



# Creating Equitable Ecosystems of Belonging and Opportunity for Youth

**An Action Guide for Cross-System and  
Sector Leaders and Practitioners**





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## About the Forum for Youth Investment

The Forum is a national nonprofit “action tank” that envisions a world where all young people reach their fullest potential—in education, work, and life. The Forum’s mission is to advance equitable youth opportunities and outcomes through quality capacity building and policy action across systems and sectors. The Forum has played an indispensable role in building the youth development ecosystem as a cross-systems coalition builder, youth voice amplifier and collaborator, and thought leader for youth development research, policy, and practice improvement.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The Forum’s Stronger Systems, Stronger Youth Strategic Plan will focus our work to activate these strategic goals over the next five years, through 2028:

- 1 Strengthen Programs.** Improving program quality in youth development systems, using the Forum’s expertise to contribute to systems-wide best practices.
- 2 Support System Leaders & Practitioners.** Designing, building, and implementing capacity building initiatives for system leaders and practitioners using assets developed in the program quality and policy functions.
- 3 Shape Policy.** Convening the youth development ecosystem to facilitate shared learning, identify policy gaps, and coalesce around a united youth development policy agenda.

## Introduction to and Purpose of the Action Guide

Creating Equitable Ecosystems of Belonging and Opportunity for Youth captures insights and recommended action from youth, systems leaders, and practitioners across the country. The Forum, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, convened a wide range of national thought leaders, practitioners, and youth, to explore research-based concepts and practices (belonging, optimal settings principles, ecosystems, ecosystem navigation, and navigation supports) that support learning and development, and to create aligned tools and processes for youth and adults to engage more deeply with these concepts in their own environments. Once that body of work was complete, the Forum then engaged more than 50 youth to co-design a Youth Journey Map for Belonging and Opportunity and action guide for systems leaders and practitioners that was informed by research-based practices on belonging and youth well-being. Whenever possible, direct quotes are shared to amplify their experiences and perspectives.

This action guide aims to support public system and social sector leaders to transition from reactive pandemic thinking to planning for the future, ensuring that youth find environments filled with belonging and opportunity across all the places and spaces where they spend their time. As youth journey through various settings and systems throughout their day, week, and year, leaders of those spaces can work together and take action to create a more equitable ecosystem to support youth not only in accomplishing their goals and reaching their fullest potential, but in thriving. Placing the perspectives and lived experiences of youth front and center, the intent of this guide is to generate cross-system action that will improve the experience of youth as they journey through various places and spaces.

This guide is specifically intended to support coordinated initiatives where multiple organizations or agencies are already working together. Whether it is a collaborative, collective impact effort, interagency initiative, Children’s Cabinet, or other system of partnership, each member and setting can intentionally foster belonging within their programming and service delivery to ensure youth experience belonging and a warm and intentional transition to other partners that they encounter along their journey.



## Ecosystem for Youth Belonging and Opportunity

Throughout this action guide, we refer to the youth development ecosystem—which is conceptualized as the range of youth-serving systems and settings that youth and their families interact with during their development, including the interactions within and across these systems and settings.

The concept of a youth development ecosystem, builds from and expands upon Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which views child development within the context of the system of relationships that form their environment. Bronfenbrenner, who helped establish the federal Head Start program, defines complex layers of environment, including family and community environments and larger societal contexts, each having an effect on a child’s development. In the Forum’s framing of a youth development ecosystem, we emphasize that an ecosystem has no center—it is made up of the complex and dynamic set of relationships within and across systems. This shift in perspective, decentering individual learners, emphasizes the role that developmental relationships play within and across systems, as well as the systemic solutions that are needed to support a healthy youth development ecosystem.

Many scholars, including Bronfenbrenner, have identified a major challenge for child development—the deficit-based approach that public systems often utilize in provision of services and administration of benefits to struggling parents and families. While many public systems are moving upstream, providing services and supports to families before a point of crisis, a reimagined ecosystem calls for systems leaders to not only apply a strength-based approach, but to also create an enabling environment for positive relationships with adults—whether they are teachers, coaches, youth workers, social workers, or therapists. Action for systems change and improvement is included in the Youth Journey Map for Belonging and Opportunity section of this guide.

