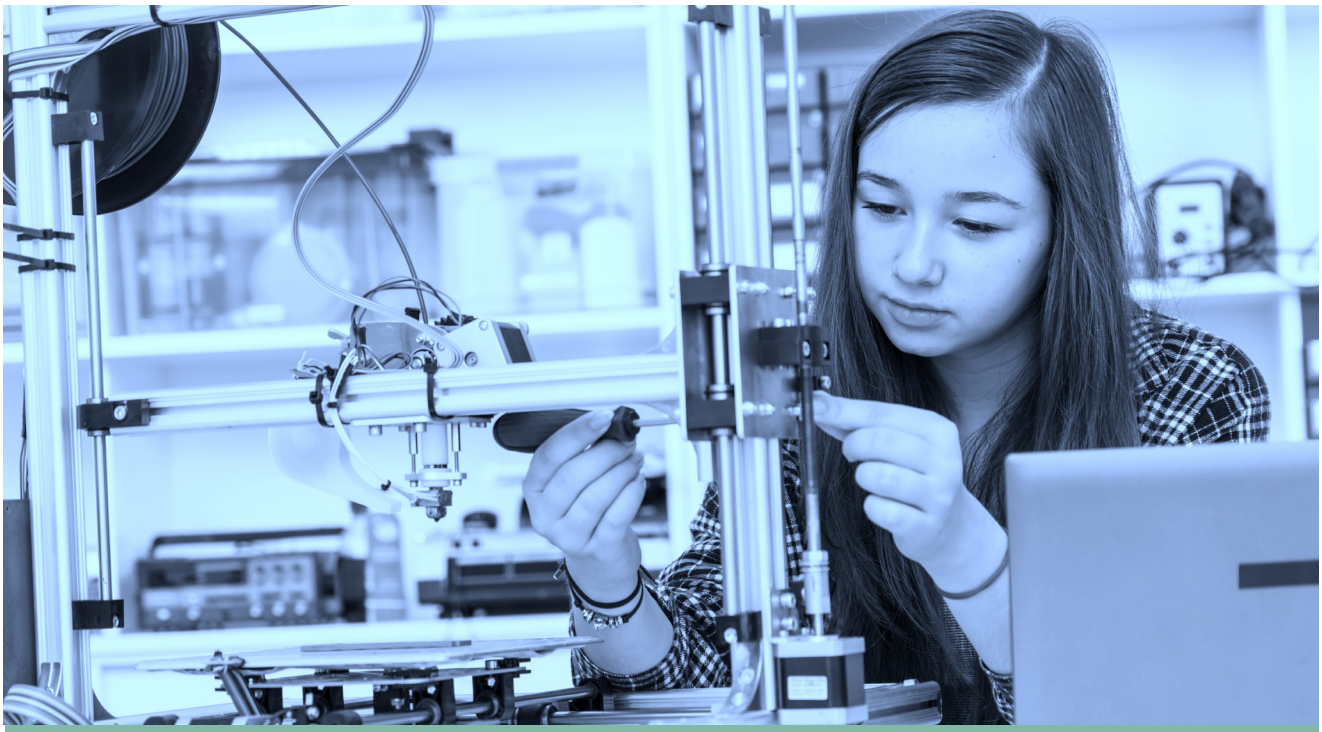

How Students in a Fresno, CA High School Used a Youth Impact Assessment to Promote Change

