

Communities Building Youth Futures

By: Mairead Steward

***Tamarack Institute**

Keywords: innovation, youth engagement, community development, collective impact, community engagement

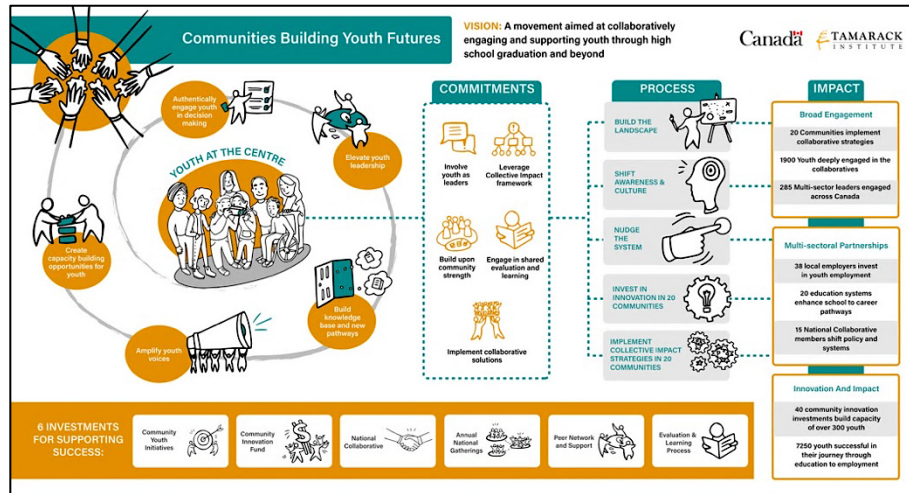
Abstract

Tamarack Institute's Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYF) is an initiative funded by the Government of Canada that seeks to reduce barriers to education for youth across the country. Using case studies from three CBYF communities, this article explores the meaningful and wide-ranging impacts of putting youth at the centre of decision-making efforts. CBYF utilizes a collective impact approach, which empowers community leaders to create and implement strategies that respond to specific challenges of youth in their communities. Together, these diverse collaborators carry out initiatives that create community and systems change to support youth in overcoming multiple barriers in their learning journey from high school to post-secondary, training, or employment.

Communities Building Youth Futures

Tamarack Institute's [Communities Building Youth Futures](#) (CBYF) is an initiative funded by the Government of Canada that seeks to reduce barriers to education for youth across the country. CBYF takes a multifaceted approach that puts youth at the centre of decision-making and planning in all aspects of the initiative including youth leadership, youth-led activities, and input from diverse youth voices. Rather than relying on outside experts for advice, this strategy empowers youth to identify specific barriers to success in education and life and collaborate on meaningful, innovative solutions within their own communities. Using the disciplined, multi-sector approach offered by the collective impact framework, CBYF acknowledges that broad community change to support youth transitions comes from community-driven strategies created through collaboration with youth across multiple sectors.

In its first year (2020), CBYF included 13 smaller, rural, remote, and/or Indigenous communities across Canada, but that number has since increased to 20 communities, spanning almost every province and territory in the country. Over the last two years, CBYF communities have increased in scope and scale, hiring 198 youth as local project backbone staff and including 241 youth voices on leadership tables across all communities. Welcoming youth into key leadership roles ensures that each local project is not only listening to youth perspectives but also empowering youth to co-design and implement meaningful change together with adult allies. Although each community's initiative looks different depending on their specific context and youth needs, all communities are working towards improving education outcomes and helping youth successfully transition from education to employment and adulthood.



Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYF) Plan on a Page

All CBYF communities have access to a Community Innovation Fund (CIF). Annual Community Innovation Fund grant calls provide specific funding that can be used to develop and prototype a promising innovation to support youth success. Applications for annual CIF grants are youth-led and focus on addressing a challenge they face in their communities in novel ways. As an example, several communities, such as Prince Albert Saskatchewan, identified a lack of access to digital technology as a significant issue for youth, especially as schools moved online during the pandemic. CIF funding helped purchase laptops and cellphones for students who may otherwise not have been able to complete their education. Other communities utilized CIF funding to support youth to gain first aid certification and job training, access tutoring programs, or establish drop-in youth centres. These local innovations contributed to supporting youth to stay engaged in their learning journey.

What is collective impact?

The collective impact framework facilitates a collaborative, multisector approach that has been proven to be successful at generating high-impact, population-level change across a range of complex issues. The collective impact approach creates a new paradigm for community innovation and solution generation because it creates the opportunity for leaders from various perspectives to establish a shared “innovation space” where they can think and learn together about a shared issue and then intentionally focus attention on identifying and co-developing new innovations to compliment the programs & services that they individually offer. CBYF communities' use of collective impact leverages Tamarack Institute’s over 20 years of experience in place-based work. The leadership table for each local CBYF initiative includes a diversity of perspectives, including youth members, community groups, education or local government representatives, and business leaders. These collaborators work together to create and implement strategies that respond to the specific challenges of youth in their communities. Together, these diverse collaborators carry out initiatives to create broader community and systems change to support youth in overcoming multiple barriers to education.

Collective impact has five conditions for success. First, community partners build a common agenda and goals based on their community's aspirations, strengths, assets, and the challenges of youth in their community. Communities use data to inform their common agenda and track their progress. Shared data collection and measurement allow the initiative to assess results and adjust their strategy and deepen their understanding of their issue. While each collaborator's role and contribution may vary, it always contributes to a coordinated plan of action. This requires continuous communication with one another – and the community as a whole – to support project iterations and maintain trust and support. Lastly, a collective impact project has a backbone infrastructure that includes staff to support effective collaboration among its diverse partner organizations and groups and enable the project to accomplish its goals.

