For Youth to Thrive

An Evidence-based Research Agenda for Impact

September 2023

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Executive Summary

The significance of prioritizing the welfare of children and adolescents cannot be overstated. It is an investment that holds paramount importance for any society. Decades of research have unequivocally demonstrated that when children and adolescents are given the opportunity to thrive, their lives undergo a remarkable transformation, and their paths towards adulthood become considerably brighter. And yet there is no clear agreement on the essential components for thriving. This report enters the discourse at this juncture, compelled to push the conversation further.

Adults bear the responsibility of ensuring that every child has the enabling conditions not just to survive, but to thrive. It falls upon our collective shoulders to create an environment where their potential can flourish, unhindered by the barriers and inequities pervasive in our society.

Foundational challenges to promoting & cultivating thriving youth

1 No consensus on a definition of thriving youth across domains of opportunity including health, education, housing, workforce, and youth development

2 An incomplete evidence base of what works across practices, programs, policies, and evaluation to promote, cultivate, and sustain thriving youth

3 Inadequate infrastructure required to systematically and rigorously expand the evidence base more broadly to advance all children towards thriving

4 A lack of coordination and integration across domains including education, health, housing, and youth development.

The COVID-19 pandemic shed further light on the enabling conditions for child development and well-being, presenting an urgent and unprecedented opportunity to construct and improve systems that prioritize and foster thriving youth. To seize this opportunity, it is crucial to first establish a shared definition of thriving youth, and then develop a robust evidence base that aligns with this definition across various practices, programs, and policies, to establish a research agenda extending this evidence base beyond its current state. This report aims to fulfill these objectives.

We first will establish a definition of thriving youth based on an extensive review of interdisciplinary literature and the insights provided by 42 diverse subject matter experts from the fields of education, healthcare, housing, workforce, and youth development. Second, we assess evidenced-based interventions that propel children towards thriving, based on a comprehensive literature review. Finally, we present a research agenda outlining specific opportunities to expand the evidence base of what works to support all youth thriving and to integrate effective strategies to cultivate that positive transformation into policy and practice.

This report serves as a catalyst for action. We aspire to ignite a national dialogue on the cultivation of thriving youth. Moreover, we plan to enhance infrastructure that facilitates collaboration between practitioners across opportunity domains and academic researchers, with the aim of extending the evidence base of effective practices. Such enhancements will require sustained partnership and commitment.

We acknowledge that our work builds upon the contributions of key scholars, research centers, and think tanks that have devoted decades to studying thriving youth. It is with great humility that we apply this existing knowledge base to our efforts. Furthermore, we recognize that our work would be incomplete without accounting for equity and justice at the community level, ensuring that all youth from diverse geographical and demographic subpopulations can experience thriving. Critical to this proposition is centering youth themselves in designing strategic solutions.

The initial section of this report defines the terminology of thriving through an analysis of academic, policy, and practice literature in healthcare and youth development. The subsequent sections offer implications across the domains of healthcare, education, youth development, and housing. In the final section, we present a research agenda shaped by the insights gained from the literature review and the implications identified in the field.

In order for shifts in research, policy, and practice to occur, institutional intermediaries which themselves are not siloed in any specific domain must act. They are well positioned to convene cross-domain experts, youth and community stakeholders, funders, and policymakers to invest in incubating local strategic partnerships that can evidence immediate short-term, intermediate, and long-term changes in the lives of children and adolescents for replicable and scalable change.

Literature Review

What do we mean when we refer to "thriving youth?" To answer this question, we present a comprehensive review of the research across multi-disciplinary literature. Within the medical literature, our focus encompassed a broad range of areas, including child and adolescent healthcare, pediatrics, public health, mental health, and psychology. Within the educational and youth development literature, we concentrated on concepts that contribute to the development of the field, both within and outside of academic achievement, rooted in the holistic views on principles of equity and justice. This notion of field building is grounded in efforts, such as those defined by the Bridgespan Group in 2020, which leverage academic and professional knowledge, as well as infrastructure, resources, and key stakeholders, to address barriers and develop scalable solutions for population-level change.

In the following pages, we present several models for thriving youth drawn from the medical and youth development literature. We began with an examination of the work of Anna Ettinger and colleagues, who are dedicated to understanding and supporting "thriving" within the medical field, with a particular focus on pediatrics. Beyond Ettinger, we explore additional contributions from the medical literature that investigate thriving as a framework for child and youth well-being. Subsequently, we turn our attention to definitions derived from the youth development literature, grounded in the seminal work of Richard Lerner and Mary Arnold, whose early conceptions of thriving included the 4-H Thriving Model and the 5 C's of positive youth development. These frameworks are discussed in greater detail below. The latest scholarship in these domains underscores the importance of situating practices within contexts that account for the diverse experiences of youth across personal, social, and cultural environments.

After outlining these definitions and key concepts, we also must recognize the crucial roles of thriving families, schools, and communities in the lives of youth. While it is beyond the scope of this report to rigorously examine each of these contexts in depth, it is important to recognize how contextual factors shape the daily experiences of specific youth in specific contexts. By considering their home life, educational environment, and social spheres, we can better understand the conditions that contribute to their present and future thriving.
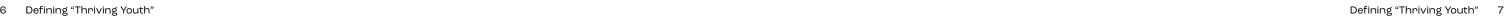
Literature Review Methodology

This report reflects a transdisciplinary and intersectional thematic analysis of decades of literature and research on "thriving youth." Our approach involved searching for recurring themes in academic publications specifically focused on thriving youth, as well as a range of related keywords. We conducted targeted searches using a combination of key terms across major electronic academic databases including ERIC, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and PubMed, which provided comprehensive coverage across the biomedical literature as well as education and youth development.