Lessons and Tips for Youth-Led Impact Assessments

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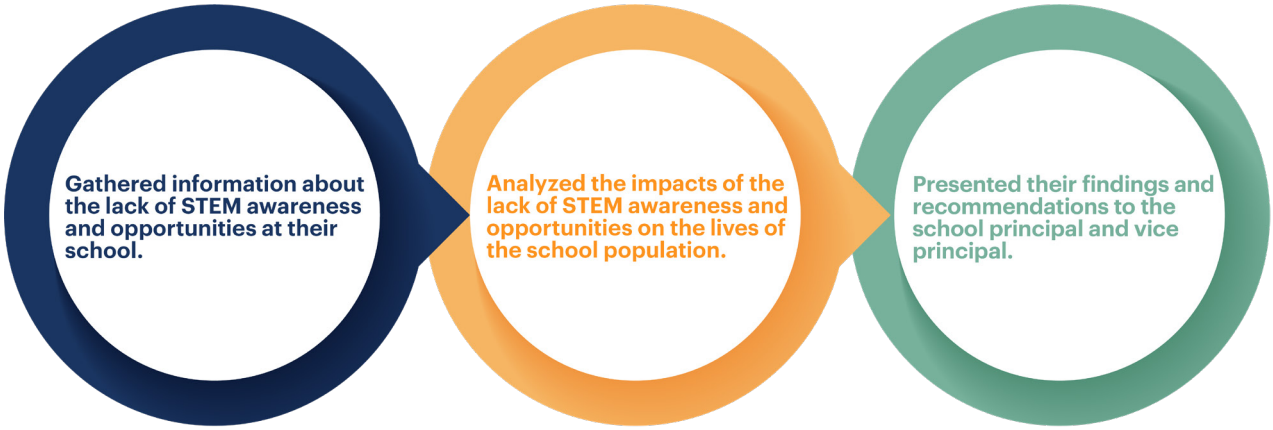
Executive Summary

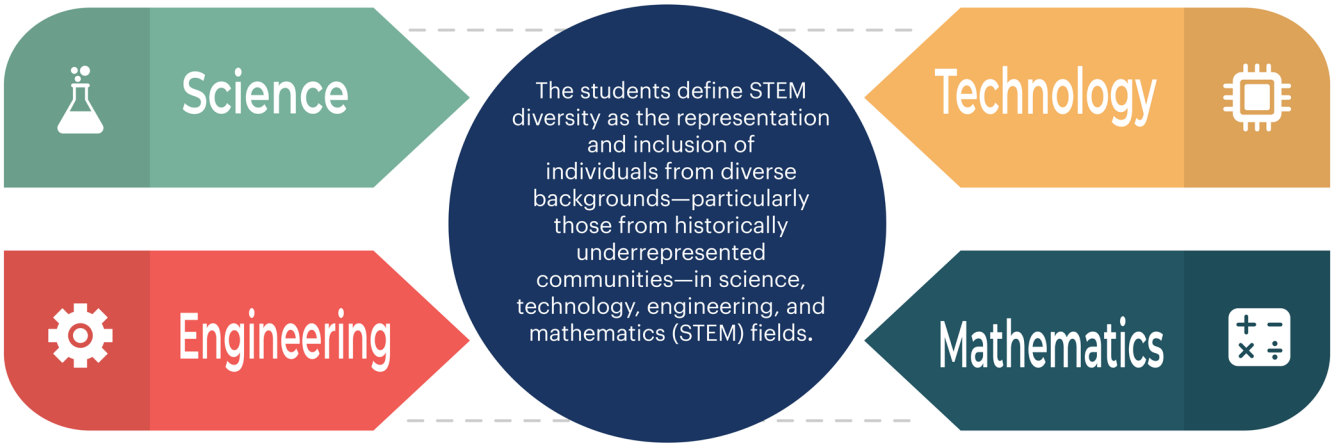
During spring 2023, six students from Sanger West High School in Fresno County, California, conducted a youth impact assessment (YIA) to understand and address the lack of STEM diversity at their rural high school. Their goal was to increase participation in STEM by students from historically underrepresented communities so these students gain a foothold on the path to economic mobility. The youth worked with Mariah Cobb, Project Specialist with Cradle to Career Fresno County (Fresno C2C), housed at the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools. Fresno C2C is a cross-sector collective impact network focused on building equitable systems and inclusive economic mobility for children and families in Fresno County.

During this nine-week project, the students carried out three main activities:



Mariah and her colleagues at Fresno C2C guided, assisted, and coached the students, while working to ensure the young people owned the project. Kids Impact Initiative (KII) lent its expertise related to impact assessments and provided technical assistance to Fresno C2C throughout the project. StriveTogether, a national Cradle to Career Network with local partners in 70 U.S. communities (including Fresno C2C), provided resources and overall leadership.

