

# REIMAGINE BLACK YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

SUMMARY OF YEAR ONE



# Background

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) partnered with the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth (BBAY) to establish a community and Black youth-led process with a shared [set of goals and a deliberate approach - MDH \(www.health.mn.gov/communities/mentalhealth/blackyouth.html\)](http://www.health.mn.gov/communities/mentalhealth/blackyouth.html).

The grant for the initiative was prompted by a rise in Black youth suicide rates. Research shows that the suicide death rate among Black youth is increasing faster than any other racial/ethnic group. The Congressional Black Caucus established an Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health in efforts to determine the causes and potential solutions to this crisis. The Taskforce released the following report detailing their work: [Ring the Alarm: The Crisis of Black Youth Suicide in America \(watsoncoleman.house.gov/suicidetaskforce\)](http://watsoncoleman.house.gov/suicidetaskforce).

# Advisory Council

The initial approach in the development of the advisory council consisted of letters of commitment from Robbinsdale Area Schools, Osseo Area Schools, Brooklyn Center Community Schools, Anoka-Hennepin Schools, North Hennepin Community College, Hennepin Technical College, ACER, One2One Mentoring, City of Brooklyn Park, City of Brooklyn Center, Hennepin County, and BBAY. Each organization selected someone to represent them.

Additionally, there were six spots for young people. As meetings and one-on-ones with the reimagine Black youth mental health coordinator progressed, what emerged was a need for the advisory council to be an affinity space for Black leaders. The initiative also identified the need to include guardians, family members, and people who may have informal roles but ultimately had a stake in the development of this initiative.

Through monthly meetings the advisory council set the values, tone, and approach for the initiative and began to map the ecosystem. Council members were contributors in the development of youth space, the Black Joy project, advised on the initial communication plan, supported outreach, and supported the planning of the Reimagine Black Youth Mental Health Summit. Currently, there are 25 members of this collective.

Black youth in Minnesota are at risk of experiencing toxic stress that contributes to depression and anxiety due to long-standing structural racism. Based on the 2022 Minnesota Student Survey data, non-Hispanic Black, African, or African American students (hereafter referred to as Black youth) reported lower rates of mental wellbeing compared to their non-Hispanic white peers. The largest disparities in mental wellbeing by race and ethnicity include social integration, social competency, personal growth, empowerment, and family/peer relationships.

This process requires building trust between communities while leveraging state and local partnerships, facilitating wider cross-system communication, and advancing racial equity.

## Advisory council approach

- We won't ignore trauma, grief, stress, or other aspects of unwellness - especially as it is situated in the context of systemic and interpersonal racism.
- We will simultaneously illuminate health - what is good and working in Black lives, what gives hope and life, what must be acknowledged and watered.
- What we ask determines what we find. What we find determines how we talk. How we talk determines what we can imagine. What we can imagine determines what we achieve.
- There is already greatness in all people and communities. Finding and studying that greatness can offer one pathway to solutions.
- Stories are a key source of insight.
- Rest and joy hold space for truth telling.
- We must tend to our own health and wellbeing to do and sustain well work.

# Key achievements and lessons from year one

- Adult supported, but youth led. As a way of practicing this, an advisory council member pursued and secured mini grant funding to support the activities of youth space through Hennepin County.
- The advisory council played a key role in
  - The selection of Blackbird Revolt as the communications vendor for the initiative.
  - Supporting young people in the Black Joy project and Reimagine Summit.

# Collaboration factors

Advisory council members participated in a [Wilder Foundation Collaboration Factors Inventory \(www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/collaboration-factors-inventory\)](http://www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/collaboration-factors-inventory) evaluation.

Advisory council members rated 15 out of 22 collaboration factors in the range of 4.0-5.0 which identify areas that members see as strengths and do not need special attention, the highest score category. A score in the range of 3.0-3.9 are items that are borderline and deserve discussion. A score in the range of 1.0-2.9 indicate areas of concern that should be addressed. Some of these factors include: "collaborative group seen as a legitimate leader in the community," "mutual respect, understanding, and trust," and "members share a stake in both process and outcome."



