



BRIEF

DFW Opportunity Youth Community of Practice Micro-Learnings Report #1

Overview

In August 2023, **Big Thought** launched the **DFW Opportunity Youth Community of Practice (OY COP)** focused on addressing the alarming rate of young people entering the juvenile justice system, especially those classified as “Opportunity Youth” (ages 16-24 disconnected from school and/or workforce).



The DFW OY COP convenes like-minded and diverse organizations across the Dallas/Ft. Worth Metroplex area whose services are focused on deflection, diversion, and/or intervention for these youth and their families. The OY COP has two primary objectives:

- 1 Break down silos and align with community-based efforts to support incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youths, and identify successful areas of practice, sharing knowledge, and fostering collaboration
- 2 Elevate and expand the community’s content expertise on preventing juvenile justice system involvement and recidivism, with the goal of improving outcomes for youth

Along this journey, Big Thought is committed to sharing real-time insights, or micro-learnings, related to both the process and outcomes of the OY COP. This is the first **Brief** in what will be a series as this initiative moves forward.

What We Are Doing

Recruit & Convene

Big Thought conducted outreach, with the plan to recruit up to 10 organizations focused on OY and juvenile justice work. In reality, **Big Thought received interest from nearly 50 organizations, with a total of 33 formally joining the OY COP.** The participating organizations represent a broad range of programmatic and/or service focus areas and expertise. Monthly OY COP sessions began in October 2023 and have focused on a range of topics.

Session	Objective	Facilitators
Session 1 (October)	Discuss alternative strategies to reach opportunity youth via creative mediums.	Vincent Coronado (Big Thought), Daniel Preach Crawford (Master Teaching Artist)
Session 2 (November)	Discuss the disparities of the alternative education system, featuring a case study of the partnership between Big Thought and Fort Worth ISD to reimagine alternative education at Metro Opportunity @ Handley.	Rashad Beal (Big Thought)
Session 3 (December)	Data exploration and discussion featuring CFT’s recent <i>Towards a Regional Strategy for Re-engaging Opportunity Youth</i> report and data related to juvenile justice, opportunity youth and factors influencing youth disconnection.	Yulise Reeves-Waters (Lone Star Justice Alliance), Ashley McIver (Communities Foundation of Texas)

Through these sessions, OY COP participants have reinforced and expanded their understanding of the landscape of factors influencing opportunity youth, what being disconnected means for a young person that is currently or formerly impacted by the criminal justice system, the systemic disparities in alternative education that influence the trajectory of Black and Brown males, and promising creative learning, restorative, and trauma-informed practices when working directly with youth currently or at risk of disconnection.

Inquire & Listen

With the support of Southern Methodist University's Center on Research and Evaluation (SMU CORE), Big Thought Institute and the OY COP facilitation team designed and rolled out **intake questionnaires**, began conducting **interviews** with OY COP member organizations, implemented **session feedback surveys**, and are capturing **video session reflections** from OY COP members. Through these data collection efforts, we aim to learn with and from the OY COP and inform future session facilitation and collaboration.

What We Are Learning

At the onset of the DFW OY COP, each participating organization was asked to complete an intake questionnaire to better understand the scope of work, impact, and stakeholder engagement (n=24). The questionnaire was designed to complement SMU CORE's assessment process and support the OY COP work.

Organizational Priorities & Focus Areas

A trend analysis of the themes across participating OY COP organizations reveals that overall, organizations collectively strive to make a positive impact on youth, communities, and systems through a range of educational, empowerment, and support initiatives. **There is not just one way that organizations are working to address this space.**

Youth Focused Services	Many organizations focus on providing services to youth, addressing their academic, social-emotional, cultural, and economic needs.
Education & Training	Several organizations are involved in education, offering after-school programs, GED classes, tech education, and workforce training. This includes online learning platforms, mentorship, and career development.
Community Empowerment	A common theme is empowering communities through various means such as providing resources, advocacy, and alternatives to traditional systems like youth incarceration.
Holistic Support	Some organizations offer wrap-around services, including counseling, parenting classes, and referral to partner organizations, addressing the holistic needs of individuals and families.
Partnerships & Collaboration	Collaboration is evident, with organizations partnering with others, retail/grocery companies partnering with nonprofits, and community service providers connecting youth with their communities.
Diversity of Focus	The organizations have diverse focuses, including tech education, financial literacy, creative engagement opportunities, support for victims of intimate partner violence, and capacity building in STEAM and workforce development.
Advocacy & Transformation	Several organizations aim to transform systems, improve life outcomes for justice-involved youth, and advocate for racially equitable alternatives to traditional approaches.
Mentoring and Empowerment	Mentoring plays a significant role, with organizations dedicated to defending the potential of youth, providing mentor programs, scholarships, and supporting leadership development.



