

**For Young Adults Who Drop Out:
Pathways Or Merely Stops Along The Way?**

A qualitative case study of two community programs that serve unemployed young adults who have dropped out of school

Peter Kleinbard



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of the Study: This paper seeks to increase understanding of the pathways to education and employment that are available to young adults who have dropped out of school and are unemployed. It provides detailed descriptions of programs that are designed and managed by community-based organizations. It includes responses from youth participants, a summary of key practices, and recommendations for funders, researchers and providers.

The past five years have seen a strong national effort to reduce the number of school dropouts. There have been encouraging results in some communities. Yet, the implementation of the Common Core standards, changes in the GED, and reductions in federal funds are likely to put more students at risk, and lengthen the pathway to an alternative diploma for those who drop out. Given the difficult job market and the poor performance of adult education programs run by school districts, many of these young adults will need sustained supports from community organizations to transition to successful adulthood. Failure to address this need will impose additional financial burdens on communities and the nation in the future.

Community-based programs serve large numbers of these youth, are sources of innovative practice, and provide the local sites for implementation of national initiatives that are more richly funded. The current constraints on federal policymaking assure that these programs will continue to play an essential role in supporting young adults who drop out. This paper includes brief profiles of the parent organizations and the history of two strong programs, and, in greater detail, the programs' key services. It includes comments by young adults about each site.

The Programs:

- Are based in cities with large numbers of dropouts and have operated for seven or more years.
- Are distinguished from many other programs in that they serve the full range of young adult dropouts, from low-skilled to those who are preparing to enroll in post-secondary education.
- Are comprehensive including academic and job readiness preparation, support while transitioning to work and further education, and help beyond the period of core services.
- Are large enough that they are able to target services to different subpopulations.
- Have hiring and management practices that strengthen the quality of their implementation.
- Build relationships with several employers and post-secondary institutions to secure placements for young adults.
- Have unit costs under \$7,000 per participant.

Responses of Youth: Young adults attributed their engagement in these programs to services that address their goals, are tailored to them individually, provide caring and encouragement and remove obstacles to their progress. They cited work and educational experiences that are interesting to them and that provide clear indicators of their progress. Incentives such as stipends were mentioned rarely as a reason for their participation. Tracking these youth for more than a year reveals that, often, their progress is incremental, with hiatuses in their participation and growth and need for support beyond the period of core services.

Recommendations address practices by providers and funders as well as research questions.
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Author Bio

Peter Kleinbard has extensive experience in work with adolescents and young adults. In 1984 he established and, for 13 years, directed the Young Adult Learning Academy (YALA) in New York City, at the time, the largest school in the country assisting school dropouts to enter employment and further education. YALA was a major component of Mayor Ed Koch's Adult Literacy Initiative. In 1996, at the Wallace Funds, a national foundation, he led the foundation's work on high schools and youth who had dropped out, and created the Youth Transition Funders Group, an affinity group of funders focused on improving opportunities for young adults to become economically self-sufficient.

From 2001 until late 2010, he served as Executive Director of the Youth Development Institute (YDI), a national intermediary organization with a focus on improving the quality of programs serving adolescents and young adults. During this time, YDI trained the first cohort of the New York City Education Department's Parent Coordinators, and worked nationally in developing and disseminating innovative practices in afterschool programs. YDI created the Community Education Pathways to Success program, a model that builds the capacity of community organizations to serve youth who have dropped out of school with poor academic skills, and has since been adopted by two NYC government departments.

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They care about you a lot. Put you on the right path. When I first came I thought it would just be help to get jobs. But it's [also]...schooling, education, a person you can talk to, friendship—a lot. — Donald, Program Participant, 22.

It is not a time like when I was a teenager ... I could just impress a supervisor or manager, fill out the application, and I had a job...But now, I have to break that down to [the youth] consistently and show them they can't get discouraged...And that's my fear. Frustration and despair. — Ralph, Workforce Development Specialist.

This paper aims to:

- Increase understanding about the *pathways that are available* for young adults who drop out of school.
- Assist local programs by describing core services and the perspective of young adults on core services.
- Identify areas for additional research as well as improvements in programs and policies to assist these young adults transition to successful adulthood.

OVERVIEW

During the past five years, there has been an encouraging increase in commitment and success in reducing the number of dropouts in some American communities. Further, for those who have dropped out already, there are providers, funders and policymakers all over the country who are working to increase opportunities and develop better program models. Yet, in the near term, the implementation of the Common Core standards is likely to result in more youth being put at risk, and adding to the nearly six million, between 16 and 24 years of age, who have dropped out already.¹ Youth who drop out will confront a new GED.² Given the poor academic skills of many, these changes will impose additional obstacles in their path to a diploma.

Programs operated and funded locally are the most widely available to these youth. In this paper, I describe in detail two strong community-based programs and how young adults are responding to their services. I also offer recommendations at the program and policy levels, and for further research.

The recession of 2007 exacerbated previous trends in unemployment for youth who fail to graduate from high school. These youth are disproportionately African American, Hispanic and Native American. Today, six years later, their labor force participation rate has declined even further, with African American, Hispanic and Native American youth continuing to suffer unemployment rates nearly double those of whites and Asians.³ The demands of job markets are increasing, even as many contract. Many young adults who have dropped out have been unemployed for long periods; some are moving continuously between different part-time jobs. Many may never become fully self-supporting. Poor literacy and other aspects of their life circumstances contribute to low levels of participation in voting. For individuals, dropping out sharply reduces earning potential as well as opportunities for marriage and participation in

activities that enrich one's life.⁴ For communities and the nation, both concerned about the costs of government, the long-term consequences are worrisome. The loss to the U.S. economy for one cohort of high school dropouts nationally is estimated to be \$154 billion over a lifetime.⁵ This amount does not include the cost for provision of services as these youth age for food stamps, health, housing, and other government services. The list is long. Today, in New York City, alone, it is estimated that nearly 197,000 youth between 16 and 24 are neither in school nor working, of which about a third did not graduate.⁶

While there are many programs for young adults, the two described in this paper have demonstrated over many years their ability to move them towards their goals, and have implemented clearly defined practices that are aligned with research. The programs are based in two large cities, each with large numbers of dropouts. They have been designed and are managed by community organizations.⁷

I decided to focus locally for several reasons. Local programs serve large numbers of young adults, yet most research is about large, national initiatives with limited generalizability to the many local programs.⁸ There are several excellent national programs and efforts to determine their effectiveness are ongoing. One wishes that these richly developed programs — YouthBuild and the National Guard Demonstration, for example — were available for more young adults. No one who follows our national news, however, can expect that this will occur in the near future, given their reliance on federal funding. While not as rich in the services they offer as these national initiatives, local programs play an important role. They are designed to meet local needs. Many of the leading national initiatives began locally, and rely on local capacities as their platforms when implementing in communities.⁹ Given the continuing paralysis in Washington, efforts by communities are becoming more central in expanding services for this population.

An important criterion for the selection of sites for this paper is that they serve the full range of youth who have dropped out. This also distinguishes them from the national initiatives. The dropout population includes several subgroups. Some are ready to attain a GED and/or job within months. Most funding has favored these youth by providing financial incentives for providers when their participants attain an outcome such as the GED within relatively short periods of time, less than a year. But most young adults who drop out have poor academic skills¹⁰ and will require a substantial amount of time — more than a year - to attain a GED and/or be prepared to keep a job.¹¹ A related issue, cited by many in the field, is the belief that among those who come to their programs, a significant percentage has disabling conditions that range from learning to mental health. These youth may have an even longer and tougher route to success. Yet, sites are not equipped to identify them. And indeed, even when they are identified, options for programming are quite limited.¹² While there has been a great deal of attention paid to youth who drop out, there has been limited examination of the challenges posed to youth and providers by poor academic skills and disabilities.

I hope the detailed descriptions of local efforts and the recommendations provided in this paper will be helpful in clarifying what is being done currently by solid local programs and will suggest avenues for further examination and research that will benefit the field.

WHAT THE PAPER INCLUDES

This paper includes descriptions of the work of two organizations. It provides brief profiles of their parent organizations and history, and, in greater detail, the key components of their services. Interviews with young people from each site are excerpted.

There are five sections: (I) overview, (II) program descriptions, (III) summary of findings, (IV) summary of practices, (V) recommendations for future work. Additionally, appendices I and II contain highly detailed descriptions of the two program sites.

This paper is based on observations, interviews and review of printed and electronic materials over nearly a year and a half, ending in the first half of 2013. *Readers should note that because the programs regularly make adjustments, these descriptions may no longer fully reflect their services.* Staff at all levels and 27 young adults were interviewed, some several times. The names used in the paper are not the real names of those interviewed. The young adults who were interviewed were selected by the sites and received a small honorarium; each site received an honorarium as well in appreciation for their assistance. As part of the agreement to do the intensive study sites are not identified.

In the paper I distinguish between the parent *organization* and the *site* or *program*, the unit that provides services to the young adults.

Site Selection: The two programs described were chosen from a group of five, located in four cities, and based on recommendations from leaders in the field and my own reconnaissance. They have sustained their work for seven or more years amid sharp changes in the field, including in funding, the increasing difficulty of obtaining employment for young adults, and the increasing expectations for participation in post-secondary education. Their funding per participant ranged from \$5,000 to \$7,000.

