



Youth Wellness Zones:

Early Outcomes of a Place-Based, Collective Impact Approach

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Acknowledgements

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BACKGROUND

In the United States, approximately 6 million children and adolescents experience anxiety, 5.5 million struggle with behavioral health challenges, and 3 million suffer from depression (CDC, 2023). More than half of these young people will not be able to access appropriate care given current infrastructure and system shortcomings. Provider workforce shortages, distrust in formal medical treatment systems, and limited accessibility to suitable levels of care highlight the necessity of incorporating new, innovative approaches to support youth wellbeing.

A statewide collaboration, generously funded by a Washington State legislative proviso, was established over the past year. The goal of this partnership was to establish whether and how a community-led, embedded collective impact approach could create positive change in youth mental and behavioral health in Washington State.

Photo courtesy of The ZONE

In addition to supporting actions to improve the wellbeing of youth in these regions, the partnership was established to develop recommendations for enacting hyperlocal, collective impact approaches (hereafter, Zones) as sustainable, government-enabled solutions to the ongoing youth mental health crisis. Research suggests young people's mental health outcomes are heavily impacted by environment, both physical and social (Bjorndal et al., 2024; Glover et al., 2021; National Research Council, 2001; Tost et al., 2015). Living in socially disadvantaged areas is associated with negative mental health outcomes and early research suggests that improving the local environment is likely to enhance community health and wellbeing trajectories (Bjorndal et al., 2024; National Research Council, 2001; Pearce et al., 2018; Tost et al., 2015). It is likely that the success of place-based approaches in improving mental health outcomes is due at least in part to them being uniquely situated to effectively navigate local culture and stigmas about mental health. These approaches can also be leveraged to identify and fill in gaps in the continuum of mental healthcare. Collective impact strategies aim to align sectors to work together towards common goals while focusing on holistic drivers of health such as social capital, housing, education, employment, and social service accessibility (Glover et al., 2021).

To date, most collective impact efforts have focused on early childhood development, education, or adolescent substance use prevention rather than mental health. This may be due to mental health being considered an issue for the healthcare industry to address rather than community or government (Moore et al., 2014). Efforts to improve mental health outcomes for young people have largely focused on improving access, engagement, and quality of services within the treatment sector. While collective impact, place-based models show promise for improving mental health outcomes, the evidence is largely practice- and consensus-based at this time (Hohl et al., 2019; Kondo et al., 2018).

The learning collaborative utilized **Youth Wellness Zones (YWZs)**, hyperlocal geographic regions that leveraged local expertise and community engagement with the goal of aligning sectors and organizations towards common goals. By leveraging community lived-expertise and fostering neighborhood engagement, Zones aimed to create sustainable, impactful change in community health and wellness, focusing on both built and social environments, resources, and policies. This collective impact, place-based approach allowed Zones to focus on lasting changes across systems. Zones were chosen as the preferred public health strategy for this initiative, as they are able to be tailored to unique local conditions (e.g., social capital, housing, education, employment, resources) and can address complex issues arising from historical disadvantages due to discriminatory policies (e.g., redlining) that perpetuate economic and racial segregation, high crime rates, and poor health outcomes (Poon et al., 2022).

The four locations involved in the initiative (Northeast Spokane, Yakima Valley, Renton, and Greater Parkland) were chosen for their proven history of commitment to or interest in addressing youth needs via local collective impact approaches. Backbone organizations for these Zones are The ZONE at the Northeast Community Center Association (Northeast Spokane), Yakima Valley Partners for Education (YVPE), Renton Innovation Zone Partnership (RIZP), and Kids Mental Health Pierce County (Greater Parkland). The collaboration is facilitated by Shine Strategies, a nationally-recognized consulting group with expertise in place-based approaches to health. The University of Washington CoLab for Community and Behavioral Health Policy (CoLab) aided in evaluation and dissemination of information to community, scholarly, and policy communities.



Students from the On Track Academy partnered with Second Harvest to offer a bi-weekly food distribution for students and their campus community, highlighting the connection between fresh foods and wellness.

Photos courtesy of The ZONE



METHODS

Review of Existing Approaches

To evaluate the successes, challenges, and lessons emerging across the four Youth Wellness Zones (YWZs), the CoLab team developed an evaluation plan to inform future planning, implementation, and scaling efforts.

Photo courtesy of Renton Innovation Zone Partnership

Approach

The data collection approach was guided by a preliminary review of frameworks for evaluating place-based initiatives, with key insights drawn from the StriveTogether network and the Youth Endowment Fund's work (Smith et al., 2023; StriveTogether, 2021, 2022). These resources highlight the use of appropriate metrics that measure systems-level change and methods that are feasible. Building on this review, the CoLab team distributed a survey to gather feedback from leadership at each of the four YWZs. Respondents were asked to evaluate the feasibility and utility of various data collection methods and to rate a set of proposed evaluation metrics. All items were adapted from existing frameworks and tailored for the YWZ initiative.

Survey responses revealed low consensus on preferred evaluation metrics and methods, reflecting variation in Zone structure and implementation stage across Zones. However, qualitative approaches and surveys were widely regarded as the most feasible and valuable. Respondents also raised concerns about the limited applicability of publicly available data and the risk of survey fatigue among community members. A more detailed breakdown of the findings are available in a previously published report (Cunningham et al., 2025). Based on these findings, the evaluation team implemented a flexible and primarily qualitative design. This included: 1) semi-structured interviews with Zone leads, 2) focus groups with community members, and 3) an optional follow-up survey to allow for additional contributions and broader reach.

Development of Protocols

The interview and focus group protocols were designed based on a set of metrics identified through CoLab's initial review and consultation with Zone leadership. These metrics guided the development of questions that explored Zone-level successes, challenges, and community engagement. The metrics included:

1. Effectiveness (impact on outcomes, including unintended, negative, and economic outcomes),
2. Reach (number and representativeness of individuals participating),
3. Participation (degree of felt ownership among diverse sectors of the community),
4. Strategy-to-outcome match (extent to which the Zones' strategy reflects an understanding of direct and indirect effects on youth mental health),
5. Implementation (delivery as intended, adaptation, and costs of delivery), and
6. Maintenance (sustainability of activities and outcomes over time).

Both the focus group and interview protocols were structured around the same set of metrics, but the questions were adapted to fit the format and the interviewees. A follow-up survey for community members was developed using the same questions as the focus group protocol. The survey was designed to allow for additional input and to gather responses from individuals who were unable to attend a session. Additionally, the focus group for The ZONE was conducted with youth participants. Therefore, both the focus group protocol and follow-up survey were further tailored for language and relevance. The full interview, focus group protocols, and surveys are included in Appendices A-E.

Data Collection Process

Interviews with Youth Wellness Zone Leadership

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with program leads from backbone organizations of each YWZ. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and facilitated by the CoLab team, with one team member serving as the primary interviewer and another as the notetaker. Each session lasted approximately one hour, with additional time provided as needed. Verbal consent was obtained at the start of each interview, and all sessions were recorded for notetaking purposes. Participants were also invited to share supplemental materials via email following the interview. Across the four Zones, a total of eight program leads participated in interviews, with one to three representatives per Zone.

Community Focus Groups and Surveys

Program leads from each YWZ identified key stakeholders and community members to participate in focus groups. These included youth, service providers, school personnel, and other community partners actively involved in Zone activities. Each session was conducted via Zoom and facilitated by the CoLab team. Sessions lasted approximately one hour. Verbal consent was obtained at the start of each session, and all sessions were recorded for notetaking purposes. The focus groups were conducted without the presence of program leads to encourage engagement and authentic feedback.

At the conclusion of each focus group, participants were invited to complete an optional follow-up survey to expand on their responses or to share the link with others in their community. A total of 24 individuals participated in the focus groups: five from The ZONE, three from RIZP, seven from YVPE, and nine from Parkland. Four follow-up survey responses were received: two from The ZONE, one from YVPE, one from RIZP, and zero from Parkland.

Analysis

Session recordings were transcribed and detailed notes were reviewed alongside follow-up survey responses and supplemental materials shared by program leads. These sources were synthesized to create a summary for each YWZ. The analysis aimed to identify key successes, Zone-specific strategies, and shared challenges across Zones. For each Zone, successes were summarized in five categories: core strategy, community connections, community ownership, knowledge integration, and sustainability. These summaries reflect how each Zone approached youth wellness and what could be learned from their processes and experiences.



