

A Collaborative Approach to Policy Change: **Lessons Learned from Achieving Transit Improvements for Youth**





1. OVERVIEW

YouthForce NOLA (YouthForce) is an education, business, and civic collaborative that builds bridges between school and work. Through its network of partner schools, employers, training providers, and community organizations, YouthForce opens more doors to economic opportunity for New Orleans youth. In service of this work, YouthForce played a key role in ensuring that youth needs, interests, and voices were included in the New Orleans region's plan for a redesigned public transit network.

In March 2021, the [Regional Planning Commission](#) (RPC) received approval from the [New Orleans Regional Transit Authority](#) (RTA) for New Links, a transit system redesign that included substantial improvements for regional transit riders, including young people. Youthforce, with support from [Ride New Orleans](#) (RIDE), provided youth-oriented transit solutions – based on research, engagement, and collaboration – that RPC integrated into the redesign plan.

In achieving transit improvements for youth, YouthForce identified key factors that contribute to successful collaborative policy change:

- **A clearly defined policy development process**
- **Collaborator relationships built on mutual respect and role clarity**
- **A shared commitment to working iteratively towards solutions**

The approach taken by YouthForce, RPC and RIDE can serve as a model for intermediaries interested in engaging in collaborative policy development and improvement.





2. CHALLENGE

It is critical that young people are able to travel between home, school, work, and career training opportunities within a reasonable amount of time. While the New Orleans public transit system works for some residents, too many – including young people – have not been able to get where they need to go. Before the RTA approved New Links:

- Transit took more than **45 minutes** from many of New Orleans' 29 public high schools to training sites where young people earn industry-based credentials in healthcare, business services, digital media, information technology or the skilled crafts.
- Transit from the homes of **75% of participants** in YouthForce's 2019 summer internship program took **more than 45 minutes** to arrive at an internship in the region's biggest job centers for a 9 a.m. start time.
- In September 2018, an [Urban Institute study](#) found that the median morning commute took **35 minutes** by yellow school bus, compared to **47 minutes** by public transit. At the same time, New Orleans schools spent **approximately 6%** of their public funds on transportation.

A revamped transit system would help young people spend less time in route to work-based and academic learning and more time learning – whether in the classroom or on the job.





3. OPPORTUNITY

- ▶ **In the fall of 2019, YouthForce established a policy priority to address the transit challenges hindering young people from accessing technical training and work-based learning.** At the same time, RPC launched the New Links project to study transit routes and develop a proposal to better serve the New Orleans region. This coincidence created an opportunity for YouthForce to engage with RPC and RIDE, New Orleans' transit riders advocacy organization, in order to ensure that New Links addressed youth transit challenges.
- ▶ **YouthForce established a working relationship with RPC and RIDE by getting to know pertinent team members from each organization.** YouthForce invited RPC and RIDE's key members to informal coffee meetings to build personal relationships and to establish credibility as a transit thought partner with access to useful information on youth interests. RIDE helped YouthForce navigate the New Links process and helped YouthForce represent youth interests using transit industry terms.
- ▶ **YouthForce was invited to act as a conduit to ensure that young people and their voices were included in the New Links planning process.** At the same time, RPC designed a policy development process that included substantial time for engagement, iteration, and collaboration on the proposed transit system redesign. YouthForce became an active partner in New Links planning by participating in stakeholder meetings and joining the RIDE Policy Committee.





4. COLLABORATION

To ensure that youth interests and youth voices were included in the New Links transit redesign project, YouthForce and RIDE took a number of steps to engage young people and education organizations that serve them.

The first set of engagements were designed to gather youth input directly.

- ▶ **YouthForce, RIDE, and RPC facilitated a listening session that gave participants in YouthForce's high school bridge year program an opportunity to share their transit experiences and suggest transit system improvements.**
- ▶ **RIDE hosted a set of Opportunity Youth roundtables with RPC to accomplish similar goals.**

YouthForce also sought input from education leaders whose programs would benefit from transit improvements.

- ▶ **RPC solicited input on transit solutions at a YouthForce School Leader Advisory Committee meeting.**
- ▶ **YouthForce, RPC, and Greater New Orleans, Inc. (GNO, Inc.), the nonprofit regional economic development organization, hosted a feedback session on proposed transit solutions for K-12, higher education, and technical training leaders.**
- ▶ **YouthForce and RPC met with the New Orleans Career Center (NOCC), the hub for high school technical training in New Orleans, to get input on transit solutions designed to increase access to the NOCC site.**

The feedback collected at these meetings helped RPC identify new data to include in the transit system redesign planning process and informed YouthForce's transit system redesign recommendations to RPC.



TAKEAWAYS

YouthForce, RIDE, and RPC were able to achieve transit policy improvements for youth by having:

- ▶ **A clearly defined policy development process which included sufficient time for stakeholders to get input from collaborators.**
- ▶ **Relationships between all partners grounded in respect for the role and expertise of each organization.**
- ▶ **A shared commitment to an iterative approach that included multiple discussions about solutions after stakeholder meetings and collaborative development of final recommendations.**



5. OUTCOMES

Based on data, research, and stakeholder input, YouthForce drafted a set of youth-oriented transit solutions in partnership with RIDE. The organizations then shared the solutions with RPC staff for additional input before formally submitting the solutions as recommendations:

- ▶ **Connect every open enrollment high school in New Orleans within 45 minutes for both the morning and afternoon sessions of the New Orleans Career Center (NOCC), a nonprofit initiative that provides high school students access to career and technical training.**
- ▶ **Improve transit performance for residents in outlying neighborhoods, and increase regional connectivity to job centers.**

On March 23, 2021, the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority approved the New Links transit system redesign prepared by the RPC, including the YouthForce and RIDE youth-oriented recommendations.

YouthForce and RIDE will continue to partner with schools and RTA to ensure that young people are able to take advantage of the improvements provided in the New Links transit system redesign, and in doing so, will continue to rely on the same set of tools.



TECH STUDENT DEVELOPS PROGRAM TO CALCULATE TRAVEL TIMES

Semaj Barthelemy, a student in web development training with [Operation Spark](#) as part of YouthForce's LAUNCH bridge year program, developed a Google Sheets program to calculate travel time for students between home and internship sites and between school and technical training using public transportation. The data collected showed that it frequently took high school students using the public transit system more than 45 minutes to get from school to training providers, or from home to internships. YouthForce used the data to develop recommendations for RPC to include in the New Links transit redesign proposal.



Semaj Barthelemy