Youth leadership program shows promise as a strategy to increase youth involvement at Bridge.

Overview of Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning
YELL is a youth lead leadership program that provides Bridge middle school students with opportunities to develop skills and knowledge needed to be leaders through involvement in a community change project. Some of the key goals of the YELL program are to enhance participant’s communication skills, develop critical thinking skills, and to create more opportunities for youth involvement and leadership at Bridge.

Study Sample
During the 2014-2015 school year, 60 adolescents from all four Bridge sites completed the Bridge Leadership Questionnaire at the beginning of the YELL program and at the end of the school year. Of these survey takers, 29 had participated in YELL, ranging in age from 12-18 (M=14, SD=2). Participants were 66% female, 3% Asian, 41% Black, 21% Latino, 7% White, and 28% Other.

Method
The Bridge Leadership Questionnaire is an adaptation of the Survey of After-School Youth Outcomes (SAYO) and the Pre-Adolescent Civic Engagement Scale. It assesses levels of change from pre- to post- test for four different constructs: foundations for civic ethics, community connection, adult support, and youth involvement. The survey also included open-ended questions about what they liked the most about YELL and how they’ve grown as a leader from participating in the program. Paired sample t-tests were used to assess change at the bivariate level for YELL participants only. Subsequently, we used linear regression analyses to compare YELL youths’ improvements to non-participants, controlling for their pre-score, racial background, grade-level, and primary Bridge site.

Results
Youth showed improvement on all measures, but pre- and post-test differences were only significant for the constructs of adult support (M₁= 3.3, M₂= 3.7, p=.02) and youth involvement (M₁= 3.0, M₂= 3.3; p=.04). After controlling for pre-test score, race, grade and primary Bridge site, regression analysis revealed that YELL youths’ improvements in the area of adult support were not significantly different from youth who did not participate in the program. However, participation in YELL was a significant predictor (β=.62, p < .001) of youth involvement, suggesting that the program makes an independent contribution Bridge participants’ perceptions that they have leadership opportunities at Bridge.

In youths’ responses to the open-ended survey questions, most students reported they liked working as a team, having group discussions, learning new ideas, making new friends, and helping other people in the community. Youth reported learning different styles of leadership, communication skills like listening and presenting, interpersonal skills such as treating others with respect and staying calm, the importance of giving back, and the need to take action to create community change.

This Research Brief was written by Rebecca Durbahn, MSW and Yolanda Anyon, PhD of the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver in consultation with the Bridge Project Research Committee.