

FORUM FOR
COMMUNITY
SOLUTIONS

aspen institute

BMWP in Action Series



Rooted in Belonging

How Denver Youth and Partners Are Changing Systems with BMWP

Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative

Denver, Colorado

October 2025

Aspen Forum for Community Solutions
Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP)

Acknowledgements

This case study was created as a collaboration between the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions and Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC) and was made possible through a grant from an anonymous funder as a part of a comprehensive three-year investment.

The case study was co-authored by Brock Grubb (Aspen Institute) and Julia Hughes (CYC). The authors did their best to capture the fullness of the DOYI with accuracy. Any errors or omissions are accidental.

The authors would like to thank Geneva Wiki of the Aspen Institute for input throughout the creation of the case study along with the following individuals for sharing perspectives that helped inform this case study.

- Amelia Federico - Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC)
- Jose Flores - Young Aspiring Americans for Social & Political Activism (YAASPA)
- Xavier Jennings - Mile High Youth Corps
- Chelsea Situmeang - YAASPA
- Chantal Vargas Jimenez - Mile High Youth Corps
- Mary Zanotti - CYC
- Lorena Zimmer - Denver Health/ CYC Board Member

The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity, and supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

We endeavor to transform systems and communities in ways that ensure that all youth can thrive. Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) is the emerging framework that is helping us to get there.

Learn more about AFCS and our work to advance BMWP at <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/bmwp>

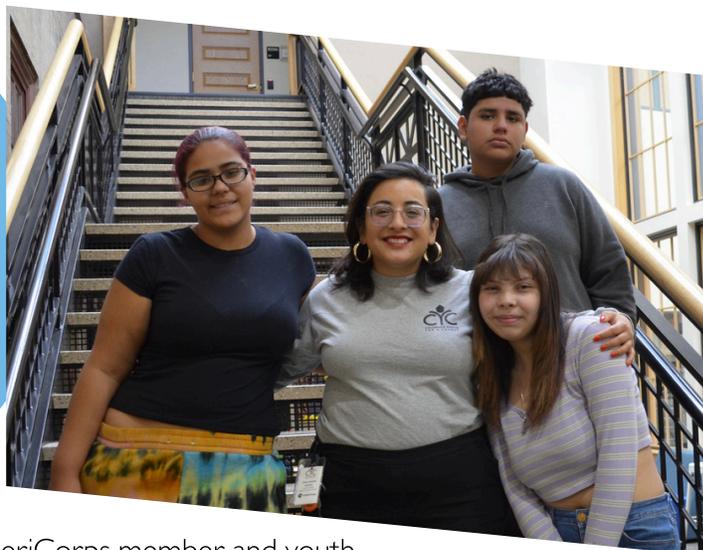
The BMWP spark

On a spring morning in 2023, Julia Hughes of Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC) sat in a breakout session at the Aspen Institute’s Forum for Community Solutions convening in Austin, TX. The session introduced a framework new to Hughes: Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP). She felt an immediate spark.

CYC, a Denver-based nonprofit that addresses barriers to learning by providing individualized support, had been looking for a framework to expand and deepen collaboration with partners, and BMWP held real promise. It was more than another program model. BMWP was a set of human conditions — universal yet deeply personal — that could anchor the work of reconnecting young people to education and careers. Hughes knew the many organizations supporting young people in Denver (nonprofits, schools, higher ed institutions, workforce partners) operated with their own missions and priorities. BMWP offered a “decoder ring” to help leaders find new connections in their work. She returned home convinced BMWP could reanimate Denver’s efforts to support opportunity youth.

The Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative (DOYI) began in 2012, when the Rose Community Foundation secured funding from the Aspen Institute to launch a collaborative focused on reconnecting young people to education and careers. Because Rose was not structured to run the initiative directly, it contracted implementation to Spark Policy Institute, where Lorena Zimmer — now Chief Impact Officer at Denver Health and a CYC board member — was working at the time. The initiative elevated opportunity youth in the community and forged new cross-sector partnerships, laying the groundwork for deeper collaboration.