The Greater Parkland youth wellness zone prioritized events focused on bringing community members together.

Photo courtesy of Greater Parkland Wellness Zone



YOUTH WELLNESS ZONES

Northeast Spokane

Northeast Spokane's YWZ, The ZONE, is supported by the backbone organization Northeast Community Center Association. This year, The ZONE partnered with On Track Academy High School, a project-based school, to create a new elective class focusing on youth wellness needs. A wellness survey was distributed in August 2024 to gather information from approximately 250 student community members about specific youth wellness needs. In the elective, students identified and prioritized youth wellness needs then proposed solutions. The ZONE community partners offered workshops and collaborated with students to develop thoughtful strategies for implementation.

Photo courtesy of Yakima Valley Partners for Education

Students not only operationalized their wellness goals, they put them into practice. They organized produce stands for students to take fresh fruit and vegetables home to their families, tie dyed sweatshirts with inspirational quotes and the suicide prevention hotline phone number, and planted trees on campus to increase green space and allow for forest bathing. These are just a few of the many initiatives these young people generated. At a showcase of their projects, students presented their ideas and projects to over 200 residents, businesses, and political leaders in their community. They also spoke to state legislators in an effort to encourage continued funding of YWZs. Students identified specific next steps for community leaders and residents to take to continue this important work. The ZONE strategies impact student mental wellness by engaging and mobilizing young people in all phases of the project (needs identification, planning, development, proposal, implementation).



Students presented their work in several showcases to community leaders including the mayor of Spokane, their regional health officer, and county behavioral health staff.

Photos courtesy of The ZONE

Summary of Successes

Core Strategy

The ZONE prioritized being in the service of student voice and residents. As one of the YWZ leads stated, “Let our neighbors transform our neighborhood.” This also required the program to be nimble, flexible, and responsive. This philosophy was echoed by the youth involved in the initiative: “The ZONE gave us a microphone and platform to address real issues that we have been discussing for a long time. We had the opportunity to meet and talk with legislators and higher-up people, like the mayor, and truly feel like our voice mattered. Just because we are young, there are still ways for us to get our thoughts out there, and we want other students to have this opportunity to feel heard and validated.”

Community Connections

One of the students came up with a “normalizing MH awareness” campaign shirt, and the company that had those sweatshirts printed was “just so very grateful to be part of something that was helping mental health awareness within the community.” Externally, to support presentations, they had the City of Spokane, Chase Youth Commission, and Spokane Schools walking beside them as they navigated permits and scheduling for the Showcase. The Spokane Regional Domestic Violence Coalition also created a 75-minute session for students to present at the Eastern Washington End the Violence 2025 conference. The work was further validated through two presentations with Alliance for Innovative Educational Redesign (AIER). One partner noted, “They really wanted to hear from the youth, and it was amazing to talk to the other high school principals affirming that they are hearing the same things. They listened to the direction and the actionable movements that we are coming up with and were blown away by what we did.”

Community Ownership

The youth-driven approach ensured that they felt a strong sense of ownership over the outcomes: “We were able to do our projects on anything we want as long as it is appropriate.” A student stated, “Initially, we did not realize the impact of what we were doing, but going to Olympia and meeting with legislators, we realized how much our voice mattered and how much impact we were making.” Over the course of the year, the youth and ZONE staff connected with over 10 sectors and hundreds of community residents, including youth and families. Policy connections included the Chase Youth Commissioners from high schools around the county, youth leadership in Spokane Public Schools, Spokane City Council, school board members, and a presentation to the Washington State Senate Human Services Committee. Outreach validated the youth projects as they heard common themes around the city. A student highlighted, “The same things were causing anxiety and depression in the youth across our community.”

Knowledge Integration

The ZONE primarily relied on the youth to shed light on mental health and wellness needs. A YWZ leader reported, "Getting their voice and their opinion on youth wellness and mental health wellness I think is probably the biggest driving factor to be able to find those results and solutions." The youth additionally drew information about mental health needs and strategies from friends and peers. The YWZ also reached out to other ZONE team members for information and resources to support the youth, and brought in community partners to help with project design, including therapist and counselor expertise. As priorities surfaced, YWZ staff reached out to experts in those areas for additional guidance.



***The On Track Academy Youth Wellness Class won a 2025 Chase Youth Award.
One student won the Chase Youth Commissioner Judge's Choice Award for
their community leadership.***

Photos courtesy of The ZONE

Sustainability

Since 2018, youth mental health has been a resident priority in The ZONE. Youth members of the Resident Steering Committee will keep reporting out on the YWZ work and continued needs, and will include wellness priorities in strategic planning for this place-based initiative. Funding partners are continuing to step forward. The Spokane Tribe of Indians is the YWZ Spokane sponsor for the 2025-2026 school year.

On Track Academy has committed to offering the YWZ courses again next year and to involving graduates as mentors to new students. They joked, “If we didn’t have the course, there would be a riot.” The initiative will also continue to work on addressing the wellness priorities outlined by the youth in the community, including collaborations with city and regional policy decision makers and multisector partners. Other schools in NE Spokane have asked The ZONE to offer wellness units, clubs, and support during the school day, and The ZONE has already committed to a club at Shaw Middle School. Other plans are in the works to expand school-based strategies as well.

As stated by one of the YWZ-involved youth:

“We believe that by giving youth a voice, we are also helping to heal generational trauma. When youth are given a platform to speak, it brings awareness to issues that older generations may have ignored or forgotten. We want to continue this cycle, so that when we are older, we will also make sure the voices of future generations are heard, and this cycle of advocacy and healing can continue.”

Yakima Valley

Yakima Valley Partners for Education (YVPE) served as the backbone to the Yakima Valley YWZ project, All Students Belong. This YWZ focused on increasing the sense of belonging amongst students and families via social-emotional learning. YVPE distributed funding to six separate entities: Mabton School District, Granger School District, Communities in Schools of Central Washington, Yakima Valley College (YVC), Yakima Valley Farmworkers Clinic (YVFWC), and Nuestra Casa. This approach supported hyper-localized community-based strategies. In addition, YVPE funded internships for four students from the Yakima Valley region to research and implement their own youth wellness models.

Mabton School District held leadership trainings, a parent introduction to mindfulness at the Parents’ Institute Conference, and community events that honored cultural heritage. Granger School District provided mental health first aid training and suicide prevention/awareness using QPR (question, persuade, respond) for all students grades five through 12. These trainings taught students to identify warning signs, how to support peers in getting help, and how to reach students who cannot or will not access help independently. They also implemented positive behavioral interventions and support for students throughout the district.

Communities in Schools of Central Washington is involved in eight school districts across Yakima County, including two full-service community schools and two schools that operate on the homelands of the Yakama Nation. Communities in Schools hosted Harmony Academy trainings in social-emotional learning and curricula for teachers, mindfulness training, and Kindness in Action. Kindness in Action events included awards ceremonies, bullying/violence prevention, conflict resolution and restorative practices, cultural/historical events, leadership training, behavior modification/intervention programs, enrichment activities, social skills, peer mentoring, sports/clubs, relationship skill building, small groups/coaching, suicide prevention/intervention, counseling, and targeted behavior support.

YVC, a federally-designated Hispanic Serving Institution, established a baseline of needs through student engagement and input. They were able to survey many first-generation college students to identify culturally appropriate mechanisms of enhancing success in college. Additionally, YVC started initiatives to enhance student leadership skills and financial aid literacy.

YVFWC utilized their Parents as Teachers Program to train parents and children in mindfulness strategies. Twenty-five members from community-based organizations received “train the trainer” mindfulness training from MIEA (Mindfulness Institute for Emerging Adults). Attendees included YVFWC and Nuestra Casa who then developed their own approach to train others. Nuestra Casa specifically supported immigrant women in learning mindfulness techniques and provided meals at each training.

Although YVPE utilized a variety of specific strategies across districts, each aimed to improve social-emotional wellness through increased awareness and understanding of mental wellness.



***Yakima Valley Partners for Education sponsored many community events
bringing families together.***

Photos courtesy of Yakima Valley Partners for Education

Summary of Successes

Core Strategy

The YVPE YWZ supported multiple community partners to assess community needs, then identify and deliver culturally responsive programs. This approach required coordinating multiple partners, a strategy the YVPE found to be essential to achieving its goals. As one of the project leads stated, this allowed for direct impact on multiple “distinct sectors. [...] We had behavioral health, we had the early learning home visitors, private businesses, we had K-12 principals, university college faculty and staff, we had community-based organizations like Casa, we had a college access partner, and college success foundation, and then we had community members. [...] And then every sector by itself did some of their work in their community with their stakeholders.”