Population Served: Each program serves young adults between 16 and 24¹³ years of age who have dropped out of school and have multiple barriers to economic independence and educational attainment. These include placement in foster care, court involvement and other barriers such as poor skills. Several youth have said they have IEPs and site staff believes that many of them have disabilities.¹⁴ The goal is to enable young adults to move toward economic self-sufficiency by improving skills, obtaining a GED or diploma, becoming employed and/or entering college. Youth learn about these programs through friends, family, other programs, online sources, or are referred by foster care agencies or probation officers.

Key Program Elements: As with most programs that serve young adults who have dropped out, these offer counseling, case management, academics, career readiness, internships, employment and/or college placement and follow-up services. Similarities and differences in the way they have designed and deliver their services are highlighted in the program descriptions.

Both sites incorporate program elements that are recognized as effective for young adults and seek to engage them and increase their skills. These include:

- A youth development approach that includes the persistent attentions of an adult counselor who expresses caring, high expectations and who tailors support toward each individual.

- The collaborative development of written goals and a pathway to reach them with each young adult, as well as regular assessment to enable them to gauge their progress.
- Academic and work-related instructional strategies designed to engage young adults and advance their skills.
- Practical supports for helping young adults connect to employment and further education, and flexible ongoing support, beyond the period of core services.
- Organizational practices designed to increase the quality of implementation. These include use of data for continuous improvement, the refining of program models and professional development of staff.

The brief profiles of youth who have participated in these programs, included below, reveal their progress, as well as a need for support beyond the period of participation in the programs. Together, the program descriptions and youth profiles highlight issues that need to be addressed by the field

Because sustaining the engagement of young adults who have dropped out until they achieve their goals is such a key consideration in shaping programs, I am prefacing the program descriptions with a discussion of engagement.

COMMENTARY ON ENGAGEMENT

Much of the leading theory and research on engagement has been created by Jacqueline Eccles and various collaborators. Their work, *Expectancy Value Motivational Theory*, describes “a comprehensive theoretical model linking achievement-related choices to two sets of beliefs: the individual’s expectations for success and the importance or value the individual attaches to the various options perceived by the individual as available.”¹⁵

This model provides a helpful framework for understanding engagement. A limitation, however, is that the model and related empirical studies are geared toward children, not to the young adults who are the focus of this paper.

Below is a summary of considerations that grow out of the research and the work on this paper. More formal research would help to increase understanding of what works for young adults.

The *readiness* of young people to move forward with their lives is important in their ability to meet their goals. What does readiness consist of? **Intrinsic factors** include:

The skill levels youth start with. Usually, higher skilled youth have a shorter route to an outcome, provided there are few other obstacles, and there is thus less opportunity for external factors, frustration or boredom to intervene over time. While the sites described in this paper acknowledge this, they have committed to take most applicants, even if they have serious obstacles to success.

Confidence: when young adults believe in their ability to succeed they are more likely to continue in the face of obstacles. Sites work in a variety of ways to support and highlight for youth their incremental successes and growth.

Self-management:¹⁶ when youth lack self-management skills, and/or rely on others to keep them on track, they are less likely to achieve the goal they care about. Here, too, sites seek to strengthen this skill by combining personal support with manageable challenges, such as consistent attendance, that cause young people to learn to rely on their own abilities to move forward.

Extrinsic factors that motivate, engage or obstruct must also be addressed by programs.

Programs must **demonstrate to participants that they can get them to the goals they value highly.** Sites addressed this is by bringing in graduates who testified to their success, and by posting GED and job placements. Several youth pointed to programs they had tried and left because they seemed ineffective or lacked the comprehensiveness of the sites described in this paper.

The relationship with an adult who serves as a guide and demonstrates caring is important. Part of the caring is expressed in strictness about keeping the youth on track. Youth cited counselors and instructors who sit down with them and target their individual interests, needs, and deficiencies.

Having clear benchmarks that are assessed frequently, such as by testing and instructor feedback, reminded young people of where they were in their quest, and highlighted the next steps for them in a concrete way.

External circumstances that inhibit young adults' success must be addressed. Examples include the need for income, child care, or circumstances that just turn up, such as being thrown out of one's home. Sites work to anticipate and prevent these circumstances or to address them once they have occurred, but often, they turn up unexpectedly, or at times become the last straw or even the excuse for young adults to give in to impatience or frustration. When staff demonstrate that they are effective in helping overcome these obstacles, their effort, increases confidence in the young people and helps to sustain their commitment to the program.

Interesting classroom materials and work experiences are helpful. Young adults cited especially readings that deal with issues recognizable from their own experience. From their work experiences youth described feeling as though they were doing something that mattered to others and thus made them feel valued.

The quality of the program's internal community was cited by many youth. Staff is out in the halls with smiles and greetings; the space itself is friendly and/or offers young adults opportunities to work on their own on music or other areas of interest. Other youth are well-behaved and there is no fighting.

While not a major focus of either program, **efforts to create a strong group identity and commitment** to other youth was evident during orientation activities and is a practice that some of the national programs use. Activities are designed to promote bonds among the young adults and get them to take responsibility not only for their own success, but also for that of their peers. Because many of the youth had had bad experiences with groups both in their high schools and their neighborhoods, this could prove to be a valuable addition to the toolbox on engagement by reducing the anticipation of negative experiences among groups of peers and establishing positive bonds.

Offering opportunities to improve the programs: both sites invited young adults to make suggestions as to how to improve. When asked during interviews for general feedback, with few exceptions, young adults were positive about the programs. Several made suggestions.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

Both sites are located in major East Coast cities. Site A is a program of a large multiservice provider; Site B is part of an organization that serves several different adolescent and young adult populations.

SITE A *(A more detailed description of this site is found in Appendix I.)*

History and Organizational Context

Site A was established initially in 2002, and expanded with a large grant from the US Department of Labor as part of the Youth Opportunity (YO!) initiative.¹⁷ After YO! ended in 2005, the site was able to continue with a mix of public and private funding and a focus on young adults. Today, the site operates several programs under unified leadership. This includes a foster care component — some of these youth are still in school — and an internship program for youth with high school diplomas or GEDs. The description below concentrates on the site's services to youth who are not in school and do not have a diploma, about two-thirds of those served at the site.

Parent Organization

Site A is part of a multiservice organization founded in 1934 to help individuals, many of whom were recent immigrants and refugees, to seek employment in the United States. Since then, it has grown and today serves more than 100,000 people annually, with a wide range of services to adults and youth in need, including the mentally ill, developmentally disabled, new immigrants and refugees, the elderly, and youth and families; its mission is to help each achieve greater independence. It has 3,500 employees and an annual budget of about \$260 million. Its interest in the education and employment of young adults stretches back more than 40 years.

Re-Engaging Young Adults

Annually, Site A serves about 450 young adults who have dropped out. It first engages them during an intake and orientation process at which time staff seeks, through interviews and with the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to determine their suitability for the program, and their academic level. During a two-week orientation, youth are grouped in a cohort of 30 to 60 and must demonstrate their commitment with consistent attendance and punctuality. Youth who fail to meet these benchmarks are not accepted. For most, a schedule of academic classes is developed based on their test results, as well as time for activities that develop other skills, such as preparing to apply for jobs.

Combining Caring and High Expectations

During the orientation, youth participate in activities designed to introduce them to the program, its expectations for performance and behavior, and its staff. Each young adult meets individually with an advisor, the site's job title for the staffer who provides counseling and other supports including help in removing obstacles to participation. This relationship is the glue that binds most young adults throughout their participation in the program. Together, youth and advisor develop goals and a plan to achieve them. The plan becomes the reference point throughout the young person's participation, and is reviewed during regular counseling sessions. Advisors seek to create a personal bond and to address practical obstacles to success, such as a need for child care. The specific goals help young people identify what they have to do to prepare for the GED, for work, and for further education.

The program works to establish an environment characterized by both caring and high expectations for behavior and performance. The program's *Student Handbook* highlights the nature of its commitment to young people:

One thing that you should always remember about our program is that: if you should stop attending or have obstacles that come up that stop you from being able to come, this does not prevent you from coming back. We are always ready to support you and help you reach the goals you have set for yourself!

When youth arrive, staff members often come out of their offices and greet them in the hallways. These are narrow and encourage contacts and interaction. Youth expressed appreciation for this informal connecting and awareness of the positive culture that the program promotes:

It's a whole new atmosphere basically. It's like a small little town—everybody knows everybody, you know. It's just a whole new environment. You don't have to worry about a lot of things when you come here—a lot of problems are nothing at all. Not even the girls fight...

— Edna, Student (19).

The orientation emphasizes the program's focus on education. Group events are led by the education coordinator. During my observations of his presentation, he stressed that youth must take responsibility for their success in the program, highlighting ways that they could do so. As the orientation winds down, the coordinator, speaking to the entire group with many staff in the room, asks everyone to agree to a list of expectations for attendance and behavior, and then concludes with: "Are you sure there is nothing you're going to have a problem with?" People nod and then speak their assent. Then he ends the orientation. Youth will start classes the following Monday. Advisors are expected to make contact with youth on their caseload biweekly, but usually interact with them more frequently than that. They are expected also to check with teachers and other staff, intervening with the young adult directly when something notable arises such as poor attendance or outstanding performance.