Figure 1 illustrates this reimagined ecosystem—describing the systems and their services in ways that are familiar to leaders across Education, Workforce Development, Health and Human Services, Child Welfare, Juvenile Justice, and Community-Based Youth Development and highlighting the opportunities for cross-system efforts to strengthen the quality of relationships, opportunities, and supports that young people experience within any system and across all systems and settings where they spend their time.

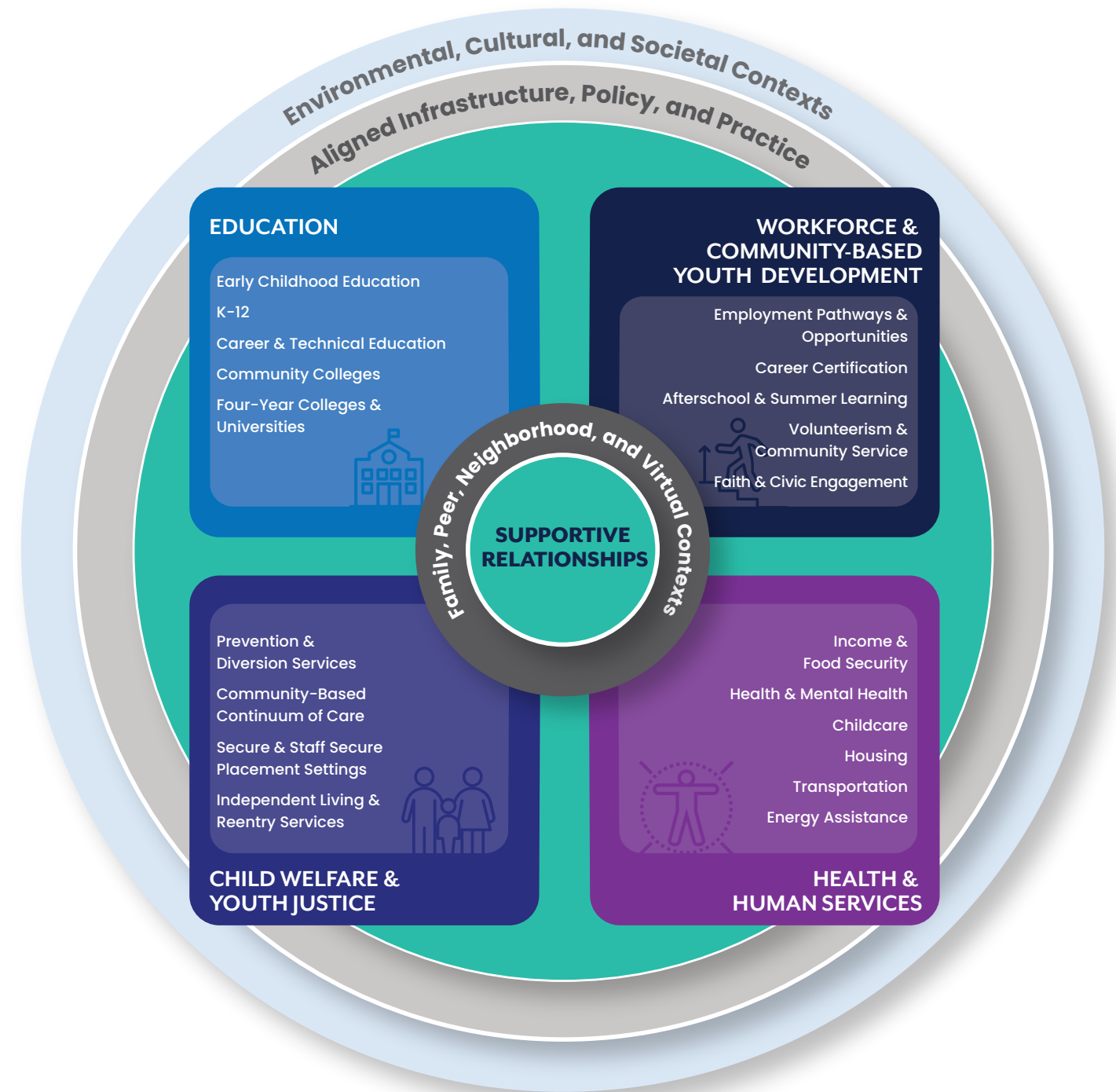


Figure 1. Ecosystem for Youth Belonging and Opportunity

## Belonging Defined

Safety and belonging are the foundation of the Forum’s Youth Program Quality Pyramid and are essential in producing positive youth outcomes. Belonging is a critical component of a setting that supports the development of youth. From a youth perspective, belonging is the epitome of feeling like one’s true self within a setting or community. This includes feeling secure, valued, affirmed, connected, and in alignment with others. Belonging does not require a need to adapt or change to fit in, nor does it include a fear of judgment or repercussions. Oftentimes, entering a new setting (like school, work, or a provider’s office) can prompt a sense of vulnerability. When belonging is present, those feelings are quickly replaced with feelings of reassurance, safety, and understanding.

