

# Y-PLAN: Teaches Youth Why and How to Plan

By Ariel H. Bierbaum and Deborah L. McKoy

In the spring of 2006, a class of ninth graders at Emery Secondary School in Emeryville, California, did an assessment of their community's needs and assets, then developed a vision for programming and building a school-based community wellness center.

Ninth grade?

Yes. Local high school students have been helping the city of Emeryville envision a place where youth can participate in important decisions about how their community is designed and operated. These students are participating in a model of youth engagement in city planning—called the Y-PLAN (Youth–Plan, Learn, Act, Now)—which uses the redevelopment of urban spaces as a catalyst for community revitalization and education reform.

“Instead of simply talking about our government, students were actually sitting in City Hall, a place that they should be able to see themselves in some day,” says Emery Secondary School teacher, Max Monroy-Miller.

## A Plan for Positive Community Planning

The Y-PLAN, established in 2000, is based at the University of California Berkeley's Center for Cities & Schools. Y-PLAN facilitates positive community outcomes by partnering university “mentors,” local high school students, and teachers, with government agencies, private interests, and other community organizations to work on real-world planning issues. Past projects have included proposals to redesign an abandoned park in West Oakland (2004) and the redevelopment of the historic West Oakland Train Station (2005). The Y-PLAN is a pedagogical and professional development tool, as well as a planning studio that addresses specific issues in local communities.

Success of the Y-PLAN depends on its meeting the

following three conditions<sup>1</sup>:

1. City and school leaders, professional planners, elected representatives, and city residents must work with students on authentic problems. All of the participants—young and old, professional and student—must focus on a real planning challenge in their community and work together to create a “community of practice.”<sup>2</sup>
2. Adults must share decision-making with young people, giving them a meaningful role in the outcomes of the projects.
3. Projects must be successful for the students and institutions involved, in order to promote the sustainability of student-driven redevelopment projects.

The Y-PLAN provides an opportunity for project-based learning in classrooms and challenges professional planners to explain what they do in youth-accessible terms. How do current planning practices limit the involvement of youth, families, and schools? What are the alternatives?

When Emery Secondary School students presented their proposals for the Center of Community Life and the Family Resource Center—a school-based community wellness center—to the Emeryville City Council, they learned a valuable lesson about the political and financial dimensions of city planning.

## Emeryville Gives Y-PLAN a Serious Chance

Y-PLAN 2007 built on the work done in Y-PLAN 2006 and for 10 weeks this spring, ninth and tenth graders at Emery grappled with the questions posed by school and city leaders, State Assemblywoman



Loni Hancock, and the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG). Students expanded their thinking on the planning of the two centers after further community-based research, and in coordination with other regional planning projects.<sup>3</sup> With help from their U.C. Berkeley mentors, students explored the connections between regional planning and local issues. In accordance with the Emeryville General Plan Update, they addressed client-driven questions in a local context, and developed strategies for accessible community spaces, housing opportunities, and a vibrant street-life. Finally, they created a presentation for the city council, detailing their experiences and visions, and a proposal for implementation of their plans. In the process, the students were able to hone their skills in data collection, critical thinking, and public speaking.

Emery Social Studies Department Chair Ruth Mathis sees the Y-PLAN as a way “to give real opportunities to students to actively engage with themes, such as the creation of democracy, conflict and revolution, and social justice.” Mathis integrates Y-PLAN into her curriculum to meet “the needs of a diverse population and to create active, engaged, and socially conscious citizens.”

Students made their final presentation to the Emeryville City Council, school leaders, and their families in May 2007. They emphasized their critical analyses of race/class disparities between the city and school districts, and articulated actionable items for themselves, their teachers, the city council, and the

planning department. Students also requested affordable housing in Emeryville for their families and increased safety through better street lighting and secure fences. They asserted their willingness to contribute to the General Plan Update Process, and asked council members to identify other ways in which they could contribute to the decision-making process in Emeryville.

Mathis reiterated the students’ analyses and asked the council members to address these two questions:

1. How can Emeryville create real spaces for diverse young people to participate in the decision-making processes?
2. Is Emeryville ready to do the necessary work of dismantling the social and economic inequities identified by the students?