Advisors described their roles as:

- Encouraging youth and reminding them of where they are in relationship to their goals and the journey ahead.
- Helping them address practical needs, such as child care or homelessness.
- Referring youth for higher level classes, GED testing, and the Career Clinic, major steps up the ladder to a successful outcome — and income.
- Documenting interactions by writing case notes in the organization's database; these can be shared with other staff through the computer network in order to align the work of all staff with each participant.

ADDRESSING ACADEMIC AND WORK GOALS

Site A's Academic Tiers

Site A has four levels of classes based on TABE results: youth progress to higher levels through tests near the end of each 13 week cycle; consideration is given also to instructor recommendations.

- 4th through 6th grade
- 6th through 8th – pre-GED
- 8th and 9th – GED preparation
- College Prep for youth who have passed the GED or have achieved a high enough score on the GED Predictor that they are considered likely to pass.

Of the thirteen students I interviewed at this site, 11 entered the program at the Pre-GED level or below, five at the ABE level, meaning they read below the 6th grade.

Most classes meet daily and focus on GED preparation, reviewing worksheets and test-taking strategies. These are designed to help youth prepare for the GED test as quickly as possible. Several classes are different in that they place more emphasis on thinking processes. For example, in the low level literacy class, youth are asked to predict what will occur in the stories they are reading, and in that class and in several math classes that are taught by one instructor the must explain how they came to their conclusions. These classes look beyond the test to the development of skills in thinking and analysis.

Often, students who begin with higher skills are impatient with classwork that does not address test preparation directly, and may even complain if the books they use do not highlight the GED. Usually, GED instruction and programs are focused narrowly on preparing for that test. These students will take the GED Predictor test and the results will determine when they will take the GED itself. The education coordinator monitors test results and will make decisions about when to refer for the GED.

At Site A, the literacy class and some of the math classes, even at higher levels, draw upon the Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS) model, in which staff is trained. CEPS embeds findings from research about learning in a youth development approach. It seeks to build stamina, fluency, and the ability to deal with increasingly complex text and math problems while preparing students for the GED – though that may be a long way off for the less skilled youth. For purposes of transparency, note that I led the development of the CEPS program when working at the Youth Development Institute.

CLASSROOMS

(For more detailed descriptions from classroom observations and for student responses, see Appendix I.

Relearning and new learning.

Often, when I observed classes, they would begin with few young people willing to participate; most of the students had their heads down or turned to others in conversation. Instructors drew upon their personal charm, teasing and jokes, and went to students' desks, usually succeeding in drawing out resistant youth. In the most highly-structured classes, low-level literacy and GED- and college-prep math, the instructors relied more upon highly structured classroom agendas and engaging academic content to get the classes moving. In most of the classes in

which students were close to passing the GED, youth would first practice on GED worksheets. Instructors would then discuss these sheets with them and move around the classroom checking answers or have youth share them out loud. In these classes, students named and applied parts of speech or practiced comprehension skills by reading stories or articles and answering short questions about them. Instructors reminded them: *“This is the type of question you get on the GED.”* Most youth had some knowledge of this content already: pronouns, sentence completion, etc. Several told me that they saw these classes as combining, in the words of one, *“relearning with new learning.”*

The low-level literacy class and the math classes I observed were different. What distinguished them was the high level of structure and that students were required both to solve problems and show their process for doing so. In Math, when youth applied math operations or rules to problems, they were required to explain how they had come to a solution rather than just giving their answer. The process of solving problems seemed to engage students and the classes had a heady feel as they worked together on problems. In Literacy, students were expected to develop and support predictions in response to questions such as how a story would end, again explaining “why” they thought this and giving evidence from the story. The emphasis on thinking was a consistent element of these classes. While not absent from other classes, it was far more evident in the classes taught by two of the instructors, both of whom had received training in the CEPS program.

WHAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN INSTRUCTION?

My biggest push is the rituals and routines.

The education coordinator is known by students to be “tough,” uncompromising around the purpose of his classes, and youth respect this. As education coordinator, he has a great deal of power because he determines when students move to higher level classes and take the GED test. But it is evident that his authority stems also from his effectiveness as an instructor. He pointed out to me that he has been at the site for nine years, beginning in computer support and then moving to a teaching position. Recently, he opted to continue teaching on a reduced schedule, even though he has been promoted to an administrative position. The long experience enables him to: *[Paraphrasing] ...anticipate how youth will respond, both correctly and what errors they will make, and this helps the teaching. As a result, I can largely control the conversation by the problems I pick for the class.*

He describes an intuitive understanding of the classroom process suggesting that, often, he does not have to think about it, but can anticipate students’ questions and how to help them solve problems. This enables him to respond rapidly, understanding what students are mastering and what they are struggling with, even though students may not have fully grasped or articulated it themselves. He promotes a competitive atmosphere in the class, urging students to come up with explanations and demonstrate them on the board.

I think that goes back to all that CEPS training I had when I was coming up. ... I want students to have a certain expectation about what's going to happen every minute of every day, and that's kind of my biggest push is the rituals and routines because the class is ritualized like that, it almost teaches itself and everything flows so nicely from one piece to the next piece, all the students know what they're doing from one piece to the next piece. ...once the students know what the structure is... they come to appreciate it. And it makes the instructors' lives easier as well because they teach to the structure and as long as you stick to the structure you know what you're going to do each minute of the day. So, rituals and routines — definitely the big thing.

ADDRESSING THE LOW SKILL LEVELS OF YOUTH WHO DROP OUT

The Youth Development Institute developed CEPS to engage and build the skills of youth whose academic skill levels are below the eighth grade. The initiative is based on research about reading and math instruction and content and draws partly upon the work of America's Choice, now The Center for Education and the Economy.¹⁸ It combines a highly structured approach to reading, math, and counseling with extensive training and program-level assistance. The model has since been incorporated by two New York City government units for several initiatives with low-skilled young adults (The Center for Economic Opportunity and the Department of Probation). Below is an outline of key elements of the model excerpted from *Community Education Pathways to Success: Preparing Young Adults for GED Programs: A Guide to Implementation*.¹⁹

It is important to note, as the evaluator pointed out that CEPS is not a Chinese restaurant menu where you can pick and choose those elements that you like. It works as a whole as detailed in the *Guide*.

In both areas, instructors establish clear rituals and routines for the classroom. In Reading, for example, each class includes explicit instruction in comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency.

- **Independent Reading (10–15 minutes).** Students enter class and immediately settle in to read books they have selected themselves from the classroom libraries. Latecomers follow suit.
- **Read Aloud/Think Aloud (up to 15 minutes).** The instructor reads aloud from a book they all are reading.
- **Daily Word Study – Vocabulary (5–10 minutes).**
- **Classroom Conversation (5–15 minutes).** Students engage in spirited discussion following the Read Aloud. The instructor will have presented a topic or questions.
- **Mini Lesson/Whole Class Instruction (up to 15 minutes).** A short lesson varies daily and may focus on comprehension, vocabulary, writing, or syntax. It is followed by a work session in which students apply the lesson at their desks.
- **Work Period (at least 30 minutes).** Students work individually or in small groups with the instructor moving between them.

Math focuses on:

- **Deep study of a few critical concepts.**
- **Language-rich environment.** Students read, discuss, and talk through the math concepts.
- **The algebraic structure of arithmetic.** Algebra is the fundamental language.

In the math segment of the class, the rituals and routines include:

- **Skills Practice (5–10 minutes).** Instructors emphasize patterns and strategies for computation.
- **Lesson (20–25 minutes).** A math task is presented by the instructor with students reading and understanding the problem. The work period includes “SoloWork,” in which students are on a task for a few minutes, followed by “Partner Work” in which students work in pairs to refine and edit their work.
- **“Probing for Understanding” and “Closing the Lesson” (5–10 minutes).** Students reflect on their reasoning and that of their peers. They ask questions.

A benefit of the strict consistency in how the classes function is that it gives the young people confidence because they are always on familiar ground, even as the problems push them into new territory; whereas mastering the content gets them closer to their goal of the GED. Theories of motivation and engagement, see page 4, stress that young people must both value the outcome of their study and also feel confidence in their ability to get there. Research on young adults highlights also the importance of the caring relationship with an adult. These elements are all present in the math and low-level literacy work at this site.

Developing the kinds of energy I observed in these two classes requires also that youth care about the content. Certainly, the selection of content in the literacy classes helps to create interest. The energy that went into solving math problems seemed to be associated also with the youth's engagement in the puzzle presented by the problems, a kind of headiness that comes with working on a puzzle they know they can solve, but is a bit beyond them.²⁰ This instructor has helped students get past the feeling that the math is too difficult and to gain confidence. Several students say that this success comes from his availability to them on a one-on-one basis. They know he will see them through when they are stuck.

CAREER TRANSITIONS

Advisors refer youth to the Career Clinic when they believe that youth are ready to begin the job search process as demonstrated by consistency in attendance and by efforts to succeed in their classes. Some young people insist on starting earlier, usually because they need income. Given today's economy, it may take months before a young adult has a secure position and not all are successful. The career preparation activities are scheduled so that youth can continue their academic classes.

Youth prepare for the placement process by completing the *Work Readiness Packet* which includes preparation of an updated resume. They then meet with the career counselor, who reviews their paperwork, discusses their employment goals, and then, if they are ready, coaches the young adults on the interviewing process and on ways to perform so that they can keep their jobs. If they have not acquired a GED, staff urges them to take jobs that allow them to continue their educations.

