Childhood Prosperity Lab

North Hartford Ascend Service Provider Meeting:

Implementing Childhood Prosperity Lab's Mastermind & Co-Design Frameworks

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NORTH HARTFORD ASCEND

North Hartford Ascend (Ascend) is a prenatal-to-career initiative 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.

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.

The Lab applies the core components of the initiative to a continuum of services that support ***changemakers***—those who are innovating to strengthen the social drivers of health and conditions in which children and families live. The Lab facilitates Mastermind sessions with changemakers to design and scale their innovations for maximum impact. The Mastermind is an opportunity for changemakers to

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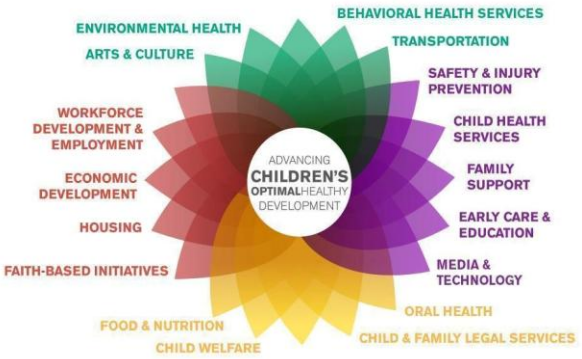
step away from their day-to-day work, socialize the innovation with a panel of **advisors**, and receive unbiased, actionable feedback from industry leaders and content area experts.



Advisors have experience designing, testing, evaluating, and scaling public, community, and population health initiatives and/or content area expertise in different facets of child health, development, and well-being. There are three components to the Mastermind:

- A semi-structured 60-to-90-minute meeting with advisors from Connecticut Children's and other organizations as appropriate;
- A short-report documenting actionable recommendations to strengthen the innovation; and
- A follow-up meeting to debrief the Mastermind and explore next steps.

PROJECT OVERVIEW & SCOPE OF PARTNERSHIP

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. Across work groups, Community Conversations, and the monthly Service Provider Meeting, the community has expressed the need to engage youth in the activities of North Hartford Ascend. North Hartford Ascend partnered with Childhood Prosperity Lab to leverage Human-Centered Design (HCD) methods to plan a Mastermind session that used service provider feedback to shape the direction of youth engagement in Ascend.

OUR APPROACH: METHODOLOGIES & FACILITATION

Childhood Prosperity Lab team members are trained Human-Centered Design (HCD) practitioners. The Lab defines 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. Team members from Childhood Prosperity Lab are certified HCD Practitioners, specializing in the 36 methods that comprise the LUMA Framework.

The Lab proposed facilitating a Mastermind session using Human-Centered Design methodologies during the March Service Provider Meeting to understand how Ascend might engage youth more intentionally. The Service Provider Meeting is a designated space for cross-sector providers 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.

March 2026 Service Provider Meeting

Childhood Prosperity Lab engaged 16 providers representing 12 organizations at Parker Memorial Community Center from 9:30-11:00 AM on March 26th. The Mastermind began with a brief presentation from Childhood Prosperity Lab, who highlighted the different ways in which youth have been engaged in Ascend. Similar to the Lab's signature Mastermind facilitated online, the Lab proposed three questions for breakout groups to discuss in depth:

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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?

These questions were framed using *Statement Starters*, a HCD methodology that "phrases problem statements that invite broad exploration" (LUMA Institute, 2025). Statement Starters are question starters that are typically framed by "how might we…" or "in what ways might we…". Importantly, Statement Starters invite creative brainstorming and promote divergent thinking. Three Innovation Specialists were responsible for implementing the Mastermind. Each specialist led a breakout group discussion so that all of the voices in the room could be heard. Participants were encouraged to document their ideas, reflections, and recommendations on sticky notes for each question, followed by group discussion.

KEY LEARNINGS & FINDINGS

Service providers agreed the youth engagement work within Ascend best aligns with the following facets of children's optimal healthy development: behavioral health services, education, and family support. Providers also agreed the youth engagement work has the capacity or potential to address gaps in care and services and addresses contemporary health needs.