## When asked what is working well, one advisory member shared:

- 1 Values (established and operating in what we value, i.e., transparency, open communication, etc)
- 2 Recognizing in each of our positions and sectors, how we can resource or support the work to move forward
- 3 Informal connection time
- 4 Leadership we have to guide the work
- 5 Bridging youth space and adult advisory council when needed, and at the right time
- 6 Sharing information from advisory space and expressing it to my own leadership internally

The advisory council spent most of the first year of this project building deep and wide relationships within the community to develop trust and respect in the community, an essential milestone for the next steps. To support the ongoing work and collaboration for this group and increase opportunities for more informal connection time which was a need highlighted by members, funding was secured through Hennepin County to offer a retreat in year two.



## Black youth affinity space

The Black youth space was launched in 2023 to create a consistent opportunity for Black youth aged 12-22 to build community, discuss and practice what helps them thrive, strengthen, and support wellbeing, take actions around changes needed in their lives and communities, and raise awareness for Black youth mental health. A subgroup of youth space includes core youth engagement team who played a staff role to help plan events and recruit other youth. In year one, this team consisted of two high school Brooklyn interns, one undergraduate student, and one graduate student.

The Black youth affinity space and their experiences with sharing Black Joy and identity is proving to be foundational for supporting young Black leaders as they define what mental health looks like and the crucial steps on the road to claiming positive racial identity and mental wellbeing. This early work addressed barriers, built capacity and educated system leaders, and began identifying and assessing potential reimagine Black youth mental health projects.

### Sessions from year one:

1. What I love about being Black mural activity *facilitated by RBYMH Coordinator*
2. Safety activity and discussion *facilitated by RBYMH Coordinator*
3. Mental Health and Race discussion event *hosted at the Penumbra Theater\**
4. The Little Mermaid movie and reflections about the importance of Black representation\*
5. Two conversations on identity intersectionality and wellbeing *facilitated by the Annex Teen Clinic\**
6. Sunday Funday family roller skating event *organized by youth engagement team\**
7. Blackout Poetry *facilitated by youth engagement team*
8. Black Connectivity event *facilitated by youth engagement team*
9. Youth Space and advisory council merge meeting for RBYMH Summit

*\*These events were made possible by Hennepin County Trauma Informed mini grant funding pursued by an advisory council member.*

### Program quality

In an effort to support continuous quality improvement, program leaders were given an effective practices self-assessment designed by Ignite Afterschool called “Believe It. Build it.” They rated six areas to assess program quality on a 3-point scale (3-thriving, 2-engaging, 1-emerging). For more details on these categories, visit [Believe It. Build It. \(www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi\)](http://www.igniteafterschool.org/bibi).

**Responsiveness to culture and identity:** 3  
**Intentional program design:** 2.7  
**Supportive relationships and environment:** 2.6  
**Youth voice and leadership:** 2.4  
**Community and family engagement:** 2.4  
**Organizational management, staff support, and youth safety:** 2

The lowest rated areas included organizational management, staff support, and youth safety. To address this, program staff along with advisory council members developed plans to implement a youth space charter. This charter will also include a permission slip as well as a photo release that is meant to be signed by youth participant guardians to further increase safety and to make sure there is proper identification for all those who are participating in the program.

## Participation and attendance

- Youth received incentives for engagement and participation.
- Average attendance was 10 youth. Fourteen youth attended more than once. Youth space is expected to grow to 25-30 actively engaged participants.
- Currently, the school districts most engaged in youth space were Brooklyn Center and Anoka Hennepin.
- Recruitment efforts for youth space take place through outreach at schools and local community events, as well as through word of mouth.

## Youth space experience and outcomes

### More than half of youth

indicated that they feel proud to be themselves and feel seen or supported by an adult in the space.

### 96% of youth

indicated that their youth space experience has been excellent or good.

### 78% of youth

indicated that they learned something from being in youth space.

### 70% of youth

indicated that they feel like they belonged in youth space.

### 78% of youth

indicated that they connect with other youth in a positive way during youth space.

