



Reimagining Philanthropy: High School Students as Transformative Grant Decision-Makers

*What happens when young people are
trusted with real investment decisions?*

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About Britebound

Britebound® is a national nonprofit at the forefront of changing the way kids learn about careers and prepare for their futures through access to career readiness information and experiences for all. Britebound helps middle and high school students to know themselves—their strengths and their interests—and understand their education and career options so that they can make informed decisions. Britebound fulfills its mission—in schools and beyond the classroom—by providing free digital experiences, including Futurescape® and EvolveMe®, directly to millions of students, and through advocacy, impact investing, research, thought leadership, and philanthropic support for educators, intermediaries, and others. Britebound fosters a generation of confident, crisis-proof young people who are ready for whatever path comes next after high school. To learn more about Britebound, visit www.britebound.org/about-britebound.

Current Landscape

In 2025, Britebound® (Britebound) launched a Youth Participatory Grantmaking Pilot in Massachusetts—designed to reimagine the role of young people in philanthropy. Instead of serving as advisors, high school juniors and seniors from diverse schools and districts were given the final authority to award real grant dollars to youth-serving organizations within their state.

Britebound gathered input from a range of funding partners to help shape this program, building on prior learnings while recognizing that data on youth-led grantmaking across the U.S. remains limited. The lack of consistent tracking and reporting underscores a broader gap in the field—these metrics are not systematically collected or used to inform practice.

While Britebound alone cannot resolve the broader challenge of inconsistent data collection, we are committed to working with our funding partners and networks to foster greater alignment and collaboration.

By breaking down silos and reducing one-off youth participatory grantmaking efforts, Britebound aims to build a more connected and cohesive ecosystem for advancing this work.

Why Youth-Led Grantmaking?

Traditional philanthropy often places young people in advisory roles, if at all. Britebound's pilot flipped this structure: students were not token participants who were asked only for their generalized feedback with little context or content area knowledge—they were informed decision-makers. This shift:

- Challenged long-standing assumptions about age, authority, and readiness in grantmaking.
- Demonstrated that youth bring unique, equity-driven insights rooted in lived experience.
- Created a replicable model for funders seeking to build inclusive, future-ready philanthropy.

For Britebound, youth-led grantmaking is not just an innovative program model—it's a strategic approach that brings the organization's mission to life. It cultivates youth leadership skills while integrating authentic youth voice into decision-making across Britebound's work. Through this model, young people have the opportunity to shape how community programs engage with them, particularly in the areas of career exploration and career-connected learning.

Since 2018, over 500 youth philanthropy programs in the US have made over \$12 million in investments.¹

Programs exist in 43 states, with 80% of youth grantmaking engaging youth ages 13–18.¹

There are 368 community-based youth grant making programs in the United States.²

The lack of clear numbers highlights a gap: these metrics aren't consistently tracked, let alone fully acted on.

As a funder, this approach allows Britebound to move beyond theory and truly live its values—creating meaningful opportunities for young people to influence the systems and programs designed to serve them. In doing so, Britebound gains critical insight into the types of direct-service programs that resonate most with young learners. These perspectives help the organization and its partners design more relevant, inclusive, and effective initiatives that reflect the priorities of the youth they aim to support.

Britebound's Program

16 junior and senior high school students representing 11 schools, across 6 districts in MA

youth decision makers allocated
\$900k

3 non-profit organizations selected **(out of 10)**

3 year funding commitments (sustained investment in impact)

4,600+
youth reached annually

14,250+
youth reached over course of grants

Program Design

Over a four-month period, students explored the history of philanthropy and its systemic inequities in the U.S., learned about Britebound's philanthropic strategy and evaluation framework, reviewed proposals, engaged directly with nonprofit leaders, and ultimately allocated \$900,000 in multi-year grants

to three organizations. Britebound intentionally applied a multi-year funding model—consistent with our broader grantmaking approach—to promote sustainability and provide grantees with the runway to strengthen programming, build capacity, and attract additional funding to extend their impact beyond the pilot.