Relationships that promote belonging are not transactional—they are transformative. Opportunities to experience belonging should be equitable—meaning that all youth regardless of their identity or circumstances should be able to experience a sense of belonging that supports their development within and across the systems and settings where they spend their time. Advancing equity is key to building systems where all youth feel valued, respected, and supported.

As young people move through various systems and settings, their experience of belonging within each setting impacts their overall ability to thrive. Figure 2 illustrates a framework that describes categories of adult practices that can support the quality of youth experiences in systems and settings in which they interact with adults and peers. This ‘pyramid of program quality’ is organized similar to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs—based on a similar concept that elements at the bottom of the pyramid must be in place to support higher-level practice. A base of physical, emotional, and psychological safety sets the stage for supportive practices that are developmentally appropriate to scaffold and support learning and development. Opportunities for positive interactions with adults and peers ultimately set the stage for an engaging environment, where young people have opportunities to plan and make choices, and to reflect on their experiences and learning—cultivating skills that support thriving in education, work, and life.

Elements of these program quality practices can be adapted and applied across the range of systems and settings that youth experience to build consistency and developmentally appropriate support in the youth development ecosystem. Many of these practices work together to ensure that young people have a sense of belonging.

What youth say about belonging:

**If you had a magic wand to help youth belong, what would you wish for or create....**

“One person that they can connect to with and feel like they belong, that way people would not feel so left out in the world”

“Access to spaces where we can learn new things and be inspired by each other”

“Have people listen to us more, rather than respond, dictate or debate”