In July and September 2023, staff from Kids Impact Initiative interviewed Mariah and Jaspreet Sahota, the student who initiated the project. They also received input from Mariah's colleague and coach at Fresno C2C, Brooke Frost. Kids Impact Initiative wanted to understand how the students developed their impact assessment, the role Mariah and her colleagues at Fresno C2C and Sanger West played to support them, what worked well, and opportunities for improvement.



This brief presents key takeaways from those conversations. The recommendations represent the views of Jaspreet, the adult allies at Fresno C2C, and Kids Impact Initiative. We hope this story will inspire greater use of youth-led impact assessments and help youth and adult allies in other communities learn from this experience.

> We saw that using an impact assessment could help us achieve our goal of introducing more of our fellow students and their parents—especially those from communities of color—to STEM skills and careers. Through the YIA, we learned a lot about what's needed and are working now to improve the situation.
> **– Jaspreet Sahota, Student, Sanger West High School**

Sanger West High School and the Project Team

Sanger West High School (Sanger West) is a new high school in a rural area in eastern Fresno County, California. It had a little over 1,040 students in grades 9-11 during the 2022–23 school year. The school population is diverse, including Hispanic/Latino, White, African American, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern students.

In addition to the students, the project team included Mariah Cobb from Fresno C2C, who served as the lead adult ally for this project. Mariah was supported by her colleagues at Fresno C2C along with school-based faculty and staff.

In early 2023, Mariah conducted presentations throughout Fresno County to encourage student participation in a digital access and literacy survey. She also discussed how a youth impact assessment helped identify the digital needs of the area's children and families. During one of these sessions, Jaspreet Sahota, the sophomore at Sanger West who initiated this project, learned about YIAs.

Getting Started

In 2022, after hearing Mariah discuss impact assessments, Jaspreet expressed interest in doing her own assessment and asked what the project would entail. Mariah agreed to help Jaspreet implement an impact assessment but requested that she recruit additional students to work with her, given the amount of work it takes to conduct a YIA. Jaspreet recruited five additional students from the STEM Honor Society Club at Sanger West High School.

Choosing a Focus

The participating students had been interested in addressing STEM diversity at Sanger West for some time, recognizing that certain youth in their school were not taking advantage of STEM educational opportunities. When the students learned about youth impact assessments, they thought an assessment would be an effective strategy to document and address the lack of STEM awareness and opportunities at their school. When they dove deeper into the data, they saw a correlation between students from certain family backgrounds (those from immigrant families and those from families where parents had limited post-secondary education) and a lack of engagement in STEM education. Learning this reinforced their instinct that STEM diversity should be the focus of their impact assessment.

In addition, they believed that the impact assessment could help them make the case to offer STEM workshops. These workshops would teach students about STEM education and careers and encourage students to engage in STEM activities.

Recommendation:

At the start of the project, adult allies ought to work with youth to identify the topic area where they want to bring about change; that goal provides focus for their impact assessment.

Youth Impact Assessment

To Assess:

A Lack of STEM Diversity

Engaging School Faculty and Staff

Fresno C2C was fortunate to have the support of the Sanger West High School principal due to Fresno C2C's previously established relationship with him. The principal connected Mariah with the school's Pathway Coordinator to support the project and to be Mariah's point of contact. He also introduced Mariah to a science teacher who lent his classroom for meeting space for the project.

School officials were fairly quick to buy into the project because Fresno C2C staff had already prepared a project timeline and plan and were ready to work directly with students. Very little was required of school staff to support the project.

Recommendation:
Adult allies, with youth input, ought to recruit several staff at the school knowledgeable about the project so that when the main contact(s) isn't available, there is another person with whom to coordinate project activities.

Mariah and her Fresno C2C colleagues—along with students—stayed in regular communication with these school staff to provide updates and get feedback. Importantly, they reminded school officials that the students owned the project. This resulted in the students feeling a sense of agency and reinforced the distinct roles of the students and school staff.