¹ Data sources from the Youth Giving, <https://youthgiving.org/>

The organizations selected by youth were **One Bead**, **Codman Square Health Center**, and **BioBuilder Educational Foundation**. The pilot was implemented as an extension of Britebound's annual grantmaking portfolio, which provides multi-year investments to organizations that innovate, catalyze, or scale promising models for career-connected learning. By shifting decision-making power to youth, Britebound tested not only whether students could rise to the challenge, but also how philanthropy itself could be reshaped to be more equitable, relevant, and community-driven. Far from a one-off enrichment activity, this pilot served as a strategic driver of Britebound's mission—advancing youth leadership, embedding student perspectives in funding decisions, and strengthening Britebound's role in transforming career readiness nationwide.

Planning, Recruitment and Youth Selection

Planning for the youth participatory grantmaking pilot began in January 2025 with the development of a program framework, training materials, and a timeline, paired with outreach to partner networks to

support youth recruitment. Britebound shared draft outreach materials with youth-serving organizations to gather feedback and ensure the design was accessible and feasible. A student-facing flyer, with a QR code linking to a simple application form and interview scheduling tool, was then distributed through these networks.

The interview process was deliberately informal and student-centered. Each session began with an overview of the program so participants understood the commitment, and applicants were given a set of guiding questions in advance. Students could choose their preferred method of communication—email or text—for scheduling and updates. Prior work experience was not required, ensuring that interest and potential, rather than credentials, guided selection. To further remove barriers, participants received a \$500 VISA gift card for their time. This approach ensured that students were compensated quickly and efficiently, streamlining payment processing for minors and simplifying program administration.

Recruitment launched in February 2025, resulting in 25 student interviews and 15 final selections. Those not chosen typically withdrew due to scheduling conflicts, a recognition that the program was not the right fit, or concerns about balancing schoolwork with program responsibilities. Recruitment was conducted in partnership with school counselors, workforce development agencies, and current grantees to assemble a cohort that was diverse and representative of Massachusetts. Students were selected based on leadership potential, commitment to community engagement, and interest in civic participation.

The final cohort included 15 high school juniors and seniors from across Massachusetts, who met virtually every two weeks from March to June 2025 for 1–1.5 hours per session, committing a total of 10–15 hours over the course of the program. Orientation, training, and structured decision-making tools provided scaffolding, but

25

students interviewed

15

selected

6

districts

11

schools

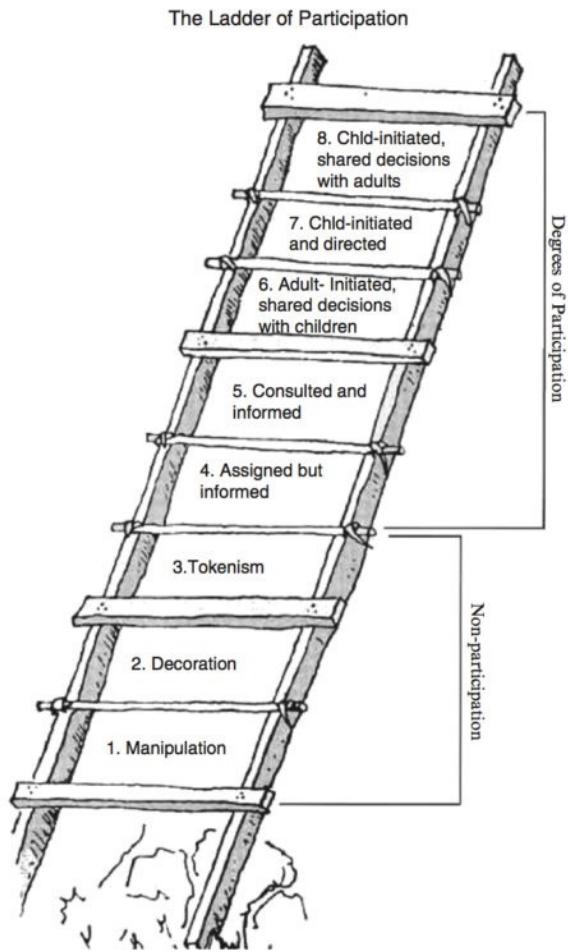
10-15

hours

\$500

stipend

authority rested entirely with the students. This was not a simulation—real grant dollars were at stake—reinforcing Britebound’s trust in youth judgment and elevating the stakes of their decisions. This intentional design aligns with best practices in youth participatory programming and draws from Hart’s Ladder of Children’s Participation³, a foundational framework developed by Roger Hart and published by UNICEF in 1992. Building on Sherry Arnstein’s