The youth who are in foster care, because of the additional funding for this component, are able to have internships that are made available in businesses, nonprofit organizations, and public agencies such as the city zoo. The program monitors their attendance and performance closely.

In addition to working with youth, Career Clinic staff builds relationships with employers. The program seeks to expand its network of cooperating employers and is working with many already, such as T.J. Maxx, the GAP, Marshall's, and others. Young people are screened before being referred to employers and are trained to work with supervision and in other on-the-job issues. This support helps to assure employers that they are making a safe hire.

For youth who are interested in college, the program offers advanced academics and help with selection and applications as well as providing ongoing support once they are enrolled. This includes guidance in navigating a college setting, and how to get student aid and deal with programming and support issues at the college. It works with several colleges in a collaborative developed by an intermediary that includes eight other community organizations. The

collaborative provides training to staff and financial incentives to students to take summer courses in order to reduce the amount of remediation they will require.

RETENTION

Students averaged 18 months in the program, with a range of from nine to 30 months. Six stopped attending classes during the period of my interviews, and four of these remained in contact with the program. Youth who do not pass the GED can return for additional 13-week cycles. Even those who age out, or who are placed in jobs or college, may maintain contact with the program.

PROGRAM INTEGRATION

Site A staff uses a common database to share information and track youth attendance and performance. Files for each participant are established by a staff person dedicated to this role when the participant first enters the program. These files include demographic information, attendance, test scores, summaries of interactions with Advisors, and other data. They are updated continuously by the staff members who work with the youth. The data is used also for managing contracts as it can be aggregated to provide information about the demographics, participation and progress of the youth.

Staff participates in several weekly meetings to share information about youth, and to review and plan their work as a program.

Training for staff is provided both from within the parent organization and by outside organizations. The training is designed to develop a common vision and to strengthen services, especially its academic instruction and youth development practices. The program continually refines its work, drawing on data about its performance as well as about research and practice that is acquired by participation in conferences and other events, and through review of materials.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH PARTICIPANTS

I first spoke with Ron in February 2012. He was 23 at the time. He had started at Site A about a year earlier at the lowest academic level and had moved up to the PreGED class, and was preparing for the test at the time.

Ron [Responding to my question]: *Actually, this year has been a crazy year for me too and they [program staff] helped me out too, a lot. They called me everyday ... to see how I'm doing. Like the teachers, the advisors. Cause last year my aunt passed away, and then my father passed away. Then his sister passed away, and then my mother passed away. So they saw that I missed a couple of days, sometimes I would be in class and I'd be zoned out and not paying attention. They used to call me every day and say, "Ron, are you okay? If you need some time off, just let us know." ...but I was all right. I was just happy that they was calling and I was okay so I came back to class and started doing things.*

After Ron and his brother buried their mother, he needed a job and a place to live. The program helped him to get a job at a large clothing retailer with whom it has a close relationship and schedule his time so that he could continue his morning GED classes.

Ron: *My last issue was I had to go to court to get my mother's apartment... so I came here and asked her [his Advisor]... I wined up getting the apartment so [she] was helpful.*

At first, Ron wanted to go directly to a job placement:

Ron: *I didn't like school at all, I couldn't stand school — my whole thing about coming here was help with my resume and help getting a job. Then later on I started going to class ...and then I started liking it and then I see the work it was giving me and it was like, "Oh, I know some of this stuff," so it was kind*

of easy. So then later on a couple of months go by and I told them that I wanted to enroll in the school instead of just doing the job programs.

... sometimes I would sit in class and if I didn't know something I was scared to ask the teacher cause I didn't want to look stupid and stuff and sometimes I'd go home and think I didn't want to go anymore. But then one of the teachers would call me, or the advisors, "Ron, why did you miss class? You're doing good progress in here. You shouldn't be missing class if soon you're going to take the test." So that gave me more confidence — if they keep calling me instead of letting me leave class like that, and let me know that I'm doing good, then I should come back. So that's why I come here a lot too.

Math was a struggle:

Ron: *Yeah, like the first couple of times I took the TABE test, like the math part, I just looked at it, and I was like, there's a whole bunch of numbers that I don't understand. Like algebra, I didn't know what it was. Until [name of math instructor] showed me. And he showed me an easy way, so he broke it down for me. That was easy for me to remember. So there were certain things that he taught me to remember for myself, instead of teaching the rest of the class. Everybody has their own technique that he shows, that he thinks will work for them, and that worked for me. So I think I'm doing better now.*

He helped me figure out math for my brain only. Like, the way he taught me math, if he taught somebody else, maybe they might think, "Oh, that's too hard, it's confusing." But for me it was good.

And sometimes when you're in class and doing work the teacher will come around and help you.... So sometimes you get individual help in the class.

Interviewer: *Has any classroom work been helpful to you outside of here?*

Yeah, the math—with the [cash] register [at work].

Ron is still on the job and has been promoted to a coordinator level. He has not yet passed the GED and has stopped attending classes for the last three months, though the program expects him to return.

Lissette (20) This young woman had been in the program for about two years at the time of our interview. Previously, she had been placed in a school program for youth with learning disabilities. She dropped out because she felt she did not get adequate help in the large classes. She is also in foster care and lives with a foster parent, although she will age out soon and lose financial support from the state. After starting at the lowest academic level in the program, she has moved up to GED-level classes.

Lissette: *And I saw that I went up I went down, I went up I went down [referring to her attendance and academic performance]. Then one day my Advisor sat down with me and said, "...you could be absent Monday, Tuesday — the whole month if you'd like. But is that really benefiting you?" ...Then she kept on pushing me and pushing me and it just came down to the point when I realized I've got to do it not for her, not for nobody — but for me. And then I got back on track and I started coming every day.*

The following excerpt reflects her desire to become more independent, which she states is inhibited by being in foster care.

Lissette: *And it's like if I want something, or I want to go somewhere, I have to go through the [foster care] agency, for the agency to go through my foster parents... [Of her Advisor] She'll show me what are my scores from the past, to what I have now. And she'll explain to me what I've got to work on, or what isn't letting me move on from that one side. So I'll set up a goal with her and it's like I actually accomplish it.*

Sensitive support and encouragement from Advisors, such as Lissette's, can make a difference in how young adults feel about themselves and help them progress:

Lissette: *And she told me, she said, "...it's just that I've seen you coming more to class and doing what you need to do, and I don't want to be on top of you because I know you're taking care of what needs to be taken care of." o I took it as I was proud of myself because I was actually acknowledged.*

Classes were different than in high school:

Lissette: *[speaking of her class in Site A, comparing it to her experience in high school] I felt like I was—that there were other people who related to me, as the learning disabilities. Some people you*

can explain and explain and explain and they just don't get it, but it's not that they're doing it on purpose—it's just everybody has a different pace for them to process things. I didn't feel frustrated... That's what helped me, what motivated me to do way better.

[The teaching] *It was more interesting because ...they would also give you nonfiction situations in where they had you think about what was going on, in [your] life and in cartoons and stuff like that.*

The thing about Miss [teacher] is I guess she sees potential and whenever she sees I'm about to give up, she always hangs in there and she'll tell me, "Listen, it's easy. You know this already." She'll keep telling me that. "You know this. You know this."

She also participated in work readiness training and two internships, the first at a Housing Works store where she worked with customers and the most recent at a child care center:

Lisette: *I go to another internship [in an early child care program] and even though I don't really get to deal a lot with the kids because I guess the lady just feels she needs more help cleaning-wise, but I have something that makes me want to get up in the morning...their [speaking of the children at the center] smiles just brighten up my afternoon. Just to see the excitement of when they're getting dropped off and the excitement — when they see their mom and they've only been there like four hours and they're like, "Mommy, mommy!" and I think about it. I'm like — damn — when I was little I didn't miss my mom, you know...*

She has taken the GED twice and failed several sections. Out of concern that she will need income when she ages out of foster care, Lisette stopped attending classes and became a manager at a local coin-operated laundry. She intends to return to Site A or another program so that she can pass the GED.

SITE A: SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Thirteen students were interviewed of whom seven were female. The average age was 21 and the average months of participation in the program was 18, with a range of nine to 30. According to data provided by the program, three of the young adults were in foster care and one was court-involved (though several others cited court-involvement during interviews). Program data indicated that 11 of these young adults entered the program reading at the Pre-GED level; five of these at the ABE level in reading. During the course of their participation, eight went up at least one level in their reading, advancing to a higher level class. Six stopped attending classes, and of these four continue to be in touch with the program. By the time I stopped observing the program, one student had passed the GED and four were employed.

Site A: Summary of Key Points

- Strong parent organization that has influence with policymakers and funders
- Services to nearly the full range of young adult dropouts, from low skilled to college ready, and continued development of capacity to serve each subgroup
- Rigorous use of data to track and follow-up on youth
- Expectation of daily attendance for classes which provides a means to closely monitor young adults
- Limited resources to provide internships or vocational training to young adults who have dropped out.

SITE B *(A more detailed description of this site is found in Appendix II.)*

History and Organizational Context

Site B's parent organization opened in 1975 as a neighborhood-based service provider, offering child care and services to youth and the elderly in a northeastern city of about 150,000. In 2000, it was the major recipient of federal YO! funding in its city. As these funds declined, the parent

organization decided to focus more narrowly on youth aged 14 and 24, and transitioned some of its programs to other organizations.