In the initial phase, we identified keywords such as "thriving youth," "thriving children," and "thriving kids'' that directly addressed the topic at hand. Subsequent phases extended the search to include the contexts in which children and youth thrive (e.g. "thriving schools," "thriving families,'' and "thriving communities''), as well as interrelated terms that have been used synonymously in prominent frameworks for signifying thriving (e.g. "well-being" and "flourishing"). Transcending disciplinary boundaries, the reviewed literature encompassed a broad scope of understanding thriving within the realms of well-being and education.

Rather than framing this work exclusively as an academic literature review, our overarching goal was to conceptualize and present practical strategies for cultivating thriving in the lives of youth. While we recognize the importance of standardized approaches to reviewing the existing research, we also value the expertise and insights of communities. This aligns with our belief that work that is happening on the ground matters and reflects our commitment to meet communities where they are. Therefore, we analyzed the literature from across the databases to allow for the inclusion of highly relevant community research, white papers, and policy briefs as well as the work of some emergent scholars picking up the most contemporary research on thriving within specific subpopulation contexts across the United States.

Overall, we identified 125 publications that directly addressed thriving youth in context. The majority consisted of peer-reviewed journals with high impact factors, and our selection was informed by a frequency analysis that identified leading scholars on the topic of thriving. Publications that discussed schools, families, and communities in general, but not youth in particular, were excluded from a landscape-based definition. However, these publications are discussed in the subsequent implications. We then prioritized the inclusion of publications across a four-point scale of relevancy, categorizing the collected literature into categories of high, medium, low, and discard. This approach ensured that we highlighted publications directly addressing the topic of thriving youth, barriers to thriving, and strategic solutions. While the initial thematic analysis included literature from across the first two decades of the 21st century, particular attention was given to the most contemporary scholarship on thriving youth.

Defining "Thriving Youth" in the Medical Literature

Headline: The medical literature on thriving youth highlights the multidimensional nature of thriving, the importance of supportive community environments, and attends to the specifics of context as well as the need for comprehensive measures for proactive interventions to promote youth thriving.

Across the existing medical literature on thriving youth, research conducted by Anna Ettinger and colleagues has been featured prominently in journals such as *Pediatrics, Academic Pediatrics*, and *Frontiers in Pediatrics*. Their research goes beyond traditional notions of positive child health and flourishing, aiming to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions necessary for thriving. This includes identifying indicators for future success and implementing interventions. In 2022, Ettinger et. al conducted a comprehensive scoping review of over 12,000

definitions and assessment related to thriving youth. Their assessment examined frameworks that centered around equity in healthy community development, with an emphasis on understanding the positive conditions for physical, mental cognitive, and social well-being.

> " Strong minds and bodies, positive identity, feelings of self-worth, and hope for the future characterize thriving. Interactions with caring families and relationships, vibrant communities, and healthy environments provide love, support, safety, and fun and happiness. Racial justice, equity, and inclusion recognize that thriving is an inherent human right of every child. Thriving children are equipped with the resources to accomplish their goals and become successful adults. "
>
> Ettinger et al., 2022, p.3

Ettinger and colleagues' work on the topic of thriving is foundational and aligns with important ongoing research emerging from the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) Research Framework established in 2017 which posited that health outcomes can span multiple levels beyond only the biological or behavioral to include analysis of the sociocultural and health systems. Notably, Ettinger and co-authors prioritized building relationships with community partners, conducting community research, and uplifting community-identified domains of thriving. This approach highlighted specific solutions which address disparities and inequities that limit the potential of thriving youth.

Additional research by Ettinger and colleagues in 2022 provided deeper inquiries into definitions of thriving within the realm of pediatrics. Thriving is recognized as a multidimensional concept that expands across relationships young people cultivate both individually and within interpersonal environments, such as schools, families, and communities. Environmental factors within these areas indicate overlapping concepts including thriving, flourishing, resilience, and subjective well-being. This research builds upon the foundational concept of "well-being" which encompasses not only psychological or subjective aspects. The overall objectives of the 2022 study contributed to the comprehensive measures for assessing thriving youth from birth through young adulthood.

Beyond the contributions of Ettinger and colleagues, specific research from within psychiatric and developmental scholarship shed light on the predictors of thriving in particular populations. Recent research from Simpson, Clark and Adams (2022) explored the profiles of thriving children on the autism spectrum, expanding the conversation on thriving youth beyond a narrow focus on neurotypical children and adolescents. Those authors emphasized the need to closely examine familial and contextual factors to foster positive outcomes for neurodiverse youth.

One significant trend in the literature is recognizing the potential of pediatric care to impact youth thriving. As Perrin et. al (2023) outlined, youth need more than resilience to thrive, they also require physical,

social, emotional, and mental well-being. By understanding how health problems manifest, opportunities for prevention can be identified, and proactive measures can be taken that are conducive to the conditions for thriving. This necessitates recognizing the interconnectedness of health and thriving of youth in relationship to families, schools, and communities. As Perrin et. al stated most precisely:

> "
>
> The health and well-being of children and youth strongly influence their health and well-being as adults. Health early in life has vital importance to many interests across society, where the basic aim of society is the well-being of families and individuals. Value (in health care) is defined as outcomes relative to costs. Outcomes for children include resolution of disease and current health status, but these connections between health and long-term well-being clarify the need to address long-term outcomes as well. The value of healthy children becoming healthy adults provides a focus for the value of high-quality pediatric care.
>
> Perrin et al., 2023, p. 96
>
> "

Perrin et. al also asserted the importance of implementing culturally competent approaches in healthcare to address the health equity needs of youth across the United States, considering factors such racial, ethnic, gendered, and linguistic diversity. They acknowledged the well-documented health effects of racism and disruptive concomitant impacts of living in poverty, both of which require attention. We will address these broader discussions around equity across domains later in this report.

Defining "Thriving Youth" in the Youth Development Literature

Headline: The youth development literature emphasizes the importance of promoting conditions for youth to thrive. Thriving indicators include openness to challenge, hopeful purpose, transcendent awareness, prosocial orientation, positive emotionality, and intentional self-regulation. Specificity in understanding youth developmental pathways and addressing underlying inequities is crucial for supporting youth to thrive. Uplifting youth voice, agency and engagement across their contexts, including schools, families, and communities, is essential.