Length of Project

The project spanned nine weeks during spring semester 2023. However, that was not enough time. It took longer than that to orient the students to the content and process of the work (three meetings); develop a method for, conduct, and analyze research; and implement other aspects of the impact assessment project. In particular, the students needed more time to learn about survey research methods and to create and refine their survey. Plus, the team needed additional time to account for scheduling changes as well as students' academic and extracurricular commitments.

Recommendation:
Adult allies and youth ought to allow 13-15 weeks for a youth-led impact assessment project, if possible, to ensure adequate time for thorough planning and an inclusive process.

Preparing the Students

Importantly, before Fresno C2C began working with the students, it had piloted the use of an impact assessment. Fresno C2C staff developed a YIA to understand the effect on children and their families of their proposed use of federal COVID-19-related relief funding to promote digital literacy. This pilot experience made it much easier to assist youth through a similar process.

Mariah created a project outline that laid out a timeline and biweekly milestones for the project. She met with the students over Zoom before the project began to review the proposed plan and get their feedback. She adjusted the timeline to incorporate their ideas and received consensus on the refined timeline and plan prior to sending them to the school principal.

Recommendation:
Adult allies ought to complete an impact assessment themselves so they understand what is involved before supporting a youth-led effort. They should also consult school-based (or other community-based organization) staff on the timeline as they will have valuable insights related to young people's schedules and other commitments. And it makes sense to engage youth from the beginning in developing work plan activities, given that they ultimately own the project and are responsible for carrying out its activities.

Steps Youth Took to Carry Out the Project

Impact Assessment Questions: To develop the YIA questions, the youth began by using the impact assessment template created by Kids Impact Initiative. While Mariah thought the questions were broad enough for the students to be able to identify answers, in hindsight, the students felt that the questions should have been more specific.

The students chose to divide up the questions and answered them independently. They conducted literature reviews, analyzed data, and surveyed their peers. They entered their answers into the impact assessment template and a PowerPoint presentation.

Recommendation:
Early in the project, adult allies ought to work with youth to adapt the Kids Impact assessment questions to young people's specific goals and interests.

The Survey:

Jaspreet found the most significant part of the impact assessment to be the survey. Identifying the right questions so that the survey would be comprehensive but also easy to complete and protect students' privacy took considerable time. Once students agreed on the questions, they initiated and created a four-minute survey on Google Forms to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on students' understanding of STEM.

They recruited students to participate in the survey by sharing it with their classes, posting flyers around school with a QR code linking to the survey, and using the school's mass email system. They received nearly 200 responses and included the survey results in their presentation to the principal and other school officials.

The survey also helped the youth understand what additional data and information they needed from other sources to document current conditions. Finally, the students interviewed two adults at their school—whom they considered champions for the project—to broaden their own understanding of STEM education and to strengthen their argument for increasing STEM diversity.

> Because the survey for the impact assessment was created by their peers, students were more comfortable taking the survey; they felt it would be more interesting.
> **– Jaspreet Sahota, Student, Sanger West High School**

How and When the Students Worked

The students met with Mariah in a classroom each week for approximately 20-30 minutes during lunch. Lunch was the only time that all the students were available at the same time, given their busy and conflicting schedules.

Students spent considerable time working on the YIA. In addition to the weekly meetings, they worked both independently and in groups, including one weekend afternoon.

How the Students Used the Impact Assessment Findings

The students were given the option to present their findings from the YIA to the school principal. At the beginning of the project, they were hesitant, but as they got deeper into the work, they decided they wanted to present.

Each student created and presented a PowerPoint slide. The presentation was developed solely by the students, incorporating some of the survey results slides they had already shared with Mariah and her colleague in advance for comments and suggestions.