The organization's total budget averages about \$5 million annually, with half in public dollars, including WIA Title I funds, some of which are used for youth who have dropped out. It has about 50 staff. The site serves about 800 youth annually, excluding the large number served in its Summer Youth Employment Program. About 10% are out of school and not working. The organization's structure comprises administrative services and direct services. The administrative unit includes leadership and program management; external affairs including fund-raising and finance; and a unit dedicated to strengthening performance through evaluation and staff development.

Today, the organization's *direct services*, which I am calling Site B, are organized into five "pathways," each of which targets a different adolescent sub-population. The pathways include both school-based, in which staff members work in several schools providing support services; and community-based, which include after school programs, and those that serve youth who have dropped out. Youth who are out of school without a diploma are assigned to Pathway I.

The organization's size, longevity, respected leadership, and its engagement with both practice and policy give it a visible role in its home city and state. Its leaders participate in forums, prepare papers, and work with leaders. These activities have lent credibility to the organization and helped to create a responsive policy environment for its work. Two examples: first, the organization has convinced the city's education department to increase the per student funding rate for youth who have dropped and are returning to school, weighting it in a manner similar to what is done for youth with special needs. This benefits the schools that the organization has established. Secondly, for youth who are in foster care or are court-involved, the organization has gained flexibility in the use of funds from the state agency that provides funds for these youth. This has enabled it to serve them for longer periods of time, albeit not at increased levels of funding. The engagement with the field influences program development internally. The organization credits work in New York City and elsewhere that it has learned about through its engagement with similar organizations, national intermediaries and through research, with helping to shape some of its programs. Recently, for example, it began to include the Thrive Foundation for Youth's work on youth development in its training for staff.²¹

The organization has an aggressive fundraising unit and has been able to bring in dollars from both local and national foundations, as well as public dollars from state and local government. This has resulted in expansion in recent years with new sites being established. At the same time, it has consolidated or dropped some programs as it refocuses on youth who have dropped out and are returning to school.

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

As noted in the section on Site A, the selection and development of staff is critically important in services to young people. A striking feature of Site B is the length of tenure among its senior leaders, several of whom have been there 10 years or more at the time I was observing in 2012; while the president had been there for 18 years. These staff members have worked together on the development of the organization so that many components were established with their involvement. This experience gives them a sense of ownership as well as authority internally

beyond mere rank. During interviews, they described being familiar with each other and with the different programs. They were comfortable citing problems as well as new developments, reflecting a strong culture in the organization of continuous improvement and security about its status and future. Research pointing to the advantage of such long-term relationships seems to apply in this organization:

Actually, the longer members stay together as an intact group, they better they do. As unreasonable as this may seem, the research evidence is unambiguous. Whether it is a basketball team or a string quartet, teams that stay together longer, play together better. ²²

Staff cited several reasons for the long tenures. One is loyalty to the youth. Nearly all of them grew up in the same city as the youth, some from the same neighborhoods. Most are either African American or Hispanic, reflecting the population served. Several said that the organization enables them to help youth who need them and that the president does a good job of keeping an ear to the staff while developing the organization. Tenures may be influenced also by the relatively small size of the city in which the organization operates, meaning that there are few comparable opportunities. Finally, the organization's salaries are competitive relative to others in the field.

The personnel policies place a strong emphasis on both performance and growth of staff. The organization invests in learning about research and practice and using that knowledge to improve services. Included in its leadership team are three senior positions concerned with organization and staff development:

- Director of Performance Management, who works with unit heads and senior leadership to review program data including comparisons of actual outcomes against expectations.
- Senior Director of Research and Organizational Performance, who develops and oversees formative and summative evaluations conducted by external organizations.
- Director of Talent Development, who orients new staff and works with current staff to design and support unit and individual development plans.

At the time I conducted my field research, Site B had just received funding to conduct a formative evaluation with an outside evaluator. Staff plans to use this to set the stage for a summative evaluation. Among other things, this study will look at how the Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) data compares with what is actually happening in the programs and how to make adjustments to ensure alignment of the services with the ETO data fields, as well as how to strengthen performance.

In hiring, the initial interviews are conducted by the relevant program manager and the staff who will work with the new hire. As part of the interview process, candidates are asked to respond to scenarios from the program in order to understand how they think about situations they might encounter on the job. In the second round of interviewing for direct service positions, youth and direct service staff participate.

New direct service staff receive extensive training before they are given their caseload. This training includes shadowing of a current employee. Topics covered during the orientation are:

- Mission and Vision
- Agency Value Statement
- Full Value Contract (see below)
- Pathways to Success Overview.

New staff must complete the orientation and sign a statement that they are ready before they can engage with young people.

Supervisors meet with their direct reports weekly. They consult the ETO data to help assess how staff is performing. Among issues that are considered in assessing direct service staff are the frequency of their interactions with youth, their willingness to follow up on youth who need extra support, and the outcomes of youth in their care.

RE-ENGAGING YOUNG ADULTS

Pathway I services are highly individualized. The intake and orientation requires that youth come to the site on four different occasions to talk with a Youth Development Specialist (YDS), the site's term for a counselor. Similar to Site A, the repeated returns help staff to assess the readiness of youth to make a commitment. The site conducts an academic skills test and the Harrington O'Shea Career Decision Making System²³ which guides the YDS and the youth in identifying career interests.

Combining Caring with High Expectations

The YDS works with each young adult to create an Individualized Service Plan (ISP), which describes a youth's goals and lays out a path to achieve them. The plan is flexible and modifications can be made over time to reflect changes in the circumstances or thinking of the youth. The YDS works closely with enrollees, getting to know them individually and making it clear that the relationship is secure and will continue throughout their involvement in the program. Program options are described to highlight opportunities to increase skills, get a GED or high school diploma, and get a job and/or obtain a postsecondary credential.

After completing the intake, youth are considered "members" of the organization. No matter which pathway they enter, they have access to three services:

- A YDS who is responsible to guide them towards an outcome.
- Academic support, college planning and, for students who enter college or get a job, continued support — through "retention" services.
- Employment preparation with ongoing support provided by a Workforce Development Specialist (WDS).

As part of its approach, the organization is committed to long-term relationships with its participants — a year or more. Many youth have been involved through several different programs as a result of the organization's services to a wide range of adolescents and to its city-wide reach. The 14 young adults interviewed for this paper averaged 36 months with the site. Much of this time had spent been prior to their involvement as dropouts, during Summer Youth Employment and after-school programs. To sustain services to youth who have

dropped out beyond the period of service permitted under its public contracts, the organization supplements its public dollars with private funds that it can use more flexibly.

ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL AND WORK GOALS

The program's data indicate that at the end of the period I was observing, five of the students had moved to post-secondary institutions, two to certificate programs and three to degree programs, and that six were still involved in Site B programs. Four were employed. The program did not provide data about changes in academic skills.

Site B's Tiers for Pathway I

The supports that are available for youth to increase their skills are:

- For attainment of the GED or high school diploma, an online educational program taken at the site with support from a YDS, or referral to an externally-run program, such as YouthBuild or Adult Education classes.
- To learn about work as well as prepare for interviews, Career Competency Development Training (CCDT).
- An internship, which is available to all participants.

YDSs are expected to check on youth in their caseload on a biweekly basis, and more frequently as needed.

Youth interact with the YDS primarily, and later during the placement stage, with a Workforce Development Specialist (WDS) as well. The major ongoing group activity for Pathway I young adults is in CCDT workshops, described below.

Internal Online Education Program

Young adults who opt for the online program work on a computer with a tutor or counselor nearby in case they want help. Students said that they like this way of working, citing the rapid responses of the computer to mark changes in skills as they advance toward higher grade levels, and not having to deal with other students in a classroom. The content of these programs is demanding and reflects what might be offered in a high school class. During my observations, youth concentrated on their work and progress. They did not request help from staff. In talking with them, they expressed satisfaction with their progress, but little interest in the content of what they were studying beyond the immediate need to move up the scale marking progress.²⁴ Several youth were taking or had taken classes at the city's adult education program. They expressed frustration with these classes (as an example, see the interview with Donald, below).

Career Competency Development Training (CCDT) and Vocational Training

All youth at Site B are expected to take CCDT workshops, a prerequisite for an internship and for beginning the job placement process. The CCDT takes from two weeks to one month to complete. The length of participation can be reduced to take account of other experiences of the student. Young adults participated actively during CCDT workshops that I observed. The curriculum for CCDT is extensive. The sections that I observed and that young adults discussed with me are:

- Developing a career plan;
- Finding a job; getting a job;
- UNICrew Assessment Review²⁵ to prepare online applications;
- Keeping a job.

As the market has changed, the staff has adjusted its approach, and now there is more emphasis than in the past on online job search and applications. Nearly all of the youth I interviewed from Site B expressed appreciation for the help they had received in preparing for employment.

Site B has also arranged with a local community college for Pathway I youth, 10 annually, to take a training course in Advanced Manufacturing (welding).

Internships

All young people at Site B can have an internship once they have completed CCDT. Most are paid; when funds are not available, the organization will provide gift cards or other benefits. Internships are set up by the WDS in consultation with the YDS and the youth.

Supervisor of Workforce Development Programs:²⁶ *[The choice of an internship] depends on the student. We really try to personalize the student's interest [in the selection of] the internship.*

Youth that I spoke with had had internships with a wide range of businesses and nonprofits: retail franchises, social service organizations, and an environmental improvement organization among them. Internships are about 90 hours in length and are monitored closely. This includes site visits by staff and weekly timesheets provided by the employer. Youth may be assigned to an internship within Site B if staff believes they are not ready to work at an outside organization.