A comprehensive review of the literature reveals an explicit focus on the topic of thriving youth is more prominent in the youth development and critical youth studies fields than in formal education research. Although an abundance of research exists that explores conditions for academic achievement as well as social-emotional learning support, the majority of thriving youth literature is situated within critical youth studies scholarship.

Mary Arnold and Richard Lerner have been consistent contributors to the existing youth development literature on thriving, with Lerner's early work playing a crucial role (his work discussed herein has been consistently cited across contemporary scholarship, particularly around the 5 C's model). Lerner, Dowling and Anderson (2019), drawing on applied development science efforts, highlighted the need for efforts that promote thriving through enhancing health, family

life, and community institutions, while also supporting youth confidence building and self-actualization. They argued that when youth experience their contexts as affirming of their values and their functional behaviors, they develop self and civic identities that allow them to contribute to their social worlds. Youth civic participation, a recurring topic surfaced in Lerner's research, offers valuable insights for ongoing opportunities and efforts to support thriving (for more publications, see Lerner's Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development online).

Mary Arnold's work established the "4-H" program model published in the *Journal of Extension and the Journal of Youth Development*. The model was designed to assess the impact of high-quality youth development programming based on key developmental outcomes. In 2020 Arnold and Gagnon updated the "4-H" program model, further

acknowledging the impact of youth engagement on thriving. The revised model's emphasis on agency and civic engagement represents a shift from earlier frameworks that didn't center children and youth active agents. It highlighted the importance of youth engagement in driving thriving trajectories and added personal responsibility into the developmental outcomes, whereas the original model focused more heavily on cultivating developmental contexts. This emphasis on youth engagement, agency and autonomy is significant.

Arnold and Gagnon expanded the "4-H" program model by incorporating the Search Institute's (2014) six indicators of thriving into it, which include:

(a) Openness to challenge and discovery

(b) A hopeful purpose

(c) An awareness beyond the self (transcendent awareness)

(d) A prosocial orientation

(e) Positive emotionality

(f) Intentional self-regulation. This part of the model describes the process of PYD, which happens as youth increase their levels of thriving across the thriving indicators

Arnold (2018) recognized the alignment of some thriving indicators and positive youth development outcomes with the "Five Cs" model of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. This model, conceptualized earlier by Lerner et al. (2005), suggested that as youth exhibit higher levels of these Cs, they are more likely to contribute to themselves, their families, their communities, and civil society. Previous research frequently viewed thriving youth in a binary manner, but Arnold and Gandy (2019) emphasized the need to understand how thriving develops over time and how it manifests in various contexts. They stressed the importance of specificity in theoretical models and situated approaches to studying thriving, acknowledging the mediating effects of thriving on youth development program outcomes.

In response to Arnold's model, Lerner (2020) emphasized the need for integrating youth development research into practice. Their research demonstrated that context-based research and practice integration are essential for innovating and iterating youth-facing programmatic models that align with the specific environments where youth live. In recognition of this finding – that program models' effectiveness are dependent upon the particular youth, contexts, and times in which they are applied – Arnold and collaborators called for all theoretical models to be specific and maintain that principle of specificity in all situated approaches when studying thriving. Arnold and collaborators conducted additional research to understand the mediating effects of thriving on youth development program outcomes (Arnold & Gagnon, 2019), as well as developed models for incorporating youth participatory evaluation to more effectively match the experiences of youth within 4-H environments to program theory (Arnold & Gandy, 2019).

Recent studies, such as Johnson and Ettekal's study (2022) on the application of 5 C's model in four different adolescent sample populations, also underscore the need for specificity in youth developmental pathways and individual contexts. The findings counter the design of earlier theoretical models that prioritize generalizability in their reach or universality without grounding in practical applicability. Even contemporary research that seeks to understand resilience in youth in the context of adverse childhood experiences (i.e. Sciaraffa, Zeanah & Zeanah, 2018) emphasizes the need to nuance simple understandings of their experiences to center important considerations of specificity grounded in equity, inclusivity, justice and belonging. The need for specificity when understanding thriving youth is especially pertinent when addressing underlying inequities that act as barriers to conditions for thriving. We will further address literature that speaks explicitly about inequities in the lives of youth below.

It is beyond the scope of this project to undertake a further interpretive analysis that reaches broadly across all of the existing empirical research and meta-analyses in the fields of education and youth development which engage with the topic of thriving in various situated environments. However, there is a great deal of evidence that affirms the value of promoting opportunities to uplift youth voice and agency across their specific lived contexts. This is particularly true not just when looking at the school or the after-school environment as a potential site of thriving (see for example: Breen, 2019; Bloomer, 2022; Love, 2019; McCain, James & Bertrand, 2020; Miller, 2020), but also when considering the role of families (see for example: Mashash & Hastings 2022; Taylor, 2021; Torres, 2021); and wider communities (see for example: Elliott & Cheff, 2021; Holmes, 2019; King & Mangan, 2023; Montgomery, 2019; Veldsman, Benade & Rossouw, 2019) as unique sites that produce the context and conditions for youth to thrive.

A Note on Equity in the Literature in the Context of Thriving Youth

Headline: To promote thriving youth, it is necessary to acknowledge and confront the inequities faced by diverse youth populations, which cut across racial, ethnic, linguistic, gendered, geographic, class, and cultural lines. Youth within these groups have been historically and contemporaneously disinvested throughout U.S. history. In centering a discussion of equity here, we recognize that it is essential to position youth from these populations at the center of any long-term planning to cultivate collaborations for thriving youth, families, and communities.

