

Childhood Prosperity Lab

Co-Design Summary Report: Youth Engagement in Ascend

Recommended Citation:

Anderson, A., Suryawanshi, M., Sowell, A., & Rose, J. (2026). *Co-design summary report: Youth engagement in Ascend*. Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Childhood Prosperity Lab (the Lab) partnered with North Hartford Ascend to elevate youth voice by exploring how young people living in Clay Arsenal, Upper Albany, and Northeast neighborhoods want to be engaged in the prenatal to career system. Their insights and perspectives will shape the direction of youth engagement and leadership within Ascend moving forward. The Lab facilitated four co-design sessions with sixteen unique youth between the ages of 13-18 over the course of four days. Using Human-Centered Design (HCD) methodologies, participants reflected on four thematic topics that were previously identified as priority by service providers serving families in the North Hartford Promise Zone:

- Involvement in After school Activities, Extracurriculars, & Other Programs & Services
- Participation in Ascend Leadership & Decision-Making
- Social Media, Marketing & Communications
- Community and Family Engagement

Specific recommendations that emerged across these conversations include:

- Co-design a Youth Advisory Board with youth so that they have more consistent opportunities to lead activities in their community.
- Co-design a Community Workshop series with and for youth in response to their ideas and priorities for learning and connection in partnership with United Way of Northeastern Connecticut.
- Facilitate more intergenerational activities in North Hartford Ascend to strengthen adult, provider, and youth engagement such as mobilizing youth ideas for Community Conversations.
- Increase awareness of after school programs and activities available to youth.
- Mobilize youth feedback to shape future marketing and communications materials so they better reflect young people's interests and encourage participation in North Hartford Ascend activities.

Overall, findings suggest that youth want to remain deeply engaged in North Hartford Ascend as both leaders in the work as well as participants of activities within the system. The recommendations will be escalated to Ascend's five thematic work groups by the Lab.

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint



CHILDHOOD PROSPERITY LAB

[Childhood Prosperity Lab](#) (the Lab) advances social innovations that support the optimal health, development, and well-being of children, families and communities where they live, learn, work, play and pray. Collaboration is key to our work. We partner with practitioners, service providers, families and changemakers across Connecticut and beyond to improve child health outcomes. Our multidisciplinary team at Connecticut Children's brings expertise in family sciences, child development, public health and more to drive impactful change.

The Lab has three core components that are unique to our approach:

- Co-designing solutions in partnership with children, families and communities using human-centered design approaches and methodologies;
- Strengthening family and community protective factors; and
- Advancing systems change to help children and families thrive in all areas of life.

NORTH HARTFORD ASCEND

[North Hartford Ascend \(Ascend\)](#) is a prenatal-to-career family navigation system designed to ensure children living in the North Hartford Promise Zone—which includes the Clay Arsenal, Northeast, and Upper Albany neighborhoods—have the support they need to reach their full potential. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods Grant Program, Connecticut Children's is facilitating a cross-sector team of early childhood experts, community leaders, community-based organizations, and residents to identify community priorities and enhance the academic, health, and quality of life outcomes of North Hartford Promise Zone residents.

PROJECT OVERVIEW & SCOPE OF PARTNERSHIP

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint

North Hartford Ascend and Childhood Prosperity Lab are two initiatives in the Office for Community Child Health. The infrastructure of North Hartford Ascend is supported by a shared governance framework and range of community and family engagement activities. Across work groups, Community Conversations, and Service Provider Meetings, the community and service providers alike have expressed the need to engage youth more intentionally in North Hartford Ascend.

North Hartford Ascend partnered with Childhood Prosperity Lab to leverage Human-Centered Design (HCD) methods to facilitate a co-design sprint with youth residing in the Clay Arsenal, Upper Albany and Northeast neighborhoods so that their perspectives shape the direction of youth engagement in Ascend.

OUR APPROACH

March 2026 Service Provider Meeting

In March of 2026, Childhood Prosperity Lab engaged 16 providers representing 12 organizations at Parker Memorial Community Center from 9:30-11:00 AM at the monthly Service Provider Meeting. The Service Provider Meeting is a designated space for providers working across sectors supporting families in the North Hartford Promise Zone to network, set strategies for deeper collaboration, and co-create events and projects that are implemented within Ascend. The session began with a brief presentation from Childhood Prosperity Lab, who highlighted the different ways in which youth have been engaged in Ascend to date. To guide discussion, the Lab proposed three questions for breakout groups to focus on in depth:



1. Within Ascend's existing infrastructure, what opportunities currently exist to engage youth more intentionally?
2. In what ways do you currently support youth needs, goals, and priorities as service providers?
3. What might be additional opportunities to support youth needs, goals, and priorities across the Ascend system?