Over time, DOYI’s “backbone” role shifted from the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce to CYC. This transition was driven by changes in Chamber leadership, a loss of momentum during COVID-19 and recognition that CYC was well positioned to lead youth-focused work. As Zimmer explained, “I always thought CYC made sense because they work directly with youth.”



CYC AmeriCorps member and youth

By 2022, CYC had assumed the backbone role and was committed to rebuilding the initiative and re-engaging partners — even before new funding arrived. Executive Director Mary Zanotti began meeting with past partners to reflect on what had worked, what had not, and how they might begin again.

When Hughes returned from Austin with the BMWP framework it proved to be the spark the group needed to turn their work into a flame. Aspen and CYC secured critical funding from an anonymous funder and DOYI officially relaunched in September 2023 with a steering committee retreat facilitated by ThinkPlace and supported by the Aspen Institute’s Forum for Community Solutions. At the retreat, Geneva Wiki (Aspen’s Director of BMWP) presented the framework as actionable, research-grounded and youth-informed.

BMWP provided a fresh starting point. The group defined shared success measures to guide them forward:

- Shifting systems toward racial equity,
- Increasing youth voice and partnerships,
- Enhancing collaboration,
- Strengthening young people’s lived sense of belonging, meaning, wellbeing, and purpose.

Reflecting on this moment, Hughes noted that BMWP, “gave us a positive, strength-based anchor. It was something we could all rally around at a time when trust was fragile.”

Integrating BMWP in an Authentic Way

The DOYI relaunch was a turning point that the group achieved relatively quickly. But the real work of integrating BMWP unfolded slowly through intentional collaboration over the next two years.

Mapping the ecosystem

In late 2023, DOYI launched an ecosystem mapping project, meeting with more than 40 organizations and school districts across the metro area. The aim was twofold: to share the collaborative’s new BMWP focus and to listen deeply to how youth and practitioners were already experiencing — or struggling to foster — these conditions.



The conversations surfaced recurring themes:

- Youth often felt adrift in transitions. Programs and systems lacked staffing and support for handoffs. Referrals to online resources felt like a dead end for students who needed a higher level of encouragement and support — especially if they had negative experiences in the past.
- Career fairs required a lot of effort by schools and organizations but many participants left feeling out of place and overwhelmed.
- Navigating local and state resource hubs could be discouraging, undermining young people’s goals.
- Workforce centers felt unwelcoming, particularly to youth not mandated to attend.
- Youth wanted more options (e.g., emerging industry certifications, postsecondary pathways), but advisors and mentors had a hard time keeping up with the shifting landscape of opportunities making it hard for youth to build trust.

These insights and others made clear that BMWP could not be conceived as an “add-on” to existing practices. Instead, the framework could help reimagine and transform the very touchpoints where young people engage with systems.

Prioritizing lived experience

In 2024, the collaborative's attention turned outward. CYC and partners facilitated forums and interviews with 45 young people ages 16–24. Ninety percent of young people identified as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) and over half had disengaged from school at least once. They were compensated for their time, reinforcing that their expertise mattered.

The first round of interviews took place at Mile High Youth Corps — a local nonprofit that leverages the AmeriCorps program to connect young people to work and learning opportunities — and three local high schools. Most of the staff who developed the framework and led the interviews were under the age of 30 enhancing the relevance of the questions that were asked and giving the facilitators instant credibility as near peers.

The sessions gave local youth an opportunity to define BMWP in their own terms in an authentic way. Youth described belonging as being acknowledged and respected — when teachers checked in, listened without judgment or adapted their teaching to students’ needs. They spoke of wellbeing in terms of both stability and safety, noting how financial stress and unsafe school environments undermined them, but also how music, art, and supportive peers helped them cope. For many young people, purpose was rooted in family and the future — a drive to make parents proud, break cycles or provide for their own children. Across the forums, young people stressed that a single caring adult could transform their path and that systems must welcome justice-engaged peers back with dignity rather than stigma.