Organizational Strengths & Barriers

Participants were asked to think about the strengths of their organizations and programming and the potential barriers to achieving their intended impact. Strengths that were most identified by the respondents are community engagement, educational excellence, innovation, resourcefulness, and advocacy. Barriers collectively highlight financial constraints, geographic and access challenges, resource and capacity issues, client engagement and retention difficulties, social and systemic barriers, as well as challenges in awareness and collaboration. Additionally, we wanted to understand the potential alignment between strengths and barriers, and if there were opportunities to leverage strengths of the group to address perceived barriers. The following table outlines the potential leverage points that the OY COP can tap into.

Strengths	Barriers
Diverse Programming and Services (Strength)	Financial Constraints (Barrier)
The strength of offering a wide range of programs and services may attract more funding opportunities, partnerships, and supporters, potentially mitigating financial constraints.	
Community Engagement (Strength)	Geographic and Access Challenges (Barrier)
Strong community engagement can help address geographic and access challenges by building local support and partnerships, improving outreach, and enhancing the organization's presence in different areas.	
Resourceful and Strength-Based Approach (Strength)	Resource and Capacity Issues (Barrier)
The strength of being resourceful and having a strength-based approach may help optimize existing resources, attract volunteers, and foster partnerships, addressing resource and capacity issues.	
Youth Leadership and Ongoing Mentorship (Strength)	Client Engagement and Retention (Barrier)
The strength of providing youth leadership programs and ongoing mentorship can contribute to improved client engagement and retention by creating a supportive and engaging environment.	
Advocacy and Impact (Strength)	Social and Systemic Barriers (Barrier)
The strength of legal advocacy, policy advocacy, and innovative programming can contribute to addressing social and systemic barriers by advocating for change and influencing policy.	
Brand Recognition and Cultural Relevancy (Strength)	Awareness and Collaboration (Barrier)
The strength of brand recognition and cultural relevancy can enhance awareness and foster collaboration by making the organization more visible and relatable to diverse communities.	
Longevity and Mission Defined (Strength)	Organizational Development Challenges (Barrier)
The strength of having a defined mission and longevity may contribute to organizational stability, aiding in overcoming organizational development challenges for a young organization.	

Perceptions of Community of Practice

Additionally, participants were asked their personal views of engaging in the OY COP over the next year. We understand that we are supporting the individuals in the room as much as we are supporting the organizations. **A majority of respondents reported that they are highly supportive and optimistic about the OY COP, which bodes well for successful engagement.** Overall, we saw the following trends:

- **Positive Sentiment:** There is a consistent positive sentiment across most questions, indicating a general belief in the value and benefits of the OY COP.
- **Enthusiasm:** Respondents overwhelmingly express enthusiasm and belief in the potential benefits of collaboration within the OY COP.
- **Learning Orientation:** A majority believes in the learning potential from other organizations and sees the opportunity to share strengths.
- **Perceived Value:** Participants generally see the OY COP as valuable, with minimal indications of it being perceived as an additional burden.

The following chart outlines the range of responses participants reported to the six OY COP engagement questions.



OY COP Participant Engagement Perceptions - Baseline



Conclusion

Questionnaire responses suggest that OY COP members believe that for those being impacted by the juvenile justice system it is a multi-dimensional problem. The variety of issues identified, and the range of responses suggest that **the challenges faced by youth and families before, during, and after interactions with the juvenile justice system are complex and multi-faceted.** This complexity arises from the interplay of various factors, such as mental health, socioeconomic conditions, systemic inequalities, family dynamics, and more.

Addressing the needs of opportunity youth and their families impacted by the juvenile justice system will likely require a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach that considers and tackles various contributing factors. Strategies and interventions should be tailored to the specific needs of individuals and families, recognizing the interconnectedness of these issues and aiming to create systemic and holistic solutions. This understanding aligns with a broader perspective that emphasizes the importance of addressing the root causes and systemic factors contributing to challenges within the juvenile justice system.

Big Thought will release additional insights from the OY COP on an ongoing basis.

DFW Opportunity Youth Community of Practice Members

- All Stars Project
- Big Brothers Big Sisters
- Big Thought
- Child Poverty Action Lab
- CodeStream Studios, LLC
- Communities Foundation of Texas
- Communities In Schools Dallas
- Creative Arts Center of Dallas
- Dallas College
- Dallas Community Fellowship, Inc. (DCFI)
- Dallas County Juvenile Dept
- Equus Workforce
- Excellence By Design Education Center
- Fit and Faithful Living
- Fossil Group
- Junior Achievement of Dallas
- Keeping Families Connected
- Lone Star Justice Alliance
- Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute
- Nomi Network
- Project Still I Rise Inc.
- RBJ
- Rockteen Youth Foundation
- Sam's Club
- Tarrant County Youth Advocate Program
- TD Jakes Foundation
- The Prison Fellowship
- The Wright Cause Urban Youth Conservation
- TLT- Tomorrow's Leaders Today, Inc
- Unity Mental Health Services
- Year Up
- Young Leaders Strong City
- Youth Guidance

Contributions

This briefing was compiled by **Big Thought Institute** with input from Kristina Dove, Sr. Director of Big Thought Learning Systems. Artificial intelligence tools were used, in part, for initial data analysis, with review, revisions and synthesis conducted by staff.