### Y-PLAN Creates Hope and Cautious Optimism

Various working committees across Emeryville are grappling with the issues raised by the Emery Secondary School students. Recently, the City/School Committee, a joint group that includes members of the city council and the school board, and the General Plan Update Steering Committee added student representatives to their committees. As Miguel Dwin, a member of the steering committee and the school board put it, “As leaders in this community, we have the chance to develop a model to bring students to the table and to let this sector of our community, [which] is rarely heard, be a part of the decision-making.”

Y-PLAN students are cautiously optimistic about

Photo: (Left) Y-PLAN student shares her work with Superintendent Tony Smith.

(Right) Assemblywoman Loni Hancock visits Emery Secondary School to talk with Y-PLAN students about their project and to share visions of San Pablo Avenue.

Courtesy of Y-Plan



their ideas being integrated into city plans. At the same time, they continue to ask difficult questions about next steps, opportunities for input, and the sustainability of their vision. On an individual level, the Y-PLAN provided opportunities for students to explore alternative careers and reframed the possibilities for a post-secondary education. Many have been inspired to improve their grades and explore two- and four-year colleges. “The past semester has shaped me for college,” claims one student, while another maintains that the Y-PLAN “made me more focused on my future career. Now, I... really want to go to college and be somebody.”

At the mentoring end, the Y-PLAN has fostered new thinking among U.C. Berkeley students in the areas of city planning, architecture, and education. The intensity of working on the Y-PLAN—dealing with professionals, learning the dynamics of classrooms, and connecting with diverse students—has also influenced their career trajectories. Pauline Lauterbach, who recently completed her master’s degree in city planning, crystallized the connection between teaching and planning: “By breaking down highly structured relationships between planners and the public, meaningful participation can be achieved, which engages participants and planners alike in shared learning and problem-solving.”

As of now, based on the work already accomplished under the Y-PLAN and the ongoing commitment of city leaders in Emeryville, U.C. Berkeley’s Center for Cities and Schools is developing a research agenda, technical assistance tools, and professional development strategies for youth participation in city planning. Emeryville will serve as a model as the Center expands its work with Assemblywoman Loni Hancock’s office, and with civic, school, and community-based partners in the region. Over the next few years, it will document and analyze the innovative and deep partnerships that bridge city planning and school district practices to meaningfully engage youth and school stakeholders across the region as part of its Youth, Schools, and Planning Initiative. ■

## Endnotes

1. McKoy, Deborah L. and Vincent, Jeffrey. “Engaging Schools in Urban Revitalization: The Y-PLAN (Youth–Plan, Learn, Act, Now!),” *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 2007, 26: 389-403.
2. The concept “community of practice” is grounded in theories of situated learning, which assume that learning takes place in the context of social participation rather than solely in an individual mind. See: Lave, Jean and Wenger, Etienne, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991) and Wenger, Etienne, “Communities of Practice: Learning as a Social System,” *Systems Thinker*, June 1998. [www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/Iss.shtml1998](http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/Iss.shtml1998)
3. Specifically, Assemblywoman Loni Hancock sought youth feedback on her “Destination: San Pablo Avenue” initiative: <http://democrats.assembly.ca.gov/members/a14/pdf/DestinationSPA.pdf>

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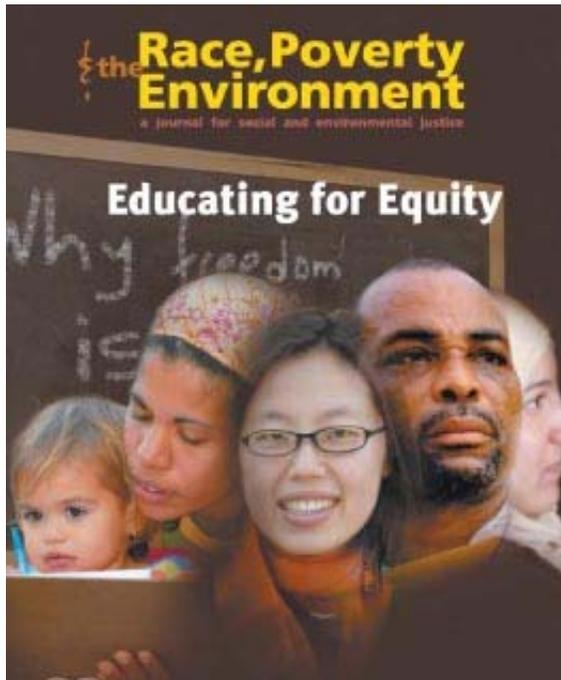
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