Job Placement

Ralph, WDS: *It is not a time like when I was a teenager I could go to McDonald's and I didn't have to worry about online stuff. I could just impress a supervisor or manager, fill out the application, and I had a job. ...But now...I have to break that down to [the youth] consistently and show them they can't get discouraged. They still have to keep trying. It's not as easy as it was... And that's my fear. Frustration and despair. Because when you're frustrated and you're desperate, now your common sense won't help you a lot because you're going to do silly things...*

Site B has put in place both a strong set of connections with employers and activities such as CCDT to strengthen young people's employability and the confidence of employers. Most job placements are with local businesses, especially in food services and retail.

Supervisor of Workforce Development Programs: *The employers that we've been working with for a long time... as example ...companies and that are into sales, but it's more the Marshalls, the T.J. Maxxes, the AJ Wrights — home goods. ... Right now our collaboration... is everybody within the ... area, they collaborate with us. So they hire their entry-level population from us.*

Youth are coached by a WDS who helps them identify potential jobs on the web, in newspapers, and through the contacts of Site B. The WDS assists them in preparing for interviews and for

knowing what to do once they are employed. The organization continues to support the young people after they are placed, working on issues that emerge on the job or helping to find another should that be necessary.

College Placement

Like Site A, Site B has developed relationships with local community colleges to increase access and graduation or attainment of a certificate. Also, it has created a position for a YDS who focuses entirely on preparing students by helping them go through the application, financial aid, and enrollment processes and follows up to support them once they are in a school. It also places a counselor at a local community college.

Today, more youth are getting into colleges from Site B than in the past; one third of those I interviewed were in degree or certificate programs. Keeping them there requires constant attention. The YDS responsible for college cited success stories but also frustration at the failure of some youth to do the basics: get paperwork in on time or seek help with academics before the end of a semester, when it is too late. Site B leadership is committed to continuing to strengthen this component of its services.

Retention

During the course of my work at Site B, six of the 14 students remained involved in the program or intended to do so; while the program was able to track the status of all 14 after 12 months.

The site's commitment for at least a year of follow-up is important as youth, especially those in Pathway I, often hit rough patches, even after they are placed. The program had not lost contact with any of the youth I interviewed three months after the interviewing ended.

PROGRAM INTEGRATION

The organization has created a *Field Guide* for staff, providing detailed descriptions of each of its services, processes and protocols. Staff also uses Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) to track youth. Data from ETO is used also in supervision to help in assessing staff's persistence and effectiveness with participants. The organization's team of three senior level workers who are responsible for assessment of programs, initiating and managing external evaluations, and program and staff development, draws on the ETO data, observations, and external assessments and uses these with program managers to identify and address strengths and weaknesses. Staff development activities are frequent. Some are geared to individuals, others to program units (such as YDSs or WDSs) and are designed in consultation with supervisors. Finally, the long tenure of staff, especially those in leadership positions, means that they are highly familiar with the program's services and provide continuity in carrying out its mission and conducting services.

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH PARTICIPANTS

Sandra was 20 when I first interviewed her in early 2012. She had just obtained a high school diploma through the Penn Foster online program, one of Site B's education options at the time. Now she is beginning college and thinking about career possibilities. Her involvement with Site B began in 2005 through its summer youth program, and, after a recent incident, she was directed by the court system to attend Site B where she participated in the online education program as well as other offerings.

Sandra: *The [high school] environment I was in didn't allow me to pay attention to my work as much as I should have been—it allowed me to be fooling around. So I felt that Penn Foster was more of a smaller room, more attention for me to focus.*

With help from Site B's tutors, she persisted.

Sandra: *It took me a long time because I didn't want to just submit [until I was ready to pass the test] ...So I wanted to take my time, because I was having trouble with my math so I had a ... tutor [from Site B]...*

Sandra benefitted also from training in work readiness and computer skills at Site B.

Sandra: *I am trained and have skills; and already have part or most of the skills I need; learned to work on the computer and that was most helpful, learned PowerPoint and data entry.*

[After being asked what she remembers as most important to her at Site B] At [Site B] since I was 14— job readiness program was most important. They tailor it to your interest; they helped [me] get OSHA [certification].

Sandra also participated in internships. Consistent with her interest in working with youth, the internships suggested to her ways to enrich experiences for other young people and she has shared her advice with program staff about expanding opportunities.

Sandra: *If I were to start my own business or school similar to this, I would definitely — like if I had internships — I would have kids go all over — go to different towns and stuff like Petco and you know, there's kids who want to do everything.*

She began to attend college shortly after obtaining her diploma:

Sandra: *Actually, I'm involved with [Site B] at [X Community College] now, because there's a lady — [names her] — she works over there and she's a Youth Development Specialist for here... She helps kids like me set up financial aid, do their FAFSA, get everything out of the way fast...keep our heads straight on.*

Sandra lives on her own and works to support herself. She has had a succession of jobs and currently works at a local "hamburger joint." She continues to draw upon the program.

Sandra: *I spend time, like if I need to update my resume, or if I need to go on the computer to fill out a job application and educational stuff, I might come here for a little help from other offices in the building because I just don't cooperate with this office, I cooperate with all offices in [Site B].*

Donald was 22 when I first interviewed him in April 2012. He has had a rough ride through much of his life, in and out of foster homes, no regular school after middle school, incarcerated, and now has a daughter — she does not live with him. He started to attend programs at Site B when he was 20.

Donald: *When I finished middle school, I was incarcerated... [Then] I was in a halfway house... I got out of that ... I was still in the system, DCF [Department of Children and Families, for foster care]. They got me into Job Corps. From when I was in Job Corps I was doing automotive. I finished my automotive, got kicked out, and I came into YouthBuild. I found YouthBuild on my own. From YouthBuild I found adult ed., on to adult ed. ...I finished YouthBuild ... I picked up my trade of carpentry. I'm certified [as a carpenter with OSHA...*

When I first met him, he was seeking his GED through classes at the local adult education program [sponsored by the city's education department] and an online education program at Site B, E2020. In the months that followed the first interview, his desire to stay connected with and to help his daughter and the support of a WDS proved to be touchstones for him, even as he struggled to complete the GED and earn income.

Donald: *Whatever I've got to do — get above things, stay out of trouble, stay on the right path. I've got a daughter so she's bringing my future up. She's bringing my eye up to better things, stay away from things I should be far away from. Because I've been here [at Site B] so long I know everybody and familiar with everybody and well connected with everybody.*

[Commenting on Site B's help.] They care about you a lot. Put you on the right path. When I first came I thought it would just be help to get jobs. But it's mostly like schooling, education, a person you can talk to, friendship — a lot...[The problem with adult education] You have people [new students] come in every two months or so and you move up and you go back every time people come in — you move forward and you come down. But with E2020, it's a big hook for me because I move ... I keep moving forward and going up.

Came to [Site B], [they] interviewed us, gave us our own job readiness training to see what we know before stepping into the field and being interviewed in a business.

Donald has had two internships. He worked in a local parks association where his major role was in maintenance, including using his carpentry skills to do repairs. Later, he worked at a Burlington Coat Factory store where he was trained, learned about the different positions in the store, and dealt with customers.

In reflecting on the internship experiences, Donald says:

Donald: *Keeping me on track... keeping me busy, finding a bunch of productive things to occupy my time instead of being in trouble out on the streets...*

His WDS hoped that he might be hired by Burlington Coat Factory, where he had helped Donald get the internship:

Ralph, WDS: *So have you spoken to them ...? Because you said your chances were pretty good two months ago... Have you spoken to [supervisor's name]?*

Donald *[internship supervisor's name] said I'll know in two weeks or four weeks before my internship is over with. I don't know.*

The job did not materialize and now Donald has moved on. He has been obtaining temporary work from local contractors utilizing his carpentry skills. He still has not passed the GED and is not currently taking classes

Asked about college, he says:

Donald: *I want to go to college, but not immediately. I want to pick up on my trade and getting into carpentry, construction.*

His WDS continues to check in on him, though at this time, there are no plans for him to be involved at Site B.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

Fourteen students were interviewed of whom one is female. The average age was 20. The average length of participation in the organization's programs (which include Summer Youth Employment and Afterschool) was 36 months with a range of seven to 124 months. If the youth with 124 months of participation is excluded from the data, the average number of months of participation was 27. According to data provided to me by the program, two of the youth were in foster care and five were court-involved. The program did not provide data about changes in academic skills. The program reported that four students had received high school diplomas from Penn Foster and one a GED. Five had moved to post-secondary institutions, two of these to certificate programs and three to degree programs. Six were still involved with Site B programs. Four were employed.

SITE B: SUMMARY POINTS

- Aggressive and growing parent organization with strong local influence that has affected state and local youth policies.
- Programs are clearly laid out and there is explicit, written guidance to staff
- Long tenures of lead staff team
- Large investment in continuous improvement
- Commitment to long-term relationships with participants
- Limited internal education capacity for youth who have dropped out
- Limited vocational training opportunities for youth who have dropped out.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This paper does not compare the two sites as only one of them kept records on academic levels. Across both sites, however, the students with outcomes (post-secondary and job placement, diplomas and certificates) averaged considerably longer periods of participation. Of the 27 students interviewed, 12 had outcomes (some more than one). Students with an outcome averaged 36 months of participation, 20 for those without. If you exclude the student who had 124 months in the program, since this was an outlier, those with an outcome averaged 28 months of participation. Separately, Site A's students with outcomes averaged 22 months in the program, and those without an outcome averaged 11 months; while in Site B the figures are 31 and 27 respectively (again, excluding the young adult with 124 months of participation).