**Youth space makes it possible to keep youth interested, engaged, and feeling ownership of this work for them, by them).**

*It is not an opportunity to make young people fit into an adult advisory council, but rather to be creative, contribute, and be poured into in a way that is rooted in mutuality and resonates with them. The summit event would not have happened the way it did without the pre-work and relationship-building that took place in youth space.*

# Black Joy

Developed and implemented by the youth engagement team and reimagine Black youth mental health coordinator, the Black Joy project emerged out of the initiative value of focusing on Black strengths rather than deficits. The overarching goals of the Black Joy project were to define Black Joy and why it matters, describe how racial identity impacts Black youth's experience of joy, describe the value of Black Joy for health and wellbeing, and demonstrate the ways in which Black Joy can inform policy change. These efforts were designed to complement existing research that tends to be rooted in deficit. This project design aligns with initiative goals that it be youth led, Black centered, community driven, and rooted in transparency, mutuality, healing, and wellness.

## Elements of Black Joy project

1. **Literature review:** to explore existing research on Black Joy and learn how project research builds on, affirms, and creates new knowledge.
2. **One-on-one interviews:** youth engagement team connected with peers and community members and recorded personal stories that help to build definition of joy and how it relates to wellbeing.
3. **Black Joy retreat (August 2023):** an opportunity to explore, define, create, participate in, and experience Black Joy.

## Black Joy Interviews

Black Joy interviews were designed to create a portfolio of relationship-based research highlighting the centrality of Black Joy in the mental health and wellbeing of Black youth. This activity demonstrated a process of research that is done by members of the Black community, for members of the Black community that is rooted in transparency, mutuality, healing, and wellness. Its intention is to demonstrate the ways in which Black Joy can inform policy change. These efforts are meant to complement existing research that tends to be rooted in deficit and disparity. This qualitative research with 15 interviewees, including 10 youth that lived in the Brooklyn and five Black adults who worked with Black youth in the Brooklyn, that provided valuable insights, laying the groundwork for future endeavors. Moreover, this process offered an inclusive and participatory way to gather feedback from the youth engagement team, collaborating on the questions and procedures as well as receiving training to conduct interviews independently.

The interview responses provide profound insights into the multifaceted nature of Black Joy, emphasizing themes of cultural identity, resilience, and community. Participants express a deep sense of pride in their heritage, with one noting, "I'm a part of something that everybody wants to be like." This sentiment reflects a celebration of the uniqueness and richness of Black culture, characterized by artistry, community bonds, and ancestral wisdom. Such reflections underscore the crucial connection to heritage and the resilience inherited from ancestors who "still find the light, even in the darkness of times."

The interviews shed light on the pivotal role of community and connections in fostering Black Joy. Participants highlight the importance of safe spaces where they can freely express themselves, with one expressing, "when I'm in a joyous space...I feel the freedom to be who I am." However, the narratives also confront the barriers to joy, including oppression and internal community issues. Despite these challenges, the interviewees advocate for change, calling for increased opportunities and accessible resources. As one participant asserts, "effort needs to change because...this is not just a one Black person problem," highlighting the collective responsibility to foster a more inclusive and joyful future. These insights express a vision for society where cultural pride, community support, and collective action work together to create more opportunities for joy in the Black community.

Following the Black Joy retreat, participants took a survey where they were asked what now comes to mind when they think of Black Joy.

## Some responses were:

“ Doing whatever makes you happy whether or not it's mainstream or popular among our community. ”



78.6% reported they connected with other youth in a positive way.



78.6% reported they learned something from attending.



“ When I'm in a joyous space...I feel the freedom to be who I am. ”

100% reported the retreat was very good or excellent.

“ Black people coming together like a family to share experiences and have fun. ”

# Reimagine Black Youth Mental Health Summit

The Reimagine Black Youth Mental Health Summit was created to be a transformative gathering for Black youth that are connected to Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center. The goal was to bring Black youth across the region together to intentionally uplift components of wellbeing, celebrate Black identity and culture, build skills, uplift changes they want to see in their community, and to have a shared experience of wellbeing. This event was the culmination of over nine months of community and youth engagement.

Planning for this event started with a grounding joint meeting with youth space participants and the advisory council members. This intergenerational connection time and power sharing practice created an opportunity for the two groups to co-create the vision for the event that was rooted in the initiative values identified through youth and advisory council dialogues over the last year:

## Transparency:

open communication, accountability, accessibility of information, inclusivity.

## Mutuality:

give as much as received, sharing of resources, expertise, and networks to achieve shared goals.