“Ladder of Citizen Participation,” Hart’s model describes a continuum of youth engagement—from nonparticipation or tokenism to genuine partnership and shared decision-making—emphasizing that meaningful participation requires granting young people real authority and responsibility. Britebound’s youth participatory grantmaking pilot was intentionally

positioned to engage students towards the higher rungs on this ladder, where students exercised authentic decision-making power. By entrusting youth with full control over grant allocations, the pilot moved beyond consultation toward true collaboration and leadership, embodying the principles of equitable, youth-driven participation that Hart’s framework envisions. At the same time, Britebound recognizes that this work is ongoing. While the pilot marked a significant step toward more student-led participation, there remains room to deepen youth leadership in future iterations—particularly in areas such as program design, facilitation, and evaluation. Britebound remains committed to continually evolving its practices to ensure youth are not only participants in the process but true partners shaping its direction.

Program Implementation

During the youth participatory grantmaking pilot, students engaged with Britebound from March - May 2025, meeting bi-monthly for a 1.5 hour virtual session. In March 2025, students participated in an orientation that allowed them to introduce themselves, share what they hoped to gain from the program, and reflect on what excited them most about the opportunity.

The session outlined the goals of the pilot, provided an overview of the history of philanthropy, and introduced Britebound’s approach to grantmaking. It also included a discussion of potential careers in the social impact sector, giving participants space to connect their personal motivations to the broader purpose of the program. A second virtual session introduced the grant review process and rubric. Students provided input on refinements to the review process and began brainstorming potential organizations to consider for funding.

During April 2025, students turned to proposal review. Each participant spent 2–4 hours independently

³ Hart, R. A. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. Florence, Italy: United Nations Children's Fund International Child Development Centre.

reading and analyzing applications, evaluating them using the established rubric and regional criteria. Students also engaged in feedback sessions with representatives from top applicant organizations, asking questions and offering insights. These interactions informed collaborative discussions with peers as the group refined its recommendations.

In May 2025, the cohort reconvened for a final meeting to deliberate as a group, weigh their evaluations, and finalize funding recommendations. Together, they made the final funding decisions and communicated outcomes to the selected organizations, concluding the pilot with real grant allocations driven entirely by youth voice.

Program Elements:

Stipend

Up to \$500 per student, paid via VISA gift card.

Eligibility

Open to current juniors and seniors in high school who are self-motivated and able to work independently on virtual assignments.

Commitment

Approximately 10-15 hours total.

Program Timeline:

February 2025

- Solicited applications from youth
- Interviews, selection and student notification by end of month

March 2025

Orientation & Overview (via Zoom 1.5 hour meeting)

- Introduction to the pilot program and its goals
- Overview of philanthropy, Britebound's history, and the basics of grantmaking
- Discussion on potential careers in the social impact sector, and participants shared why they are interested in this opportunity and what they hope to gain

Grant Review Process (via Zoom 1.5 hour meeting)

- Explanation of the grant review process and rubric
- Provided feedback on any needed adjustments to the process before beginning the proposal reviews
- Initial brainstorming session on potential organizations to consider for funding applications

April 2025

Proposal Review (independently 2-4 hours)

- Students read and analyzed grant applications independently
- Evaluated proposals based on established rubric and regional criteria

Attended feedback sessions with top organizations (via Zoom)

- Engaged with representatives from selected organizations to provide insights and ask questions
- Collaborated with peers to refine final recommendations and decisions

May 2025

Final Review & Recommendations (via Zoom 1.5 hour meeting)

- Participated in Zoom meeting to discuss feedback on proposals
- Evaluated and finalize funding recommendations and decisions
- Communicated funding outcomes to the selected organization

Organizations Selected by Youth

Through a rigorous review and deliberation process, students selected three Massachusetts-based nonprofit organizations to receive a combined \$900,000 in multi-year funding. Each organization reflects the values of the youth cohort—emphasizing access, equity, and hands-on learning opportunities that empower young people to explore careers and contribute to their communities.