Breakout Group #1

Breakout group #1 was facilitated by Annika Anderson, Innovation Specialist with the Lab. The participants of the group agreed on an emerging priority within the Promise Zone—respond to youth who are regularly congregating at McDonalds on Albany Avenue. Recent incidents in early 2026 indicate safety concerns ranging from drug deals to physical altercations. Providers emphasized that there is an opportunity to support at-risk youths' mental health, connect them to services, and build life skills. Providers shared that McDonalds likely serves as a physical brick and mortar space where youth feel safe and connected to one another, and that trusted adults can address this group to get them involved in positive after school programming. Providers identified the following next steps and solutions:

- Providers within Ascend should attempt to understand youths' passions, motivations, and goals so that we can address their current behavior(s) with prosocial activities. One concrete way providers might do this is flipping the deficit-orientation into future-state strengths. For example, if youth are dealing or purchasing drugs, providers might highlight to them that they are financially savvy or entrepreneurial then push them towards financial literacy classes or create space for them to dream about owning a business.

- Identify trusted adults who can slowly and meaningfully build relationships with these youth to better understand what they need and why they are congregating at McDonalds specifically. Consider having a Family Navigator set up there.
- Ask youth what "community" means to them, as it is likely different than how adults are currently defining and operationalizing it.
- Consider tabling at McDonalds so that youth can see the array of programs and services that are available throughout the initiative.
- Wake Up Wednesday has an effective model for community engagement and organic neighborhood connection to services. Consider collaborating with the Wake Up Wednesday team to pilot the model at the McDonalds.
- Consult the Partner Engagement and Family Navigation System work groups.

Breakout Group #2

Breakout group #2 was facilitated by Adriana Sowell, Innovation Specialist with the Lab. The participants of the group identified both broad and specific considerations that providers within Ascend should aim to integrate into ongoing programming. Providers identified the following next steps and solutions:

- Build authentic relationships with youth so that there is strengthened trust in programs, services, and the service providers in the community. One way to do this is by affirming youth and their lived experiences.
- Center youth ideas, goals, and perspectives in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs.
- Focus on opportunity youth, young people who are between the ages of 16 to 24 years old and are disconnected from school and work. Providers emphasized that the youth who are currently engaged are not always the at-risk youth we need to put more effort into engaging.
- Offer community workshops on topics that are of interest to youth. Providers recommend that workshops focus on workforce development training and financial literacy education.
- Continue to prioritize affiliated partner and service provider networking activities so that adults can promote events and opportunities in the community.

Breakout Group #3

Breakout group #3 was facilitated by Madhura Suryawanshi, Innovation Specialist with the Lab. The participants of the group brainstormed a list of strategies for how youth might be more engaged in co-design activities as well as how to strengthen engagement. Providers identified the following next steps and solutions:

- Participants recommended that youth be involved in the development of Ascend Marketing & Communications materials, given their expertise in what might interest their peers and the social media platforms that might successfully reach them.

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- Offer workforce development opportunities so that youth can actively skill-build with adults.
- Consider youth driving key Ascend activities including Community Conversations or serving in leadership roles.
- Engage youth in mental health programs and services that are available through the Ascend network.
- Lean into the provider network to disseminate youth engagement opportunities. 2-4-1 CARE, for example, offers sports sampling programs in the five Ascend schools and can directly spread the word about activities with youth themselves.

SERVICE PROVIDER FEEDBACK & IMPACT

At the end of the session, service providers were asked to provide their feedback through a quality and satisfaction survey. A total of 8 providers completed the survey.

Of the feedback collected on the Service Provider meeting feedback survey:

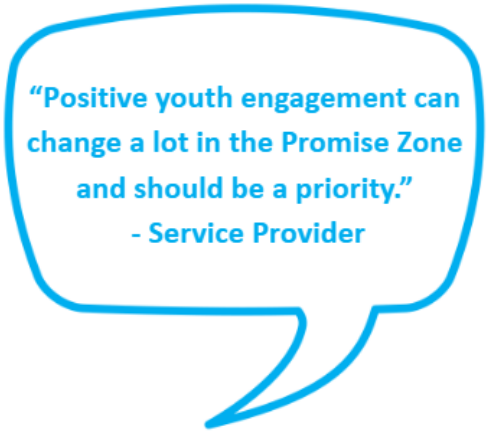
- 100% strongly agree or agree that their voices and perspectives were heard.
- 100% strongly agree or agree that the meeting was of high quality.
- 100% strongly agree or agree that the meeting goals were achieved.
- 100% strongly agree or agree that the meeting was facilitated effectively.

