiatives and supports for young people).

“The implementation committee meets every month and [...] is a space where we discuss implementation challenges. Where we discuss best practices and basically whatever comes out of that, we usually end up rolling out the system [...] The young people's perspective and engagement on that committee, I think is pretty strong, in terms of them like having really unique perspectives and ideas. And I always really enjoy hearing their input.” - **Staff**

Figure 1. Youth Roles and Activities on the Fair Futures YAB



How Did Fair Futures Empower and Support Youth?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework

Organizations create environments that empower youth to engage in the policy process by implementing supportive structures and facilitating meaningful connections.

- **Structures** include:
 - **Centering youth** in the organization's work by adopting specific frameworks (e.g., holistic well-being framework) or broader values related to shifting decision-making power and leadership to youth and viewing youth as experts.
 - Implementing **practices** that support authentic youth engagement, including recruitment strategies, regular meeting structures, mutual respect between adults and youth, safe spaces where youth feel comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences, flexible and accessible participation options, regular debriefing of youth experiences, and transparent communication.
 - Providing **resources** to youth, such as financial compensation and transportation to facilitate participation, connecting youth with external resources to meet their individual needs, training youth and adults, and equipping youth with data and information.
- **Connections** include:
 - **Peer support:** Youth foster an inclusive community, build relationships, and provide emotional support to one another when needed.
 - **Adult support:** Adults develop mentoring relationships with youth and connect youth with external resources to support their engagement.
 - **Connection to future benefits:** Youth have access to professional development opportunities such as internships and networking opportunities.

During the YAB's advocacy to fund the Fair Futures coaching model, **adult support** and **peer support** were the most common organizational supports provided to YAB members in the connections category. Adults (including the YAB coordinator, Steering Committee, lobbyist, communications firm, and foster care provider agencies and coaches) provided different types of support. The YAB coordinator, lobbyist, and communications firm provided one-on-one support and group sessions with YAB members to develop their advocacy skills. The Steering Committee, lobbyist, and communications firm worked in partnership with the YAB to develop and implement the advocacy strategy (e.g., adults leveraged their advocacy expertise and relationships to schedule meetings with decision makers). YAB members explained that the YAB coordinator's personal lived experience in foster care enabled them to relate to one another in a uniquely supportive way. YAB members also described developing deep relationships with their peers, including through regular team building activities and annual retreats.

"I feel like [Former YAB coordinator] really supported us in telling our stories because like, she has also experienced the child welfare system. So it was like easy to talk to her about those kinds of things. And it was like she gave us a kind of like a three pronged approach like tell your name, your background, tell about your story, and tell how your coach helped you, and then [...] it wasn't like really complicated. I feel like she really supported us." – YAB Member

Supportive resources and **youth training** were the most common structures identified. More specifically, youth received support to enable their participation (e.g., stipends and transportation) and training to develop their communication and advocacy skills (e.g., training on how to share their experiences and journeys). These and other examples of supportive organizational strategies employed by Fair Futures are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

“One thing that I really appreciate about the [Youth Advisory] Board is that like folks also value the relationships that they have with each other. So in our group chat there’s always space to have conversation [...] and that’s something that really helps us to, like, maintain a commitment or even like strengthen commitment when it’s really hard to stay committed.” – YAB Member

Figure 2. Organizational Strategies Used by Fair Futures to Empower and Support YAB Members

Structures		
Centering Youth	Practices	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth are partners, not tokenized Trauma-informed approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment that prioritized diversity in age and experiences in care across YAB members Meeting structures facilitated by YAB coordinator with subcommittees and community guidelines Mutual respect between youth and adults Debriefing with youth post-advocacy Accessible meeting times and formats Flexibility to participate when and at the level that works best for each youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth training on topics such as communication and advocacy trainings for youth Supportive resources, including financial and practical supports for participation (e.g., stipend, transportation, professional clothing) Data to use in advocacy
Connections		
Adult Support	Peer Support	Future Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual and group support provided by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> YAB coordinator with lived experience in foster care Steering Committee Lobbyist and communications firm Foster care provider 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships fostered through team building activities and annual wellness retreat Youth turn to one another for support outside of meetings New YAB members meet with existing members when onboarding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support with resume development Feedback and support from adults and peers on professional goals Internship opportunities

While most of the organizational strategies identified by interviewees supported authentic youth engagement, a handful of challenges emerged, primarily related to recruitment and adult supporter training. Initial YAB recruitment was hindered by concerns that youth would be retraumatized by participating in the advocacy efforts and a lack of clearly defined expectations for participation. While the YAB prioritizes diversity of experiences, some youth may face barriers to participation (e.g., youth in residential treatment programs, youth with disabilities, and preteens). Staff and partner interviewees also reflected that it would have been helpful to provide training to adults in partnering with youth on advocacy efforts.