Four priorities emerged from the breakout group discussions, which correspondingly informed the thematic design sprint topics:

- Expand visibility and reduce access barriers to youth-serving programs and resources.
- Offer regular opportunities for youth to ideate, co-create, and shape the work of Ascend.

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint

- Engage youth in marketing and communications efforts so that their lived experience shapes how other youth are reached and involved in the initiative.
- Collaborate with partners, such as the United Way of Northeastern Connecticut, to facilitate Community Workshops on topics that are of importance and interest to youth.

The Design Sprint, facilitated the first week of June, was anchored by the following goals for discussion:

DAY 1: After School Activities, Extracurriculars, & Other Programs & Services

GOALS:

1. Understand the types of programs and services youth are currently connected to and/or engaged in and why;
2. Understand the types of programs and services youth want to be connected to engaged/in; identify structural barriers that limit participation; and co-create solutions to address those barriers;
3. Understand from youths' perspective what defines trusted adults and providers providing programs/services.

DAY 2: Participation in Ascend Leadership & Decision-Making

GOALS:

1. Youth define what "community" means to them.
2. Understand the level of youths' interest in being leaders and decision-makers in Ascend, based on community and family engagement activities and governance structure (i.e., co-design sessions, community workshops, community conversations, Resident and Community Advisory Group [RCAG])
3. Operationalize what leadership and decision-making means in practice in those settings;
4. Identify what barriers/enablers might be to participation.

DAY 3: Social Media, Marketing & Communications

GOALS:

1. Understand how youth are currently receiving information about programs and services available in their community;
2. Identify what youth are most interested in learning more about in their community;
3. Understand what marketing/communications strategies would successfully reach them;
4. Understand how Ascend might incorporate more youth voice and storytelling into the initiative.

DAY 4: Community & Family Engagement

GOALS:

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint

1. Understand what youth are passionate about and what their motivations are for their health, development, and well-being;
2. Identify what “life skills” youth want to build out to inform Community Workshop topics;
3. Prioritize the programs, services and trusted adults’ youth would prefer to learn these skills from;
4. Understand what would incentivize youth to participate in Community and Family Engagement activities.

METHODOLOGIES & FINDINGS

Childhood Prosperity Lab defines Human-Centered Design (HCD) as a methodological framework for centering the needs, goals, and perspectives of children, families, communities and other key stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social innovations. The Lab team members are trained HCD practitioners, specializing in the 36 methods that comprise the LUMA Framework. The Lab proposed facilitating a co-design sprint with youth using Human-Centered Design methodologies. A co-design sprint is an intensive, time-constrained framework used by teams to generate ideas, prototype, and engage in meaningful dialogue. The Lab aimed to recruit twenty youth, recognizing that each individual could participate up to two sessions throughout the week and each session could accommodate ten participants. Youth who attended each session received a \$50 VISA gift card for their participation. A hot meal from a local small business was catered for each session. Family Navigators from Connecticut Children’s Center for Care Coordination and The Village for Families and Children attended each session to facilitate assessment, referral and linkage if youth were interested in and/or needed access to programs and resources available in their community.

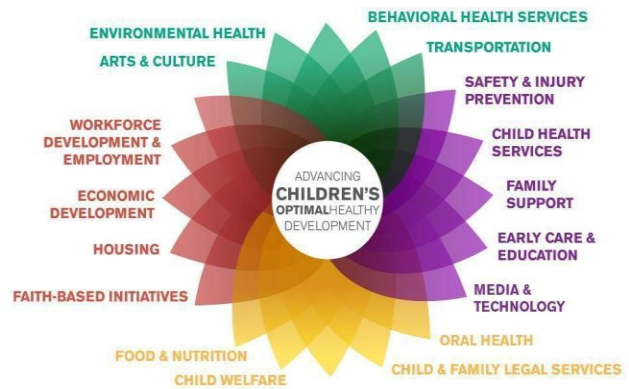
Day 1: After School Activities, Extracurriculars, & Other Programs & Services

A total of six youth participated in the first co-design session of the week. The Childhood Prosperity Lab facilitators level-set the definitions of a program, service, and resource so that youth could reflect on their engagement within a pre-established frame. Facilitators taped three large easel pad sticky notes to the front of the room, labeled by 1) programs 2) services 3) resources. To ensure youth had a fundamental understanding of the difference, they were prompted to think of an example in their community.