Community Connections

The YVPE region spans from the Yakama Reservation to Prosser, Benton County. The YVPE supported six hyperlocal planning efforts (essentially, six YWZs). As a “super backbone” the YVPE supported each site to engage in local community planning, resulting in more than 10 engaged sectors and participation by hundreds of local residents and service providers.

Community Ownership

The YVPE community partners were enthusiastic about their involvement and the YVPE’s role in supporting culturally responsive approaches around the region. One community member highlighted, “YVPE is a catalyst for driving community voice and need. They collaborate effectively to bring all voices to the table and find the ways to support each program with what they need. I share this work across the state and every community wishes they had a community partner like YVPE, this speaks volumes of the amazing work they do in the Yakima Valley.” A key aspect of the YVPE was they provided support but allowed customization. This also required strong partnership and teamwork. Another community partner noted, “We were able to collaborate constantly sending messages back and forth and checking in. So it was a very holistic approach to the work, but still individualized to every wellness zone. So even if we were using the same curriculum, the same model, the same approach, it was very unique to each organization that was partnered.”

Knowledge Integration

The YVPE strategy was strongly informed by research on the role families play in child and youth wellbeing, a position heartily endorsed by local partners and cultural values. When asked about impact, one community partner stated, “One hundred percent feel that it’s going to have impact. Healthy families equal healthy children. It’s research-based, it’s factual.” The YVPE also used multiple methods including surveys, interviews and community meetings to identify areas of need and receive feedback on community-informed and community-implemented solutions.

Using pre- and post-surveys and ongoing assessment allowed YVPE to identify impactful approaches and also know when to pivot. For example, they found that a school-based de-escalation training improved staff's feeling of confidence in dealing with difficult students behaviors by 200% (30-90% felt confident pre- to post-training).

A community partner noted, "We were able to slowly see that we were impacting systems within schools that are overwhelmed. And I think that alone is a testament to the work that we're doing within the wellness zones because we now have staff that say, 'Hey, there's a calming corner in school.' If we have students throwing chairs or explosive behaviors, we know how to be able to navigate a system of support within a school that may not have happened before or have been resourced."

Sustainability

YVPE will continue support for the wellness efforts within hyperlocal sites, supporting programs with strong community buy-in through other values-aligned funding. Having visibility and evaluation builds buy-in with government and funders. The YVPE will continue to collaborate with research partners to continue their work.



Yakima Valley College launched Yak Family Nights, inviting students and families to campus alongside a resource fair.

Photo courtesy of Yakima Valley Partners for Education

Renton

The Renton Innovation Zone Partnership (RIZP) is the backbone organization behind the Renton YWZ, focusing on the Skyway/West Hill and Renton Highlands communities (located in unincorporated King County). In 2023, RIZP conducted a summer learning program evaluation with 41 parents and 54 student participants to gather feedback on ways to improve youth wellness. Many responses highlighted the importance of having a friend, particularly when entering a new educational environment.

For the past three years, RIZP has joined with Dimmitt Middle School to prepare for implementation of the “Where Everybody Belongs” (WEB) program, a middle school orientation and transition initiative designed to welcome and support rising sixth graders. In this curriculum, eighth grade students mentor incoming sixth graders, serving as role models by welcoming them to the school, and encouraging connection with fellow sixth graders, the school itself, and the school staff. The eighth grade mentors, also known as WEB Leaders, provide monthly check-ins and hang out sessions with their mentees. WEB will be implemented in the 2025-2026 school year, with the goal of enhancing a sense of belonging and overall wellbeing for incoming sixth graders.

As stated by a community partner, “Having young people who have a voice, knowing they are safe and they belong and matter is critical. Making them have a consistent experience in elementary & middle school is important.”

In preparation for this year’s kickoff event, Spring Bling, RIZP focused on planning, training, and incorporating youth and student voice and creative direction. With over 260 attendees (including families), 73 of whom were rising sixth-graders, this year’s event included student-led tours, a student panel, on-site event photography, and a photo booth managed by three Renton High School students. These Renton High School students were all Dimmitt Middle School alumni who received paid stipends and volunteer hours that count towards their graduation.

Summary of Successes

Core Strategy

RIZP's approach was shaped by prior data from youth and community assessments, which highlighted the need for grassroots strategies to support young people's sense of belonging and self-worth—key foundations for strong mental health. Youth were meaningfully involved in planning and hosting YWZ's signature event, Spring Bling, which aimed to ease the transition for incoming 6th graders and addressed school climate concerns (such as anxiety around locker use). RIZP integrated the YWZ strategy into its four-year cycle model, which includes needs assessment, program selection, implementation, and evaluation. A consistent community need identified was for more out-of-school programs led by middle schools. As one community partner noted, "When the students get to go [to programs], great things happen – but it's a matter of making more of those opportunities available."

Community Connections

RIZP relied on continuous partner feedback—both informal and through formal assessments—to stay responsive to community needs. This included close collaboration with Dimmitt Middle School and partnerships with local businesses and service providers for events like Spring Bling. Over time, RIZP shifted its focus more intentionally to middle school spaces, choosing to strengthen existing partnerships rather than build parallel initiatives.



Amongst the fun during this year's Spring Bling, RIZP made a surprise donation of \$2,000 to Dimmitt Middle School's building fund in support of middle school transition.

Photo courtesy of Renton Innovation Zone Partnership

Community Ownership

The Spring Bling event empowered students through a dedicated panel, stipends for participation, and the opportunity to lead major aspects of the event. As one stakeholder said, “The student could do the whole event if they want to.”

Knowledge Integration

RIZP chose programming that aligned with community priorities, especially around youth mental health and belonging. Middle school emerged as a pivotal developmental stage. One team member shared, “Using the results of the survey, we were able to boil down our goals – a big ‘aha moment.’” Ongoing assessments also informed program adjustments to better align with local systems and community values.

Sustainability

RIZP served as a catalyst for launching initiatives with the goal of transitioning program ownership to schools and community partners. The WEB program, for example, is set to continue under the leadership of Dimmitt Middle School. RIZP is also working to identify additional partners to sustain broader youth mental health efforts across the region.



Renton’s Youth Wellness Zone Spring Bling event drew in over 260 attendees and supported 73 incoming 6th-graders and their families.

Photo courtesy of Renton Innovation Zone Partnership

Greater Parkland

Greater Parkland's YWZ is championed by their backbone, Kids' Mental Health Pierce County (KMHPC), a coalition of community leaders and organizations moving to address the mental health crisis among children and adolescents in their neighborhoods. The current initiative aims to create a coordinated, comprehensive, and culturally responsive mental health care system to support young people. A three-tiered approach is being piloted at Keithley Middle School, where students are screened for mental health challenges, a family and community multidisciplinary team provides case coordination, and a mental health clinician at the school provides brief intervention until the student initiates treatment with community providers. The goals of this program are to identify mental and behavioral health issues earlier, provide timely triage and connection to culturally appropriate community-based services, and deliver bridge treatment until outside services are established so the student can receive care as they wait. This strategy aims to increase community connection across youth, families, providers, and organizations, allowing for a broader network of support and an increased sense of confidence that their neighborhood can and will support young people. Since its inception in November 2024, a total of 37 referrals have been received. Among participating students, 90% demonstrated a clinically significant reduction (defined as a decrease of four points or more on assessment measures) in depression- and anxiety-related symptoms following their period of care. The Greater Parkland Zone held a community and provider kickoff event this year, which was attended by almost 90 community members.

Summary of Successes

Core Strategy

As a very new backbone, the Greater Parkland YWZ facilitated by Kids Mental Health Pierce County, focused on a dual strategy of supporting the school district's existing effort to support a mental health counselor position in Keithley Middle School while beginning to build community engagement and planning for additional strategies. The goal was to identify key partners that are already doing the work, specifically small organizations/businesses. The main objective, as stated by one of the YWZ leads, was to "Look at where people naturally find community and just get creative with what [we can] build upon that's already there."