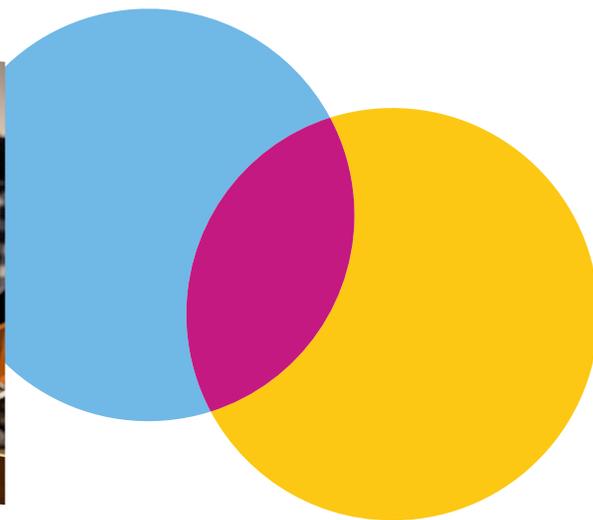
Shifting the public narrative

Members of the DOYI steering committee knew that change needed to start by listening to youth. And they were also aware that transforming systems would require larger shifts in public narratives. To complement the listening sessions, the collaborative began telling new stories. A three-part blog series in summer 2024 — crafted in collaboration with the Aspen Institute — lifted up youth strengths and named the systemic barriers they face. Posts like [Belonging is a Superpower](#) and [High School Heroes: Creating Pathways to Prosperity](#) reached stakeholders across Denver and beyond, reframing young people not as problems to solve but as partners in building solutions.

The blog series was a success on a couple of fronts. First, readership was high, nearly doubling the number of visitors to the CYC website during the time period that the blog posts were released. Second, the process of creating the posts gave the DOYI steering committee a chance to look in the mirror, reflect back on their community agreements and re-ground their work. The blog series process allowed the coalition to embrace both/and thinking, re-affirm their commitment to center and amplify youth voice and recommit to remain curious and combat defensiveness.



Xavier Jennings (Mile High Youth Corps) and a MHYC graduate



Sharing power

In fall 2024, DOYI named its first BMWP youth fellows: Jose Flores of Young Aspiring Americans for Social & Political Activism (YAASPA) and Chantal Vargas Jimenez of Mile High Youth Corps. Both traveled to national OYF convenings and helped shape emerging BMWP strategies at home and nationally. Flores, an outspoken advocate, threw himself into developing ideas for a BMWP training curriculum. Vargas Jimenez, who had earned her GED and construction certifications through Mile High Youth Corps before joining staff, brought credibility as someone who had lived the journey.

For Flores, BMWP was powerful because it pointed to concrete practices and a way to push toward systems change: “the framework allows us to push on systems that don’t usually budge. It opens the door for shifting narratives and power dynamics, without needing to revolutionize everything all at once.” Vargas Jimenez shared her own belief that, “belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose is important no matter where you are. It’s part of self-care for young people — it helps them know that there’s a community that strives for the wellbeing of everyone.”

In addition to the engagement with youth fellows, CYC hired Amelia Federico in the fall of 2024. At the time Federico was a student at MSU Denver and had been referred by a DOYI steering committee member as someone who had recent experience in Denver Public Schools. It was obvious that Federico’s passion, lived experience and insights would be valuable to the collaborative. She was hired as a contractor and led efforts to engage young people to advise DOYI on system improvements, conduct outreach and interviews to surface youth priorities and integrate BMWP into local meetings and training.

Closer in age to the participants, Federico knew that her lived experience was valuable to the work of the collaborative. “It mattered that I could walk in and say, ‘I’m a DPS graduate too,’” she recalled. “That created a sense of belonging before our conversations even started.” She also understood that she played a crucial — though at times awkward — role of bridging youth and adult perspectives: “It felt weird because I’m like, ‘am I an adult? Am I a young person?’ But being in a space with adults talking about high school students in such a caring light was so refreshing. I wish I could have seen that space when I was in high school, because back then it felt like adults didn’t care.”