BioBuilder Educational Foundation – Connecting Students to Biotechnology and Real-World Science

BioBuilder engages students in hands-on biotechnology education, introducing them to careers in STEM through authentic lab work and problem-based learning. Funding will expand access to BioBuilder’s curriculum and lab-based programs for high school students, allowing more youth—particularly those underrepresented in STEM—to participate in real-world scientific inquiry and career exploration.

The organization’s model links classroom learning to industry practice, helping students understand how biotechnology intersects with environmental, health, and social challenges. BioBuilder’s collaborative partnerships with schools and industry leaders make it a proven bridge between education and workforce development, ensuring students see tangible pathways into high-demand STEM careers.

Codman Square Health Center – Integrating Career Readiness with Community Health

Funding will help Codman Square Health Center expand its youth development and community health programs, which engage middle and high school students through health education, mentorship, and civic leadership opportunities. **The initiative focuses on connecting young people to career pathways in healthcare while promoting overall wellness, equity, and community engagement.**

Codman Square’s approach emphasizes early exposure, hands-on experiences, and strong youth voice in shaping local health initiatives. The organization’s deep community roots and trusted relationships make it uniquely positioned to bridge career readiness and social impact, serving as a model for integrating youth programming within community-based health settings.

Favour S., now a college freshman, reflected on the program's broader impact:

"Britebound's program is impactful for future generations. I felt like my voice was heard—it helped me understand the difference between needs and wants. Nonprofits are great, but how you decide to spend the money is what really matters."

Initially drawn to the opportunity by the stipend, she quickly came to value the sense of empowerment that came with making real funding decisions.

Isabel G., a high school senior, shared that:

"I wanted to learn about grantmaking, and this experience opened my mind about funding and charity. Youth should be involved—all grants should include youth participation."

She appreciated the structured process and the chance to see how organizations plan to use their funding.

Dylan S., another senior, joined the pilot out of curiosity and with an existing interest in nonprofits:

"I had the opportunity to advocate for my beliefs. I felt like my voice was heard—Britebound treated us like adults. We were on the same level."

He emphasized the seriousness of the responsibility and the importance of thoughtful feedback in future cycles.

One Bead – Building Career Awareness and Representation in Schools

Funding will support One Bead's in-school programming, ensuring that students dedicate at least 10 hours annually to structured career exploration and planning support to navigate the school choice process in Boston, MA. **The organization strengthens schools' capacity for career-connected learning by integrating diverse guest speakers who reflect the students' own backgrounds and lived experiences.** One Bead has demonstrated strong impact through in-person engagement, its ability to adapt to each school's unique context, and a clear emphasis on representation across industries.

Looking ahead, One Bead aims to balance growth with sustainability by deepening partnerships with existing schools before expanding to new ones.

Its model is designed for scalability, with potential to replicate and share best practices across districts operating under school choice frameworks.

Together, these organizations exemplify the type of career-connected, equity-driven programming that resonates with youth and aligns with Britebound's mission to prepare all students for meaningful futures.

Key Learnings

From the Youth on Program Implementation

Youth participants described the pilot as a rare and meaningful opportunity to engage directly in real-world grantmaking. Their motivations centered on learning about philanthropy, developing leadership and critical thinking skills, and contributing to positive change in their communities. Across participants, common themes emerged—students felt a strong sense of agency and empowerment, valued the

trust placed in their judgment, and appreciated being treated as equals rather than observers. They gained insight into how funding decisions are made and reflected on what fairness, equity, and impact mean in real-world contexts.