What Local Factors Helped Youth Engagement?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework

Local contextual factors include any characteristics of the local environment (e.g., political, geographical, historical) that help or hinder authentic youth engagement in the policy process. In this study, contextual factors were organized into five categories:

- **Stakeholder and partner engagement:** Stakeholders' and partners' receptivity to and engagement with youth
- **Political landscape:** The effect of local and/or state politics (e.g., majority political party's policy priorities) on youth engagement and state and local policies
- **History of youth engagement:** Historical and recent examples of youth engagement in the community
- **Philanthropic/private support:** Funder investments in youth engagement
- **Historical local and systemic inequities:** Inequitable access to supports and resources
- **Geography and infrastructure:** Physical landscape and infrastructure (e.g., transportation) available to support youth engagement

On the road to securing baseline funding for Fair Futures in NYC, two contextual factors emerged as most helpful for authentic youth engagement: (1) stakeholder engagement and buy-in, and (2) philanthropic and private support.

The YAB benefited from the **engagement and buy-in of both decision makers and community partners**. One Fair Futures staff member described policymakers' general openness and comfort with working with constituents and youth as an important precursor to their engagement with and receptiveness to meeting with YAB members. Fair Futures' advocacy strategy focused on YAB members engaging every champion (e.g., Borough Presidents, City Council members), and that strategy paid dividends when two key champions were elected mayor and appointed commissioner of the child welfare agency in 2023 – just a few months before the \$30.7 million investment in Fair Futures was baselined in the city's budget. The context of New York City's privatized child welfare system also helped create the conditions for partner engagement and collaboration. At the time of the YAB's advocacy for Fair Futures, foster care services were delivered by 26 provider agencies, many of which came together in the Fair Futures coalition of over 100 nonprofit organizations, foundations, and youth groups.

Philanthropic partners in New York City’s funding community supported Fair Futures before, during, and after this policy win through a funders collaborative now called Youth + Families Forward. Together, they funded the early coaching and tutoring programs on which the Fair Futures model was built, convened a series of panel discussions leading to the identification of coaching as an advocacy priority, met with child welfare agency leadership to garner agency support, and provided financial support for youth engagement. The funders invested approximately \$4 million in advocacy for baseline funding and now support the ongoing implementation and innovation efforts of The Center for Fair Futures. Beyond funding, leaders from two foundations were active members of the Steering Committee and nimbly responded to funding needs as they emerged (e.g., quickly deploying funds to provide stipends to YAB members and hire a YAB coordinator). One of the foundations is a public charity, which enabled them to fund lobbying and allowed them to engage the lobbying and communications firms which supported the YAB.

“One of the benefits of us being so engaged was we [funders] could be incredibly responsive [...] to meet the funding needs. And when we realized that we really needed youth voice and young people leading [...we] were pretty quick to be able to mobilize some funding to support the initial coordinator and then to provide a fund of stipends for [...] a broader group of young people to really be able to engage in the Youth Advisory Board as that developed.” – **External Partner**

What Outcomes Did Youth Achieve?

Authentic Youth Engagement in Policy Framework

Authentic youth engagement in the policy process can lead to changes at the individual, organizational, community, and policy levels. This project focused specifically on organizational and policy outcomes; however, we share examples across all relevant levels:

- **Policy outcomes:** Administrative and/or legislative policy changes, and the intermediate steps that lead to these changes (e.g., increased decision maker awareness, new coalitions)
- **Community outcomes:** Changes within the community (e.g., how youth are engaged by other entities, shifting community narratives and mental models of youths’ strengths and needs, and more equitable access to services)
- **Organizational outcomes:** Changes in how the organization engages youth
- **Youth outcomes:** Changes for individual youth (e.g., increased self-efficacy; skill development, including transferable skills; and sense of belonging)

The YAB, in partnership with the Steering Committee and Fair Futures coalition achieved outcomes across all four domains, with policy and community outcomes cited most frequently.