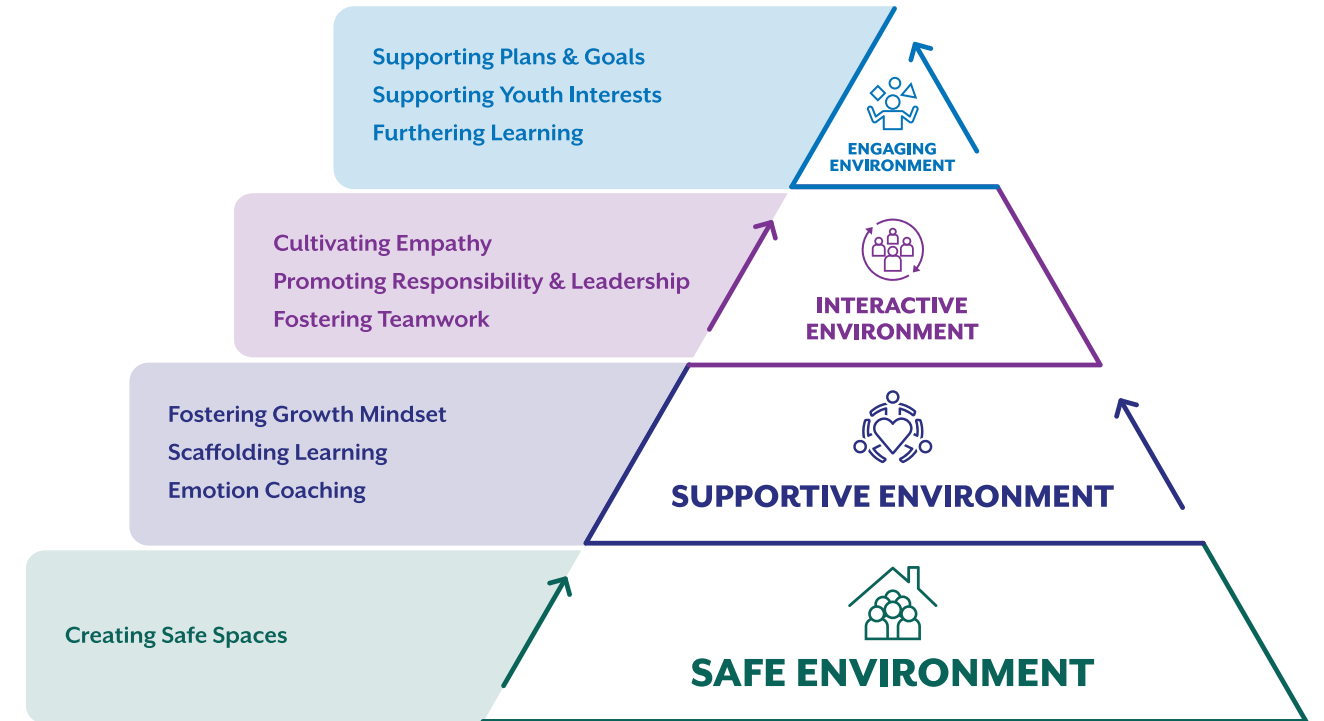


FIGURE 2. Pyramid of Program Quality

## The Youth Journey Map for Belonging and Opportunity

**The complexity and fluidity of an ecosystem approach requires effective coordination to ensure that youth have consistent and supportive experiences within and across systems and settings that reinforce the importance of equity and belonging.**

The power to transform the quality of experiences, relationships, and ultimately outcomes for youth depends on cultivating a shared set of positive youth development practices that can be utilized within and across settings. This requires strategic partnerships that prioritize, strengthen, and expand adult capacity building, and a coordinated cross-system approach that addresses inequities embedded within and across systems.

As illustrated in Figure 3, youth often navigate multiple and different kinds of systems and settings and may have varied experiences that can either support or hinder their development and thriving. This visual is intended to support cross-system reflection and action to create and strengthen ecosystems of belonging and opportunity for young people. As young people journey through various settings, programs, and systems such as Education, Workforce Development, Health and Human Services, Child Welfare, Juvenile Justice, and Community-Based Youth Development, throughout their day, week, and year, leaders of those systems can work together and take action to create a more equitable ecosystem to support youth working to reach their fullest potential—in education, work and life.

FIGURE 3 ON PAGES 8–9. Youth Journey Map for Belonging and Opportunity

# YOUTH JOURNEY MAP FOR BELONGING AND OPPORTUNITY

Youth go into an interaction with a setting or system with certain expectations and goals. When their experience and interaction do not meet their expectations, you see pain points in a youth's journey. To identify these instances, first reflect on the youth persona and what is important to them. Ask yourself; what are the youth's dreams, goals, and aspirations? What are the challenges and pain points when interacting with your system/setting? Where did she come from before this journey, what has she seen and what does she know already? Putting yourself in the youth's mind space will allow you to understand which interactions conflict with youth's prior ideas and expectations.

As young people move through various settings on any given day, month, year while on their journey towards success, their experience of belonging within each setting impacts their overall ability to thrive. The settings and systems included in the journey map can collectively provide an ecosystem of services and support. Partners who have influence over these various systems can examine the coordinated action needed within and across settings to create an ecosystem rich with opportunities and a sense of belonging for youth that eases navigation all along their journey.



Department of Human Services | Department of Children & Families | State/Local Education Agency | Department of Behavioral Health | Department of Juvenile Services | Department of Employment Services

## ACTION FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE AND IMPROVEMENT



**CULTIVATE BELONGING**  
 Affirm the value of every youth's culture and many identities, building off of the wisdom, strengths, and heritage of youth and their families.




**CULTIVATE SAFE & SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS**  
 Young people navigate various settings at once, all with different expectations and rules. How can we align experiences of young people by having shared expectations for adults and youth across settings?

**CULTIVATE INTERACTIVE ENVIRONMENTS**  
 Create safe spaces for inclusiveness and camaraderie. Foster personal connection and a sense of purpose. Reflect on mistakes, fostering a growth mindset and scaffolding learning. Solve conflicts and offer counseling and coaching when needed.

**CULTIVATE ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTS & OPPORTUNITY**  
 Promote responsibility and leadership among youth, fostering empathy and teamwork. Developmentally, young people need room to experience failure, challenges, and support to get back on track. Community care and connections with adults promote capacity building and healing, helping young people to build self-regulation and advocacy skills.

Support youths' interests, plans, and goals, providing opportunities for further learning, skill development and growth. New experiences and relationships can help youth thrive. How can we partner across systems and settings to develop the skills that youth need for success?