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint

Youth then engaged in a *Creative Matrix* exercise to individually brainstorm and reflect on what programs, services, and resources they were or are currently engaged in. Their reflections were posted onto the large easel pads. *Creative Matrix* is a methodology for generative and open-ended brainstorming according to the LUMA Institute (LUMA, 2026). Youth were then asked why they engaged in those programs, services, and resources. This deeper level of inquiry helped the North Hartford Ascend and Childhood Prosperity Lab team understand their motivations, goals, and needs—as well as who they identify as trusted sources in the community.



After this activity, youth were invited to participate in a gallery walk of the Office for Community Child Health Flower Diagram, which outlines various social drivers of health and well-being. Youth were given 2-3 stickers that they were prompted to put next to the types of programs, services, and resources they want to be connected to. This activity was inspired by a methodology, *Visualize the Vote*, which is a way to build consensus and identify priorities among a group (LUMA, 2026). The goal of this activity was to inform the kinds of programs and services in the North Hartford Ascend network the initiative needs to prioritize to connect youth with—whether it be through Family Navigation Services or targeted marketing and communications efforts. It was clear that youth are interested in after school programs and spending time in community spaces such as parks. During this conversation, facilitators learned more about how youth prefer to be informed. Youth shared that they do read flyers though they ignore “bad ones.”

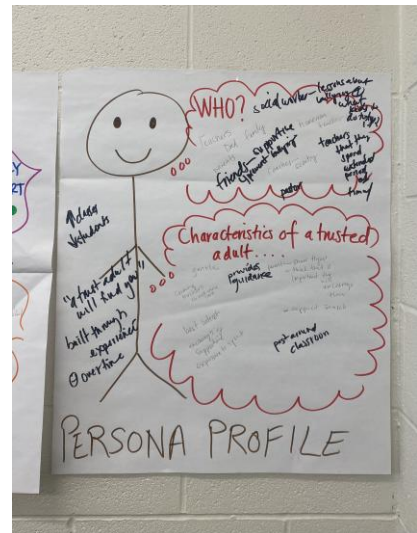
To understand structural barriers to participation and potential solutions for increasing engagement in the programs and services youth identified, facilitators led a *Rose, Thorn, Bud* exercise. *Rose, Thorn, Bud* is a methodology for understanding the strengths, challenges, and opportunities of a given topic (LUMA, 2026). In this discussion, the thorns represented a challenge and buds represented opportunities or solutions.

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint

The last and final activity was a *Persona Profile* activity, a methodology for creating a visual representation of a said “persona” to capture attitudes, values, roles, and traits (LUMA, 2026). The goal of this exercise was to understand who the trusted adults and messengers are in the community, from a youth perspective, so that Ascend can more intentionally engage them. Youth were given a worksheet that resembles a blank “persona” and given ten minutes to fill in key fields of information such as:

- Who is the person?
- Why are they a trusted adult in your community?
- What role do they hold?
- How can they support your engagement in programs, services, and resources connected to Ascend?



In summary, key takeaways from the session include:

- Youth are engaging in programs that are fun, promote social connection, physical activity, and positive self-identity (i.e., sports, after school programs at Community Centers).
- Youth want further exposure/connection to programs that offer a variety of fun activities like arts, sports, field trips, and spending time outside in nature. They identified an opportunity for more youth-driven advertisement as a pain point to participation.
- Youth have positive experiences with their student councils and are interested in further leadership roles to shape their community. They are interested in mentorship programs and building workforce development and life skills. Workforce development skills included how to save money and shadowing providers to learn more about industries. Life skills include baking and cleaning.
- The services that youth reported receiving were primarily in school. They referenced their school counselors, teachers, and nurses as trusted adults who provide concrete support.
- Youth receive information about their health and wellbeing from adults (i.e., parents, doctors, therapists), their close friends, their phones, (i.e., YouTube, social media, Google) and online resources like the Hartford Public Library website and Parent Square.
- The trusted adults in youths' lives are their parents, teachers who genuinely care about their well-being, coaches, and social workers.
- Youth mentioned having positive experiences with programs such as Black Girls Achieve, UConn Husky Sport and Nutrition, church homes, and camp at Parker Memorial Community Center.
- Youth define trusted adults as those that are always there; help navigate challenges; prevent bullying; are gentle and calming; can relate to what young people are experiencing; and whom step up in the absence of parents.

