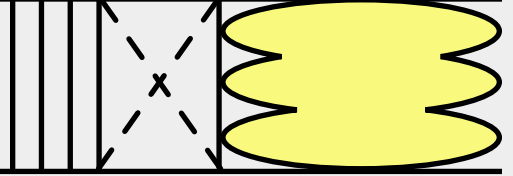


# GROWING YOUTH VOICE AND LEADERSHIP THROUGH RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING

INSIGHTS FROM A SUMMER RESEARCH  
PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN REAP, INC. AND  
FOUNDATIONS FOR A BETTER OREGON



**FBO**  
FOUNDATIONS  
FOR A BETTER  
OREGON

**REAP**  
the next wave of leaders



THIS RESEARCH PROJECT WAS  
COLLABORATIVELY DESIGNED AND  
PRODUCED BY REAP, INC AND  
FOUNDATIONS FOR A BETTER OREGON

REAP, INC.

FOUNDATIONS FOR  
A BETTER OREGON

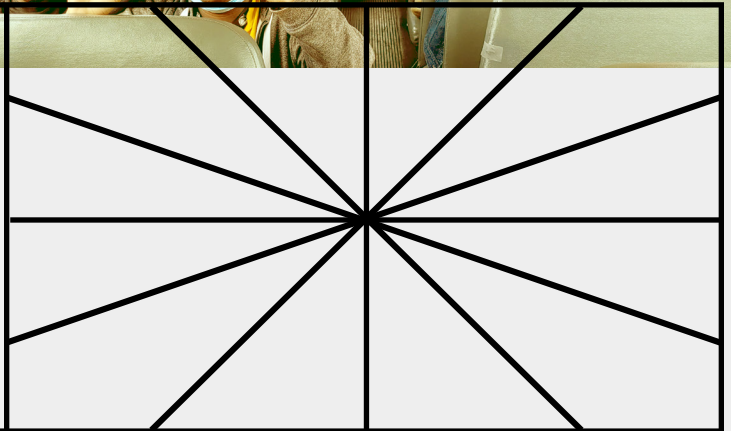
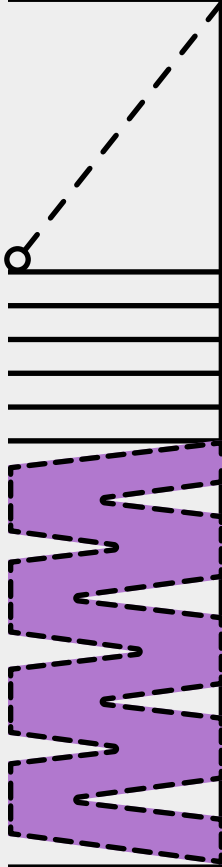
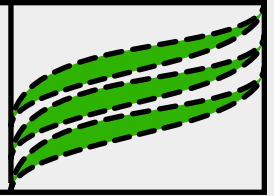
FEBRUARY

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# REAP, INC.'S APPROACH TO SUMMER 2021



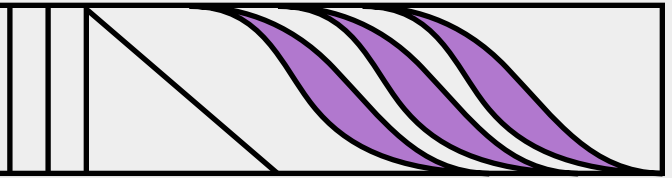
Following a year of social isolation and disrupted routines, REAP, Inc. welcomed youth from across the Portland metropolitan area to spend the summer in tight-knit, supportive environments that were highly responsive to their hopes and needs. REAP engages young people who are historically and currently underserved by Oregon's education systems, which generally include culturally diverse students and those impacted by poverty. Throughout the pandemic, REAP has supported young people as they navigated both collective traumas and personal adversity, from a global pandemic and high-profile episodes of racial injustice to coping with hunger, housing insecurity, family job loss, and even, the death of loved ones.

After a year of mostly virtual learning due to school building closures during COVID-19, REAP designed a dynamic and responsive summer experience to support young people's transition back to in-person activities and learning by organizing opportunities for play, discovery, and

connection with peers and trusted adults. REAP's ongoing commitment to responsive programming encourages young people to contribute and shape daily programming through self-advocacy and collaboration with REAP staff so their time spent at the program is meaningful, engaging, and fun.

During a five-week session, REAP's summer programming renewed a sense of rhythm, agency, and community for youth at a series of "hubs" across the Portland metropolitan area. Staff created a program blueprint to guide the development of the hubs by fostering social and emotional development and encouraging young people to use their voice to influence summer programming. At each hub, daily activities focused on play and recreation, community-building, personal exploration, and goal-settings. A weekly "destination day" took young people away from the hub to experience new places, activities, and challenges, ranging from escape rooms and hikes to ropes courses.

# ABOUT REAP, INC.



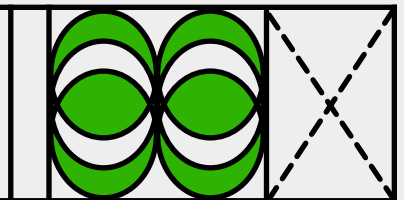
REAP, Inc. is a year-round multicultural leadership program that seeks to ignite, engage and elevate the next wave of leaders. REAP's approach to programming is grounded in the transformative power of cultivating youth voice, developing emotional intelligence, and developing young people's identities as leaders. By helping youth know themselves better, build a community of peers, and develop self-advocacy skills, REAP supports young people to navigate both challenges and successes in stride.

Since 2001, founders Levell Thomas and Mark Jackson have offered programming designed to uplift and empower youth to become leaders within their community and achieve their dreams. All are welcome, but REAP places a strong focus on engaging students and families from school communities with a significant number of underrepresented youth. REAP recognizes that children from these families often face the most challenges in negotiating school and life, and benefit from additional resources to thrive. Over the past two decades, REAP has connected young

people to community role models, mentors, and potential employers in private, government, and nonprofit sectors across the state.

Each year, REAP serves more than 1,000 students from grades 3-12 across five programs. The majority of REAP's programming occurs during out-of-school time, but REAP staff coordinate closely with school sites where programs operate to support students and school communities. Each program empowers students to develop mindsets, skills, and relationships to become "global leaders" through an emphasis on civic engagement, entrepreneurship, leadership, and cooperative management. Responsive programming is a core element of REAP's approach, which requires a commitment to listening deeply to youth voices in order to develop and adapt programming in the image of young people's interests, goals, and perspectives. Meeting the objectives that young people express for themselves is a fundamental component of REAP's programming.

# A COMMUNITY-CENTERED RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

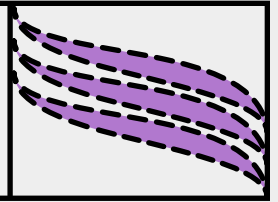


This research effort is a partnership between REAP and Foundations for a Better Oregon (FBO), a nonprofit organization and project of Oregon philanthropy seeking to collaboratively rethink and reimagine how Oregon supports every child to learn, grow, and thrive. By co-designing and co-leading research grounded in the perspectives, experiences, and truths of youth and community leaders, REAP and FBO aim to elevate insights that help Oregon's education, philanthropic, and legislative partners understand the expertise, strength, vision, and opportunity within our

communities to better support children and young people—especially those who are historically underserved by public systems.

The insights presented below capture the results of a co-designed inquiry, centering the experience and expertise of REAP leadership, staff, and participants, and provide tangible insights about how youth-serving programs, including schools, can support young people through moments of collective and individual adversity to thrive.

# RESEARCH INSIGHTS

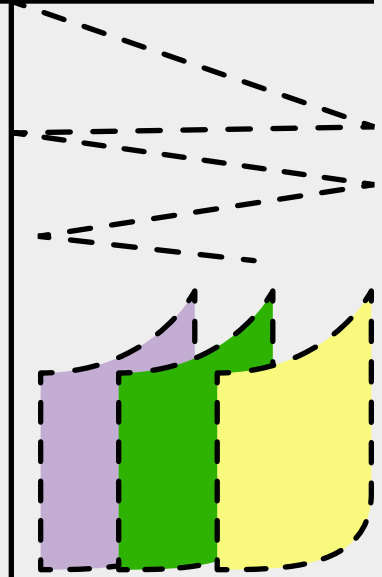


## INSIGHT 1

“SUMMER IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BREATHE”

“This summer has been very different. Instead of being so serious on a specific social-emotional curriculum or on academic goals, it’s been more of a chance to do what young people love to do, which is to socialize, hang out, see us as adults learning from them, and communicate with one another. It’s very beneficial. We don’t always have to have a specific curriculum or agenda; we can turn young people’s talking points into an activity and build on their interest.”

REAP YOUTH ESSENTIALS COORDINATOR



## CREATING THE CONDITIONS TO MEET YOUNG PEOPLE’S NEEDS

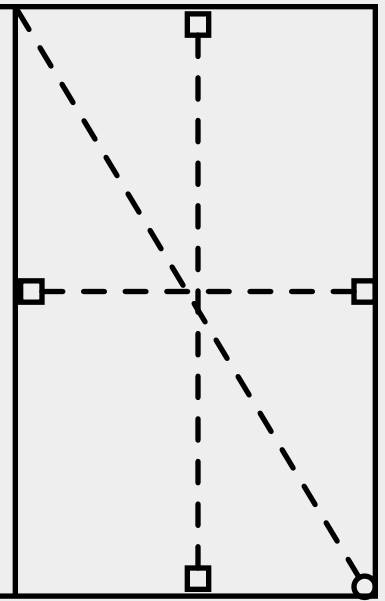
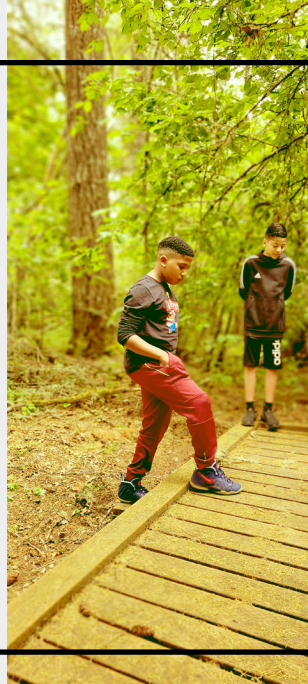
Following more than a year of virtual learning that often felt impersonal and formulaic, young people came to REAP seeking opportunities to get real: to get out of their houses, out of their comfort zones, and out into the community. Taking stock of the full scope of challenges and disruptions youth had encountered during the ongoing pandemic, REAP leaned into its longstanding strengths and created intentional spaces for summer learning where young people could both decompress and be challenged in a supportive way. Rather than relying on a prescriptive or static curriculum, REAP staff laid out a blueprint for summer programming that generated **responsive youth programming**, in which adults engage young people to shape their own experience, activities, and development through dialogue and co-development.

REAP’s organizational model for youth development centers the perspectives, desires, and voices of youth in order to build programming that invites

young people to develop their self-advocacy and leadership skills. Each of REAP’s hubs provided a regular rhythm of activities and opportunities for mentorship where young people could feel at ease. Whether young people were relating to new people, working on communication, or working through challenges, *summer was an opportunity for youth to breathe: to get out, to connect with others, and to experience new things.*

Adult mentors at REAP hubs, known as Youth Essentials Coordinators (YECs), used social and emotional learning competencies as a framework to support young people’s return to in-person social settings and create opportunities for personal reflection and growth. **Social and emotional learning** is the process by which people gain knowledge, skills and attitudes about their own identities and goals, develop relationships, form part of a community, and deepen their own understanding and use of emotions, empathy, and care. YECs integrated learning about social and emotional well-being and applied social and emotional processes throughout summer programming.

**SUMMER 2021 AT REAP:  
YOUTH EXPERIENCES  
AND GROWTH**



<p><b>REAP PROGRAM VALUES</b></p>	<p><b>WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WERE LOOKING FOR</b></p>	<p><b>WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCED</b></p>	<p><b>WHAT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL GROWTH LOOKED LIKE FOR YOUTH</b></p>
<p><b>IGNITE :</b></p> <p>Students igniting interests and awareness of what is possible.</p>	<p>Opportunities to get out</p>	<p>...exploring self &amp; interests</p> <p>... taking on goals &amp; confronting challenges in supported ways</p>	<p>+ Self-awareness + Self-confidence + Recognizing strengths</p>
<p><b>ELEVATE :</b></p> <p>Students elevating relationships and skills through mentorship.</p>	<p>Connection with others</p>	<p>...sharing a place &amp; activities with people who have common experiences and goals</p> <p>...feeling supported even when struggling</p>	<p>+ Trust + Respect for others + Seeking mentorship</p>
<p><b>ENGAGE :</b></p> <p>Students engaging skills and influence they received to use what they have learned.</p>	<p>New experiences</p>	<p>...taking on challenges &amp; discomfort in supported way</p> <p>...accelerating relationships &amp; belonging</p> <p>...using voice in new ways</p>	<p>+ Self advocacy + Social awareness + Teamwork</p>

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## RESPONSIVE YOUTH PROGRAMMING IN ACTION

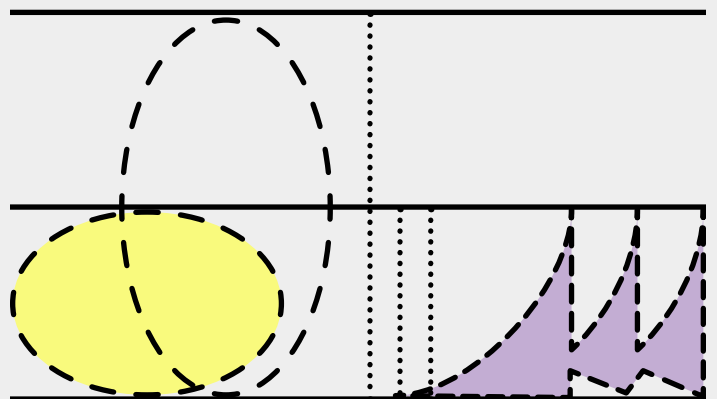
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Hearing, responding to, and co-creating with young people to address their unique needs, desires, and goals has been central to REAP's approach to programming since the organization's founding. Staff created an adaptable blueprint to guide the five-week summer program, with each week framed around one of the core competencies of social and emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. For example, the first week of summer was built around the relationship skills competency, and was titled "Look, it's people again!" The playful theme of the week kept YECs focused on the novelty of being in person again and the need to "re-discover" relational skills through interaction, play, and dialogue. The summer blueprint guided how YECs frame weekly goals and outcomes for youth, and outlined a curriculum of potential activities or lessons to implement or offer a starting point for dialogue with youth. Using a responsive youth programming model, YECs each adapted their individual approach and tailored activities in response to the interests and needs of the hub.

REAP's summer blueprint purposefully established a regular rhythm of programming for youth. Each week included a mix of "high energy days" and "chill days" at hubs as well as a weekly "destination day" that brought all summer programming participants across hubs together for field trips. Establishing a weekly rhythm allowed young people to both anticipate and influence programming based on their individual and shared interests as a hub, and practice leadership and cooperation skills. On "high energy days," programming involved group activities like dodgeball, giant jenga, and role playing. On chill days, young people were invited to work on creative projects, make smoothies, participate in low-key group activities focused on dialogue and cooperation, or to pursue their own interests independently. Destination days included a trampoline park in Vancouver, hikes in the Columbia River Gorge, an aerial ropes course in Gaston, and a famed trip to Bullwinkle's in Wilsonville.

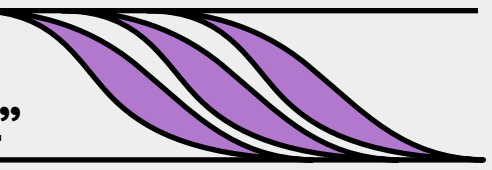
Regardless of whether it was a chill or high energy day, each day started with an invitation, rather than an expectation, to engage. Each morning kicked off with a low-stakes activity to facilitate connection and dialogue among peers and YECs. This activity would also set the tone for the day and create space to explore the week's social and emotional learning theme through play, community building, and challenge-by-choice activities. From there, YECs could offer another organized activity that might hit right, or the hub could head out for a pickup game of basketball, or young people might tuck into their own activities—perhaps reading, playing video games, studying for a driving test, or just hanging out. As the summer progressed, daily programming became increasingly responsive and malleable, as young people developed trust and their own sense of voice and self-advocacy, which allowed YECs to shift programming to meet young people's mood, energy levels, and interests.

REAP's focus on responsive programming de-emphasizes adult actions and expertise to know how to support youth, and recalibrates the role of youth development as a means to cultivate young people's self-awareness and power to shape their own experiences and outcomes. By listening to, honoring, and responding to young people's interests, REAP's responsive programming shows young people that their voices and opinions matter, and validates that they know what they need to become leaders, community members, and peers.



## INSIGHT 2:

### “BE INTENTIONAL”



**“In my experience, kids like to observe before they deal with people. They like to see how you act, how you move, and then they decide if they want to interact with you. I was just being myself and luckily kids thought I was cool enough and they let me in the circle. From there, I was able to become a figure. I like to say a figure because they identify me and others at REAP as figures that they will go to for any situation.”**

YOUTH ESSENTIALS COORDINATOR

### STAFF AND YOUTH SHOW UP AS THEIR WHOLE SELVES

Young people at REAP respond to adults that “show up as they are” and who seek understanding and connection with youth “as they are.” Staff at REAP operate within a framework of **radical care**, *recognizing the wholeness and brilliance of young people, and creating caring and challenging environments where youth are invited to explore their full identities as peers, community members, scholars, and above all, leaders.* Young people intuitively know when the adults they interact with are being real and are actually invested in who they are and their words.

REAP staff regularly demonstrate **TWO ESSENTIAL TRAITS** as they show up authentically:

**BE CONSISTENT:** Young people know when adults are being real about who they are, their motivations, and their expectations. They constantly look for and confirm cues from adults. Responsive youth programming requires ongoing dialogue and negotiation between young people and their mentors. Consistency is key to building trust for young people to use their voice and lead.

**MATCH THE ENERGY:** Some days, young people need active and high energy engagements. Other days, they need a space that is low-key and reflective. At REAP, young people take the lead in shaping the feel of the day, and YECs are skilled at assessing the vibe and revising the day’s activities based on the explicit requests and non-verbal cues. Matching the energy allows everyone to engage positively, feel supported and prevents young people from being forced to engage in prescribed activities.

Showing up as one’s true and whole self is central to the YEC role and function at REAP. YECs adapt curriculum and programming by drawing from their own lived experiences, interests, and identities. By showing young people who they are as people, they model authenticity and self-love and give young people permission to do the same. As a result, daily summer programming looked and felt different across REAP’s hubs, as each YEC brought their full self and ways of being to support young people, cultivate their voices, and create conditions for them to experience the core tenets of social well-being: joy, connection, and growth. The ways in which YECs conduct themselves not only supports positive adult-youth relationships, but also allows responsive programming to take root by establishing critical trust bonds for youth can develop their voice and exercise self-advocacy.

**“I decided to join REAP because it allowed me to experience greater opportunities. I was able to get involved with more activities I never would have outside of REAP.”**

**YOUTH PARTICIPANT**

**“It’s important to be a part of REAP this summer because you learn how to use teamwork, cooperate effectively and you make new friends.”**

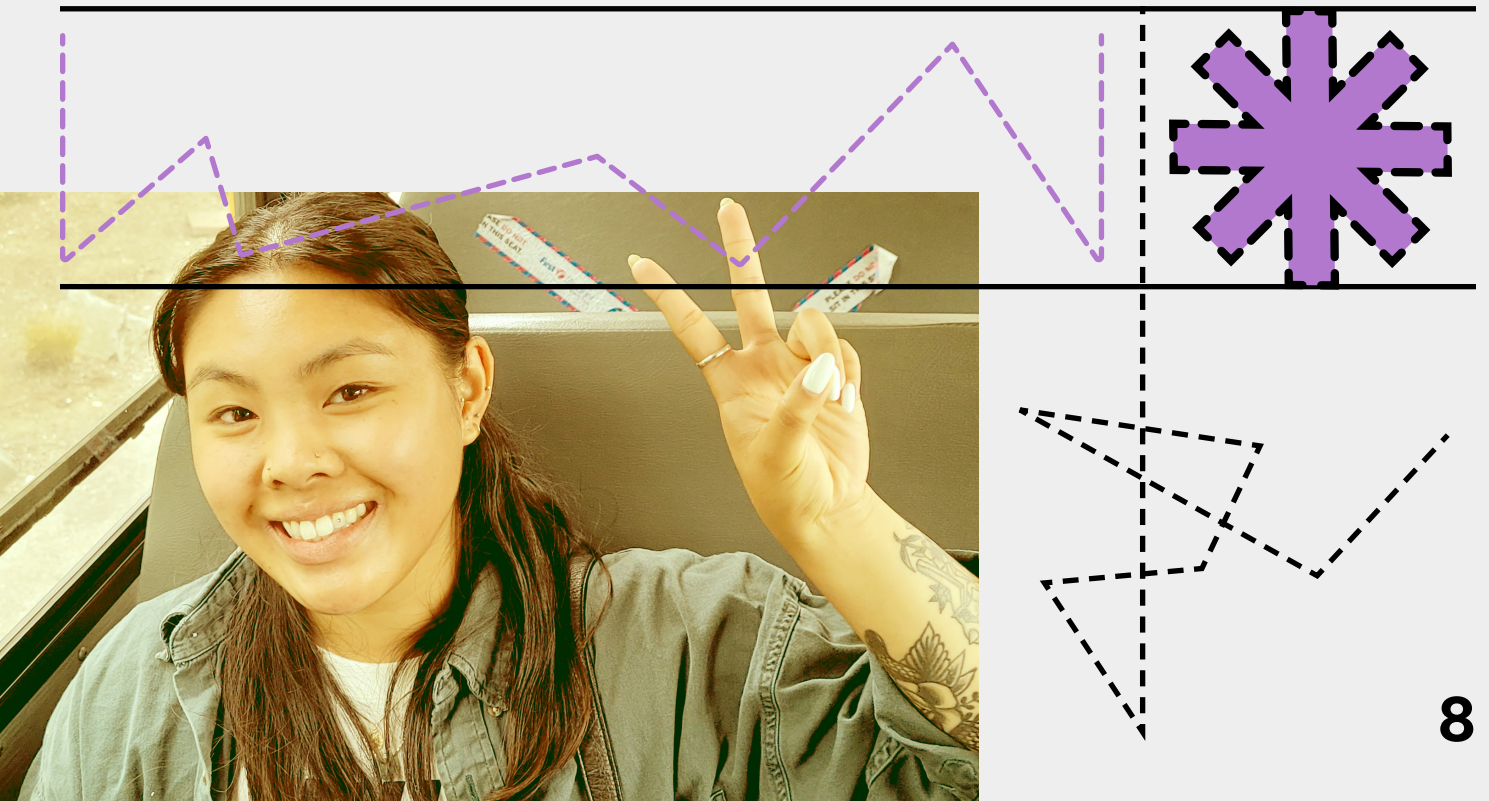
**YOUTH PARTICIPANT**

**“Summer this year was about social emotional learning. We focused on getting students to have the interactions they missed out on because of COVID-19, so we put a focus on team building instead of individual activities, and on mentorship. We tried to connect with students on a more personal level.”**

**YOUTH ESSENTIALS COORDINATOR**

**“I feel like young people are seeking out communication and see the value of connection with their peers way more than they did before COVID. They see the value within one another.”**

**YOUTH ESSENTIALS COORDINATOR**





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## TRUST AND HONESTY ARE THE ENTRY POINTS TO RELATIONSHIPS

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Cultivating an environment where youth can both trust and be trusted is central to REAP's responsive youth programming model. Youth at REAP shared throughout the summer that young people often seek to establish trust as a condition to being transparent and honest with others. Once trust is established, whether with peers or adult mentors, young people report feeling empowered to advocate for themselves, ask for guidance to accomplish goals, and speak up about how they'd like to spend their time.

On the other hand, REAP staff reflected that demonstrating vulnerability and honesty as adults is a lever for building trust with youth. When adults commit to "be intentional," to show up as their whole, authentic selves, and create spaces for young people to trust them, young people feel at ease to pursue their goals and advocate for what they want at REAP, in their community, and for their own lives. For example, a number of young people proactively sought out mentorship at REAP during the summer after having identified important goals for themselves. While goal-setting wasn't an explicit objective for youth during summer programming, the establishment of trust between YECs and youth led participants to exercise their self-advocacy and self-determination skills to seek mentorship and support to set and pursue personal goals such as completing missed course credits, obtaining a driver's license, or making a fall sports team.

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## EMPATHIZE AND IDENTIFY WITH YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

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About 20 percent of REAP staff participated in REAP's programming at some point during their adolescence; among the rest of the staff, they often joke they likely would have been REAP youth too, if they'd had the chance to participate. Program alumni hold deep connections to the transformative nature of REAP's responsive programming model and hold strong narratives about how the cultivation of their voice and self-advocacy have shaped their own personal development and identity. The close identification with the REAP experience allows this group of REAP staff to hold space for youth voice among staff in a powerful way, even when young people aren't physically present. The sense of accountability, advocacy, and empathy they feel for the experience of young people in many ways is characteristic of what it means to "be intentional": to show up as their whole selves and create the conditions for young people to develop trust.



# INSIGHT 3:

## “REAP IS THERE FOR YOUTH”

### ADAPTABILITY SUPPORTS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT OVER TIME

Summer provided a unique space for youth programming both in terms of the experience offered and who was able to engage. The core group of summer programming participants knew REAP and had previously engaged in REAP programming offered at their school during the academic year. For others, summer offered young people an entry point to join the existing REAP community at their school. The summer “hub” model also allowed young people from schools where REAP doesn’t operate programs during the academic year program to join the REAP experience.

Regardless of one’s previous connection to the organization, REAP doesn’t assume to know what

young people are seeking or take for granted their choice to participate. Enrollment in REAP programming is an invitation for engagement—not an agreement to show up, to participate, and certainly not to comply. As summer 2021 arrived, young people were eager to get out of the house, reconnect with others, and experience new things, but they were weary from the frequently formulaic, impersonal, and restrictive approaches to virtual learning during the pandemic.

REAP welcomed young people to in-person programming, understanding that they couldn’t truly anticipate or script the summer without knowing who would show up. This balance was especially evident across REAP’s summer programming hubs, where the small scale of each program site created accountability, dialogue, and negotiation between youth and YECs.

**“They checked up on me and made sure I was involved, even on days I didn’t want to be. Some days I’d want to sit at home, and they would ask me to come out; every time I did, I was never disappointed.”**

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

**“Anytime I said something or gave an example for an activity, they’d always put it in as the week went on. So it was never the same thing. And every week, they incorporated more of what we were asking about into the day.”**

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

**“This isn’t a traditional school day. Young people volunteer to be here every day. So if they’re bored, that’s on us. If they don’t want to engage with what we’re presenting them, that’s on us. I always try to monitor what’s causing them to tune out—not in a behavioral sense, but more trying to connect with their interests and emotions.”**

YOUTH ESSENTIALS COORDINATOR



## NURTURING SOCIAL WELL-BEING

After a year of virtual interaction and isolation, REAP prioritized creating hub communities, where young people could connect with others, feel safe, and experience social well-being. **Social well-being** is about understanding yourself in order to relate to others and developing the skills to be part of a positive community.

YECs nurtured summer hub communities and facilitated activities that allowed young people to safely explore their emotions, test boundaries,

and develop a positive sense of social well-being in relation to others once again. Noting the significant time spent away from in-person activities, YECs also emphasized making space for young people to process their emotions in real time with guidance from mentors as they navigated new relationships, tried different ways of communicating, and participated in a collective environment that activates youth voice and balanced consensus and compromise.

**“When I tell them they’re feeling something that I’ve felt, I can be open with them about some struggles I’ve had in the exact same social-emotional sphere ... I just made it clear to [a REAP youth participant] that I struggle with the exact same thing all the time, and to remember, if you come at people with good grace and with the best mindset possible, then they’ll probably meet you halfway.”**

YOUTH ESSENTIALS COORDINATOR

**“Implementing social-emotional skill building in activities is not as hard as you think. You can turn anything into skill-building exercise, even the card game UNO. You can learn about cooperation, self-management, communication while taking turns, listening to each other and practicing positive self-talk.”**

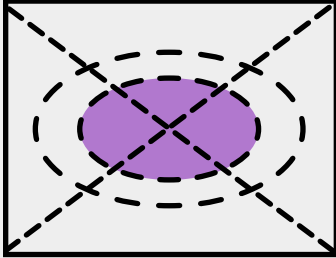
YOUTH ESSENTIALS COORDINATOR

**“REAP has helped a lot this summer. They have taught me how to help other kids, to have fun, and to never give up on myself.”**

YOUTH PARTICIPANT



# TAKEAWAYS



During the summer of 2021, REAP offered a return to care, community, and exploration for young people as they coped with the isolation and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach wasn't unique to REAP's summer 2021 programming, nor did it reflect a programmatic pivot in response to the conditions of the 2020-2021 school year. Indeed, this approach is characteristic of how REAP has always responded, shown up, and made space for young people's desires: starting with authentic dialogue that explores young people's interests, their identities, and their goals in order to frame programming. REAP's responsive approach can provide a new perspective for Oregon's youth-serving systems, whether public education or other out-of-school time providers, that discards dominant culture ideas about the need to strictly occupy young people's time and focus on building content knowledge and skills.

## HOW REAP SPARKS LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP

REAP IS COMMUNITY-CONNECTED:	REAP IS DYNAMIC:	REAP EMPHASIZES THE WHOLENESS OF YOUTH:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From the organizational level to individual program sites, REAP is led by and for the community.</li> <li>Programming is built on the strengths, wisdom, and cultures of the community and REAP staff.</li> <li>Youth explore their relationship to the community as leaders through place-based learning and service.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff respond to the moment and create spaces, experiences and challenges for young people to both be at ease and be challenged.</li> <li>Staff take cues from youth and adapt programming to remain relevant to young people's needs, desires, and goals.</li> <li>REAP takes a responsive approach to designing programming that supports the conditions for co-creation and co-learning between young people and adults.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Programming centers young people's identities and experiences.</li> <li>Staff create space for young people to advocate for themselves, their interests, and their goals.</li> <li>Learning opportunities cultivate young people's intersecting identities as individuals, as community members, as scholars, and as leaders.</li> </ul>

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## TAKEAWAYS

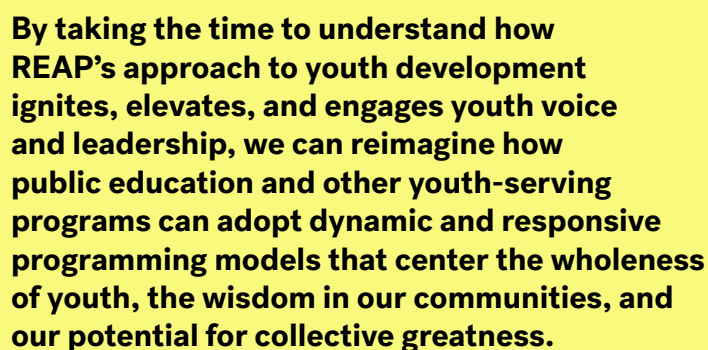
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REAP reaches and responds to young people in ways they don't often experience in public education and other informal learning settings. Rather than emphasizing a specific curriculum or youth development model, its approach to youth development is characterized by *how* the program model and staff offer young people an environment and the encouragement to belong, to develop their own voice, and to lead among peers and within the community. Other youth-serving systems and programs can learn from the ways REAP empowers its staff to build relationships with youth, assume their roles as mentors and curators of space, and adapt programming in partnership with youth. These components co-create the space, support, and opportunities for young people to self-determine and thrive.

This approach to youth programming aligns with the concept of community-based education, in which education is led by and for communities with shared identities, experiences, and stories. **Community-based education** *includes both formal and informal learning that builds on the inherent strengths, wisdom, and culture of the community to lead learning and is informed by desires and needs for both individuals and the community overall.* REAP demonstrates the power of this approach when engaging and serving young people who are historically and currently pushed to the margins by public education systems and dominant culture approaches to learning.

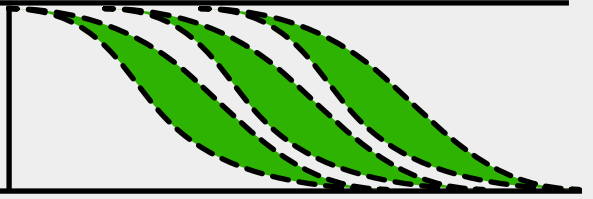
REAP's founders created the organization, its programs, and its responsive approach to youth development based on their experience and understanding of what is needed to grow and develop future leaders. Today, through the principles of community-based education, REAP is able to reach, mentor, and launch self-aware and community-minded young leaders who go on to continue the traditions of community-based education, as evidenced by the notable portion of program alumni among REAP's staff. Whether supporting young people during a global pandemic or confronting the daily challenges of dominant culture systems, REAP's impact for young people is always grounded in:

1. A commitment to designing and adapting programming to respond to young people's interests and desires without sacrificing core program or learning objectives.
2. An emphatic and genuine understanding of the shared values, identities, and experiences between youth and adults.
3. An understanding of the dynamic and personal conditions young people need to develop confidence in their identities, the power of their voices, and their roles in the community as natural leaders.



**By taking the time to understand how REAP's approach to youth development ignites, elevates, and engages youth voice and leadership, we can reimagine how public education and other youth-serving programs can adopt dynamic and responsive programming models that center the wholeness of youth, the wisdom in our communities, and our potential for collective greatness.**

# PROCESS & METHODS



This project is a collaborative research inquiry co-designed and implemented in partnership between FBO and REAP. FBO believes authentic evidence emerges through authentic partnership that honors community wisdom and perspective at all stages of the research process. FBO operates as a project facilitator and research guide so that community partners are able to engage as experts rather than subjects.

The research design for this project was developed in a parallel process to REAP's design and implementation of summer programming in 2021. The research aims and questions that underpin these findings attended to the joint objectives and genuine interests, concerns, and curiosities that arose among both REAP and FBO as it related to youth engagement, social and emotional development, and authentic relationships in the context of summer programming.

Research methods were qualitative in nature, composed primarily of five interviews with REAP staff; four interviews with REAP youth participants; and data collection strategies embedded within summer programming activities, including an active reflection session, a photovoice event, and writing prompts. Data was co-analyzed between REAP and FBO during a two-part participatory sensemaking process. Using the ATLAS Looking at Data Protocol, REAP staff examined, reflected, and uplifted initial themes across the data sources and identified missing perspectives to capture through an additional series of youth interviews. The final insights of this study were developed using a real-time axial process to organize themes in relationship to one another and to REAP's program model. Together, we further refined our insights through the co-development of this report.



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