## Healing, joy, and inherent goodness.

## Event highlights include:

- Open space activity: opportunity to identify priorities and share experiences topics included safety, family, identity, school, social media (or something that has not been named yet)
- Policy workshop: to build on open space conversations, youth completed policy boards to articulate root causes of issues, opposing and supporting audiences, and tactics to carry out the change they saw fit to improve the issues discussed in the youth space. They dove deeper into identifying policy priorities by working in small groups to name areas of focus as well as what would be opposing and supporting audiences.
- Wellness activities
- [Summit recap video](https://www.vimeo.com/927769957) ([www.vimeo.com/927769957](https://www.vimeo.com/927769957))
- [Health Summit Recap Report](https://www.health.mn.gov/communities/mentalhealth/rbymhsummit.pdf) ([www.health.mn.gov/communities/mentalhealth/rbymhsummit.pdf](https://www.health.mn.gov/communities/mentalhealth/rbymhsummit.pdf))

## Program quality

To support continuous quality improvement, advisory council members and BBAY staff were given the same effective practices self-assessment designed by Ignite Afterschool to identify the strengths and areas of improvement for this type of event. They rated six areas to assess program quality on a 3-point scale (3-thriving, 2-engaging, 1-emerging). The summit shined in the category of responsiveness to cultural identity. For future events, the BBAY plans to increase communication with community partners that volunteer to better ensure that their expectations are clear, in hopes to improve the rating for supportive relationships and environment.

**Responsiveness to culture and identity:** 3

**Youth voice and leadership:** 3

**Intentional program design:** 2.7

**Community and family engagement:** 2.7

**Organizational management, staff support, and youth safety:** 2.3

**Supportive relationships and environment:** 2.2

## Participation and attendance

After having engaged schools early in this process to build their support, they were able to allow students to attend during the school day with the initiative reimbursing them for transportation costs for all of the students, allowing over 200 Black youth to attend the event with consent from their guardian. Recruitment efforts were made by advisory council members to the respective school districts. School districts that were most represented at the summit were Anoka-Hennepin, Robbinsdale, and Brooklyn Center which all met their maximum of 60 students. The summit presented an opportunity to support local business. 83% of money spent for the summit went to Black individuals and businesses. In addition to this, five Black youth emcees and two Black performers were compensated.

## Program experiences

Following the summit, youth were given a survey to that 50 out of 200 completed. 94% of students felt connected to and supported by others at the summit. When asked which element of the event they liked most, most youth selected open space and their choice of wellness activity. When youth were asked what one thing they will remember most from the summit, popular responses included food, people, dancing, and activities. If anything were to change, they shared that they would have liked more time to engage in each activity.

**80%** of students reported feeling more confident after the summit.

**89%** of students understood more about policy change and how to take action.

**95%** of youth said that they would attend an event like this again.

**90%** of youth had a better understanding of policy change and leaders in their community, and walked away with intended skills.

After the summit, advisory council members gathered to assess open space and policy workshop posters that youth created with the use of technology of participation facilitation methods led by BBAY staff. Care was taken to ensure language that the youth used was consistently applied through the process and did not morph into an adult vision of these issues.

## The six themes were:

1

Make sure Black youth are safe at all times.

4

Provide more education on Black history and culture more often, including leaning beyond academics.

2

Give Black people the space to create our own spaces and have our voices heard.

5

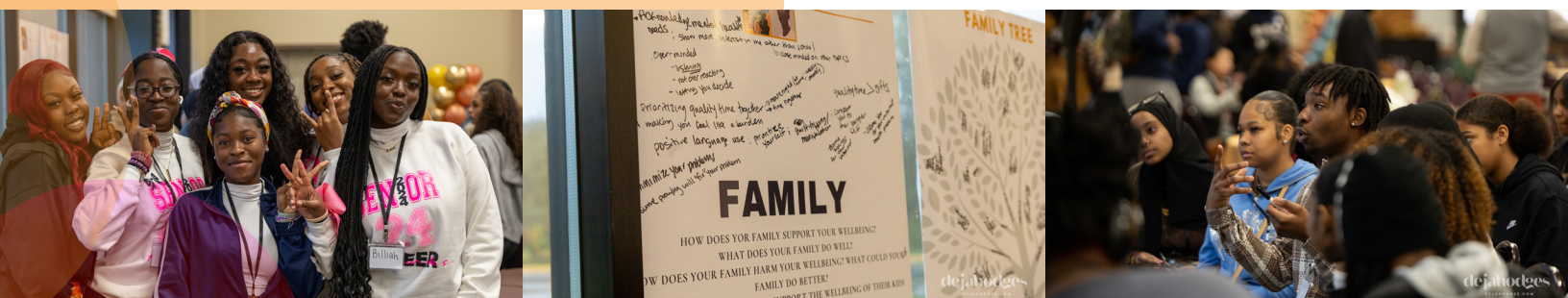
Place more Black teachers in schools.