At Site B five young adults, more than a third of those interviewed, attained a diploma and went on to college. At Site A, there was only one diploma, but eight of the 13 youth showed gains in academic level, and only one of those who was post-tested did not show a gain (four were not post-tested at the time I completed my observations). It is probable that many of the Site B students came in at higher skill levels than those at Site A where 11 students entered at eighth grade level or below.

It is important to note that of the five sites that I reviewed for possible inclusion in the paper, three do not accept students who test below the eighth grade level, the reading level considered close to the GED. I did not ask for math results, but generally, in the field, students test lower in math than in reading.

Both sites applied practices that are consistent with research about how to engage young people, and were successful in doing so over more than a year. The central practice that both sites applied was that of having each young adult supported by an adult counselor who expressed caring, provided encouragement, removed obstacles to their participation, and maintained regular contact with the young person during their involvement in the programs. Young adults expressed appreciation for counselors and instructors that demonstrated caring and encouragement and most said that they were in touch with them several times each week. They pointed to the importance of services that were tailored to them individually. Additionally, they expressed appreciation for services that were comprehensive in that they included both academic and work-related supports. They felt positive about work experiences and about educational materials that were interesting – to which they could relate their own life experiences.

Five of the Site A participants interviewed entered the program at the ABE level in reading and participated in the literacy class, which utilizes a curriculum based on research about instruction. Three of the five remained in the program, and two of these gained either one or two grade levels in reading. The other two had not been post-tested at the time I completed the study and were not active in the program. More broadly, there were sharp differences in the quality of classroom practices that were observed, with both literacy and math classes aligned with research. In these classes, I observed a high level of student engagement.

Both sites are using practices that are designed to improve the quality of their implementation. These include investing in training and other supports to strengthen practice, selecting staff who can relate well to the participants, and using data to improve the quality of services.

Only two of the students interviewed had received vocational skills training from their programs, and both mentioned this as helping them obtain work. The lack of opportunities for such training seems to be a big gap in the field, given its focus on preparing youth to obtain financial independence. The internships that are far more common were greatly appreciated by the participants. But it would be helpful to know more about the benefits of vocational training as opposed to internships, or along with internships.

Both programs benefitted from the work of their parent organizations. These organizations were able to influence both government and private funders in ways that provided more resources and flexibility to their programs. They worked with advocacy organizations to support those goals. And they provided various administrative and fund-raising services.

Both programs are fairly large, serving annually 80 or more young adults who had dropped out. This enabled them to target their services, especially Site A, which has classes for the different academic levels of its students, and several staff who specialize, a Social Worker and a Compliance Coordinator.

These findings reinforce two important assumptions about work with these young adults. The first is that students with longer periods of support for young adults get better results. At the same time, consistent with earlier research, those who enter at low academic levels, participation of more than a year is not enough for them to obtain a diploma. They need more time, and it is uncertain that some of these students will ever obtain a diploma. In my view, this highlights the need for a better means of assessing students as to their potential and the time it might take for them to achieve a diploma, including identifying those who have disabling conditions.

Finally, the lack of program options for students with poor academic skills is an important issue in the field since the majority of dropouts read and do math poorly. Indeed, this is a primary reason why many fail to remain in school. Yet, most public and private funders stress the need for fairly rapid progress to a GED, and this is most markedly true of the Workforce Investment Act, the largest source of public funds for this population. At the same time, there is a need for research into how long it will take these students to achieve a diploma, and the benefits of vocational training that might help to position them for obtaining an income even while they continue to seek a diploma.

PRACTICES THAT MATTER

This summary is drawn from the sites described in the paper as well as from interviews and observations with additional providers, funders and others.

FUNDING

Unlike in public education, there is no stable base of funding that programs can rely upon.

As a result the sites have to be prepared constantly to modify their work in order to maintain funding. Even public funders, such as agencies that manage the Workforce Investment Act funds, may change grantees on a regular basis. Yet, despite the practice of changing grantees, effective programs take several years to develop. Funders that stay with organizations, while at the same time closely monitoring their growth, are more likely to see strong results.

Several funders recognized interim results, such as grade gain and strong practices, rather than only outcomes such as the GED or job placement. These enabled sites to serve the entire population, rather than the smaller subset that is close to attainment of the GED. Nearly 75 percent of dropouts read below the eighth grade level.

Funders need to select, prepare and manage their staff and consultants carefully. Because funders wield so much power, it is difficult for grant and contract recipients to bring up issues about funder personnel. Among the conversations I had with numerous providers in preparation for this study, there were instances in which great appreciation was expressed for funder staff, for example, in connecting them to resources or information. Troubling issues were cited as well including unethical behavior by funder staff and/or consultants and staff being sent to sites when they appeared unprepared. It would make sense for funders to consider, in addition to thorough preparation of their staff, support for an ombudsperson for a city or region who could hear such complaints and pass them on without naming the source. This position could, for example, be based in regional or citywide associations of funders.

SERVICES

Key Role of Parent Organizations

The history, values, and capacity of the parent organizations proved to be important factors in the quality and duration of the programs studied. Each program receives multiple and essential supports including legal, fiscal and human resources management, and fund development. They provide financial stability and stable cash flow in the face of year-to-year variations in funding that otherwise would undermine services.

Their size, reputation, and work with advocacy organizations gave the parent organizations a voice in their cities' policies about young adults. This created opportunities for increased funding and/or greater flexibility from policymakers and private funders.

Strengthening Work at the Program Level

Effective personnel selection and management were essential in producing and sustaining high quality services. Salary levels, staffing structures, how supervision is applied, and how new staff are integrated into programs are described in the detailed program descriptions.

Hiring processes are demanding, yet open to those who appear able to establish constructive relationships with young adults even when they do not have conventional credentials. Both programs studied are committed to having staff that reflect the backgrounds of those they serve. Several staff that had been hired with unusual or limited credentials had moved up to more responsible positions and were highly valued by participants. Programs use training, shadowing, and other supports to orient new staff. One has a detailed manual that guides its staff.

Programs devoted staff time and other resources to collecting data, improving their work, using both internal program staff and external intermediaries to conduct training or provide other assistance. This resulted in both development of new program efforts (such as literacy instruction), and improvements in services, such as support for students once they enroll in college. Leaders encourage a program culture that is devoted to growth. Without such supports, services can atrophy and/or fail to incorporate what is known about effectiveness.

Intermediary organizations that are knowledgeable about developments in the field and related fields, such as education and work preparation, and that are skilled in assisting programs, brought concrete payoffs in impacts on participants, strengthening the academic work at one site and the individualized counseling supports at the other.

Engaging Young Adults

Both sites have incorporated a youth-development approach in their work. This is rooted in a conviction in the ability of young people to succeed, even when there are significant barriers and setbacks. This approach is reflected in their practices that combine caring, high expectations and sustained support over long periods of time.

The relationship with the counselor is the glue. Nearly all the young adults interviewed cited the importance of this relationship and the encouragement and help in solving practical problems they received. More than half said they speak to their counselor several times a week. They cited also instructors who reached out to them and provided individualized help.

The counselor role is broad — the term “primary person” applies to how they are defined and carried out.²⁷ Counselors were responsible for working with the young adults from when they start the programs through to the end of their involvement with the services and beyond.

During the orientations at both sites, the counselors worked with the young adults to plot out in writing goals and a series of steps - a pathway - to achieve them. Counselors were expected to check in with each young adult at least biweekly and to engage with the institutions and individuals that are involved in their lives, helping youth address issues that arise with foster care providers, probation officers, family members, employers and other program staff.

Programs had limited resources for determining if young people had disabling conditions or how long it might take them to attain a GED.

Young adults were especially positive about 1:1 customized supports. They cited the value to them of sitting down with instructors to get help during classes or afterward. Test results were cited also. Young adults use them to assess their progress.

To strengthen bonds with each young adult, programs intentionally introduce them to several staff. These multiple relationships were cited by young adults when describing their feelings of connection to the programs.

Both programs have developed ways to manage their funds in order to extend the duration of support to young adults, including after the core services are completed and young adults have moved on. This is important because many young adults require more than a year to achieve an outcome such as a GED or a job. Even after they aged-out of the core services and were not covered by contracts, young adults returned to speak with staff and use computers or space. These sustained efforts are rarely supported by funders.

The physical qualities of the sites contributed to helping young adults feel connected to the programs. Sites encourage informal contact with multiple staff in eating areas and other spaces, provide places for young adults to practice skills and enjoy leisure in activities that interest them (such as music). Both sites were clean, bright, and well-kept.

Two other practices that were identified as valuable at each site separately: the use of a formal career development assessment, the Harrington O'Shea, by one site which was seen by young adults and staff as valuable in their career planning. The other site has created **an interim class structure that allows young adults who wish to enroll off-cycle to remain involved** while awaiting a new cycle to begin, thus keeping them engaged while not disrupting existing classes.