Community Connections

The Greater Parkland YWZ used multiple methods to build community awareness of the new YWZ as well as of other resources in the community. This included a service provider event that drew over 80 participants from youth serving organizations in the Greater Parkland region as well as newsletters and a website with centralized information. The Greater Parkland YWZ also supported the school district to engage a youth leadership committee to develop and distribute a survey about youth mental health needs. One YWZ leader noted, “Data about the youth from the youth is pretty powerful.” The YWZ is working with community leaders to form an advisory group to guide ongoing strategies.

Community Ownership

Community ownership is core to the Greater Parkland YWZ’s philosophy. YWZ staff were intentional about attending Parkland community events and are always looking for different ways to engage and participate with existing community efforts (e.g. tables, co-lead events, provide sponsorships). A community partner stated, “The kickoff event was really cool to see multiple different people, not just the typical folks from Kids Mental Health Pierce County, but there’s different folks from the Parkland area as well. So during the event it felt very applicable, very engaging.”



The Greater Parkland Youth Wellness Zone partnered with Innovative Change Makers for a youth-focused event, a paint and vibe night.

Photo courtesy of Greater Parkland Wellness Zone

Knowledge Integration

The Greater Parkland YWZ worked with 60 community stakeholders (including behavioral health providers, parent supports, youth serving organizations, school district partners and staff, and juvenile justice professionals) to adopt a Theory of Change model for developing local planning efforts. This included cultivating an advisory group of 40 providers and other community partners to develop a plan for integrating the local mental health provider network, due to be released in fall 2025. Information about youth mental health is cultivated from Kids Mental Health Washington's network of mental health experts as well as information from community input obtained from surveys, community events, and ongoing relationships.

Sustainability

The Greater Parkland YWZ is looking to multiple sources for sustaining the community planning and backbone efforts, including leaning on existing resources within Kids Mental Health Washington and its fiscal sponsor, Multicare, to support fundraising and grant writing. The YWZ is also thoughtful about cultivating respectful, bidirectionally beneficial relationships that can support the long-term sustainability of programs.



Greater Parkland hosted a large community kickoff event.

Photo courtesy of Greater Parkland Wellness Zone

Forest Bathing

Roots Entwined

In the shadow of a trembling earth,
A generation questions worth.
With their future so far away,

It's hard to imagine a future, they
dare not say. Beneath the weight of
an increasingly warming sky, These
teenagers watch with anxieties high.
Oceans rise where dreams once
grew, The future feels stolen before
it's due.

With their glassy eyes, their
tears unknown, replaced by
Their river of worry, When
once sang of hope, they
But then—a silence, a
A path through the dark,
near. Into the unknown,
one, Beneath the sun.
With their hands on their
sides, they stand on
the edge of the world,
as the wind howls and
the trees whisper secrets
that only they can hear.

The spark of community is gained,
A fire is lit, not just with a flame.
Community—no longer alone,
A forest of hearts, a place called
home.

Here, they learn what nature brings,
Their senses awaken, and it's not
just a fling. The trees remind them
they belong, To something vast,
enduring, strong.

For in the shade of ancient trees
The anxious mind finds its release.
Through forest paths and outdoor
play, The ache of worry fades

My call out is this: let more
this calm refrain, This cure for
this break from pain. Outdoors
together, let hope flow
For in nature's arms, these teens
can grow.

So let them wonder and gather,
Let them roam, Among the green,
finding their home. Together, they
can face what storms may come,
For with this knowledge, they know
life can survive.

Reasons to

Worry

By: Star



EVALUATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUTH WELLNESS ZONES

The Youth Wellness Zone (YWZ) year one initiative provided partners with the opportunity to reflect on the feasibility and challenges of measuring success with place-based, collective impact approaches. As noted in an earlier report (Cunningham et al., 2024), place-based initiatives are powerful and complex social policy efforts requiring nuanced evaluation strategies. Evaluation must consider how Zone leaders balance resident voice as well as evidence- or theory-informed strategies (Geller et al., 2014) and external judgments of success must be informed by the community context and conditions leaders are working within.

Photo courtesy of The ZONE

Common measurement challenges include establishing the saturation of efforts (or reach; e.g., how many residents was the initiative able to involve), resident engagement and mobilization, successful alignment of sector efforts, and success of engaged initiatives through individual or aggregate change (e.g., educational outcomes, health outcomes). While funders and policymakers may simply want to know “does it work,” it is important that evaluation approaches are carried out to answer more targeted questions, recognizing that the value of place-based approaches is not solely established by evaluation metrics but in its political goals to engage local planning and resident mobilization over the long-term.

Accordingly, the research team at CoLab drew from YWZ leaders and community interviews to develop a set of recommendations for the ongoing measurement of YWZ success. Below we report on themes arising from our efforts to measure year one successes and recommendations for ongoing assessment. We believe these findings will be of use to other external evaluators as well as local governments looking to support place-based efforts as part of their policy portfolios.

Core Theory of Change

Measuring the success of YWZs requires an understanding of the theories guiding local YWZ leader decision-making. The state learning collaborative provided an opportunity for leaders to share ideas and to draw from content experts and research partners at Shine Strategies and CoLab, but no framework or theory of change was imposed on the YWZs as they developed local strategies. Two strong themes emerged when asking YWZ leaders about values underlying their decision making processes: **interconnected influences on youth wellness and youth involvement as a driver of change.**

Interconnected Influences on Youth Wellness

All four of the YWZ leaders referred to individual youth wellness as arising from the health and strength of surrounding influences and systems. This drove leader decision-making to be open to and/or explicitly aim to influence a continuum of conditions and supports, beginning with families and supportive adults, school culture, out of school activities, and then formal services. All four sites supported at least one initiative aimed at influencing school culture, focused on youth belonging and/or staff awareness and responsiveness to mental health and wellness. Two sites supported parent and family initiatives focused on co-regulation (supporting caregiver and parent emotion regulation as strategies to support youth wellness) or parent education. All four sites held community meetings and outreach strategies aimed at connecting at least three levels of a continuum of support (e.g., youth, families, service sectors, schools) in community awareness or planning activities.

Quotes from YWZ Leaders

“I would say taking a ‘both/and’ approach, making space for therapeutic and non-therapeutic options. [...] The way we do the work is we approach it cross-sector and everybody has a contribution to make in supporting the wellbeing of oneself and others and developing a sense of belonging across the communities we serve in. And that will look different. It will not just be therapeutic. [...] We’re always navigating that and it’s a lot, you can’t just so quickly replicate even our approach because we are tending to the language and the culture and that has taken a lot of effort on our behalf to engage in our community.”

“Anytime you can get one sector to work on one goal [it’s a] success, right? But we did multiple sectors on one goal with a language and a cultural lens that I think for us was just a wonderful exercise that yes, we can do it and it’s necessary and it produces results, but that every sector has a contribution towards a them in support of its community, and then it’s worth engaging in. We did a lot, but it didn’t feel heavy. [...] And it was informed by the parents and the students every step of the way, but it wasn’t formal necessarily.”

“We try to do too many blanket responses as a state and don’t give local communities agency to drive what community is. And I think community has so much power now more than ever, to be the resource that we are needing to sustain our young people. I think if we continue to rely on systems, we’ll continue to be completely disappointed and failed every time. [...] And this is this opportunity to expand beyond our formal behavioral health systems to create an actual community for our kids that doesn’t look like the traditional psychotherapy counseling, but other ways of just being seen and heard and having that connection with our kids.”

Youth Involvement as a Driver of Change

All four YWZ leaders referenced the value of youth input, voice, and influence on local strategies as a way to source more insightful and impactful ideas for community change, as well as provide direct benefits to the participating youth. All of the sites canvassed youth voice through surveys and community events. Three of the sites engaged a youth advisory committee either directly or ran ideas through an existing committee. One of the sites built their entire community strategy from ideas emerging through a yearlong engagement with a core youth planning team.

Quotes from YWZ Leaders

“We built our strategies and all plans for action around what [the youth] said and their voice. That was really our directive, I suppose. Our strategy was to listen to their voice and listen to their strategies and follow through with that. We wanted to leave that kind of unknown ambiguity there so that we could get that raw voice out of them to figure out what we need to do as a community and adults to help fix the issues that they bring forward.”

“We absolutely are here in service of the voice, the needs, the goals of our neighbors. And so we don’t have any prescriptive outcomes. We don’t impose our definition of success on something. We literally hold the space, set up the ability to do the work, break down barriers like food and transportation and cost of facilitation and then let our neighbors transform our neighborhoods. [...] I think the reason why The ZONE is successful is that we are nimble, we are flexible, we are responsive, and we absolutely honor the will, the goals, the dreams, the vision of children, youth and families in our neighborhoods. And we just do that, whatever that is.”