Day 2: Participation in Ascend Leadership & Decision-Making

A total of eight youth participated in the second co-design session of the week. In the Service Provider Meeting, one provider shared that the definition(s) of community that adults hold is likely different than that of youth. This sentiment informed the first activity of the session. Youth were given creative materials including pipe cleaners, construction paper, markers, pom poms, popsicle sticks, scissors, glue, glitter, etc. to



build a 3D representation of what community looks like and feels like to them. The hands-on activity was inspired by the methodology *Rough & Ready* prototyping, which is a way to develop new concepts or bring ideas to life through 3D representation (LUMA, 2026). This activity unearthed key dimensions of community health that youth are prioritizing as important to them, such as neighborhood safety. This is helpful for service providers to know as they engage with youth, design programming, and help navigate youth to appropriate services. Importantly, some of the characteristics and dimensions of community that youth offered are aligned with North Hartford Ascend's Government Performance Measures (GPRAs), including *students are healthy, students feel safe at school, and community stability*.

After this warm up activity, the conversation organically transitioned to more focused dialogue on how youth want to be engaged in Ascend. The facilitators posted five large easel pads at the front of the room, grouped by Ascend's current community and family engagement activities and youth-friendly definitions. To ensure youth had space and felt empowered to voice something entirely different than what currently exists, a fifth easel pad represented an opportunity for open-ended idea creation titled "Other Bold Ideas." The activities were framed accordingly:

- **Co-Design Sessions:** Thematic, small-group conversations to advance community needs, goals, and priorities so that their ideas and voices shape Ascend's work.
- **Community Workshops:** Activity-based, skill-building workshops selected by community.

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint

- **Resident & Community Advisory Group:** A group that meets regularly to advise Ascend on its activities and direction.
- **Community Conversations:** Monthly meetings where community and providers come together around a specific topic, partner spotlights, and system updates.
- **Other Bold Ideas:** New/other ideas for North Hartford Ascend.

Youth were then given independent time to reflect on the following questions for each activity:

- How might you define leadership and decision-making in these activities?
- What would participation like look and feel like to you?
- What is important to you about leading this work?



To build off of this activity, youth were given 1-2 stickers that they were prompted to put next to the activities they want to be more engaged in as leaders and decision-makers of the work. This activity was inspired by a methodology, *Visualize the Vote*. The goal of this activity was to identify which areas of governance youth want to lead so that providers can allocate resources and build out a process for how to integrate youth more intentionally into the governance and future infrastructure of Ascend as it evolves.

"Youth voices are most important."

To understand structural barriers to participation and potential solutions for increasing engagement in the activities youth identified, facilitators led a *Rose, Thorn, Bud* exercise. In this discussion, the thorns represented a challenge and buds represented opportunities or solutions. Youth shared that the time of day and location plays an important role in whether or not they can attend activities. They shared that they are most available in the summer and go to parks after school, such as Bushnell Park. Youth shared that they do not typically travel to

libraries or Community Centers, though a lot of younger children enjoy playing basketball at Parker Memorial Community Center. Finally, they shared the \$50 incentives are motivating for youth to attend activities because they are trying to earn and save money, but at the same time wondered "*whether people would still attend if they weren't available.*" The facilitators flipped their inquiry back to the group, and asked whether they would continue attending without incentive. The youth agreed that they would because they care about their community and have fun.

In summary, key takeaways from the session include:

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint

- Youth were asked to create a 3D representation of what community means to them. Youth shared that their artwork represents a safe, drug-free, environmentally friendly space to play, connect, and access resources.
- Youth are most interested in Community Workshops series and recommended that they be designed for young people. Their priority topics include: how to be resilient through life's challenges, building life skills (i.e., cooking class, how to wash laundry, gardening and growing your own food, managing money, authoring books, and leisurely art workshops to bring youth together for connection and joy).
- Youth are interested in intergenerational co-design sessions for specific topics, such as the impact of social media on youth health and well-being.
- Leadership (i.e., youth advisory board or internships) and mentorship opportunities would help youth to build workforce development skills and position them for decision-making. Youth want to be included more regularly and deeply; one participant shared that they'd like to be further involved in the co-design process by shaping recommendations thereafter and mobilizing them so that they see real action as a result in their community.
- Youth shared that if and when adults want to partner, adults and organizations cannot make conversations about themselves or lecture. Youth recommended that one Community Conversation could be facilitated fireside chat style wherein young people connect with their parents and providers in the same space to discuss a topic from everyone's point of view and experience. Youth cautioned that certain topics, such as mental health, would not be ideal for this setting. Instead, they suggested focusing on topics like how social media is impacting youth and how adults' perceptions differ from youth lived experience.
- Youth recommend the following priorities for Ascend activities:
 - **Co-Design Sessions:** Discussions on how to navigate the intersection of mental health and social media, promoting a "drug-free" community and third spaces for youth within North Hartford. Third spaces are social environments other than the home and school.
 - **Community Workshops:** Mental health supports and strategies, cooking and baking, managing money, a space for sparking hobbies or "dreaming" (i.e., create vision boards and self-betterment plans).
 - **Resident and Community Advisory Group:** Consider youths' vision for their future.
 - **Community Conversations:** Bullying and cyberbullying, how to be the best version of yourself to succeed in life, neighborhood safety, and youth-to-youth forum for sharing experiences and connecting.