Cross-System leaders can use this journey map to:

 ASSESS	 PLAN & ALIGN	 ACT & IMPROVE
<p>Observe and collect data about your programming, with an emphasis on safety and belonging, and supportive, interactive and engaging environments.</p> <p>How can each setting build a more robust environment filled with safety and belonging for all youth who are engaged?</p> <p>What differences are you observing across systems and settings? How can the strengths in one system support the challenges in another?</p>	<p>Use the data to create an improvement plan with your team, across all programs.</p> <p>Examine the ways in which cross-system and sector partners can align strategies to create equitable ecosystems that center belonging for youth.</p> <p>What are the requirements of settings that, if aligned, would ease navigation for youth and create a supportive ecosystem?</p>	<p>Implement action agendas and improvement plans that center belonging within and across the various settings in the ecosystem.</p> <p>Train and coach staff to improve the experience of belonging within each program/setting where youth might spend time.</p> <p>What strategies can we undertake collectively to increase a sense of belonging and reduce the burden of navigation for youth?</p>

A lot of the systems aren't able to learn from the people they are serving...there needs to be a willingness for systems to want to learn to navigate with youth; you don't know what you don't know.

-YOUNG PERSON

Centering belonging within the systems and settings that make up the ecosystems that young people navigate increases the opportunity for them to thrive and reach their fullest potential. Cross-system partners can use the following tools to reflect on the essential components for developing equitable ecosystems for young people. Ensuring that young people have key supports, cross-system partners can optimize the opportunities for them to experience healthy transitions, supportive settings, and healing all along their journey to achieving their goals for success.



## Conversations for Reflection and Action

All youth, no matter who they are or where they are from, can be more effectively supported to thrive, and to contribute to a complex, fast-changing, interconnected world through a more intentionally supported ecosystem of youth belonging, support and opportunity.

The following tool enables cross-system partners to reflect on current structures and practices, within and across systems and settings, and strategically spark conversation and action among partners to facilitate improved coordination and collaboration. Remember, inviting youth to the table as part of these and other discussions will provide real-time insight on their experiences within ecosystems and what works best for them.

Together, cross-system partners can use the reflection tool strategically to spark conversation and action among partners. System collaborations and partnerships can examine whether the actions are present and how they are evidenced in the work. They can also develop action plans to ensure that the systems within the youth development ecosystem work together to enhance youth belonging and opportunity.

## Reflection Tool for Systems Leaders and Practitioners

**Instructions.** Systems leaders should use the first three columns on the right to rate each of the below practices from 1 (low) to 5 (high) on how important it is and it is how well it is currently being practiced within and across partners. The fourth column should be used to note specific examples of how these practices are demonstrated.

### CULTIVATE SAFETY AND CONSISTENCY

	How important? Rate 1 – 5	How well within our system? Rate 1 – 5	How well across our youth ecosystem? Rate 1 – 5	How well across our youth ecosystem? Fill in your response.
Do we implement consistent practices, routines and rituals that support risk-taking and help young people feel physically and emotionally safe?				
Do we help young people build personal connections and a sense of purpose for themselves, within the setting and beyond?				
Do we use practices to help young people reflect on any mistake, solve conflicts, and receive emotion coaching when needed?				

### BUILD COMMUNITY

Do we use positive management practices aimed at fostering a healthy, inclusive community?				
Do we foster strong peer to peer relationships and teamwork?				
Do we co-develop program expectations with young people?				

## Reflection Tool for Systems Leaders and Practitioners (cont.)

**Instructions.** Systems leaders should use the first three columns on the right to rate each of the below practices from 1 (low) to 5 (high) on how important it is and it is how well it is currently being practiced within and across partners. The fourth column should be used to note specific examples of how these practices are demonstrated.

### BE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE AND INCLUSIVE

	How important? Rate 1 – 5	How well within our system? Rate 1 – 5	How well across our youth ecosystem? Rate 1 – 5	How well across our youth ecosystem? Fill in your response.
Do we use affirmations that establish the value of every young person's many identities, intersectionality, and abilities and actively counter stereotypes and bias?				
Do we build on the diversity and cultural knowledge of young people and their families to make learning and development engaging?				
Do we develop young people's knowledge, skills, and agency to critically engage in civic affairs?				

#### ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS:

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