“We’ve had youth surveys that the youth have conducted, that they created, that they implemented, that they analyzed about their peers and what initiatives they wanted. And I think data that comes literally from the youth about the youth is pretty powerful to include and lean on.”

“I think the student voice was super helpful. [...] I think that is definitely a big piece, but to set up the opportunity for student voice to have this structure, [...] understanding even just the wording, ‘How do you ask a middle schooler a question about this?’ It’s different than asking an adult. And so even just that nuance is super important, but I think, again, our partners are great at that. So it’s been very helpful.”

Community Perspectives

Responses from community members within each Zone supported the importance of 1) viewing youth wellness from a holistic lens with responses pointing to the value of family and parent roles, 2) appreciating seeing multiple people and perspectives across the community being brought together, and 3) youth directly speaking to the value of having their views centered and being able to advocate for community change with community and policy leaders.



Spokane Regional Health District and Spokane County Leadership learn from Wellness students from On Track Academy High School.

Photo courtesy of The ZONE

Quotes from Community Members:

“I think everything that The ZONE or The Wellness Zone had for the goal of giving a microphone and a platform for our voices, for these problems that have been weighing on our minds and weighing on our shoulders for a long time. [...] Our eyes have been opened, being able to talk to legislators, being able to speak with high up people. I shook the mayor’s hand. [...] It has widened the stage and I want that for every student who has these things to be given the opportunity to have these problems be heard and seen and validated.” - Youth

“[It would depend] on what coalitions and partners wanted to be involved. So I would say from that perspective and that level, it was inclusive and it provided opportunities for those partners who were part of Partners for Education to be able to drive their community voice through their ideas and their proposals.”

“We’re able to customize and create our wellness zones that work best for our program, our program outcomes. One of the reasons that we love working for Yakima Valley Partners for Education is that their work aligns with ours. Our mission, the cradle to career pathway. [...] Getting children ready for kindergarten, knowing that a child having a successful start for kindergarten and a strong family connection and parents that know how to navigate the system are going to have an overall more successful adult. And so how impactful that is. And so we were able to collaborate constantly sending messages back and forth and checking in. So it was a very holistic approach to the work, but still individualized to every wellness zone. So even if we were using the same curriculum, the same model, the same

Analysis

The operating beliefs and theories of change emerging from YWZ leader and community interviews are well-supported by the research and scholarly literature. Research on youth development has long pointed to the substantial influence of family and neighborhood conditions on engagement in school, mental and behavioral health, long-term employment, justice involvement, and even mortality rates (Alegría et al., 2015; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Schreier & Chen, 2013). Successful interventions addressing these conditions engage multiple community partners and sectors in aligning vision and actions across services (e.g., Communities that Care; Hawkins et al., 2008). This was clearly observed in the YWZ learning collaborative. The research on the role and impact of youth voice in driving change is still an emerging research area, while quickly being considered a standard of good practice in policy and community planning sectors (e.g., McKinney et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2010). Youth voice and decision-making is an example of person- and human-centered approaches in system design, ensuring large system efforts are centered in a vision articulated by those impacted by system change efforts (Walker et al., 2024; Wong et al., 2010). Strategies observed in some of the more matured YWZ sites align with recommendations provided by those studying youth participation approaches in planning efforts, including the role of supportive adults in using the resources, knowledge and capacity more readily available to adults to enact system changes centered on youth insights (Aceves-Martins et al., 2019; Ozer et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2010).

Recommendations for Evaluation Metrics

Evaluation of YWZs should be centered in a theory of change reflecting an awareness of interdependent, multisystem influences on youth wellness and the value of youth insight and involvement in change processes on system and individual levels. Metrics reflecting these insights would include developmental ratings of YWZ maturity reflecting these two dimensions:

- Degree to which the YWZ is actively engaging multiple sectors along the continuum of ecological influences on youth wellness: Environmental (e.g., parks, buildings, walkways, transport, food systems, housing), Social climate (e.g., community awareness and education in churches, schools, other community organizations), Family support (e.g., programs aimed at families, caregivers, parents and supportive adults), Youth awareness and support (e.g., positive activities, belonging, social connection), Treatment systems (e.g., screening and referral, brief intervention, complex interventions).
- Degree to which youth from the community are guiding system efforts: No participation (focus on interventions but not involved in planning), Low participation (opinions solicited through surveys or limited input), Medium participation (one time or time-limited opportunities shape direction of strategies), High participation (youth engaged throughout to shape community planning).



Yakima Valley Partners for Education distributed social-emotional toys and books to community members.

Photos courtesy of Yakima Valley Partners for Education

Effectiveness: Impact on Outcomes, Including Unintended and Negative Outcomes

All of the YWZ leaders indicated that measurements of effectiveness of selected programs and strategies are important. Two themes emerged from the interviews for guiding evaluation of effectiveness in future YWZ efforts: **program evaluation** as distinct from **systems evaluation**.

Program Evaluation

Each leader discussed effectiveness and impact in terms of whether instituted services or programs achieved their short-term intended results. These included reports on how many individuals participated or were referred to new programs, whether participants liked those programs, and whether the programs largely improved whatever they were aiming to achieve (e.g., increased comfort with emotional regulation skills). Leaders of more matured YWZs noted that tracking these types of metrics in an ongoing fashion were critical for understanding when to pivot, adapt, or even pause programs. One leader noted that they think about program implementation as two- to three-year cycles, assessing whether programs supported by the YWZ are continuing to meet current needs or if adaptations or new strategies would be more effective.

Systems Evaluation

Many of the leaders noted that the broader effectiveness of strategies and programs on community-wide health would not be detectable for years, particularly for any strategies aiming at policy change. Leaders of newer YWZs, in particular, noted that the community needed more time to build planning and implementation capacity before the larger impact of short-term decisions could be assessed.

Community Perspectives

Across sites, community members tied perceptions of effectiveness to how well the YWZ leaders communicated and engaged community members in planning. Leaders' perceived effectiveness was linked to the visibility of their efforts and to their commitment to the community.

Analysis

The YWZ leaders' characterization of program evaluation benefits matches well with the concept of developmental evaluation. Developmental evaluation is assessment conducted for the purposes of ongoing program improvement, including whether programs need to be adapted or paused. It is distinct from summative evaluation in that the purpose is not to compare the program to another condition for the purpose of assessing relative benefit. Rather, developmental evaluations produce assessments of value based on intended goals. They also provide the benefit of offering multiple opportunities for community input, design, and decision-making.

Themes emerging from interviews related to the complexities of systems evaluation are also echoed in public policy and health systems research. Recommendations for evaluating systems interventions are more easily characterized by what they warn against, including drawing overly simplistic conclusions from complex conditions, or assuming the conditions leading to success in one system can be easily replicated elsewhere.

Recommendations for Evaluation Metrics

Evaluation of YWZ effectiveness should consider individual strategy and program evaluation as distinct from effectiveness in achieving broader population health goals, which are longer horizon efforts requiring the integration of multiple points of information and analysis:

- Degree to which YWZs are able to employ point–developmental evaluation approaches as a part of strategic implementation, with routine opportunities for assessing participant views, attendance, and perceived benefit.
- Degree to which YWZs have the capacity to modify, adapt or select other strategies to achieve the community’s stated goals if existing programs are not working as intended.
- Degree to which YWZs can articulate (with real or hypothesized metrics) a 10-year expected community-wide impact if all of the short-term program and strategy goals are met across the portfolio of strategies and programs.



Photo courtesy of Greater Parkland Wellness Zone

Reach: Number and Representativeness of Individuals Participating and Affected

The reach of interventions or a suite of interventions is considered a critical part of population health strategies and was also prioritized among YWZ leaders as an important metric. While representativeness and reach were uniformly agreed upon as a strong requirement of Zone credibility and success, there were no standard methods of collecting and reporting reach across the YWZs. Three types of representativeness emerged from leader interviews as important: **community identities**, **sector representatives**, and **reach of strategies**.

Community Identities

As part of planning, all of the YWZ leaders noted the intent to capture feedback and engagement from diverse groups of community members within the Zone region. Some YWZs achieved this through a combination of surveys and community meetings, or surveys alone, but all recognized the value of having ways to assess broader community views as part of planning. None of the YWZs noted any benchmark or minimally acceptable number of responses needed to claim adequate representativeness.