Students also offered several thoughtful recommendations for future program improvement, which Britebound will incorporate as it continues to deepen youth leadership and participation:

- **Balance Online and In-Person Engagement:** Introduce a hybrid model to strengthen focus, interaction, and relationship-building.
- **Simplify Proposal Language:** Use clear, accessible language to ensure all submissions are easily understood.
- **Increase Time for Deliberation:** Reduce the number of proposals per session to allow for deeper discussion and reflection.
- **Enhance Training and Support:** Provide more structured prompts and guidance similar to what adult grant reviewers receive.

From the Youth on Organizations and Future Programming

When reflecting on the types of programs and opportunities they would like to see more consistently available in their communities, youth participants offered valuable insights that can help inform future grantmaking and program design. Several key themes emerged:

- **Preference for In-Person Experiences:** Students emphasized that in-person programming fosters stronger engagement, deeper connections, and greater impact compared to virtual alternatives.
- **Limited Access to Industry Exposure Beyond Schools:** Many participants noted challenges in accessing work-based learning or industry connections outside of school-led initiatives.

They responded most positively to program models that combined classroom content with real-world, solution-oriented projects.

- **Schools as Primary Gateways:** Students largely learned about opportunities through their schools, underscoring the need for expanded outreach and collaboration with community-based organizations to reach youth beyond traditional education settings.
- **Accessibility and Inclusion:** Participants highlighted the importance of ensuring all programs are inclusive and accessible—particularly for learners with disabilities—so that every student can fully participate and benefit.
- **Gaps in Measuring Impact:** Youth observed that virtual program outcomes were often well-documented, while the impact of in-person experiences was less consistently measured or prioritized in reporting.

Together, these insights reflect a strong desire among youth for hands-on, inclusive, and community-connected learning experiences—and point to opportunities for Britebound and its partners to strengthen access, visibility, and measurement across future programming.

These insights underscore that when youth are given real responsibility—and the tools to succeed—they rise to the occasion with maturity, integrity, and purpose.

BioBuilder Education Foundation (Natalie Kudell, Founder and Executive Director) provides hands-on biotechnology education for middle and high school students. Natalie emphasized the value of hearing directly from youth, explaining, ***“I also love to learn what students have to say about programs—what they resonate with, what they are less interested in, what makes their eyes light up.”*** While she avoided jargon in her proposal, Natalie admitted she added extra details to emphasize benefits for participants, tailoring the application to a student audience.

Codman Square Health Center (Chetna Naimi, Partnership Director) engages youth in wellness programs, peer education, and civic leadership. Chetna reflected on the novelty of the process: ***“No, I’ve never seen it before. It’s almost like anxiety when teenagers have to work with adults, but it really helped us think differently. This was a different structure, and we appreciate it.”*** She also valued the long-term potential of the model, suggesting that youth reviewers could remain engaged over time, adding: ***“Once the grantees are funded, if the reviewers want to say ‘I still have questions’... they could become a part of the evaluation or give constructive feedback.”***

One Bead (Sara Kittle, Founder and CEO) empowers youth through jewelry-making programs that teach entrepreneurship, leadership, and financial literacy. Sara expressed admiration for the process, noting, ***“I love to say that high school students made the decision... It’s okay that it requires some work from us. High school students certainly learn so much from feedback.”*** She also acknowledged that while video proposals can be powerful, they pose challenges for smaller nonprofits, making written proposals a fairer and more feasible option.

From the Grantee Organizations

One Bead, BioBuilder Education Foundation, and Codman Square Health Center—brought unique missions and youth-centered approaches to the Britebound pilot. Each reflected on their experiences with youth reviewers, offering insights into how the process challenged assumptions and affirmed their commitment to engaging youth.

Together, these perspectives highlight a common theme: while the structure was new and at times challenging, the grantees trusted Britebound’s process and valued the seriousness of student reviewers. The grantees consistently emphasized that youth involvement did not diminish the rigor of the review process; in fact, it pushed them to rethink how they communicated their work. As Sara put it, *“This process reaffirmed our mission—being consistent in what we do and why we do it, understanding our purpose.”* Natalie echoed this sentiment by noting that she avoided jargon and instead focused on describing the direct benefits for participants, while Chetna emphasized the importance of using examples and stories that resonate with youth. These adjustments, though small, demonstrate how the student reviewers shaped the way organizations framed their impact.