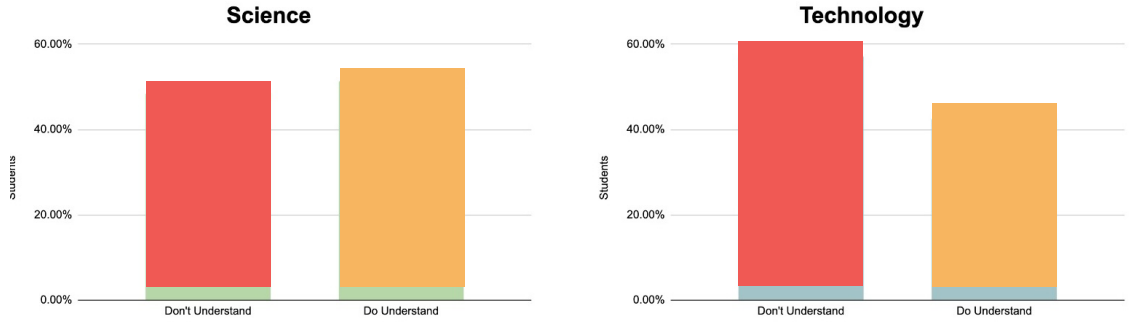
The students presented to the principal and vice principal at the end of the school year in the classroom where the students met throughout the project. This gave them more confidence than presenting in the principal's office. Both the principal and vice principal asked questions after the presentation. The students felt good about the feedback they received from these school officials.

Recommendation:
Adult allies ought to provide ample opportunities for youth to understand their options for using the assessment findings and to decide how they want to use them.

RESULT: A Lack of STEM Diversity Exists

Question Posed In Survey:

How Well Do You Understand The Process Behind Attaining A Degree In ...



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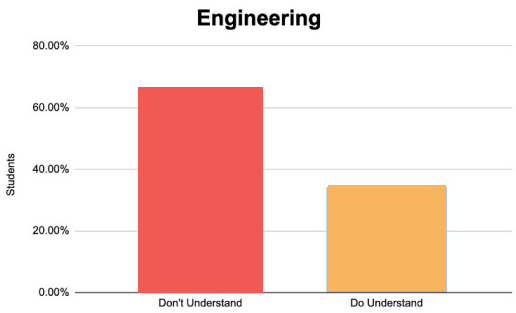
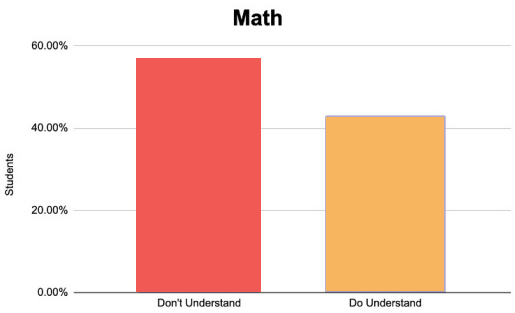




Summary of Findings:

Adressing the lack of STEM Diversity may give way for:
-Enhanced Learning Experiences
-Increased Representation
-Broadened Skill Sets

This can help prevent:
-Limited Perspectives
-Reinforcement of Stereotypes
-Narrowed Career Opportunities
-Missed Collaborative Learning Opportunities
-Inadequate Preparation for a Diverse Society

Next Steps for the Students

Based on positive feedback from the principal, the students felt confident planning their work for the next school year. Their focus for the 2023–24 school year is to host workshops that expose students to STEM-related skills and careers. The students will plan and teach the workshops themselves with support from their mentor—noting that students will find them more appealing if they are student led. Their first workshops will be for fifth and sixth graders at the three elementary feeder schools because their high school survey results showed the need for earlier exposure to STEM. To inform the workshops, the high school students will conduct short Q&A sessions about STEM with the fifth and sixth graders.

Students' research for the impact assessment also showed that some students are interested in careers that do not exist in Fresno, like jobs in marine biology or aerospace engineering. They plan to explore having the STEM Honor Society bring professionals in STEM jobs like these to the students via videoconference and/or in person. In addition, they hope to create awareness of events and activities, like career fairs, that focus on STEM subjects.