Day #3: Social Media, Marketing, & Communications

A total of nine youth participated in the third co-design session of the week. To ease into conversation, the group engaged in an icebreaker that each youth responded to: *What is your favorite social media app?* While a fun question, it helped the Ascend team understand what social media platforms youth are using most frequently. Youth are mostly enjoying Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, while one youth shared they intentionally stay off social media.



"It was fun to talk about social media."

The first activity was guided by *Think Aloud Testing*, a methodology that encourages individuals to share their feedback aloud in the moment to articulate real, raw recommendations that are both positive and constructive (LUMA, 2026). Participants reviewed an existing flyer created by the Ascend Marketing & Communications team and provided real-time feedback, which evolved to feedback on Ascend's website and Instagram page, too. Their feedback included:

- Include more photography of young people enjoying the activity being marketed because seeing the outcome of participation is more enticing.
- Reduce the amount of text on the page of a flyer. Youth said they don't have the attention span to read everything in detail. Participants recommend bolding and increasing the font size of the activity at the top to serve as a "hook", followed by the following information in bullets: time, date, location. Youth recommended advertising the incentive more boldly, too.
- Youth highlighted that, once one young person is interested in an activity, they usually recruit their friends to join them.
- Reconsider the font that is used because it currently looks like an adult selected it. Use more "crafty" and "squiggly" font to make it look less serious.
- Clearly state what the value add is for participation. Participants shared that youth would be drawn to opportunities that are fun, build leadership experience, help reach their volunteer hours, and the incentive. Youth suggested *#BraggingRights* and *#BringCommunityTogether* as playful hashtags to include.
- If the goal is to reach more young people through programming, consider hosting events at locations where youth are already are because they become curious about the activities around them. Furthermore, they recommended adding directions for how to get to the location.
- According to youth, the Ascend Instagram and website "does not look like it's for us." Youth recommended that a responsibility of a future Youth Advisory Board could be to support social media and marketing efforts so that content and trends are relatable to them and their peers.

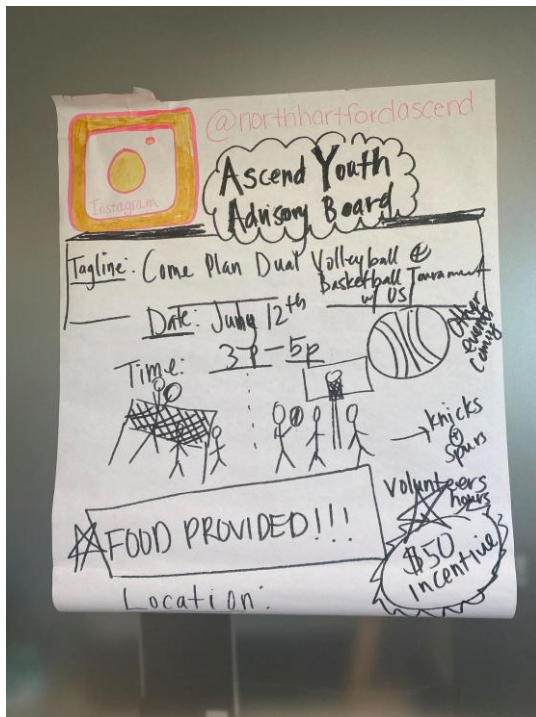
The third activity of the session was inspired by Creative Matrix. Youth were asked to take three minutes to write down all of the ways they currently receive information, inclusive of

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint

who it is from and where they access it. From this exercise, the facilitators learned the following:

- Youth are using Google and YouTube as a search engine for specific information and ChatGPT for supports like homework help and inquiries. One participant shared that they trust ChatGPT because it “pulls resources from the internet together into one overview in seconds.”
- Youth are using social media like Instagram and TikTok to learn about what is going on in their community and the world at large. They shared that they do look for trusted news sources to filter the noise online so that they receive objective information.
- Youth trust the information that is provided to them by parents and trusted adults in the community. In addition to social media, youth think that boots-on-the-ground canvassing would be effective for engaging youth in Ascend activities. Participants recommended that Ascend consider the youth that congregate at McDonalds, the Hartford Public Library Albany Branch, and Dunkin Donuts as they have nowhere else to spend their time after school.
- Youth do not want to see influencers promoting Ascend because then community efforts become about popularity. For sustainable efforts, they recommend that it stays community member driven.