Beyond proposal writing, grantees also reflected on the potential for deeper youth engagement, such as ongoing feedback or dialogue with student reviewers after funding decisions are made. This willingness to adapt and even invite critique underscores a respect for youth perspectives as more than symbolic. Instead, grantees came to see students as authentic partners in philanthropy—offering insights that could strengthen program design and accountability over time. In this way, the pilot not only affirmed the missions of individual grantees but also revealed the potential for a new model of participatory grantmaking where trust, transparency, and youth voice intersect.

Looking Ahead

The pilot demonstrated that youth-led decision-making in philanthropy is both impactful and transformative—for the students, the grantees, and Britebound as a whole. Youth participants emphasized how meaningful it was to have their voices taken seriously, describing the process as empowering and eye-opening. As Favour reflected, “*This is grant-making, this is real.*” Similarly, Isabel noted that the experience expanded her understanding of funding and charity, while Dylan highlighted the seriousness of making decisions about significant resources and the importance of clearer guidance and training.

Grantees, meanwhile, affirmed the value of engaging young reviewers, even when it required them to simplify language or rethink how they communicated their mission. As Sara stated, “*This process reaffirmed our mission—being consistent in what we do and why we do it.*” Chetna envisioned an even deeper role for students in the future, suggesting that youth could remain involved in feedback or evaluation after grants are awarded. Natalie also pointed to the potential of student feedback to strengthen proposals and refine organizational storytelling.

This process reaffirmed our mission—being consistent in what we do and why we do it.

There are several opportunities for strengthening the model. Youth recommended more time for dialogue, interactive sessions, and clear rubrics to guide decision-making. Grantees suggested the value of feedback loops, visual or multimedia elements in proposals, and opportunities for direct dialogue

with reviewers. These insights underscore a shared recognition that youth participation is not only feasible but also desirable when structured thoughtfully.

One key recommendation for future iterations is to create opportunities for youth to engage with grantee organizations before the decision-making process.

These early interactions could help students better understand the purpose and impact of philanthropy, grounding their role within a broader philanthropic ecosystem. Such exposure has the potential to strengthen their sense of responsibility, increase transparency, and align their funding decisions more closely with overarching goals. However, Britebound also recognizes that introducing direct contact at this stage could unintentionally influence perceptions or create bias toward certain organizations, depending on the nature of the interactions. Striking the right balance between context and neutrality will be essential as the model evolves. As Britebound continues to evolve this program, the organization remains committed to creating a process that is increasingly student-led, inclusive, and reflective of authentic youth voices.

Britebound hopes this case study demonstrates that when young people are entrusted with real responsibility and provided with the right support, they rise to the challenge. Their insight, thoughtfulness, and creativity not only lead to more equitable funding decisions but also signal a broader cultural shift in philanthropy—one where the next generation is embraced as true partners in driving meaningful change.

If you’d like to learn more about this youth pilot or Britebound’s ongoing efforts to elevate youth voice, please reach out to:

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Resources

Content decks and discussion prompts used to facilitate onboarding and decision making conversations **are available**, with further details for implementation.

Planning, Recruitment & Youth Selection

- Feedback Email to Partner Organizations
- Introductory Email to Partner Organizations
- Youth Participatory Grantmaking Guidelines
- Youth Participatory Grantmaking Schedule 2025
- Student Interest Form & Interview Questions

Program Implementation

- Youth Participatory Grantmaking Guidelines 2025
- Youth Participatory Grantmaking – ALL Sessions Deck
- Mentimeter for Increased Student Engagement
- Evaluation Google Form
- Discussion Prompts

Additional Links

- [**WGBH**](#)
- [**Highlight Video**](#)
- [**Newswire Article**](#)

This document provides a brief overview of the materials included in Britebound's Youth Participatory Action Pilot resource folder. It lists key tools, templates, and examples used to design and implement youth-led grantmaking and participatory programming, with links to access each file.



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FIND YOUR WHY. FIND YOUR WAY.