While it is beyond the scope of this report to unpack the totality of existing research on inequities present in youth development, healthcare, education, and housing, it is the commitment of Opportunity Labs to address equity across domains and bring attention to this critical conversation. Considering the racial, ethnic, gendered, and linguistic diversity of youth across the United States, it is evident that there is a continued need for culturally competent approaches to care to disrupt the well-documented health effects of racism, particularly when intertwined with the experience living in poverty (Perrin 2023).

To gain a deeper understanding of these challenges, it is important to further disaggregate the earlier discussion on physical and mental health. Exploring child and youth health within specific contexts necessitates examining the social determinants of health. According to the CDC (2022), social determinants of health (SDOH) are nonmedical factors that influence health outcomes. The CDC adopted this framework based on the work of the World Health Organization. In this model, equity is central to understanding the social conditions that impact determinants of health. Addressing inequities in this model requires a range of interconnected strategies that revolve around infrastructure and capacity; policy and law; data and surveillance; evaluation and evidence building; partnerships and collaboration; and community engagement. While there is no consensus on the effectiveness of the SDOH modeling in providing quality care, it significantly places equity at the center of thinking about the health and well-being of children, adolescents, and families.

A 2023 study published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, utilizing MRI research, revealed that Black children living in poverty face an increased prevalence of stress and trauma that can impact their brain development (Dumornay et al., 2023). These race-related disparities are concerning, particularly when coupled with other data indicating a shortage of Black doctors (Boyle, 2023), underscoring the urgency to address social determinants of health (Pytell, 2022) in order to mitigate the prolonged exposure to adversity that disrupts the physical and mental well-being of historically marginalized demographic groups, which have experienced systemic failures and healthcare inequities.

To support the thriving of youth in education and youth development, there is a consistent call for specific and context-based understandings of situated development to address inequities. Bang (2020) called for paradigmatic shifts away from universalist and individualistic models, instead emphasizing the need to confront racial violence that hinders collective thriving and disrupts possibilities of humanizing recoveries, resilience, and reimagining. This framing by Bang aligns with contemporary youth development research. A 2020 report from the American Institutes for Research and the Forum for Youth Investment proposed a model for thriving youth that is informed by transformative learning and development multiplied by robust equity.

> " A commitment to aggressively expand access to equitable learning environments is a targeted and effective way to accelerate individual and collective thriving of all young people by focusing explicitly on creating opportunities and conditions that support the learning and development of our most marginalized young people. In both school and community settings, this commitment must focus on thriving, optimize transformative learning, enhance development, and address multiple determinants of inequity. "
>
> Bang, 2020, p.3

That 2020 report challenged the notion that terms like thriving, equity, learning, and development are interchangeable. Instead, it highlighted distinct goals, with thriving historically associated with health, equity with racial justice, and learning and development with education or out-of-school youth developmental environments. The authors called for more nuanced understandings that consider the dynamic processes in which the interactions between thriving, equity, learning, and development should inform policy and practice. They emphasized that thriving is a dynamic process grounded in ongoing agency for both individual and collective growth, going beyond the mere absence of problems and encompassing the interconnected dimensions in their physical, economic, emotional, psychological, cognitive and spiritual lives. Furthermore, the report called for addressing thriving within the dynamic space of formal institutions, understanding the socio-cultural systems and barriers that operate within the institutional environments as well as informal spaces youth inhabit.

That 2020 report also significantly challenged simplistic notions of resilience and well-being, making it clear that while some stress and adversity can be motivating, excessive exposure

to stress and adversity can lead to detrimental outcomes for youth. The authors argue that thriving and flourishing are facilitated when youth have sufficient personal and community resources such as nutrition, safety, housing, general wellness and freedom from the stresses imposed by racism. They underscored these societal components as a collective effort that focuses on healing and engagement, allowing youth to thrive while supporting one another in the process.

Tyler et. al (2020) sought to specifically answer the question "is understanding inequality connected to thriving" for White and Black adolescents? The authors pointed to the lack of research using the Five C's model that explicitly addresses youth thriving informed by experiences within larger systems of privilege and oppression, particularly grounded in an analysis of systemic racism. They called for further research to explore these systems and the conditions they interact with within institutional spaces:

> "
> Thriving for Black youth therefore necessitates critical consciousness and has, in fact, been included in models of youth development tailored to youth who experience marginalization (e.g. Social Justice Youth Development; Ginwright and James 2002). However, less research has conceptualized how thriving necessitates critical consciousness among White youth. "
>
> Tyler et al., 2020, p. 759

Echoing calls for specificity and contextuality, the authors advocated for understanding the intricacies of school climates, demographic compositions, and geographic regional positionality for youth. This approach is further amplified by Coulter (2022) in relation to Latinx youth, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive understanding of thriving. This mandate aims to empower practitioners of child and youth development, as well as researchers and youth themselves, to gain a better understanding of developmental adaptations among diverse youth across the United States.

Such specificity is evidenced across research focused on cross-sections of particular sub-populations. Like Osher and co-authors, Tyler et al. (2020) argued for expanding definitions of thriving to explicitly incorporate youth's participation in and action against systems of oppression, particularly structural inequalities and systemic racism in the lives of White and Black youth. Coulter (2020) similarly called for studying Latinx adolescents and looking at their specific cultural, racial, and linguistic contexts when building subsequent research, practice and policy that leads to thriving. Coulter highlighted the implications of such research, including designing contextual pathways into post-secondary life and underscoring the need for interventions that enhance thriving to address potential challenges over the transition to adulthood.

Before transitioning to discuss the results of the Q sort, here we introduce a snapshot of the major outcomes and indicators for youth thriving that emerged in the literature discussed on the previous pages. The tables that follow illustrate the categories that constitute component outcomes of thriving as well as the indicators identified by the authors as evidence of actionable characteristics that could be motivational for future work.