DOYI Steering Committee

Members

- Colorado Department of Higher Education
- Colorado Youth for a Change – Reengagement Program
- Community College of Aurora
- Denver Economic Development & Opportunity at the City and County of Denver
- Denver Public Schools
- Inclusive Design Group
- Innovate+Educate
- Mile High Youth Corps
- Public Safety Youth Programs at the City and County of Denver
- Young Aspiring Americans for Social & Political Activism (YAASPA)
- Zero Dropouts

Making an impact

By mid-2024, the work was beginning to ripple outward. Four developments illustrate BMWP's impact in action.

IMPACT

Youth Mental Health Corps

In August 2024, CYC and partners launched the Youth Mental Health Corps, linking AmeriCorps service with an industry-recognized behavioral health certification. The program aimed to diversify Colorado's mental health workforce while giving 18–24-year-olds meaningful pathways into stable careers. BMWP shaped the design: recruiting members with intentional messaging around belonging, training them to anticipate impostor syndrome and reinforcing that their lived experience was an asset. By linking a free behavioral health certification, this initiative responded to the desire of youth to have more options beyond high school and ways to gain experience. It also pulled in the Community College of Aurora as a partner on the certification.



DOYI Steering Committee members

IMPACT

A Bill of Rights for Justice-Engaged Students

That same spring, the Colorado legislature passed HB 24-1216, a groundbreaking bill establishing rights for K–12 students involved in the juvenile justice system. The law requires schools to promptly re-enroll students after release, award credit for coursework and provide personalized graduation plans. YAASPA youth testified in support and DOYI acted as a critical platform for information sharing and implementation. A group of justice-impacted youth, recruited by partners at the Denver Office of Public Safety, talked with implementation partners to share personal experiences and barriers in pursuing education while being connected to the justice system. The policy was a tangible extension of BMWP: codifying that justice-engaged youth still belong in school, still deserve dignity and still have a future.

IMPACT**Trust and referrals across organizations**

Perhaps less visible but equally important was a shift in how steering committee members related to each other. Historically, staff had hesitated to refer young people to certain programs after poor experiences and staff turnover, effectively narrowing options. Through BMWP, partners found common ground, natural points of collaboration, and began rebuilding trust.

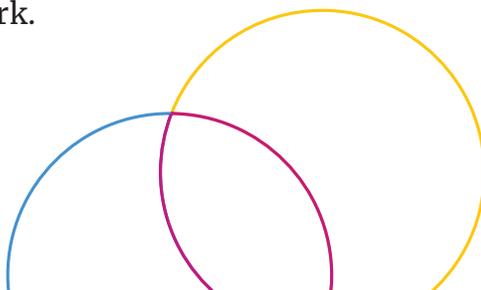
As steering committee member Xavier Jennings — Director of YouthBuild at Mile High Youth Corps — explained, “when organizations work in silos the opportunity youth are the ones who suffer. As a collaborative, our foundation has to be: how are we working together to serve opportunity youth?” His perspective reinforced the committee’s commitment to trust and collaboration above competition.

Reflecting on the importance of the DOYI collaboration, Federico noted that this collaboration is important modeling for young people. When youth see adults collaborating across systems, “it shows them they’re not alone — that people really are working to make schools and programs better.” Hughes directly credits the BMWP framework for unlocking this increase in collaboration: “We’ve definitely seen more referrals happening because we all can rally around BMWP. It’s changed the culture of the steering committee.”

IMPACT**Scaling Youth Outcomes Cohort (SYOC) Grant**

In summer 2024, the Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative secured a \$1.5 million award through the national Scaling Youth Outcomes Cohort. The three-year investment is part of a [national \\$6 million investment](#) made by the Ballmer Group with the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions supporting opportunity youth collaboratives in four cities.

In Denver, resources are supporting efforts to strengthen re-engagement, high school completion and postsecondary pathways for youth ages 16–24 across Denver and Aurora. With direct dollars flowing to Denver Public Schools, Aurora Public Schools and five nonprofit partners, the collaborative is expanding proven interventions: re-enrolling young people who have left school, supporting chronically absent students to complete high school or earn a GED and providing postsecondary guidance into high-demand careers. CYC leaders emphasized that the collaborative would not have been in a position to compete for this opportunity without the foundation BMWP had created — aligning partners, building trust and grounding the collaboration in a shared framework.