Community Innovation in Action | CBYF Case Studies

Case Study 1: Portage La Prairie's Roving Campus Supports Student Graduation

In 2020, [CBYF Portage La Prairie](#) prototyped a community innovation called the [Roving Campus](#) (RC). Headed by three high school teachers, the initiative welcomed 22 students who were at risk of not graduating into a program designed to meet their needs. The mission of the Roving Campus is to make learning engaging and relevant to students. The success of the Roving Campus focused on achieving three goals: improved attendance; development of citizenship skills (achieved through completion of certifications); and graduation from high school.

Rather than a traditional classroom setting, the Roving Campus treats the entire community as its classroom and moves location from class to class. Students spend most of their time gaining hands-on experience and learning opportunities that cover an array of high school courses in an integrated way. Fundamental in the design of the Roving Campus approach is the recognition that to be able to learn, students must have their other needs met first. For some Roving Campus students, these needs include overcoming barriers such as a lack of transportation, food insecurity, and experiences of racism and judgment in traditional school settings. To address these issues, the RC team gained access to a van, which provides transportation to and from programs. The van was also used for student job training sessions, doctor's appointments, and job interviews. The Roving Campus staff team also provides meals and encouragement and promotes peer support to create a safer classroom environment free from judgment.

When asked whether their attendance was better with the Roving Campus compared with traditional school, one student replied, "yes, because I actually enjoy attending," and another said, "yes, because I want to graduate." A parent of an RC student wrote in, saying, "I am absolutely thrilled about the changes I have seen in [my son] since he started this program. Between the skills he has learned and even some excitement about going to class and getting a job, it has all been a super positive experience". In addition to increasing student attendance, the Roving Campus also strengthened their confidence in other areas. One RC teacher mentioned that a student was terrified to start an office job, "however, the Executive Assistant training we completed last month helped her have the confidence to apply. When she got home, we got a

"Yipeeee" message. She is very excited to start her job". Of the 22 students who initially joined the program, all have graduated or are on track to graduate. The program has been such a success that other communities are considering adopting similar programs for their own students.

Case Study 2: Sudbury's Future North Highlights Community Supports for Youth

[Future North](#) is a brand identity and website design project created by the [CBYF Sudbury](#) community to reduce access barriers around services for youth in the area. The project was designed and undertaken with youth input and leadership at every stage, including surveys, focus groups, planning committees, and leadership tables. Early research revealed that while there are many youth services in the Sudbury area, youth struggled to locate and access the services that worked for them. In fact, 61.4% of youth surveyed stated that the most significant barrier they face when accessing information is that "it is not clear what steps I need to take to access service." With that information, the project's youth chose to work with a design team to generate a branded virtual hub that would collect information about pertinent services and quickly link youth to the services they need. As one youth participant said, "Let's treat youth services the way we treat college and university. We need to be talking from a young age about what is out there for youth".

The key element of the Future North virtual hub is a 'community map,' which locates social services and helps youth easily navigate to the services they need through a map and a search function. The impacts of the project are far-reaching. One hundred and three (103) youth participated in the project, some acting as consultants and leaders in the branding process, and 62 youth communicated that they would like to continue to work on future initiatives in the community. One partnership created as a direct result of the project even secured \$18,000 for a future youth-led initiative.

Case Study 3: Prince Albert Bridges the Digital Divide

Beginning in 2020, CBYF's [Prince Albert community](#) highlighted several challenges facing youth in their journey to academic achievement. To address some of these issues and advise on further programming, the community created the Youth Leadership Council (YLC), composed of 25 youth advisors who met once a month. Through the YLC, youth leaders identified a need for laptops and other devices in order to complete school assignments and join online classes. A separate initiative named Youth Accessing Digital Devices (YADD) was set up to connect 13 youths with the devices needed to finish Adult Literacy Education programs during the first year and 12 youths in the second year.

The Prince Albert community includes a large population of Indigenous youth who reported feeling disconnected from their culture and the support of elders in their community. To address this challenge, the Prince Albert team designed and carried out beading workshops and other support programs attended by elders and over 50 youth. According to one youth participant, the workshops "helped me get back into beading, which made me feel like I belonged and helped me with my patience." Of the youth who were connected to Indigenous elders in their community, many continue to benefit from these relationships for ongoing mental health support. The same participant revealed that the efforts of the CBYF Prince Albert team "changed my life after

becoming a single mom it is difficult, but they help me feel support when I don't get it anywhere else... they also helped me get accepted into school by supplying me with a laptop for my courses." As a result of the CBYF project, four youths gained high school credit placements, and 25 youths had the opportunity to occupy leadership positions in the CBYF initiatives, where they were involved with every aspect of the planning and development of the program.

Youth at the Centre

CBYF's unique approach of locally based, youth-centered collective impact initiatives helps each community adapt and respond to the diverse needs of youth in their journeys to graduation. To date, the twenty CBYF communities have provided support and community involvement to over 19,600 youth across Canada and supported 241 youth to share their voices on youth leadership tables. They have employed almost 200 youth as backbone staff and supported 562 youth as advisors and program developers. In response to many early successes and the results and learnings from more than 40 Community Innovation Fund Projects, local CBYF Initiatives will continue to share ideas, collect data, and deepen their collective understanding about barriers to educational success and promising innovations to overcome them so that all young people across the country have access to resources and supports to reach their full potential.