Outcomes and Indicators for Thriving Youth

Table 1: Outcome and Indicators: Arnold and Gagon (2020)

Outcomes	Indicators
Youth Thriving	• Challenge & Discovery • Goal Management* (only in revised model) • Hopeful Purpose • Intentional Self-Regulation* (only in original model) • Positive Emotionality • Pro-Social Orientation
Developmental Outcomes	• Academic Motivation • Connection • Contribution • Personal Standards • Social Competence
Developmental Context	• Developmental Relationships • Program Quality* (only in original model) • Sparks • Youth Belonging*(only in revised model)

Table 2: Outcomes and Indicators: Ettinger et al. (2022)

Outcomes	Indicators
Strong Minds & Bodies	• Characterized by positive mental health, cognitive development, physical health & health behaviors • Resources to become a healthy, self-sufficient adult • Being thoughtful & positive decision-makers
Positive Identity and Self-Worth	• Positive self-concept, self-efficacy & social well-being • Pride in self & sense of self-worth • Developing meaning & purpose • Strong sense of self & self-worth
Fun & Happiness	• Opportunities for fun & feeling happy • Having positive attitudes toward & engagement with communities • Having child-focused community advocates who speak up for children
Caring Families & Relationships	• Having caring, stable and positive relationships with parents/caregivers & other family members • Having caring, stable, & positive relationships with teachers, mentors, peers, friends & partners • Having positive role models & mentors in addition to parents or caregivers
Safety	• Safe spaces (schools & neighborhoods) • Secure relationships (not fearing bullying, violence or abandonment) • Protected development (free to be children)
Vibrant Communities	• Community & local resources such as community programs, family services, religious institutions • Engaging, quality schools & educational programs • Accessible & affordable transportation
Healthy Environments	• Ensurance of systematic fair treatment of youth across settings to provide equitable opportunities & outcomes, particularly addressing the experiences of Black children • Children & youth feeling comfortable, accepted & included in all spaces they enter, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, religion, health status or appearance
Racial Justice, Equity & Inclusion	• Physical & social environments, including clean air & water • Adequate medical, mental health & social services • Economic opportunities • Access to fresh, healthy foods & food secure households

Table 3: Outcomes and Indicators: Osher et al. (2020)

Outcomes	Indicators
Strong Minds & Bodies	• Strengths-based • Multi-dimensional • Linked to internal characteristics & external conditions
Positive Identity and Self-Worth	• Intentionally countering inequality, institutionalized privilege, addressing contextual deficits • Mindful of overall interconnected thriving • Cumulatively rooted in historical awareness with commitment to long-term, complex change
Fun & Happiness	• Broader than schools/academics • Critical for understanding thriving • Holistically involving social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, aesthetic, kinesthetic & expressive dimensions
Caring Families & Relationships	• Identity • Meaning • Purpose • Membership • Spiritual/Cultural Rootedness • Civic Participation
Safety	• Physically • Economically • Emotionally
Vibrant Communities	• Social & emotional competencies • Intellectual skills & knowledge • Beliefs & habits of mind to meet life's demands & challenges

A note: The table below is distinct from the three presented on the previous pages in that it focuses on activating systems in order to ensure coordinated strategies and collaborations for thriving to occur. Whereas the tables on the previous pages are organized around major conceptual frameworks for identifying outcomes and indicators of thriving, the table below provides an example for what such coordinated work looks like locally.

Table 4: Activating Systems: Everson and Klopfenstein (2021)

Outcomes	Indicators
Prevention-oriented child & family well-being system	• Center root causes of inequities to understand child maltreatment • Embed family strengthening within broader public health policy & practice • Increase visibility of partnerships as entity to support child/family thriving
Building a comprehensive service continuum	• Build continuum of services that take a life course approach for long-term • Apply equity & anti-oppression lens to practice and service delivery • Integrate child & family voice and leadership during service continuum implementation & improvement
Strengthening cross-system coordination & collaboration	• Align state & country systems for funding, policy, practice, data access • Create universal early touchpoints of children & families • Facilitate state-based cross-systems collaboration as well as national & cross-state partnerships for well-being
Investing in family-centered, equity-grounded systems development	• Create shared measurement systems that multi-sector, cross-system stakeholders can use to track progress • Diversity & expansion of funding • Ground development of child & family well-being in racial, economic & social equity & justice
Scaling shared strategies & collective impact	• Expand availability of service sand supports that are evidence-based, culturally responsive & linguistically accessible • Secure sustainable funding for a community-based, family-centered, prevention-focused service continuum to meet the needs of children/families • Established shared frameworks for ongoing monitoring of service quality & systems coordination

Q sort Methods and Findings

Headline:
We conducted a Q sort, an innovative mixed-methods approach that brings a quantitative understanding to a qualitative methodology to shed light on a definition for thriving youth. We employed this methodology as it is appropriate to address questions concerning diverse viewpoints, plurality of discourses, or processes across disciplines. Forty-two respondents who are subject matter experts from academia and the field, representing education, healthcare, housing, and youth development, expressed their views on a thriving youth definition by sorting five different definitions from most agree to most disagree. There was consensus that a definition of thriving must include a focus on optimal development, holistic well-being, and the promotion of youth's sense of self within the context of their community.

Before delving into a more detailed analysis of thriving in the domains of healthcare, education and housing, we describe the participatory process conducted with practitioners, policy makers, and researchers to establish a consensus-based definition of thriving that can guide the creation of the research agenda presented in the final section of this report. To gain insight beyond the comprehensive literature review on thriving youth and related components such as well-being and flourishing, described on the previous page, Opportunity Labs conducted a Q sort to identify resonant definitions and build consensus across sectors. While the sample size was limited in scope, valuable insights emerged that served to inform the report and subsequent convenings.

Following the published guidance of expert researchers across disciplinary environments, including psychology and sociology (ex: Stainton, 1995; Watts & Stenner, 2012), Opportunity Labs conducted the Q sort during April and May 2023. The process involved gathering expert perspectives on definitions of thriving extracted from the literature. As a methodological choice, Q sort is used in research to categorize and prioritize human perspective and subjectivity. In the execution of the Q sort, the following steps were taken:

Step 1: Definitions of Thriving Youth were identified in the literature

Initially, we identified eight definitions from the literature review that specifically addressed thriving youth. These definitions were articulated by prominent figures in the field who are recognized as leaders in their respective domains.