Sector Representativeness

All of the YWZ leaders referenced the importance of engaging leaders from community, service, and government sectors in their work, though specific sectors varied by the focus of the YWZ goal. One YWZ engaged over 50 members from youth service sectors as part of outreach efforts, while two other YWZ engaged multiple representatives from ten different sectors (e.g., government, healthcare, youth services, treatment, schools) throughout planning processes.

Reach of Strategies

Leaders also noted the importance of selecting programs or a portfolio of strategies with the intent to positively, directly affect large numbers of individuals in the community. One YWZ achieved this by investing in multiple organizations. Other YWZs achieved this by selecting strategies that engaged entire schools or organizations in awareness and/or universal screening efforts.

Community Perspectives

The awareness of the YWZs' efforts to engage representative planning groups varied among community members across sites. Some communities were unaware of all that the YWZ leaders were doing, although they trusted the YWZs were making effective choices based on past track records. Communities echoed the value of broad community input, and emphasized the importance of youth voice and parent/caregiver voice in decision making.

Analysis

The social impact and research literature provides little direct guidance on minimum benchmarks for reach among efforts aiming to impact community health for specific regions. Reach is typically defined by specific intervention goals (e.g., those identified in screening efforts). Studies of community response to population-wide surveys or other information gathering campaigns are often able to reliably capture between 1-5% of an entire population and could provide a starting point for YWZ goals for reach (Jaffar & Eladl, 2016). Reach across sectors is also commonly reported and considered best practice in collective impact efforts.

Recommendations for Evaluation Metrics

Evaluation of reach should be assessed against the YWZs short-term impact goals as well as the overall maturity of the YWZ using the criteria proposed in the core strategy considerations. These would include:

- Degree to which the YWZ engages across community diversity and sectors according to the maturity of the YWZ backbone: Early phase (process measure of effort, convening and information gathering), Middle phase (process measures and success in engaging feedback from diverse communities, approximately 1% return), Mature phase (multiple convenings and higher success in engaging feedback, approximately 5% return).
- Degree to which YWZ strategies achieve reach through direct touchpoints in community by developmental maturity of the YWZ backbone: Early phase (one organization, small number of participants), Middle phase (multiple organizations, more reach into community through public awareness, trainings, or services); Mature phase (can rapidly engage multiple communities to roll out new programs and strategies).



Photos courtesy of Yakima Valley Partners for Education

Participation: Degree of Felt Ownership Among Diverse Sectors of the Community

We use the term participation in its political sense as an indicator of ownership from complete lack of ownership of decision-making to full ownership of decision-making (Arnstein, 1969). Leaders uniformly agreed that participation was an important if not the defining characteristic of place-based work. When asked whether they thought the community felt ownership over YWZ efforts, leaders revealed various ways of approaching and defining this value in practice. Four themes emerged around the definition of participation relevant for measurement: **legacy participation, issue centrality, leadership, and breadth.**

Legacy Participation

Three of the four leaders noted that strategies implemented during the project year were informed by previous information gathering and community participation efforts. The leaders identified this as an important way to be responsive to community preferences and needs. One leader suggested cycles of about three years for considering identified needs and community-informed strategies as still “active.”

Proximity to the Issue

All of the sites commented on the importance of engaging community members into planning initiatives based on identity and relevance as defined by the effort. Site leaders identified folks with lived experience as crucial participants. For example, “youth voice” was noted by all leaders as important to planning and implementing youth-focused efforts. YWZ leaders talked about how they helped make the visions articulated by the youth a reality, including setting up connections the youth did not have (e.g., with local and state policymakers) or suggesting approaches the youth may not have known about (e.g., programs that fit with the youth’s vision for greater social connection), while preserving youth ownership over the spirit of the initiatives. Another example is if the YWZ’s goal was to impact parent emotion regulation strategies, it would be important for parents and caregivers to be involved in planning and implementation.

“We built our strategies and all plans for action around what [the youth] said and their voice. That was really our directive, I suppose. Our strategy was to listen to their voice and listen to their strategies and follow through with that...”

Leadership

All four leaders referenced the importance of co-owning initiatives with local organizational leaders or demonstrated this value in how they implemented project plans. For example, one leader attributed much of their success in rapidly implementing programs and strategies to the mutually beneficial and trusting relationships they had developed with local organizational leaders.

Breadth

All of the leaders also referenced efforts to achieve breadth in participation, with greater breadth being inversely related to how much ownership the leaders sought to achieve with outreach strategies. For example, one leader noted that they achieved good breadth of feedback across multiple school sites, but the leader and backbone looked to a small cohort of students to make decisions directly affecting the YWZ strategies.

Community Perceptions

A key reason for recruiting community leaders and members to provide feedback on the YWZ efforts, separate from backbone leaders, was to assess perceived community participation directly from participants. Interviews with community leaders provided very insightful and helpful corroborating information regarding community involvement.

Analysis

The social welfare and health services fields have produced a number of thoughtful guidelines for assessing community perceptions of ownership and participation (Luger et al., 2020). Typically, these guidelines are most useful after community partners are selected by researchers, which tends to occur either through self-selection or convenience. We could find no guidance on how to measure perceived participation in communities where the region is identified separately from or prior to specific community partners. But setting this aside, these guides do provide thoughtful, systematically developed guidance for assessing individual perceptions of personal and group participation in decision-making, including whether individuals 1) felt sufficiently heard and respected, 2) felt that decision-making was clear, and 3) felt that they understood their role on teams, among other domains (Luger et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Evaluation Metrics

Overall, guidance for measuring community participation was the least developed among YWZ leaders despite sites achieving strong participation for a number of initiatives. Leaders were able to intuit and interpret success in participation by the behavior and spoken feedback of community members. Only one site used surveys to directly measure participation as a routine activity. Evaluation of community participation could be more systematically measured using multiple methods including:

- Leaders' efforts to engage authentic participation through holding predictable and routine community meetings (or encouraging these through community leads and partner organizations), leaders' ability to reflect on how community feedback changed their perception of an issue, sparked a new idea, or determined a new direction for programming, and leaders' proactive actions to forge mutually beneficial relationships in community.

- Confirming a core group of community members and leaders from the place-based region exists who have a thorough understanding of project initiatives, decision-making rationale, and matching understanding of the theory of change and strategies as the Zone leads.
- Obtaining feedback from engaged community participants on survey measures of participation and ownership.



Mayor Brown interacts with Youth from On Track Academy at the Youth Wellness Showcase.

Photo courtesy of The ZONE

Strategy to Outcome Match: Degree to Which the YWZ Strategy Reflects an Understanding of Direct and Indirect Effects on Youth Mental Health

The capacity to absorb and act on knowledge is one of the most important elements of achieving sustained success among collective impact efforts (Chaskin, 2001). Backbone organizations and community leaders guiding Zone efforts must be able to quickly filter and prioritize multiple inputs, including potentially contradictory information, when deciding on strategies. Balancing community feedback with expert and empirical knowledge is of even greater relevance when trying to achieve a health outcome with known predictors and effective intervention approaches. Zone leader responses identified three themes around the capacity to identify and make use of relevant information: **community knowledge, expert consultation, and tested resources.**

Community Knowledge

All of the leaders reported using community-informed definitions of mental health and ideas for mental health-supporting strategies to guide decision-making. Two of the sites also reported using systematic data collected by community members to revise or promote strategies. In one case, data was collected to confirm the value of a community idea, and in a separate case, data was used to substantially revise a program to be more culturally-responsive and value-sensitive.

Expert Consultation

Three of the YWZ leaders reported relying on local experts, typically mental health providers and administrators, to add to community ideas or suggest enhancements. In one YWZ, leaders reported consulting closely with local mental health practitioners to advise on ideas coming from community member planning sessions.

Empirically Supported Resources

Two of the leaders specifically referred to their selection of strategies being informed by a motivation to be evidence-based. Having been tested and found effective for the advertised outcomes was a positive consideration in these leaders' selection of programs over other options.

Community Perspectives

Interviews with community members and leaders supported the rationales provided by the YWZ leaders. In general, community members were less familiar with how evidence or expert knowledge played a role in decision-making or what sources backbone leaders relied on to vet ideas. Community members did value when YWZ strategies appeared to be a good match for community needs and when effectiveness considerations were part of the decision making process.