3

Prioritize the needs of Black youth that are defined by Black youth.

6

Change the narrative around mental health in ways that strengthen mental health support for Black families. Address generational trauma.



In the beginning of year two, the goal is to use school assemblies as a means to re-engage young people and allow them to determine the top two themes to be developed into policy demonstrations.

## State resource team

The State resource team is a team of state agency leaders who meet quarterly to offer support and connections for the reimagine Black youth mental health initiative, each state resource team member had at least two one-on-ones with MDH project staff, first to provide an overview of the project and review the charter, and the second to prime responses for the state ecosystem mapping and communications tool. State participants have also contributed thinking about how to operationalize power sharing. Partners have offered some resources to support the initiative during year one: some members engaged in youth space, referred individual youth to the initiative, and provided space for the Black Joy retreat.

### Membership:

- Minnesota Department of Health (Center for Health Equity, State Health Improvement Partnership, School Clinics, Suicide Prevention)
- MN Department of Human Services (Medicaid Director, Child Safety and Permanency, and Behavioral Health)
- MN Department of Education (Project Aware, Office of Equity, Title I Director)
- MN Department of Employment and Economic Development (Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act Coordinator)
- MN Office of Higher Education (Assistant Commissioners Office)
- MN Department of Natural Resources (Community Environmental Justice, Parks)
- MN Department of Public Safety (Juvenile Justice Advisory Council, Restorative Justice, Title 2 grant funds)
- MN Association of Children’s Mental Health (MACMH)
- Public Health Law Network

## State and local leadership dialogue

On November 16, 2023, MDH hosted an event to focus on strengthening community environments for mental wellbeing through community capacity and policy. The event was designed to support a shift in the narrative about mental health that includes a focus on community policies, and to highlight the critical role of community-led policy initiatives. Approximately 150 state, county, and city government leaders, elected officials, and community influencers attended the event which included a diverse range of impactful speakers and topics.

MDH Commissioner Dr. Brooke Cunningham set the stage for an insightful dialogue, laying the foundation for discussion on the vital link between community factors and Black youth mental health. Keynote speaker Dr. Mavis Sanders from Child Trends provided valuable insights into protective community resources and policies promoting the mental health of Black youth and families.

Highlights of the event were the dynamic small group discussions and a presentation by the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth. The day concluded with a powerful panel discussion that fostered a collective understanding of the critical role of community-led and youth-led policy initiatives for mental health.

### Key themes and takeaways of this meeting included:

- There are policy opportunities to increase economic stability to improve mental health.
- A challenge that community leaders encounter when moving towards collective action is practicing engagement in a way that is sustainable.

**Some action steps that can be taken to consistently support and share power include being transparent and honest about how state and community resources have had failures, concepts of rest and joy to inform and build power, as well as encourage the creation of more affinity spaces.**



## Opportunities in year two

- Launch communications plan, videos, social media.
- Hire youth – BBAY will hire youth engagement staff to lead youth space and participate in the policy assessment and demonstration planning phase.
- Host assemblies to engage youth in a poll to narrow the six identified policy priorities to two themes that can be further explored to select for policy demonstration.
- Conduct stakeholder interviews - Youth and community members will conduct interviews with potential demonstration site leaders to assess readiness.
- Host an advisory council retreat to practice the innovative value that rest and joy are foundational in the ability to do well work. This also includes focused time for taking steps in the planning process for the demonstration project.
- Select demonstration projects and design workplans.



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