Remaining in their groups, youth were given large easel pads to draw a hypothetical TikTok plan, Instagram post, flyer or other figurative form of media to convey the message to their peers about an activity of high interest. The goal of this activity was to understand what types of media resonate with youth for marketing, understanding the language and framing they'd select for how they would share information with their peers, and what design considerations would be prioritized.

In summary, key takeaways from the session include:

- Youth do not see themselves as current audiences of Ascend's marketing and communications materials
- Young people want to be engaged in the co-design of marketing and communications materials and believe this is an effort that they can help advance through a standing advisory board.
- A clear value add, such as securing volunteer hours and/or providing food, will be needed to hook youth into interesting activities. Youth expressed that after initial engagement if they have seen a value add from participation, they are more likely to engage further. Thus, getting youth engaged initially is the hardest step.
- To reach youth, consider using social media, printed flyers, and reaching their parents to spread opportunities for engagement.

Day #4: Community & Family Engagement

A total of 10 youth participated in the fourth co-design session of the week. Early in the week, youth raised community connection (i.e., icebreakers) as a fun, lighthearted way to get to know people in the room. In response, the facilitators provided participants with creative materials to create a 3D representation of a “fun fact” about themselves to share with the group.

Earlier in the week, youth shared their interest in Community Workshops and Community Conversations. In spirit of this high interest, the facilitators used this design session to plan future events through youths' vision. Each breakout group planned one activity. The open-ended nature of the *Creative Matrix* methodology is helpful because it allows for brainstorming and prioritization. The facilitator of each group asked youth logistical questions so that they could guide the planning of these sessions.

The facilitators created two large easel pads with a list of topics inventoried from earlier in the week for youth to react to through visualize the vote. The breakout groups opted to plan a Community Conversation focused on Youth Civic Engagement and a Community Workshop on the Impact of Social Media and Cyberbullying. Not only did this activity provide an opportunity to get clear on whether the youth in this session agreed with priorities identified by others earlier in the week, but shed light on the logistics of future activities. The key takeaways include:



- **Community Conversation: Youth Civic Engagement**
 - Youth believe that their peers and adults alike would benefit from light education on the importance of voting, so much so that a Community

Conversation might be an effective venue at increasing voter registration numbers.

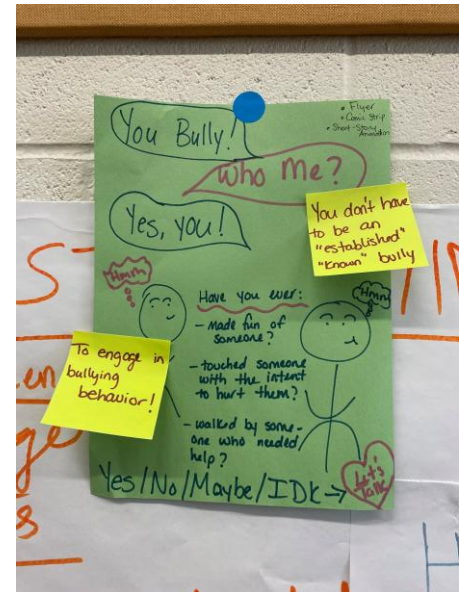
- Youth view civic engagement as a motivating channel for community advocacy.
- A presentation would be helpful to level-set the difference between local, state, federal government; what voting impacts (i.e., reproductive health, immigration safety, etc.) that resonate with the community; and education on why every vote counts.
- Youth agree with existing Community Conversation logistical considerations, such as facilitating the activity at Parker Memorial Community Center after traditional work hours on a weekday with minimal conflicts.
- To engage people in a topic that might be mundane, youth recommend connecting the dots to community values such as environmental health, employment, and substance misuse.
- **Community Workshop: The Impact of Social Media and Cyberbullying**
 - While the group selected social media as the focus of the workshop, the conversation evolved to reflect on the impact of cyberbullying.
 - Youth identified a few ideas, from their perspective, on how to intercept bullying. Their solutions include creating a compliment wall to give/receive positive affirmations from social connections, facilitating an in-person meditation Community Workshop, encouraging youth to get involved in sports, and to name that bullying is in fact an issue at school.
 - Youth created their own version of a Community Workshop flyer to help spread awareness about the impact of bullying. Importantly, the flyer captures concrete examples of bullying, articulates that the conversation is for everyone – even if they are unsure whether they have bullied and/or been bullied, and cues an effective marketing idea for how to start the conversation by adding a “Let’s Talk” icon circled by a heart. Adults should regard this prototype as an effective flyer for engaging youth.

