



## Youth Support Network

### Overview & Background

In 2020, ACT for Alexandria partnered with the Frank & Betty Wright Foundation, Alexandria City Public Schools, the City of Alexandria, and youth-serving community organizations and other stakeholders to support the ACPS Virtual PLUS+ vision for supportive programs and services, so that all youth in Alexandria could be successful with distance learning. ACT for Alexandria hired a Network Manager, Caitlin Brown, to focus on building relationships and collaboration among out-of-school time stakeholders to establish the Youth Support Network. The purpose of the Youth Support Network is to provide coordinated supports to a network of community organizations, government agencies, schools, and other partners to ensure that every youth in the City of Alexandria has equitable access and engagement in high-quality out-of-school time and community-based programs.

Last year, the [Forum for Youth Investment](#) invited the Youth Support Network to be part of the [Build Forward Together](#) initiative. *Build Forward Together* encourages communities to collaborate and establish “equitable learning and development ecosystems that unleash the potential of all learners, recognize the power of all committed adults, and optimize all learning settings and approaches.” Through technical support from the Forum for Youth Investment, the network was connected to communities across the country who had embraced this approach. In November 2021, more than sixty organizations in the City of Alexandria attended the Youth Support Network Retreat to share their hopes for the network, as well as ideas to ground the network’s values, vision, and mission statements (results below).

There are approximately eighty diverse youth-serving organizations currently encompassing the network. The Youth Support Network Executive Committee is responsible for driving the decisions and development of the network. Current members of the Executive Committee include Caitlin Brown, Heather Peeler, and Brandi Yee from ACT for Alexandria, Kurt Huffman from Alexandria City Public Schools, Noraine Buttar from the Department of Community & Human Services, and Kara Blankner and Jim Epstein from the Frank & Betty Wright Foundation. The Executive Committee is currently recruiting additional committee members from the network and provider organizations to ensure equity and representation for the breadth and diversity of all community-based programs in the City of Alexandria. In addition, the Executive Committee will include co-chairs of the middle school and social and emotional learning workgroups. Also, in collaboration with the Department of Community & Human Services, the Youth Support Network is leading the designated out-of-school time actions set by the Children & Youth Community Plan.

## **Current Work & Priorities**

The network is focusing on two priority initiatives: middle school programming and social-emotional learning.

- **The primary objective of the Middle School Programming Work Group is to identify strategies and solutions to expand middle school student engagement in out-of-school time and community-based programs.**

Data from the 2017 Community Report on Out-of-School Time indicated that fewer than 24% of middle school students in the City of Alexandria are engaged in out-of-school time programming. The work group currently consists of 17 members representing 18 youth-serving organizations, and the group is open to any providers serving youth in the City of Alexandria who would like to participate.

In the first phase of this work group, there will be an extensive landscape analysis of middle school programming that will involve middle school youth, providers, and families. This research is led by Weber Moore Partners as part of a broader landscape analysis (see below). The middle school analysis seeks to examine the barriers experienced by youth-serving providers, middle school youth, and middle school families. The analysis will involve surveys as well as engagement with middle school youth, families, and providers through listening sessions. At the completion of the analysis, Weber Moore Partners will provide recommendations and solutions to expand middle school student engagement in programs. The second phase of the work group will involve planning for and implementing the proposed recommendations.

- **The primary objective of the Social-Emotional Learning Work Group is to identify strategies and practices that will support the professional learning and well-being of staff and volunteers in fostering the social-emotional learning and development of youth.**

The Social-Emotional Learning Work Group is also open to any providers serving youth in the City of Alexandria and currently consists of 31 members representing 25 youth-serving organizations. The work group will be exploring and discussing several frameworks, including developmental assets/developmental relationships, adult social-emotional learning, trauma-informed practices, and restorative practices. Additionally, the group seeks to learn more about the existing social, emotional, and academic learning (SEAL) supports practiced by ACPS, including RULER and Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports (PBIS). With the knowledge of these frameworks, youth-serving providers will develop a common language with the school division, thus supporting alignment and sharing the responsibility for the social-emotional development of our youth.

To fulfill the Children & Youth Community Plan actions for Out-of-School Time Programs, the Youth Support Network partnered with DCHS to provide Developmental

Assets training to 50 staff members representing 25 organizations. Deepening the network's commitment to Developmental Relationships, the Youth Support Network is partnering with the Search Institute and offering two Developmental Relationships workshop series through the end of the calendar year. More than 50 staff members, volunteers, board members, and community members attended the first developmental relationships workshop in May.

Building off the data gathered in the 2017 Report on Out-of-School Time in the City of Alexandria, **the network is launching a landscape scan of existing programs** in the City, which will be completed by early 2023. The landscape scan will identify current opportunities available for K-12 youth in the City of Alexandria, as well as identify gaps and possibilities for collaboration. The Youth Support Network engaged Weber Moore Partners to lead the research.

The landscape scan will provide an understanding of all expanded learning opportunities (ranging from multi-interest programs to arts, sports, academics, mentoring, STEM, library, museum, enrichment, positive youth development, faith-based, career/workforce development, etc.) for youth and will be completed by early 2023. The information sought through the landscape scan includes but is not limited to:

- general information on program content, enrollment numbers,
- demographics/population and ages served, location of services, hours/timing of programs, recruiting and registration procedures, fee structure, availability of scholarships/financial aid, and willingness and ability to participate in common data collection and/or registration processes and a community program finder.

Based on the data received from the landscape analysis, the Youth Support Network will be able to identify the support systems needed to ensure that all youth have access and engagement in high-quality and meaningful opportunities. The typical supports and functions of other networks across the country include program quality frameworks, data systems, community program finders, professional development and networking opportunities, social-emotional learning initiatives, collaborative afterschool programming, summer programming, and youth and family advisory councils.

### **Our Vision**

Every youth in the City of Alexandria thrives, regardless of circumstances, through equitable access and engagement in high-quality and meaningful out-of-school time and community-based programs.

### **Our Mission**

We foster collaboration and provide coordinated supports to a network of community organizations, government agencies, schools, and other partners dedicated to improving the equity, quality, and continuous innovation of youth-serving programs in the City of Alexandria.

### **Our Values**

**Equity & Inclusion**

Youth need high-quality, inclusive, linguistically- and culturally-responsive opportunities. As a community and a network, we have a responsibility to change systems, policies, and resources that exacerbate disparities based on race, ethnicity, cultural background, socioeconomic background, gender, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, ability, religion, and other dimensions of difference. We recognize culture is an essential lens through which we learn and grow.

**Positive Youth Development**

We embrace positive youth development and a whole child approach to learning. Youth engage with caring role models equipped to foster their social-emotional development. Youth learn best in an atmosphere of safety and belonging, where their individuality and creativity are valued, they have a voice in their engagement, and the experiences are meaningful and relevant to them.

**Partnership**

We will be successful only when an inclusive network of youth, families, schools, organizations, and government, reflective of our diverse community, actively works together to achieve long-term results. We strive to have a cross-sector, citywide, youth-centered system that offers multiple pathways to expand opportunities for the youth of Alexandria.

**Commitment to Quality & Ongoing Learning**

We commit to sharing best practices. We each have something to learn and to contribute. We promote authentic youth engagement, practice-based reflection, and research-based knowledge to improve opportunities for youth. Gathering and analyzing data is critical to program improvement, accountability, transparency, and sustainability.

***For more information, please contact Caitlin Brown, Youth Network Support Manager, at [caitlin.brown@actforalexandria.org](mailto:caitlin.brown@actforalexandria.org).***