Looking Ahead

The road forward is not without obstacles. Recent closures of nonprofits like Our Turn Colorado — a nonprofit that Federico credits with providing her with critical support during her own high school journey — and looming cuts to AmeriCorps funding threaten the very infrastructure on which opportunity youth initiatives rely.

Vargas Jimenez of Mile High Youth Corps voiced what many in the community are feeling: “It sucks to see opportunities taken away when we know how much they matter. There will always be youth behind us who need this support.”

Yet Denver OYI is pushing ahead.

Developing a universal training

In April 2025, CYC surveyed local schools and community-based organizations about their BMWP practices. The findings revealed new opportunities: many programs lacked youth exit surveys and intake processes weren’t always strengths-based. These gaps underscored the need for practical tools to help organizations operationalize BMWP.

Based on survey findings, the collaborative is preparing to launch a universal BMWP training program in early 2026. Co-designed with youth fellows and facilitators, the training will provide an overview of the BMWP framework, offer reflection tools and challenge participants to align policies, practices and culture with BMWP. Target audiences include diversion officers, case managers, employers, postsecondary advisors and others who work directly with opportunity youth in Denver.

The collaborative is clear that these trainings must be youth-led in more than name. As Chelsea Situmeang of YAASPA put it, “Tokenism is always in the back of our minds. Every day we have to make sure that’s not what we’re doing — we center young people at the forefront in every decision-making process.”

Flores has been particularly passionate about this effort, envisioning youth not only as co-designers but also as trainers. “If we want systems to change,” he said, “youth need to be the ones leading those conversations.”

Supporting the “wholeness of person” approach

As the DOYI looks to the future, leaders are eager to deepen partnership with local postsecondary partners including the Community College of Aurora (CCA). The college's president — Dr. Mordecai Ian Brownlee — has championed a “wholeness of person” approach that integrates high-quality instruction with wraparound supports such as mental health services, food assistance, and cultural bridge-building for students from more than 60 countries. This work is deeply rooted in purpose, equity and belonging and it was underway well before CCA learned about the BMWP framework.

Dr. Brownlee first encountered BMWP through community leadership networks and saw immediate alignment: rather than adding something new, it validated CCA’s mission to build strong on-ramps back into higher education for justice-involved and opportunity youth. Looking ahead, he envisions expanding BMWP by developing micro-credentials, quick stand-up programs, and “fluid infrastructure” that responds to Denver’s shifting demographics and economy. As he notes, the key is keeping students at the center: “People have praised us for being innovative and amazing, [when] all we did was listen to our students and do something about it. It’s important to pay attention to the person you’re seeking to serve. Don’t bring an agenda to them. Make them the agenda.”



Community College of Aurora President Dr. Mordecai Ian Brownlee with CCA staff

“It’s why people came to the table”

The Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative’s journey with BMWP has been anything but quick. It has unfolded through patient relationship-building, authentic youth partnership and a willingness to sit with complexity.

Yet in just two years, the collaborative has transformed its culture, influenced state policy, launched a new workforce pathway and seeded a model for youth-led training that can accelerate the spread of BMWP practices.

Reflecting on the journey, CYC’s Julia Hughes emphasized that BMWP gave Denver more than a framework: it gave the collaborative a renewed sense of purpose. “It’s what made us unique. It’s why people came back to the table.”

For Jose Flores, Amelia Federico, and Chantal Vargas Jimenez, the impact is personal: they have felt belonging, purpose and meaning themselves — and are now spreading this to peers in their community.

For funders and backbone leaders across the OYF network, the Denver case offers a simple but profound lesson: when systems are rebuilt around belonging, meaning, wellbeing, and purpose, young people thrive — and so do the adults and organizations who serve them.

Youth voices



“My hope is that these amazing programs keep going because there will always be youth behind us who need this push and support. We are the future, and the decisions we make now will shape the next ten years.”

— Chantal Vargas Jimenez

“BMWP gave me language for what I had felt but didn’t know how to describe. Those moments when adults showed me I mattered, that I had purpose.”

— Amelia Federico



“BMWP is humanizing. It shifts power and makes collaboration possible.”

— Jose Flores