Finally, the students are exploring how to measure—such as through surveys—the outcomes of the workshops to understand whether they result in any changes in awareness about or interest in STEM among students. They also want to identify ways, like offering incentives, to obtain more responses to surveys.

What Mattered Most in Keeping Youth Engaged

01

Making the Work Appealing: Mariah wanted to make sure students were learning skills they saw as relevant and in ways that were engaging. For example, she assigned the students TED talks to watch and discuss.

02

Conveying a Sense of Ownership: One of the most important elements was to impart a sense of ownership of the project among the students, regardless of the results. The students had the final say on the project activities and products. While Mariah and her colleagues made suggestions, the students decided when they would meet, how and when they would work together, how they would communicate (e.g., they created their own group chat), and how they would conduct and present the YIA.

03

Conveying a Sense of Achievement: Mariah broke activities down into steps so that the youth could accomplish tasks incrementally, see their progress, and be confident to move to the next step, especially when learning various data research tools.

After their presentation to the principal, Mariah presented the students with certificates of completion, giving them a sense of achievement and professionalism. It was also important that the principal witnessed this recognition. The certificates and physical copies of the assessment were included in a portfolio. Students can use these materials for job or school references and future projects.

Recommendation: Adult allies ought to formally acknowledge the youths' work in ways they value. Examples include providing honoraria/stipends (if allowed), school credit, and a reference letter from a school principal or community-based organization that can be used in college or job applications.

04

Adapting Activities to Match Students' Desires and Work Styles: At each meeting, Mariah facilitated a "share out" where she prompted the students to share how they felt the project was going and what adjustments they would like to see. They then worked together to make those adjustments. In addition, Mariah used her other interactions with the youth to better understand and adapt to their working preferences.

05

Helping Students Learn New Skills: The students learned new research methods, presentation skills, civic engagement strategies, and how to advocate for policies and practices that affect them. For example, Fresno C2C data specialists trained and supported the students to use new research tools, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, Census data, and other relevant information sources.

This was the first time the students created and administered a large-scale survey. And they are eager to apply what they learned as they hone their survey skills in the future. In preparation for the students' presentation, Mariah reminded them to keep their audience in mind and include information the principal would find most relevant. Mariah also urged the students to encourage questions from the audience and share their future project plans.

06

Providing Food: Fresno C2C provided snacks and drinks at each meeting. Not only did food serve as an icebreaker and build trust, but it also ensured that students could eat during lunch period.

07

Being Available and Flexible: Mariah made herself available in various ways. She hosted regular "office hours" via a Zoom meeting two afternoons a week. Students also emailed Mariah—which they seemed to prefer over the "office hours." And Mariah made herself available via phone so that they could call or text her. In addition, Fresno C2C and the students rescheduled meetings and activities when needed.

08

Continuing Communications: Mariah communicated with the students continuously. She emailed them reminders before each meeting, before "office hours," and when products were due.

09

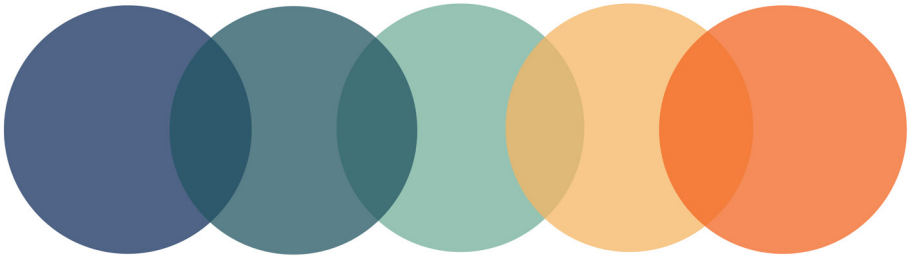
Building Trust: This project would not have succeeded if the students had not trusted Mariah. She served as an adult ally and mentor with the sole purpose of helping the students achieve their goals.

The approach described above—being flexible and responsive to the students' needs and desires—contributed to their trusting her. In addition, the fact that she was not in an authoritative position, even though she worked for the school district, helped reinforce her position as an ally.