Analysis

The external assessment of whether an organization is able to effectively deploy knowledge is often referred to as absorptive capacity in the management and knowledge translation literature (Cuéllar et al., 2024). In the context of collective impact and place-based approaches, prior efforts to require certain frameworks for decision making have largely proved to be challenging and ineffective. Limiting choices by constraining eligible programs leads to poor morale, sabotage, or stagnation, while vague or very broad guidance does not provide sufficient decision making heuristics.

Recommendations for Evaluation Metrics

Adequate use of relevant knowledge for selecting strategies should integrate information across community, expert, and empirical sources in line with the following guidelines:

- Selected strategies do not run counter to, include elements that are known to be counterproductive, or have only a tenuous relationship with supporting youth mental health and wellness as assessed by an external content expert.
- Multiple sources of information from community, local experts, and best practice/ scholarly sources support the selection of the strategy.



Photo courtesy of Renton Innovation Zone Partnership



CONCLUSIONS

The Youth Wellness Zone (YWZ) year one initiative provided partners with the opportunity to reflect on the feasibility and challenges of measuring success with place-based, collective impact approaches. As noted in an earlier report (Cunningham et al., 2024), place-based initiatives are powerful and complex social policy efforts requiring nuanced evaluation strategies. Evaluation must consider how Zone leaders balance resident voice as well as evidence or theory-informed strategies (Geller et al., 2014) and external judgments of success must be informed by the community context and conditions leaders are working within.

Photo courtesy of Greater Parkland Wellness Zone

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APPENDIX A: LEADERSHIP INTERVIEW

The following formed the basis of the leadership interview used for all sites. The interview guide can be adapted to include additional tailored language for each zone.

Role (Can tailor based on target audience)

1. What is your role/involvement with _____ Zone?
2. How would you describe your experience/expertise?
3. In the past year, what activities have you been involved in that support youth mental health and wellness?

How do you think about youth mental health wellness?

1. What do you think is the driving factor or best solution to improving youth mental health and wellness in your community?

Effectiveness: Impact on outcomes, including unintended and negative and economic outcomes.

1. The initial goal for the YWZ was [fill in from first report]. Is that still your community's goal?
2. How were diverse views about youth wellness gathered and considered by the initiative?
3. Were any practical changes in community programs and policies influenced by the YWZ strategy?
4. Alternately, was the YWZ strategy significantly impacted by existing community programs or policies?
5. What aspects of the way your team runs the YWZ was most relevant to its success?
6. What activities/actions had the largest impact (e.g., public outreach event, social media campaign)?
7. What was the biggest accomplishment for your zone in the past year?
8. Were there any unintended or unforeseen outcomes, either positive or negative?

Reach: Number and representativeness of individuals participating.

1. How many different sectors did the campaign involve in government, service sector, education, youth, families, business community and community? (Who was involved and in what?)
2. Considering your zone's demographics, did individuals involved with the zone largely mirror these?
3. How many community members were directly involved with the zone planning and/or implementation?
4. What agencies, organizations, and partners were involved in YWZ strategies and planning?

Participation: Degree of felt ownership among diverse sectors of the community.

1. What was the degree of felt ownership by core community participants (feeling involved, engaged, and heard in the process)?
2. How does your YWZ assess the level of involvement and participation community members have in contributing to projects and strategies?

Strategy to outcome match: Degree to which the YWZ strategy reflects an understanding of direct and indirect effects on youth mental health.

1. Do you believe the YWZ has had/will have an impact on youth mental health in your community? If yes, why? If no, why not?
2. If no, what do you think would result in greater impact on youth mental health?
3. What research or expert information sources did you access when deciding what program strategies (e.g., direct services, educational workshops) to use to support youth mental health and wellness in your zone?
4. How was the zone's strategy shaped by current understanding of youth development and behavioral health?

Implementation: Delivery as intended, adaptation, costs of delivery.

1. How did your team shift to accommodate barriers or community needs as the campaign progressed?
2. What, if any, adaptations were made to the initial plan?

Implementation: Delivery as intended, adaptation, costs of delivery. (continued)

3. Were there important changes in the social, economic, or political context as the YWZ activities were implemented?
4. Alternatively, was YWZ strategy/rollout directly or indirectly impacted by other systems or policies (e.g., social, economic, political)?

Maintenance: Sustainment and institutionalization of implementation, sustainment of impacts.

1. What is the plan for sustaining the YWZ campaign or recommendations? For example, in The Zone, are plans in place for sustaining the youth recommendations for continuing the high school course?

Anything else:

1. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the _____ YWZ that we may not have covered?

APPENDIX B:

COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUP

The following formed the basis of the community focus group used for all sites. The interview guide can be adapted to include additional tailored language for each zone.

Informed Consent

1. Introduction of [CoLab team lead] and other CoLab members present.
2. Brief explanation of CoLab/CoLab's role (youth wellness think tank at the University of Washington, partnering with youth wellness zones in gathering data to share with the Washington State legislature who has financially supported this work in an effort to encourage further support/funding).
3. The goal of today's meeting is to gather information about how your community defines youth wellness, what you think worked well in the YWZ, what challenges there were to overcome, and what your hopes are moving forward.
4. Participation in this focus group is completely voluntary. You have full autonomy to choose how much or how little you participate or answer questions. You may leave at any time. Your decision to participate (or not) will not be shared with anyone outside of UW CoLab.
5. You may have noticed that the executive directors of the Zones are not in the room at this time, this is in an effort to encourage authentic feedback.
6. Your personal information will remain confidential and private. We will not share your specific answers with anyone outside of CoLab. Your responses will be incorporated into a published report but will not be connected to your identifying information.
7. We will be recording this discussion so that we can make sure to accurately capture your feedback. This recording will not be shared with anyone outside of UW CoLab.
8. Does anyone have any questions before we get started?
9. If you consent to participation, please raise your hand. If you do not consent, please raise your hand. (If anyone denies consent, ask them to step out.)
10. We would love to hear from as many of you as possible. Since we only have an hour together today, we will also send along a follow up survey with similar questions so that you can share anything else you might think of afterwards or that we do not get to today! Please also feel free to distribute this to anyone else you think might have feedback, information, or insight about this YWZ.

Questions

Role (Can tailor based on target audience)

1. What is your role/involvement with _____ Zone?
2. How would you describe your experience/expertise?
3. In the past year, what activities have you been involved in that support youth mental health and wellness?

How do you think about youth mental health wellness?

1. What do you think is the driving factor or best solution to improving youth mental health and wellness in your community?

Effectiveness: Impact on outcomes, including unintended and negative outcomes.

1. The initial identified goal for the YWZ was [fill in from first report]. Is this still the goal for your community? If not, what do you think is the new/updated goal?
2. What YWZ activities/actions do you think had the largest impact (e.g. a public outreach event, social media campaign)?
3. What was the biggest accomplishment for the YWZ zone in the past year?

Reach: Number and representativeness of individuals participating.

1. Considering your zone's demographics, did individuals involved with the zone largely mirror these?

Participation: Degree of felt ownership among diverse sectors of the community.

1. What was your level of involvement and participation in contributing to YWZ projects and strategies?
2. What was your degree of felt ownership in the zone (feeling involved, engaged, and heard in the process)?

Questions (continued)

Strategy to outcome match: Degree to which the YWZ strategy reflects an understanding of direct and indirect effects on youth mental health.

1. Do you believe the YWZ has had/will have an impact on youth mental health in your community? If yes, why? If no, why not?
2. If no, what do you think would result in greater impact on youth mental health?

Implementation: Delivery as intended, adaptation, costs of delivery.

1. Is there anything you would like to see change about the YWZ projects or strategies?

Maintenance: Sustainment and institutionalization of implementation, sustainment of impacts.

1. Would you like to see the YWZ activities continue (why or why not)?

Anything else:

1. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the _____ YWZ that we may not have covered?

