

Youth Engagement in Planning Nationwide

A Convening in New Orleans

By Ariel Bierbaum and Alissa Kronovet¹

Over a hot late May week, young planners from around the nation convened as part of the Planners Network National Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. Twenty youth and adult allies came from Brooklyn, the Bay Area, and New Orleans to show just what can happen when students are provided with an opportunity to engage in urban planning efforts. Over the course of 4 days, participants learned about the current situation in New Orleans and brought their unique skills and perspectives to the question “How can New Orleans be rebuilt into a vibrant, economically and racially diverse city?”

While city planning practitioners and community development professionals often seek to include diverse constituents, particularly as a way to ensure equitable development across regions, they often overlook young people as key stakeholders in the community. But youth have a unique and important perspective on how cities function for its residents. Across the country, a number of organizations and programs are seeking to enhance young people's civic participation, to fundamentally change city planning practice by integrating youth into public processes, and improve the educational system by integrating city planning and community development into school-based curricula.

Three such organizations joined together in New Orleans to grapple with the urban planning challenges facing the city after Hurricane Katrina. Students participating in the Y-PLAN program directed by the Center for Cities and Schools at UC Berkeley came to New Orleans after working on a real world planning project in Emeryville, where they had the opportunity to learn how to work with residents, community organizations, and city council. Three-thousand miles away, in Brooklyn, New York, students at the Academy of Urban Planning (AUP) had fine-tuned their urban planning and GIS skills through unique partnerships with community organizations, planning agencies, and local colleges and universities.

And down in the Big Easy, students at the O. Perry Walker Charter High School (Walker) have been collaborating with the non-profit, Communities In Schools of New Orleans, Inc (CISNO) to champion for connecting necessary community resources with schools to help young people successfully learn, stay in school, and prepare for life. The collaboration has spearheaded several successful initiatives for students, such as a youth leadership council that gives youth a voice during the city's recovery. In partnership with Walker, CISNO has facilitated arts education, mass volunteer events, music performances, positive behavior support programming assistance, and professional development related to identifying trauma and building resilience.

Walker students acted as the hosts for this event, bringing their peers to New Orleans's many distinct neighborhoods, including the French Quarter and the Lower Ninth Ward. This trip was both educational and emotional for participants, due to the intensity of this place and experiences that Walker students shared with the others. This was especially poignant when the students visited the Lower Ninth Ward and the site where the levies broke. Walker students shared their personal experiences of loss, relocation, and rebuilding. It was a powerful moment, as many of the young planners had never before left their native cities or met other young people with similar urban experiences to theirs.

The students quickly jumped into the planning challenge, bringing the skills that they have learned in their respective programs to bear in New Orleans. Building on Y-PLAN students' experiences of working on client-driven projects, participants conducted a survey for the City of New Orleans Office of Recovery Management. In the Elysian Fields neighborhood of New Orleans, students walked door to door, assessing which units were re-occupied since Hurricane Katrina, and which remained vacant. Students also had the chance to speak with local residents and document their perspectives on the recovery efforts.

AUP students led a lesson on GIS at the University of New Orleans, where they discussed projects they had worked on documenting housing affordability issues in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and encouraged other students to examine their respective cities through this lens. And the Walker Youth Council invited their guests to a meeting to discuss their upcoming campaigns and work. Students and their adult allies also facilitated a participatory workshop at the Planners Network Conference entitled, “Youth Participation in Planning—Where do we Go from Here?” There was also time to socialize, at a spoken word recital by one student at the opening ceremony and a crawfish broil hosted by Walker High School.

At the end of the week, students left New Orleans with new relationships and with increased knowledge of urban planning skills and practice, knowledge that they will be able to apply back home in their own communities.

The Economics of Early Childhood Development as Seen by Two Fed Economists

1. This commentary is partially based on an article previously published in *Education Week*: A. Rolnick and R. Grunewald, "Early Intervention on a Large Scale," *Education Week* 26, no. 17, (January 4, 2007): 32, 34-36.
2. Chairman Ben S. Bernanke, "The Level and Distribution of Economic Well-Being," Remarks before the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Omaha, Neb., February 6, 2007. Online at <http://federalreserve.gov/BoardDocs/Speeches/2007/20070206/default.htm>
3. J. Heckman and D. Masterov, "The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children," Early Childhood Research Collaborative, Discussion Paper 104, August 2006, 43. Online at <http://www.earlychildhoodrc.org/papers/DP104.pdf>
4. For a detailed description of the scholarship fund, see A. Rolnick and R. Grunewald, "A Proposal for Achieving High Returns on Early Childhood Development," Working Paper, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, March 2006. Online at <http://www.minneapolisfed.org/research/studies/earlychild/highreturn.pdf>

Linking Community Development and School Improvement

1. Mark Warren is the author of *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*, which studies the Texas/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation, the nation's most prominent faith-based community organizing network.
2. For more details, see M. Warren (2004), "Linking Community Development and School Improvement," A Report prepared for the Ford Foundation, online at <http://www.isna.net/display.aspx?pointer=2515>.

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1. Ariel Bierbaum is the Program Manager at the Center for Cities & Schools, UC Berkeley. She manages the Y-PLAN program, as well as the broader Youth, Schools, and Planning Initiative, which includes professional development, capacity-building, and research around youth engagement in planning practice. Alissa Kronovet is a candidate in the Master of City Planning program at UC Berkeley and a research fellow with the Center for Cities & Schools. In addition to coordinating the New Orleans trip, Alissa is heading up the national organizing efforts around the Young Planners Network.

The Glow Foundation

1. L. Muraskin and J. Lee (2004) "Raising the Graduation Rates of Low-Income College Students" (Washington: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity In Higher Education).
2. Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2006). *Mortgaging Our Future: How Financial Barriers to College Undercut America's Global Competitiveness*. (Washington, D.C.: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance).
3. "In their Words", College Summit, 15 April, 2007, <<http://www.collegesummit.org/school-districts/>>
4. Bedsworth, W., S. Colby and J. Doctor (2006). *Reclaiming the American Dream* (Boston: Bridgespan).
5. Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2002). *The Empty Promises: The Myth of College Access in America* (Washington, D.C.: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance).