

Youth Voice in Action: Empowering Learners as Leaders



Funding Opportunity

Online Application Deadline: Friday, October 10, 2025, 4:00 p.m. HST

OVERVIEW

The Hawai'i Community Foundation (HCF) is pleased to announce a new funding opportunity to support nonprofit organizations that intentionally uplift youth voices and empower young people by placing them in decision-making roles, enabling them to shape their educational¹ experiences.

HCF heard clearly from young people and the organizations that serve them that many learners feel disconnected from what they are required to learn versus what they want and need to learn to succeed.² This disconnect can hinder their sense of purpose, belonging, and success in today's rapidly changing world.

Informed by our community, HCF believes that all learners in and from Hawai'i deserve a strong educational foundation, built through learning experiences relevant to their needs and interests, including opportunities to explore their passion to attain a meaningful life. One path towards this vision is to *empower the diverse voices of Hawai'i's learners to be active participants, decision-makers, and co-creators in shaping their learning experiences and environments.*

FOCUS AND GOAL OF FUNDING OPPORTUNITY

This funding opportunity seeks nonprofit organizations whose work aligns with values that demonstrate their commitment in authentically **uplifting youth voice**,³ **empowering youth agency**,⁴ **and advancing youth-led engagement**.⁵ HCF has identified three strategies (below) that incorporate these key components in a way that places youth in significant decision-making roles which empowers them to advocate for their needs and interests thereby increasing their sense of agency and purpose. Through collective action around these key strategies, HCF's hope is that youth can dismantle systemic barriers from within, thereby advancing relevant, responsive, and equitable educational experiences that foster their long-term success.

HCF will award **two-year general operating support grants up to \$100,000** (\$50,000 per year), with a total of \$600,000 available to support key nonprofit partners already engaged in this work with youth who are in grades 7 through college completion.⁶

¹ For purposes of this funding opportunity, "education(al)" refers to all learning experiences learners in and from Hawai'i do in schools, communities, workplaces, and households. Hawaii's formal education systems, such as the Hawaii State Department of Education, will be referred to as "Hawaii's education(al) system(s)."

² These findings were a result of HCF's 2022-2024 CHANGE framework community engagement series. More information can be found at <https://www.hawaiicommunityfoundation.org/change>.

³ Refer to [Appendix A](#).

⁴ Refer to [Appendix B](#).

⁵ Refer to [Appendix C](#).

⁶ Recognizing that older youth are more developmentally ready to engage in shaping their learning environments and decisions, this funding opportunity aims to support organizations who work with youth in grades 7 and above.

Over the two-year grant period, HCF aims to better understand the various ways communities are already turning youth voice into youth action. As a first step towards this, grantees will join a “community of support” network, where they can engage in shared learning that contributes to a growing knowledge base about diverse approaches and strategies that increase youth advocacy and influence on the systems they encounter throughout their educational journey. These learnings will inform HCF’s broader education strategies, initiatives, and be shared as a resource to inspire other organizations to embed youth voice in their work.

ELIGIBILITY & REQUIREMENTS

To be eligible for this funding opportunity, applicants must meet the following criteria:

- Be a nonprofit organization with 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status and must provide services in Hawai‘i (nonprofits may submit only one application for its organization). Schools or their fiscal sponsors may not apply, however nonprofit organizations who partner with schools may apply.
- Organization must align with at least one of the key strategies below.
- The organization’s existing work that aligns with this funding opportunity must primarily serve youth in grade 7 through college completion, with plans to extend that work into 2027.
- Be in good standing with HCF (i.e., no past due final reports from previous HCF grants).

Examples of organizations who would not be ideal applicants:

- Organizations that are not currently engaged in youth voice and youth-led advocacy or engagement activities.
- Organizations that do not regularly and consistently uplift youth to guide or improve their work, and do not provide youth with meaningful agency or decision-making authority.

KEY STRATEGIES

Organizations must identify and describe how their work aligns with one of the following strategies:

- **Youth Organizing and Governing:** Youth play a key role in shaping the direction of an organization or educational program. They participate in decision-making at the structural level – such as strategy, governance, or policy – and are supported in developing their leadership and vision.
- **Youth-Led Activities:** Youth lead activities that aim to shift systems, policies, or public narratives. These efforts may include advocacy, participatory research, or organizing – and are designed and driven by youth to identify issues and solutions with potential or proven systems impacts to improve their learning environments.
- **Collaboration with Youth:** Youth and adults collaborate as equal partners to co-create programs, projects, or initiatives on an iterative basis to advance the organization’s mission or strategic goals. Youth co-develop goals, anticipated results, and youth input is embedded throughout - from planning through execution and evaluation - with mutual respect, shared decision-making, and joint accountability.

For examples of these strategies, refer to [Appendix D](#).

AWARD INFORMATION

- **Funding:** Two-year general operating support grants up to \$100,000 (\$50,000 per year). Up to \$600,000 in total will be awarded for the 2-year period, contingent upon the availability of

funds. HCF estimates the average grant amount will be \$60,000 (\$30,000 per year). If the organization's work encompasses a broader range of programs than youth programs aligned with this opportunity, funding may be limited to programmatic support.

- **Grant Term:** Applicants will be notified of funding decisions by mid-December 2025. The grant period will be December 31, 2025, through December 31, 2027.
- **Reporting:** At the end of each year, grantees will provide a brief report, with the option to participate in a conversational interview instead of a written submission. Reporting requirements will be discussed with grantees and may be adjusted as needed to reflect what is most useful and manageable. Rather than traditional mid-year progress reports, grantees will participate in a community of support gathering each year (discussed below).
- **Requirements:** Grantees must participate in two "community of support" gatherings. If held in-person, HCF will provide a stipend for travel costs for participants travelling between islands.
- **Restrictions:** Grant funds may not be used for: re-granting (i.e., redistribution of these funds to other organizations or individuals); endowments; for the benefit of specific individuals; major capital improvements including capital campaigns, construction or renovations (minor capital improvements required to implement programs are allowable); or activities that promote religious beliefs.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

HCF staff will review and recommend funding for this Funding Opportunity. The strongest applications will demonstrate the following:

- **Organizational Experience & Capacity** – Demonstrated history, capacity, and staff expertise to deliver programs in alignment with the organization's mission and selected key strategy.
- **Alignment with Key Strategy** – Description of existing activities and approach clearly connect to the selected key strategy. Youth voice, agency, and roles as decision-makers or co-creators are clearly identified within the activities described.
- **Quality of Activities** – Demonstrated intentional and relevant design of activities that elevate and act upon youth input, engage youth iteratively throughout and even after the process, and empower youth ownership, leadership, or agency.
- **Organizational Impact** – Evidence that youth leadership and input influence organizational strategies, programs, policies, or governance, and whether the work has potential of actual impact on Hawai'i's education system.
- **Youth Impact** – Evidence that youth participants gain agency, leadership, and ownership over their learning, supported by examples, stories, or data showing tangible benefits such as increased skills, confidence, or civic engagement.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Online Application

This application is available for online submission through the Hawai'i Community Foundation's Grants Portal. New users may register for an account here:

https://hawaiiicf.smartsimple.com/s_Login.jsp. Registered users may log in to their account to submit an application. Please give yourself adequate time before the submission deadline to

access the system and familiarize yourself with the application process and requirements. Reference our [Applicant User Guide](#) for further instructions.

Instructions

- Only complete applications submitted by the deadline will be considered for funding.
- The online application has fillable boxes with character limits. The character counts in MS Word may not match the character counts in the application. If you cut and paste your work into the application, please be sure your text fits the space provided.

ORGANIZATION PROFILE

As part of the online application your organization profile must be certified prior to submission of grant applications and must be certified every 6 months. Information needed to complete your organization's profile includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- IRS 501(c)(3) determination letter (not required if previously applied to the Foundation)
- Number of full-time, part-time, or regular volunteer staff
- Organization Mission
- Service Location(s)
- Types of services provided (including age, gender, and target populations served)
- Financial Statements
 - Annual Operating budget for current year
 - Income statement (or profit/loss statement) for the most recently completed fiscal year
 - Balance sheet for the most recently completed fiscal year
 - Audited financial statements are preferred but not required
 - Local units of national organizations must submit local unit financial information
- Board of Directors List

APPLICATION

The application consists of 3 tabs. Information needed to complete your application includes, but is not limited to the following:

- **Program Overview:**
 - Provide general information and characteristics about the program including program title, duration, program location(s), ages and genders served, and the CHANGE sector(s) your program most closely aligns with.
 - This funding opportunity is part of HCF's CHANGE [Education Sector](#) opportunities. For more information about the CHANGE framework, visit our [CHANGE web pages](#).
- **Program Information:**
 - **Organization Description:** Describe the history and mission of the organization. What is the organization's experience implementing this program and what are the staff capabilities to conduct the proposed work into 2027? Provide a brief statement about the organization's experience working with youth in decision-making or leadership roles. (*Maximum 2,500 characters = ¾ page*)
 - **Key Strategy:** (select one) Select the key strategy your organization or program aligns with from the list on page 2. Note: if your organization does not align with at least one of the key strategies, your organization is not eligible to apply.
 - **Activities:** Describe the activities related to your key strategy. What role do youth play in these activities? How does your organization gather and act on youth input,

and how often or at what duration? Describe how the outcomes or learnings from these activities inform organizational decisions, priorities, or policies? What are the goals of these activities? (Maximum 3,500 characters = 1 page)

- **Organizational Impact:** Explain how your selected key strategy influences the design, implementation, and/or evaluation of your work. What impact does youth input have on your organization's decisions? Describe any formal or ongoing roles that youth hold within the organization that influence programs, policies, or governance. Provide relevant data, stories, or examples where possible. (Maximum 3,500 characters = 1 page)
- **Youth Impact:** Explain how your activities impact youth participants, particularly how they build agency and ownership in their learning. Provide relevant data, stories, or examples where possible. (Maximum 2,500 characters = ¾ page)
- **Supporting Documents & Certification:**
 - Certifications & Conditions: Complete the certification.

DEADLINE & KEY DATES

- **Application Open:** Tuesday, September 2, 2025
- **Information Session 1:** Friday, September 19, 2025 at 2:00 pm HST. Register for this session here: [Session 1 Zoom Registration Link](#)
- **Information Session 2:** Thursday, October 2, 2025 at 10:30 am HST. Register for this session here: [Session 2 Zoom Registration Link](#)
- **Application Close:** Friday, October 10, 2025 at 4:00 pm Hawaii Standard Time

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions about this funding opportunity, please contact Misti Pali-Oriol by email at MPaliOriol@hcf-hawaii.org, or by phone at 808-566-5523.

For technical assistance with the online application process, please submit a support ticket at <https://www.hawaiicommunityfoundation.org/web/support-tickets>.

APPENDECIES

APPENDIX A – Youth Voice

HCF recognizes that youth voice can be uplifted in many ways – through conversations, surveys, interviews, focus or advisory groups, or decision-making roles. While applicants should describe how they engage youth voice, this funding opportunity is particularly focused on how those insights are then used to shape and inform the organization’s strategies, decisions, and work.

APPENDIX B – Youth Agency

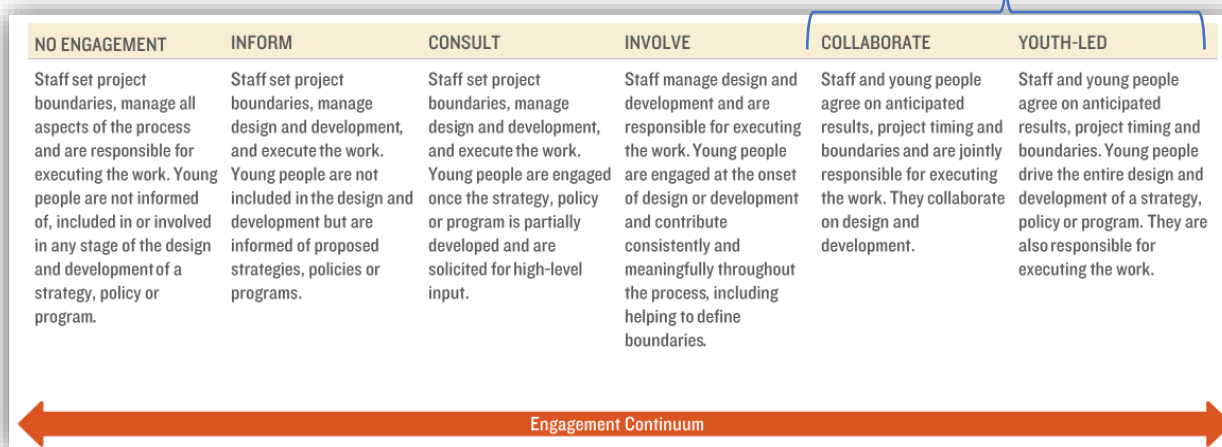
Young people navigate many systems throughout their lives, particularly in their educational journey. This funding opportunity emphasizes “increasing youth agency” as a key component of HCF’s strategy to foster a strong sense of purpose, belonging, and positive youth development. Findings from HCF’s Youth Action Participatory Research Fellowship support that allowing youth to exercise their voice early on helps them to realize their capacity and capabilities to create change. Applicants should describe how their youth voice efforts help young people feel more secure, valued, affirmed, and connected to people, places, and culture. When youth experience greater agency, they become better equipped to self-advocate while navigating complex systems, ensuring they can obtain the resources they need to thrive.

Appendix C – Youth-led Engagement

HCF recognizes there is a wide spectrum of meaningful ways communities – especially communities of youth – can actively and authentically engage around issues that matter to them. This includes empowering young people in leadership and decision-making roles. To guide applicants in identifying their youth engagement efforts, HCF offers an example below of a youth engagement continuum from our colleagues at [The Annie E. Casey Foundation](#).

Continuum of Youth Engagement Strategies⁷

2 of HCF’s Key Strategies



We note that our key strategy of “Youth Organizing and Governing” is not identified on this continuum, however we would place this to the right of “Youth-Led” engagement on this spectrum.

⁷ The Annie E. Casey Foundation Youth Engagement Continuum:

[https://assets.aecf.org/m/blogdoc/The Annie E. Casey Foundation Youth Engagement Continuum 2.pdf](https://assets.aecf.org/m/blogdoc/The%20Annie%20E.%20Casey%20Foundation%20Youth%20Engagement%20Continuum%20.pdf).

APPENDIX D – Examples of Key Strategies

For purposes of this funding opportunity, HCF intends to support organizations whose activities connect three important components to advancing our strategy of empowering the diverse voices of Hawai'i's learners to be active participants, decision-makers, and co-creators in shaping their learning experiences and environments. The key three components are: 1) Uplifting youth voice; 2) Empowering youth agency; and 3) Advancing youth-led engagement.

To further assist applicants in identifying whether their work aligns with this funding opportunity, descriptions and examples of our funding priorities are provided below but are not meant to limit organizations interested in applying.

Key Strategy	Description	Example(s)
Youth Organizing and Governing	Youth play a key role in shaping the direction of an organization or educational program. They participate in decision-making at the structural level – such as strategy, governance, or policy – and are supported in developing their leadership and vision.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Youth voice as core to the mission and values of the organization and drives strategic direction.• Youth are empowered as active participants in organizational decision-making and strategy development. Youth sit on governing boards or steering committees with decision-making authority.• Creating and filling staff or leadership positions with youth to ensure their perspectives are embedded within organizational decision-making.
Youth-Led Engagement	Youth lead activities that aim to shift systems, policies, or public narratives. These efforts may include advocacy, participatory research, or organizing – and are designed and driven by youth to identify issues and solutions with potential or proven systems impacts to improve their learning environments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student-led campaigns advocating for educational policy, curriculum, or services.• Youth co-designing or co-leading civic education or advocacy workshops for their peers.• Youth research their community issues that aim to inform decision-makers, or lead to youth-led implemented solutions.
Collaboration with Youth	Youth and adults collaborate as equal partners to co-create programs, projects, or initiatives on an iterative basis to advance the organization's mission or strategic goals. Youth co-develop goals, anticipated results, and youth input is embedded throughout - from planning through execution and evaluation - with mutual respect, shared decision-making, and joint accountability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peer-to-peer partnership/mentoring models that foster and increase youth agency, advocacy, and belonging.• A collaborative media project where youth plan and produce content. Work may be coached or guided by adults, but youth have agency over the final content.