Of the feedback collected on the Mastermind feedback survey:

- 87.5% of service providers strongly agreed or agreed that serving as an advisor during the Mastermind aligned with their professional goals.
- 87.5% of service providers strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the quality of the Mastermind.

Strengths of the Innovation: Youth Engagement in Ascend

Service providers appreciated that the presentation on youth engagement in Ascend level-set current opportunities for engagement while creating space to imagine improvement opportunities for the future. It was clear that service providers agree youth engagement can spark positive change in the Promise Zone neighborhoods and should be a priority. To do so, service providers reflected on the importance of youth feeling safe and secure in their environments, as this will help them learn well, help them to feel confident in their community, and empower them to be connected to other resources and programs. All of the service providers who completed the post-Mastermind survey identified youth engagement in Ascend as a high priority.



Challenges of the Innovation: Youth Engagement in Ascend

Service providers agreed that adults need to meet youth where they are. To do so, providers agree that youth need to be involved in early conversations on how they might not only be engaged in Ascend, but

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what they need and want from their community. Providers agree that engaging youth is impacted by the depth of partnership with one another and that the conversation needs to continue.

RECOMMENDATIONS & NEXT STEPS

The following recommendations are informed by the feedback from service providers documented above. The recommendations are intended to be concrete next steps for the North Hartford Ascend and Childhood Prosperity Lab:

- **Expand visibility and reduce access barriers to youth-serving programs and resources.** Ascend should prioritize increasing awareness of existing programs, services, and resources that support youth health and well-being, while simultaneously addressing structural barriers that limit participation. Service providers identified access to information about mental and behavioral health services as an urgent need—echoing findings from prior youth co-design sessions facilitated by Childhood Prosperity Lab. Equally important is reducing logistical barriers to engagement. For example, youth participation in Community Conversations is currently constrained by limited access to reliable evening transportation. Addressing this barrier presents a clear opportunity to increase engagement. Potential strategies include providing transportation supports (e.g., transit stipends or organized rides), rotating event locations across neighborhoods to ensure walkability, and more prominently sharing public transportation options in outreach and registration materials. Together, these approaches can significantly expand access to engagement opportunities.

- **Offer regular opportunities for youth to ideate, co-create, and shape the work of Ascend.** To ensure relevance and sustained engagement, Ascend should embed regular, structured opportunities for youth to shape program design, outreach strategies, and decision-making processes. Service providers unanimously emphasized the need for ongoing youth co-design sessions and facilitated dialogues with trusted adults to better understand how youth want to engage. These efforts should intentionally address two distinct, but related, dimensions of engagement:

  1. Participation in programs and services, and
  2. Involvement in leadership, capacity-building, and decision-making roles.

  Elevating youth voice in both areas will strengthen program alignment and deepen impact. In particular, providers noted that youth-driven marketing and communications strategies are likely to significantly increase peer engagement. A high-impact next step would be to convene a youth co-design session focused specifically on developing outreach and messaging materials. To support meaningful and sustained participation, Ascend should continue implementing established best practices, including providing meals, compensating youth for their time and expertise, and selecting accessible, youth-friendly locations. Service providers—who are trusted adults in youths' lives—can also serve as key partners in amplifying outreach and connecting youth to these opportunities.

- **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.** Ascend should collaborate with partners, such as United Way of Northeastern Connecticut, to deliver Community

Workshops that reflect youth-identified priorities and build critical life skills. Insights from a 2025 youth co-design session indicate strong interest in financial literacy and workforce development—priorities that were reinforced by service providers. These workshops represent an opportunity not only to connect youth to mental and behavioral health resources, but also to strengthen key protective factors that support long-term well-being. In particular, programming can be designed to build Social Emotional Competence (SEC)—which includes the skills to regulate emotions, communicate effectively, solve problems, and make informed decisions. By aligning workshop content with both youth interests and evidence-based protective factors, Ascend can enhance its impact on youth readiness for the workforce and overall life success, while reinforcing upstream approaches to health and well-being. In response to this need, a series of financial literacy Community Workshops are being offered through Ascend, with marketing and communications efforts focusing on reaching youth.

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