APPENDIX C: YOUTH FOCUS GROUP

Informed Consent

1. Introduction of [CoLab team lead] and other CoLab members present.
2. Brief explanation of CoLab/CoLab's role (group at the University of Washington aiming to improve youth wellness, partnering with youth wellness zones to gather information to share with the Washington State legislature to encourage them to continue supporting this kind of work).
3. The goal of today's meeting is to gather information about how you all defined youth wellness, what you think worked well in your projects, what challenges there were to overcome, and what your hopes are moving forward.
4. Participation in this focus group is completely voluntary, meaning you can leave at any time. You also get to choose how much or how little you say during this time. Your decision to participate (or not) will not be shared with anyone outside of UW CoLab.
5. You may have noticed that some of the adults involved in this work are not in the room at this time. We are hoping this makes you feel more comfortable sharing the good, the bad, and the ugly about your experiences!
6. Your personal information will remain confidential and private. We will not share your specific answers with anyone outside of CoLab. Your responses will be incorporated into a published report but will not be connected to your identifying information.
7. We will be recording this discussion so that we can make sure to accurately capture your feedback. This recording will not be shared with anyone outside of UW CoLab.
8. Does anyone have any questions before we get started?
9. If you consent to participate, please raise your hand. If you do not consent, please raise your hand. (If anyone denies consent, ask them to step out.)
10. We would love to hear from as many of you as possible. Since we only have an hour together today, we will also send along a follow up survey with similar questions so that you can share anything else you might think of afterwards or that we do not get to today! Please also feel free to share the survey with anyone else you think might have feedback, information, or insight about this YWZ.
11. Finally, we are going to send \$50 to each of you as a thank you for participating in today's focus group!

Questions

How do you think about youth mental health wellness?

1. What do you think are the main issues impacting youth mental wellness in your community?
2. What do you think is the best solution to these problems?

Effectiveness: Impact on outcomes, including unintended and negative and economic outcomes.

1. The initial identified goal for the YWZ was [fill in from first report], is this still the goal?
2. If this is not the goal, what do you think is the goal?
3. What do you think should be the new/updated goal?
4. What YWZ activities do you think had the biggest impact?
5. What was the biggest accomplishment in the past year?

Reach: Number and representativeness of individuals participating.

1. Do you think the people involved in the YWZ are similar to (or a good representation of) the rest of the community? If no, what kinds of identities are not included?

Participation: Degree of felt ownership among diverse sectors of the community.

1. Did you feel like your voice mattered when participating in this project? Did you feel heard?
2. How engaged did you feel during this project on a scale of 0-10?

Strategy to outcome match: Degree to which the YWZ strategy reflects an understanding of direct and indirect effects on youth mental health.

1. Did the YWZ have an impact on youth mental health in your community? If yes, why? If no, why not?
2. If no, what do you think would work better to improve youth mental health?

Questions (continued)

Implementation: Delivery as intended, adaptation, costs of delivery.

1. What would you like to see change about YWZ projects?
2. What problems did you run into when working on this project? How did you work to solve those problems?

Maintenance: Sustainment and institutionalization of implementation, sustainment of impacts.

1. Would you like to see the YWZ activities continue? Why or why not?
2. Would you like to continue participating?
3. Would you recommend to other youth? Why or why not?

Anything else:

1. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience participating in the _____ YWZ?

APPENDIX D:

COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUP FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

The CoLab for Community & Behavioral Health Policy at the University of Washington is conducting a project aimed at improving youth wellness. This project is in partnership with Youth Wellness Zones, including **the [YWZ name]**, and seeks to determine whether community-informed approaches can lead to meaningful, positive change in youth mental wellness.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a **brief survey**. The survey will gather information on your community's definitions of youth wellness, what has worked well in **the YWZ**, the challenges you have faced, and your hopes for the future. If you have already participated in the focus group, we encourage you to complete the survey to share any additional thoughts or insights that may come to mind after the discussion or that we may not have had time to cover.

Your personal information will remain **confidential** and private. We will not share your individual responses with anyone outside of CoLab. Your responses will be included in a published report, but they will not be linked to your identity. Participation in this survey is entirely **voluntary**, and you are free to choose whether or not to participate. You may also withdraw at any time without facing any negative consequences.

If you have any questions about this survey or the project, please contact [contact information].

- I consent to participate in this survey.
- I do not consent to participate in this survey.

Please answer the following questions about your personal information. Your responses will remain **confidential** and will not be linked to your identity.

1. What is your role or involvement with the YWZ?
2. Please briefly describe your experience or expertise.
3. In the past year, what activities have you been involved in that support youth mental health and wellness?

4. Although the categories listed below may not represent your full identity or use the language you prefer, for the purpose of this survey, please indicate which group below most accurately describes your racial identification. Please select all that apply. (*optional*)
- Native American/Alaska Native/Indigenous
 - Asian
 - Black or African American
 - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 - White
 - Not listed, please specify: _____
 - Prefer not to say
5. Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin? (*optional*)
- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
6. What is your gender identity? (*optional*)
7. What is your age? (*optional*)
8. Are you the parent or guardian of a child, teen, or young adult?
- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
 - Prefer not to say
9. Are there any other identity characteristics you would like to share?

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

10. What do you think is the driving factor or best solution to improving youth mental health and wellness in your community?
11. The initial identified goal for the YWZ was the following: [Insert YWZ goal] Is this still the goal?
- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
12. [Question displayed if answered no] If this is not the goal, what do you think is the new or updated goal?

13. What activities at the YWZ do you think had the largest impact (e.g., a public outreach event, social media campaign)?
14. What was the biggest accomplishment for the YWZ in the past year?
15. Considering the demographics in the YWZ, did individuals involved with the YWZ largely mirror these?
16. Please describe your level of involvement and participation in contributing to the YWZ's projects and strategies.
17. Please describe your degree of felt ownership in the YWZ (feeling involved, engaged, and heard in the process).
18. Do you believe the YWZ has had or will have an impact on youth mental health in your community? If yes, why? If no, why not?
19. If no, what do you think would result in greater impact on youth mental health?
20. Is there anything you would like to see change about the YWZ's project or strategies?
21. Would you like to see the activities at the YWZ continue? Why or why not?
22. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the YWZ that we may not have covered?

APPENDIX E:

COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUP FOLLOW-UP SURVEY (YOUTH)

The CoLab for Community & Behavioral Health Policy at the University of Washington is conducting a project aimed at improving youth wellness. This project is in partnership with Youth Wellness Zones, including **the [YWZ name]**, and seeks to determine whether community-informed approaches can lead to meaningful, positive change in youth mental wellness.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a **brief survey**. The survey will gather information on your definitions of youth wellness, what has worked well in **the [YWZ name]**, the challenges you have faced, and your hopes for the future. If you have already participated in the focus group, we encourage you to complete the survey to share any additional thoughts or insights that may come to mind after the discussion or that we may not have had time to cover.

Your personal information will remain **confidential** and private. We will not share your individual responses with anyone outside of CoLab. Your responses will be included in a published report, but they will not be linked to your identity. Participation in this survey is entirely **voluntary**, and you are free to choose whether or not to participate. You may also withdraw at any time without facing any negative consequences.

If you have any questions about this survey or the project, please contact [contact information].

- I consent to participate in this survey.
- I do not consent to participate in this survey.

Please answer the following questions about your personal information. Your responses will remain **confidential** and will not be linked to your identity. These questions are optional, and you are welcome to skip any that you do not wish to answer.

1. Although the categories listed below may not represent your full identity or use the language you prefer, for the purpose of this survey, please indicate which group below most accurately describes your racial identification. Please select all that apply. *(optional)*

- Native American/Alaska Native/Indigenous
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White
- Not listed, please specify: _____
- Prefer not to say

2. Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin? *(optional)*

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

3. What is your gender identity? *(optional)*

4. What is your age? *(optional)*

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

5. What do you think are the main issues impacting youth mental wellness in your community?

6. What do you think is the best solution to these problems?

7. The initial identified goal for the YWZ was the following: [Insert YWZ goal] Is this still the goal?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

8. [Question displayed if answered no] If this is not the goal, what do you think should be the new or updated goal?

9. What activities at the YWZ do you think had the biggest impact?

10. What was the biggest accomplishment in the past year?
11. Do you think the people involved in the YWZ are similar to (or a good representation of) the rest of the community?
- Yes
 - Maybe
 - No
12. [Question displayed if answered maybe or no] What kinds of identities are not included?
13. Did you feel like your voice mattered when participating in this project? Did you feel heard? Please explain why or why not.
14. How engaged did you feel during this project on a scale of 0-10? [1 - Not engaged at all, 10 - Extremely engaged]
15. Did the YWZ have an impact on youth mental health in your community? If yes, why? If no, why not?
16. What would you like to see change about the YWZ?
17. What problems did you run into when working on this project? How did you work to solve those problems?
18. Would you like to see the activities at the YWZ continue? Why or why not?
19. Would you like to continue participating in the YWZ?
- Yes
 - No
20. Would you recommend the YWZ to other youth? Why or why not?
21. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience participating in the YWZ?