Subsequently, we selected half of the definitions to be included in the formalized Q sort process. This selection aimed to ensure representation from both the medical literature and the youth development literature, resulting in the inclusion of two definitions from each domain.

Finally, the Opportunity Labs team formulated a definition of thriving that represented a broader perspective, drawing from the collective expertise within the organization. This fifth definition aimed to capture a more comprehensive understanding of thriving, incorporating diverse dimensions and considerations.

The five definitions included in the Q sort were:

- The six indicators of youth thriving are (a) openness to challenge and discovery; (b) a hopeful purpose; (c) an awareness beyond the self (transcendent awareness); (d) a prosocial orientation; (e) positive emotionality; and (f) intentional self-regulation. Adolescent thriving occurs from mutual, positive interactions between youth with their developmental contexts. At the heart of thriving is that a young person is animated and motivated intrinsically by his or her spark, or special sense of who he or she is as a person (Arnold & Gagnon, 2020).

- Transformative Learning & Development X Robust Equity = Thriving Youth. Thriving as a dynamic process that goes beyond well-being to include individual and collective growth in grounding and agency...Thriving is more than the absence of problems or the development of basic competencies; it is a dynamic and holistic process that involves children, youth, and adults influencing each other both in every moment as well as over time (Osher et al., 2020).

- Positive childhood experiences in the health system can support resilience and good health in later life. The experiences of children and their early health impact the health and health equity of our society. Children and youth who thrive become productive contributing young adults. The health of children depends on healthy parents, families, neighborhoods, schools, and communities. Thriving children reflect the health and well-being of their families and communities (Perrin et al., 2023).

- Child thriving is multidimensional and involves the complex interaction between individual characteristics and family, community, and environmental factors...Thriving differs from both psychological or subjective well-being and flourishing by including physical and social health in addition to mental health (Ettinger et al., 2022).

- Thriving youth is a condition of optimal functioning and development that leads youth to fulfill their potential by growing confident in who they are, discovering who they want to be, and becoming a productive member of society. It is the product of children receiving the specific relationships and supports aligned to their unique abilities, interests, and aspirations and their own physical, mental, and social and emotional needs to secure their well-being and ability to flourish (Opportunity Labs, 2023).

Step 2: Potential participants were identified

Approximately sixty (60) individuals were identified as experts with an established ability and willingness to articulate a viewpoint on thriving youth across the fields of healthcare, education/youth development, housing, and workforce as potential participants in the Q sort.

Sampling was purposefully designed to ensure a diverse representation across gender, geography, race/ethnicity, domain, and sector.

Team members from Opportunity Labs personally conducted outreach to identified members of their networks on the Q sort participant list, inviting individuals to share their expertise.

Step 3: Q sort survey was administered

The Q sort survey tool was distributed on April 1 and remained open for eight weeks to ensure that all invited participants had an opportunity to reply.

Step 4: Q sort respondent data was analyzed

The total number of respondents was 42 for a response rate of 72%. The breakdown of identifying information for the respondents follows:

- Gender: Of the 42 respondents, 11 identified as men, 30 identified as women and 1 identified as non-binary.

- Race/Ethnicity: Of the 42 respondents, 7 identified as Asian; 5 identified as Black

or African American; 4 identified as Hispanic or Latino; 1 identified as Middle Eastern or North African; 1 identified as Multiracial or Multiethnic; 22 identified as White; 1 self-identified as Filipino and 1 preferred not to answer.

- Zip Code: This data point was captured to account for geographic diversity. While there are areas of saturation evident across the participant respondents, there was an array of expertise provided from around the country. Subsequent research and coalition building can work to more strategically bring in individuals from underrepresented geographic regions of the United States.

- Current Role: Of the 42 respondents, 21 identified as "practitioner"; 7 identified as "academic"; 14 identified as "other" and specified roles ranging from non-profit leaders and researchers to pediatricians, funders, entrepreneurs, policy coordinators, and administrative staffers.

- Work Domains: Of the 42 respondents, individuals identified as working in following domains: 24 were involved in education; 17 were involved with healthcare; 9 were involved in workforce; 1 was involved with housing. There was also crossover for some individuals who worked in multiple domains. Certain individuals reported working in other arenas, such as advocacy, higher education, violence prevention, politics and policy, union, public health, community-based organizations, pediatrics, and youth development.

Step 5: Respondent definition rankings were analyzed

Across the aggregate data, the first and second most selected definitions were:

- Ranked first by respondents, with 17 votes, was the following definition:

"Thriving youth is a condition of optimal functioning and development that leads youth to fulfill their potential by growing confident in who they are, discovering who they want to be, and becoming a productive member of society. It is the product of children receiving the specific relationships and supports aligned to their unique abilities, interests, and aspirations and their own physical, mental, and social and emotional needs to secure their well-being and ability to flourish" (Opportunity Labs, 2023).

- Ranked first by respondents, with 14 votes, the second preference of respondents was the following definition:: "The six indicators of youth thriving are (a) openness to challenge and discovery; (b) a hopeful purpose; (c) an awareness beyond the self (transcendent awareness); (d) a prosocial orientation; (e) positive emotionality; and (f) intentional self-regulation. Adolescent thriving occurs from mutual, positive interactions between youth with their developmental contexts. At the heart of thriving is that a young person is animated and motivated intrinsically by his or her spark, or special sense of who he or she is as a person" (Arnold & Gagnon, 2020).

The other three definitions received the highest ranking from a relatively small number of respondents (3-4), and therefore, they will not be discussed in detail here. It is important to note that as we move down the Q sort, many definitions received a relatively even distribution of votes, with the majority of them receiving 9-10 respondents' support.