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint

The last activity of the session was framed by *Experience Diagramming*, a methodology that maps individual or group experiences over time, noting when interactions are positive or negative (LUMA, 2026). The diagram was organized by two categories: a smiley face and frowny face. The smiley face represented positive incentives for engagement in Ascend activities, whereas the frowny face represented negative experiences or potential barriers from wanting to participate in and/or accessing Ascend activities.

Youth would be motivated to attend an event with food available and stipends for attending. Youth shared that a “participation checklist” would be helpful in the marketing materials so that they are informed of what to expect upon arrival. In the Service Provider Meeting, one provider highlighted how youth want to attend but they do not have reliable or affordable transportation to get to and from Parker Memorial Community Center. Youth confirmed that transportation to and from the event might be challenging for families. They also shared that it can be intimidating for young people to attend events that are typically attended by adults, so activities designed for intergenerational dialogue should be established ahead of time so that everyone’s voice can be heard and respected in smaller settings. On the flip side, youth also might feel pressured to respond, so flexibility should be welcomed. One way to achieve this, youth shared, is to avoid round robin report-outs.



In summary, key takeaways from the session include:

- Youth shared that Community Conversations and Ascend activities are appropriately framed as “Community Issues” because youth voice/experiences and adult voice/experiences together comprise a community. To that end, they recommend these activities remain hands-on and dialogue-driven versus presentation formats.
- In the Community Workshop breakout group, youth identified mindfulness exercises as an activity that would be welcomed in Community and Family engagement settings whether practices are taught or experienced in the space together.
- Youth invite discussion on hard topics in Ascend’s Community and Family engagement activities so long as there is space for healthy, respectful disagreement.
- Youth elevated that the atmosphere of the activity or session matters for engagement. They referenced decoration such as balloons, music, and posters as a space that people would want to be in and/or be interested by in passing.
- A call to action should be embedded within Community and Family engagement activities. For example, in the Community Conversation planning breakout group, youth recommended that residents are provided with next steps or concrete ways

to get involved beyond the convening itself. Youth recommended this be captured in the quality and satisfaction survey to gauge whether residents feel activated to make a difference in their community.

RECOMMENDATIONS & NEXT STEPS

- **Co-design a Youth Advisory Board with youth so that they have more consistent opportunities to lead activities in their community.** In the second co-design session focused on *Leadership & Decision Making*, youth were asked how involved they wanted to be in Ascend activities. In reflecting on co-design sessions specifically, youth shared that while the conversation starts at co-design sessions, they want to be further engaged over time to help advance the ideas into tangible recommendations. When asked what this structure for engagement might look like, they compared the level engagement to a student council – where they help set the goals, plan activities, and guide work from a leadership perspective. In community health settings, these roles and responsibilities are similar to a youth advisory board. Preliminary brainstorming produced the following recommendations: the advisory board should be open to youth ages 14-18 but during meetings, conversations should be split across two breakout groups of younger and older teens; and while recruiting students, the application should have a needs assessment built in to understand whether youth need transportation support to attend, etc. The immediate next step is for Childhood Prosperity Lab to facilitate a co-design session with youth to continue collaboratively shaping how it would operate and mull over other important considerations.
- **Co-design a Community Workshop series with and for youth in response to their ideas and priorities for learning and connection in partnership with United Way of Northeastern and Central Connecticut.** In the second co-design session focused on *Leadership & Decision Making*, youth agreed that they are most interested in workshops to learn how to become the best versions of themselves and build community. Topics that they are most interested in include: learning how to cook/bake, managing money, and opportunities for creating art. Specific ideas included making slimes, bedazzling phone cases, and painting. Importantly, youth agreed this will strengthen workforce development, strengthen social connection, and give them an alternative activity after school to participate in so that they don't scroll on social media. Youth recommend strong marketing and communications strategies to so that they are aware of the opportunity including a combination of flyers, social media posts, Parent Square, and canvassing in school.
- **Facilitate more intergenerational activities in North Hartford Ascend to strengthen adult, provider, and youth engagement such as mobilizing youth ideas for Community Conversations.** In the second co-design session focused on *Leadership & Decision Making*, it became clear that youth feel adults cannot understand the digital world they are growing up in yet have a lot of unsolicited wisdom to share. Youth passionately articulated the social pressures of growing up online, the challenges of cyberbullying, and highlighted some of the benefits of

being digitally connected, like having instant access to news outlets. Youth recommended that a Community Conversation be focused on *Growing up Digital* with small fireside chats that youth can participate in with their caregivers and providers in the community. Youth believe that this forum will be less intimidating than a larger setting and provides every generation with a chance to voice their perspective on that social driver of health. Importantly, youth shared those adults need to actively listen to what they experience if they want an authentic understanding of their mental and social health. While this example is concretely thematic, Community Conversations as a whole should be more accessible to youth and marketed to encourage youth attendance. In addition to the Community Conversation, youth shared that they'd like to participate in co-design sessions that are intergenerational to bridge the gap of conversations happening in isolation between the two age groups.