Recognizing that building trust takes time, Mariah worked on it throughout the entire project. She got to know the students in hopes that they would feel comfortable asking for assistance and accepting her support over time. They discussed topics beyond the impact assessment project, including their lives, weekend plans, and personal goals. And students who chose to stay quiet were made to feel welcome.

It also helped that Jaspreet played the role of "project keeper" whom Mariah could turn to when needed. Jaspreet had a strong rapport with the other students, encouraging consistent attendance and participation.

In addition, Mariah is a young adult of color who attended high school in the adjacent school district. This likely was a factor in the students being more comfortable with and trusting her.



How Students Benefited

The process of conducting the impact assessment uncovered information about STEM awareness and engagement that the youth did not expect. For example, they learned that other students may not even know what STEM is, let alone the different careers that require STEM knowledge and skills (e.g., becoming a doctor, civil engineer, etc.). This meant that, in addition to ways to engage in STEM activities, the STEM workshops would need to present basic information about the skills STEM encompasses and the many careers that require it. Students also learned that they have an opportunity to engage parents and other community members in STEM awareness and learning.

The students enjoyed learning in ways that were different from traditional classroom education. They valued the TED talks, engagement with Fresno C2C staff members, and access to various research resources. They also appreciated the discussion-based learning method and team approach in which they engaged in dialogue with their peers and Mariah, rather than listening to teacher presentations.

The students learned about data sources they didn't know existed and gained new research skills they can use both in school and extracurricular activities. They also learned about the value of data to inform their work for bringing about change.

Importantly, the students gained confidence. The process of designing and conducting research, surveying their peers, working together as a problem-solving team, and presenting to the school's top executives a product they developed was very empowering for the students. Not only did the students feel a sense of ownership but also a sense of agency—that they could play a meaningful role in improving what happens at their school.

Resources and Time Required to Support the Youth

Mariah and her colleagues provided significant capacity to this project to ensure the students had the resources and support they needed to be successful. She committed roughly 25 percent of her time during the project period. This included relationship-building and ongoing communication with school faculty and staff; coordinating logistics, such as food, schedules, and meeting space; working with the students several hours a week in person and by phone and Zoom; responding to their questions; reviewing and providing feedback on students' work; and incorporating feedback from Fresno C2C and Kids Impact Initiative staff.

Other staff at Fresno C2C lent their research expertise to the project and provided guidance and support to Mariah. In addition, Fresno C2C staff participated in certain meetings with the students to offer their perspective. They also provided Mariah with feedback on students' products. The Sanger West staff provided back-end support to the students, including sharing their knowledge about how best to distribute surveys within the school, logistics regarding space, and exhibiting confidence in their work.

The primary cost of this project was the "in-kind" time provided by staff at Fresno C2C, Sanger West High School, and Kids Impact Initiative. Because the students and Fresno C2C staff were able to meet at the school free of charge, costs beyond that were minimal and included refreshments and other incidental expenses. Going forward, Fresno C2C is seeking funding for incentives for students to participate in the workshops and complete surveys.

Key Takeaways

Engaging youth in developing impact assessments is a powerful way for them to learn highly relevant and transferable skills and exercise agency in influencing decisions that affect them, their peers, and their families. Maybe most valuable, youth-led impact assessments can teach young people how to identify a problem they want to address, understand it more fully, and come up with steps to improve the situation.

To ensure success, young people need to have ownership over the process and final products, while adult allies support them as mentors. Finally, the supporting organizations need to dedicate the necessary time and resources so that the youth can gain the skills, knowledge, and confidence to be successful.

This project was part of a national pilot organized by StriveTogether through their Cradle to Career Network. Fresno C2C was one of five communities across the country participating in this pilot called Shifting Public Accountability and Resources to Center Youth (SPARCY). To effectively engage youth, SPARCY provides StriveTogether communities with technical assistance on youth impact assessments through Kids Impact Initiative, a national nonprofit focused on strengthening public-sector accountability for children and youth's well-being.

This report was designed by the staff at Fresno C2C.

To learn more about Youth Impact Assessments:
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