The definition that garnered the highest votes in the secondary spot is as follows:

"Transformative Learning & Development X Robust Equity = Thriving Youth. Thriving as a dynamic process that goes beyond well-being to include individual and collective growth in grounding and agency…Thriving is more than the absence of problems or the development of basic competencies; it is a dynamic and holistic process that involves children, youth, and adults

influencing each other both in every moment as well as over time."
(Osher et al., 2020)

Although this definition, which highlights the importance of equity, did not rank as the top definition, it would be valuable to delve into how experts are analyzing and strategically addressing inequities in their respective professional domains.

Step 6: Definition was established

While it was valuable to incorporate diverse perspectives and disparate priorities, it is essential to acknowledge that this Q sort process has limitations in fully capturing the complexity of the interconnected domains represented by the voluntary respondents. However, it is worth noting that among respondents, there was a clear consensus on the definition that emerged as the preferred choice:

"Thriving youth is a condition of optimal functioning and development that leads youth to fulfill their potential by growing confident in who they are, discovering who they want to be, and becoming a productive member of society. It is the product of children developing specific relationships and support aligned to their unique abilities, interests, and aspirations and their own physical, mental, and social and emotional needs to secure their well-being and ability to flourish."

Importantly, more than a dozen experts ranked the "six indicators of youth thriving" as their first choice. There are important similarities between these two top definitions including an emphasis on optimal development, holistic well-being, and the promotion of youth's sense of self within the context of their community. We explore these components below to articulate a research agenda moving forward.

Research Agenda

During our research, we considered a total of 125 publications on thriving youth, out of which 71 articles were included in this review. We assert that this review represents a comprehensive and inclusive compilation of existing knowledge on thriving youth. However, it is evident that a definitive consensus on "what works" has not yet been fully established. Even the identified outcomes and indicators have been articulated only recently, requiring further investigation and increased long-term investment. The passages on the prevoius pages exploring the literature review demonstrate that different researchers have identified definitions and conditions for thriving at different points in time and within different contexts. Nevertheless, the reproducibility and scalability of those interventions and efforts have not been conclusively determined.

The research does make clear, however, that across the domains of healthcare, housing, education, and youth development, fundamental prerequisite interventions for youth to thrive are known. The interdisciplinary body of research explored in this report consistently demonstrated that in order for youth to survive, and be positioned to thrive, they must have access from birth to the following:

Table 5: Prerequisite Interventions

Healthcare	Education and Youth Development	Housing
• Healthy, affordable nutrient dense foods and clean drinking water • Regular health check-ups, preventative medical screenings and core immunizations • Coordinated physical and mental health care holistically attending to youth well-being	• Center root causes of inequities to understand child maltreatment • Embed family strengthening within broader public health policy & practice • Increase visibility of partnerships as entity to support child/family thriving	• Center root causes of inequities to understand child maltreatment • Embed family strengthening within broader public health policy & practice • Increase visibility of partnerships as entity to support child/family thriving

Though beyond the scope of this report's aim, we would be remiss if we didn't also mention the need for women to have access to high-quality, affordable, and comprehensive, prenatal care as a fundamental prerequisite to thriving youth.

Throughout the extensive exploration of literature in this report, significant findings emerged regarding potential pathways for youth to not only thrive but also sustain their thriving into adulthood. However, it is important to note that the vast majority of the research strongly emphasized the need for further investment in research, advocacy, and policy endeavors, including the coordination of geographic partnerships. These efforts are crucial for developing concrete components of specific interventions that can be locally activated, effectively replicated and implemented on a larger scale.

While the prerequisite interventions listed on the previous pages are essential, there remains a crucial need for a broader evidence base of interventions that move beyond the prerequisites and elevate to the level of thriving. It is imperative that interventions specifically focus on the unique contexts in which youth reside, thereby creating avenues for collaborative partnerships among practitioners, researchers, and community-level institutions while uplifting community knowledge and expertise. Such unique contexts do have the effect of creating challenges when attempting to scale solutions, which underscores the need for additional research. These partnerships should be designed, implemented, and supported to yield short, intermediate, and long-term outcomes that contribute to sustained thriving. Such opportunities will create the capacity to forge more meaningful collaborations, leveraging and building on existing efforts that are often siloed. Numerous holistic models, such as community schools or mobile health units, offer valuable insights into strategic directions that could provide comprehensive support for youth and their families, ultimately leading to greater chances of thriving.

The research revealed the need for cross-disciplinary interaction between education, healthcare and housing, thus seeking to spur consistent interaction between and across the domains to execute coordinated strategies for holistic youth thriving based on the definition established within. Recognizing the significant influence of contextual factors including families, schools and healthcare, it becomes crucial that interventions transcend disciplinary boundaries and be coordinated through the cultivation of local partnerships that uplift community knowledge and expertise.

This research agenda also focuses on the need for further evidence of interventions that systematically and holistically contextualizes services and care for specific youth. While it is essential that these interventions are contextually specific, this approach to building out such coordinated strategies can be scaled across different geographic locations. Therefore, this research agenda calls for the establishment of funded opportunities to support, enhance, and uplift partnerships on the local (town/city) and state levels, with ramifications that can be applied against across national trends. It will be crucial to be able to assess the efficacy of work within local contexts, taking into account the diversity of local values, and remaining cognizant of the fact that these local values are not monolithic. Assessment of such interventions should be designed in various directions, accounting for quantifiable components such as economic return and/or social return on investment.

Below we identify priorities, themes for research questions, and offer specific examples of worthwhile research questions — those that will lead to answers that could help policymakers and practitioners effectively implement and scale. Any of the research questions codified below can be answered through within-program randomized controlled trials (RCTs), across-program evaluations, or mixed-methods surveys. By no means is this list comprehensive. Instead, it is illustrative and designed to inform and inspire. In sum, it emphasizes three priority areas: (1) identification of characteristics of effective, local interventions moving youth toward thriving; (2) the characteristics of cross-domain partnerships between youth, practitioners, researchers and policymakers; and (3) scaling effective local interventions for wider reach and replication.