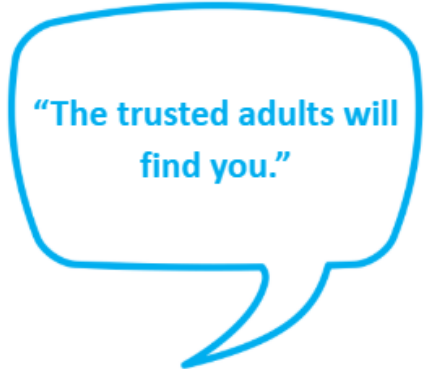
- **Increase awareness of after school programs and activities available to youth.** In the first co-design session focused on *After school Activities, Extracurriculars, & Other Programs & Services*, youth shared their motivation to participate in programs is based on fun, opportunities for exercise/healthy competition, and self-development. Youth expressed their joy for playing various sports such as basketball, engaging in the arts, and workforce development/mentorship opportunities. Importantly, some youth shared that they feel they have “aged out” of some community hubs, such as Parker Memorial Community Center and are seeking additional third spaces to engage in activities that are safe and fun. While the North Hartford Ascend Family Navigation system has appropriately focused on access to basic needs and services, youth want to learn more about opportunities to get involved in their community. The Family Navigation Work Group should reflect on their existing infrastructure and resources (i.e., Family Navigator services, the Community Resource Map) and adapt them to youth priorities. Furthermore, Ascend Marketing & Communications efforts should support the visibility of after school programs and activities through social media, flyers, and youth-identified distribution channels. Information about after school activities should be promoted with intentional support of Hartford Public Schools and the City of Hartford's Department of Families, Children & Youth.
- **Mobilize youth feedback to shape future marketing and communications materials so they better reflect young people's interests and encourage participation in North Hartford Ascend activities.** While Ascend is currently leveraging Instagram and Facebook to increase visibility of events and activities, youth do not see themselves as an audience of the content. In addition to the surplus of ideas they have for strengthening digital and print materials, they want to help actively shape the design of content. Youth know what trends, music, and visuals will interest their peers across outreach materials and elevated this as an example of how they could participate in a Youth Advisory Board. For example, if a future Youth Advisory Board was collaboratively planning a Community Workshop on managing money, a role that they would like to have is co-creating what the flyer and digital content would look like to reach their peers.

YOUTH FEEDBACK & IMPACT

At the end of each session, participants were asked to provide their feedback through a quality and satisfaction survey. A total of 33 responses were documented in the survey throughout the week.

Of the total feedback collected:

- **94%** strongly agree or agree that they felt a sense of community, a protective factor for health and well-being.
- **100%** strongly agree or agree that there was ample opportunity for participation.
- **97%** strongly agree or agree that the activities were interactive and engaging.
- **91%** are interested in future opportunities to participate again.
- **2 participants** connected with a Family Navigator across all four sessions.



**"The trusted adults will
find you."**

The following anecdotes were collected from youth across all four sessions:

- *"Very meaningful to have my voice heard."*
- *"This was a great experience. I like the way youth are participating in conversations like this."*
- *"I found it good. Great communication and ideas look forward to doing this again."*
- *"The program was great and interactive. Hope to come again."*
- *"I have a new understanding of the process for how youth ideas get used."*
- *"I felt very satisfied because I gained a lot of information and had a good time."*
- *"It was nice I liked the food today."*
- *"It was fun and it was a very good time here."*
- *"It was fun interacting with other people."*
- *"I am satisfied with how it turned out and learned things, I enjoyed working with peers."*
- *"It was very enjoyable and the food was great I liked how it was very comfortable."*

STAY CONNECTED

- **Email:** childhoodprosperitylab@connecticutchildrens.org
- **Facebook:** Connecticut Children's Community Child Health
- **LinkedIn:** Connecticut Children's Office for Community Child Health
- [Advancing Kids Blog](#)

RESOURCES

Youth Engagement in North Hartford Ascend

Childhood Prosperity Lab's Inaugural Co-Design Sprint

- **North Hartford Ascend Website:** [Home - North Hartford Ascend](#)
- **Family Navigation Email:** ascend@thevillage.org
- **North Hartford Ascend Instagram:** @northhartfordascend
- **North Hartford Ascend Facebook:** [North Hartford Ascend](#)
- **City of Hartford Youth Services:** [Youth Services – City of Hartford](#)