Table 1. Outcomes of Authentic Youth Engagement

Outcomes	
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informed champions. The YAB formed relationships with and educated policymakers, building champions for foster care in key decision-making roles. • Public investment. The YAB and Fair Futures coalition secured incremental funding increases for the Fair Futures coaching model, culminating in \$30.7 million baselined in the city budget. • Youth engagement. The YAB normalized the involvement and compensation of youth in policymaking spaces, with more examples of youth engagement outside Fair Futures. • Increased cross-system attention to foster youth. The YAB and Fair Futures coalition began breaking down siloes between youth-serving systems, as other systems (e.g., housing and education) began to better understand the needs of foster youth.
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth-centered practice. Authentic youth engagement and the Fair Futures coaching model have shifted child welfare culture to more youth-centered practice. • Public awareness. The YAB raised awareness among the general public of issues facing youth with foster care experience. • Funder support. By working alongside youth, funders increased their knowledge of and commitment to youth advocacy.
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrastructure. Youth are embedded in advocacy, implementation, and program innovation. • Culture. Enhanced organizational culture centers youth voice in all aspects of the organization’s work, with increased organizational capacity to support youth. • Relationships. YAB members and staff have built enduring relationships.
Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-efficacy. YAB members built confidence in themselves and their advocacy efforts. • Skill development. YAB members developed new skills and gained experience. • Public recognition. YAB members earned recognition (e.g., certificate of merit from an elected official). • Healing. Adult partners helped to “redeem” YAB members’ earlier negative experiences in foster care by hearing and advocating alongside youth in support of shared goals.

Before Fair Futures, [...] foster care issues were sort of an inside baseball kind of situation. [...] Unless you had some direct involvement, you really didn't think about it, and aging out of foster care was always an issue and the city never solved it. And so, if we did anything, it was really to elevate these issues for the more [...] general public [...] and increase the public will around doing something and understanding this issue. And so, we felt we had an obligation, while asking for the money, to really educate people on this issue. And that's where the young people played a critical role.

– External Partner

Once baseline funding was secured to expand Fair Futures to young people with foster care experience through age 26, efforts shifted toward ongoing implementation and other policy priorities. Fair Futures now serves youth impacted by the juvenile justice systems through a partnership with nine juvenile justice agencies implementing the model. The Center for Fair Futures was created as the ongoing hub for this work, and youth roles have expanded. Several YAB members serve with adults on the Advocacy Committee (which grew out of the former Steering Committee) and the Implementation Committee. The YAB identified housing as its next area of focus and developed a multipronged strategy to improve access to high quality housing for youth with foster care experience. The Center for Fair Futures also expanded to include a “Youth-Informed Innovation arm” designed to develop and scale new supports for youth. As of Fall 2024, The Center for Fair Futures began discussions with the New York City child welfare agency about the need to expand funding for the Fair Futures coaching model to ensure that all youth with foster care experience who desire a coach can have one.

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Appendix: Methodology and Data

This project was a community engaged research project – a collaborative approach to research that enables researchers and community members to develop and/or conduct research that is motivated by and meets the needs of a community. Child Trends conducted this project in partnership with a Research Group comprised of one youth representative and one adult representative from each of the five grantee organizations participating in the study, including The Center for Fair Futures. Research Group members were paid consultants to Child Trends. Child Trends served as the research and technical assistance partner and convened the Research Group 10 times from July 2024 to June 2025 to participate in the design of the study, data analysis, and dissemination of findings.

Members of the Research Group identified this policy win and recruited their peers and partners to participate in interviews. This profile of The Center for Fair Futures is informed by seven interviews with a total of four youth, three staff, and three external partners, supplemented with information gleaned from five documents. We coded all transcripts and documents in Dedoose and conducted thematic analysis with the Research Group to distill our findings and finalize a Framework for authentic youth engagement in the policy process. For more information on study’s methodology, please see <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/authentic-youth-engagement-policy-framework>.

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