Table 6: Research Agenda

Priority One	Sample Themes for Research Questions	Overarching Research Question	Sample Research Questions
Identifying the characteristics of effective, local interventions moving youth towards thriving	• Service or care delivery settings; • Cross-disciplinary execution; • Adoption by stakeholders; • Cost-effectiveness of different models; • How models increase community engagement and fidelity; and • How best to extend the research focus.	• What makes interventions that promote and cultivate thriving youth effective?	• How can thriving be measured at both the individual and contextual (e.g., relationship, community, society, system) levels? • What are valid and reliable measures of thriving youth? • How can we measure the fidelity of thriving youth programs as they are being implemented? • How can we reliably measure dosage (e.g., frequency, duration, and intensity) of thriving youth interventions, programs and models? • What are the features of the settings in which thriving youth programs are delivered that contribute to positive outcomes (e.g., at home, school or community-based? • What modifications may need to be made to thriving youth interventions, programs and models to best serve the needs of diverse (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, poverty level, risk level) youth?

Priority Two	Sample Themes for Research Questions	Overarching Research Question	Sample Research Questions
Identifying the conditions for effective, local, cross-domain partnerships between youth, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers	• Identifying individuals and institutions; • Coordinating collaboration amongst stakeholders; and • Centering perspectives of youth in design.	• What are the necessary conditions for cross-domain partnerships to successfully cultivate youth thriving?	• Who is best positioned to drive change toward youth thriving within any given community? • What resources are required to activate this partnership to support youth thriving? • What barriers to coordination amongst stakeholders must be addressed for success?
Identifying the conditions for scaling effective locally identified interventions for state-wide and national reach	• Supply and demand issues; • Motivations; • Opportunities; • Logistical considerations; and • Barriers	• What are the enabling conditions to effectively implement thriving youth interventions?	• How can the collaboration and partnership between local community organizations, educational institutions, government agencies, and other stakeholders be enhanced to facilitate the successful scaling of youth interventions, and what models or frameworks exist to support such collaborations? • What are the critical stages or milestones in the implementation of local youth interventions where scaling efforts can be optimized, and what are the most effective strategies for overcoming barriers at these stages? • How can this knowledge be shared across communities for the benefit of all youth thriving?

What follows is an example of an evidence-based intervention that cultivates thriving youth based on the established definition. We examine community schools, from which we identify themes, priority research questions, and provide suggestions regarding how researchers might start answering each question through within-program randomized controlled trials (RCTs), across-program evaluations, or surveys. While much research has been conducted on community schools across the U.S. since the 1980s, starting with important research out of Children's Aid Society and continuing in large school districts across the country (ex: Daniel, Quartz & Oakes 2019; Rand 2020), that research has overwhelmingly been conceptualized around a scarcity model which primarily focuses on problems, measuring attendance and identifying drop-out prevention stop-gaps instead of determining asset-based coordinated care that cultivates sustained thriving youth aligned with the definitions codified on the previous page.

Table 7: Sample Research Scenario

Sample Theme	Sample Research Question	Sample Testing Strategy
• Integrated student supports to identify indicators of thriving including holistic well-being and sense of self	• Are community schools more effective when they incorporate accountability measures for health and social service providers working to address out-of-school barriers to learning?	• Randomly varying the types of health and social service provider accountability. • Conducting a multi-program evaluation and comparing effectiveness among programs with different types of health and social service provider accountability.
• Expanded learning time and opportunities to identify indicators for thriving including holistic well-being and sense of self	• What is the marginal benefit of increasing the number of hours students spend in after-school, weekend or summer programming?	• Randomly assigning students to receive different numbers of hours per week within a program.
• Family and community engagement to identify indicators of thriving including holistic well-being and sense of self	• Are community schools interventions for mental health that require parents to opt in their students less effective at increasing well-being than those that are universal, mandated, or have an opt out feature?	• Randomly assigning students to programs in which their parents have to either opt-in or opt-out.
• Collaborative leadership and practice to identify indicators of thriving including holistic well-being and sense of self	• Do students at schools who employ a community-school coordinator who manages the collaboration between the school and external partners have better academic or well-being outcomes?	• Conducting a comprehensive evaluation across multiple programs to compare the outcomes of students in schools with and without a community-school coordinator.

The research agenda must operate in conjunction with policy and advocacy efforts if we are to move towards all youth thriving. By combining these three pillars, we can invest in inquiries that further identify what works, how the evidence base can be further built out, and what routes to funding exist in order to sustain such efforts. Crucial to this commitment to uplifting local communities and situated knowledge is bringing young people themselves to the table, centering their experiences and expertise of their own reality in any strategic designs across wider partnerships.

To do so requires institutional intermediaries which themselves are not siloed in any specific domain in order to convene cross-domain experts, youth and community stakeholders, funders and policymakers to invest in incubating local strategic partnerships that can evidence immediate short-term, intermediate, and long-term changes in the lives of children and adolescents for replicable and scalable change. Such institutions and organizations sit at a nexus of leveraging capacity building, prospect fundraising, community participatory research, and bringing together the right stakeholders to foster institutional and social shifts toward elevating routes to long-term youth thriving. This is the work ahead.

Conclusion

This report underscores the importance of context and specificity in understanding holistic youth developmental pathways and addressing underlying inequities to support thriving youth. It further emphasizes the need for cross-disciplinary collaboration for creating the conditions to cultivate sustained thriving, while also recognizing the significance of uplifting youth voice, agency, and engagement across their contexts, including schools, families, and communities. By integrating evidence-based strategies into policy and practice and prioritizing equity and justice, we can create a society where all youth, regardless of their backgrounds, can experience thriving. This report serves as a starting point for further research and action, with the goal of cultivating thriving youth and ensuring a brighter future for generations to come.

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