Fostering Growth

The goals cited most frequently by young adults were acquisition of the GED or a high school diploma and, eventually, college. Those who enroll seeking only a job were urged to consider the advantage that having a diploma will make in their ability to earn. In recent years, both sites have increased staff resources to support enrolling in and graduating from college.

A major difference in the academic services of the two programs is that one offers online courses supported by program staff that monitor progress and tutor when needed. It also refers young adults to other organizations, such as YouthBuild or the local education department's adult education classes, all the while maintaining the counselor relationship as a means of supporting young adults in these activities. The other offers a sequence of increasingly demanding academic classes in-house, culminating with a precollege course. Here, the young person must attend the classes on a daily basis, providing opportunities for close oversight and interventions when necessary.

Sites work to have youth take responsibility for their own advancement. Counselors and other staff sought to achieve a balance between being highly responsive and supportive, and shifting responsibility to the young person. Completing their plan and their goals may take several tries for some young adults.

The young people's ability to stay on the pathway toward their goals came into focus as they completed orientation and began classes or other programs to advance their skills.²⁸ Some young adults may be ready right at the start. For many who were interviewed, getting control of their own progress, taking the wheel so to speak, was a developing awareness; it was expressed

as an assertion or aspiration, but not with the assurance of a firmly held conviction. The degree of readiness was evident especially in their ability to fulfill their commitments for participation and in applying themselves to master the skills and attitudes necessary to achieve their goals. Often, participation proved uneven, with youth failing to attend for a few weeks or more, and then restarting.

Interest and active engagement in academic content by young adults were evident from observation of some, but not all classes, and were cited by youth. Some instructors, for example, require that young adults solve problems in math or analyze texts in literacy and explain how they came to their conclusions, thus encouraging youth to think and not merely answer test questions. A math instructor who doubles as education coordinator was cited with great frequency because, young adults said, he made himself available to them, often taking the initiative to offer assistance outside the classroom and was successful in enabling them to overcome hurdles in understanding math. In discussing the online courses, young adults expressed interest in their progress, but not in the content of the courses.

A challenge for the field is the content and quality of GED instruction. Much of the material is familiar to the young adults, though they may not have mastered it in the past. Often, instructors present it through worksheets copied from GED texts which reinforce the feeling that this is “old work,” and, therefore, dull.

For youth who enter programs at low skill levels, Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS), a PreGED program of NYC’s Youth Development Institute, was cited and its practices used by the site which provides classes. It has been evaluated over three years and showed consistent improvements in both participation levels and performance across diverse community-based organizations.²⁹

Work Readiness Preparation

Jobs: Staff of both organizations mentioned the difficult job market, saying it takes far more interviews to land a job than in the past and that many are temporary/seasonal. Staff members who specialize in employment and have relationships with employers reviewed each student’s personal documentation and helped them polish resumes and anything else that was to be sent out. At one site, all young people participated in internships or other work experiences. At both, they take a series of workshops with a curriculum that prepares them for job search, job interviews, and staying on the job. Even youth who intend to go to college participated.

A typical curriculum might include:

- Developing a career plan
- Finding a job; getting a job
- Preparing online applications and letters to employers
- Keeping a Job: dealing with issues that occur on the job

Staff said that online applications have assumed increasing importance. Companies rely increasingly on computer programs to review applications. Respond incorrectly, and one may never be considered by that company. Youth said that the training workshops helped them understand how to apply online.

Internships are stipended and intended to build understanding about the workplace and to develop skills and confidence. They run from four to eight weeks. At one site, young adults were given several internships in succession. Programs have developed a large number of internship options, in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations. This allowed young people choices with which to pursue their interests. Some are set up with organizations that are likely to hire after the internship, in as one staffer said, “a try before you buy” arrangement.

All young adults I spoke with were positive in their comments about internships. They cited the opportunity to do work that is valued and to be occupied with constructive activity.

Stipends and other monetary awards were rarely mentioned by young people in interviews.

Site staff determined the readiness of young adults for an internship, considering attendance and behavior. When staff believed that young adults require close supervision, they assigned them to an internship within the program or its parent organization, or withheld the opportunity until the youth were considered ready.

Site staff monitored internships. They checked attendance and conducted site visits to learn from both the mentor and they were doing. The extent of reflection and other supports for internships was not consistent across sites.

Internships were not the first work experience for most youth. Many had had other experiences, mostly in the Summer Youth Employment Program. A large number had volunteered. The sites provided few opportunities for work experience in groups.

Once a young person decided to seek employment, the programs provided individualized coaching, helped them to identify opportunities and offered constant encouragement. Often, a staff person met with the young adult after an interview to help him/her reflect on it. Staff members maintained contact with young adults after they were placed, helping them work through issues that emerged on the job.

The programs are establishing long-term relationships with employers. Major retailers, such as T.J.Maxx, Marshalls, as well as nonprofits hire young people. Programs worked to keep the door open to each employer for further opportunities. They sought to demonstrate their ability to address the employers’ concerns about youth readiness and retention

Jobs in retail, food services and “logistics (mail service, messengering) were cited most frequently for youth placements. Often, they are in “back-end,” positions, such as stocking. Several young adults worked their way up during the period of the interviews; one moved into a new position as a “coordinator” in a clothing franchise.

Young adults got jobs on their own. These included in construction, food services, and retail sales. Skills learned in the programs for getting jobs, such as interviewing and self-presentation, are helpful according to the young people. Specific vocational skills proved to be valuable — carpentry and computer skills especially.

COLLEGE³⁰

Both programs have increased their efforts to help young adults enroll in and graduate from community colleges. One offers an extensive pre-college preparation program in which young adults who pass the GED, or who are likely to pass it, can take classes that are designed to reduce their need for remedial courses once they are in college and address other forms of college readiness, such as learning how to get student aid and planning their academic programs.

Programs have dedicated staff to help young adults with the college process. These staff told me that they must work closely with young adults to prepare them and get their application materials in on time so as not to foreclose opportunities. They cited the importance of staying in touch once young people have started college so that they can address challenges proactively, such as falling behind academically. Failure to catch these issues in a timely fashion makes it difficult to correct them and can lead to separation from the college. Both programs have staff positioned on a college campus. Students described how they had been helped by these staff through tutoring and assistance in navigating college bureaucracies.

Retention in college is a major concern. Sites are working to increase youths' academic readiness and ability to navigate in a college setting. Helping young people figure out which courses to take and programs to pursue is especially important to reduce false starts that consume aid that may be even more important at later stages when young adults are more certain about their choice of programs of study. Additionally, programs are extending the time during which they support young people beyond the first year of college. Just as they do with employers, the programs are building relationships with the colleges to make them more hospitable to young adults.

FOLLOW-UP

Young people were able to continue to be involved with these programs beyond the core period of service. Facebook was cited by counselors as a valuable tool for keeping track of youth. Youth expressed appreciation for the open-ended support of the programs. Support is not indefinite, however. As young adults move away or age-out of the contracts that fund the work, support is reduced. Even then, however, young adults can return to speak to someone or use facilities, such as computers to prepare resumes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN WORK WITH YOUNG ADULT DROPOUTS

What is to be done to enable more young adults to become independent financially and active as learners and citizens? Many able individuals and organizations have wrestled with this question over the decades. In the last few years, there have been several major papers that reflect renewed interest in these young adults including those by Civic Enterprises and The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Jobs for the Future and MDRC have for many years implemented demonstrations, written commentary and conducted research. The American Youth Policy Forum and National Youth Employment Coalition have worked on this issue for decades. In New York, Los Angeles and in several other cities, there are promising initiatives focusing on these youth, driven by local governments. Project RISE, initiated in New York City, is now operating in four cities.³¹ The recommendations below draw upon this broad work with a focus on local organizations.

Policy and Funding:

Reducing the flow of new dropouts is the top priority. Programs continue to have a high demand from young people who have dropped out and are not able to find stable employment. The small high schools and Multiple Pathways to Graduation initiatives in New York City have increased the number of graduates and offer a promising range of models, many of which draw upon the capacity and expertise of community organizations with a history of commitment to the young adult population, organizations much like the ones described in this report.³² Recently, Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) initiated a major new investment to apply what has been learned from these and other successful efforts to develop more effective high schools.³³

The CBOs in this study work to build relationships with schools, post-secondary institutions and employers. These efforts are labor-intensive and could be facilitated if they were to have energetic support from city government, not only in funding, but by using government's influence to open doors and coordinate efforts. This would augment CBO efforts and reduce the need to negotiate and re-negotiate these relationships which are critical for building pathways for young adults. An example from Los Angeles is cited in the recent paper by Tom Hilliard of the Center for an Urban Future.³⁴

Incentivizing and supporting providers to serve young adults with low-skill levels will help to align the services that are available with the population of dropouts. Most of the organizations that I considered in the initial reconnaissance do not serve these young adults. In order to change this, policymakers and funders must recognize interim outcomes, such as gains in skills and support longer periods of participation by young people than is currently the case.

The quality of much GED-level instruction and materials is mundane. There is a need for more investment in creating GED curricula and developing instructional practices that are engaging, highly structured and increase skills in critical thinking.

Training, such as in commonly used software applications, gave young adults more ways to obtain paid work. This did not reduce the need for academic skills, but gave individuals a broader set of skills.

Adult education programs operated by school districts were consistently mentioned by young people as ineffective. These funds should be redirected to organizations that have a commitment

and capacity to serve the young adult population. This will help to assure better use of this limited resource.

Given the large numbers of youth who lack opportunities for development either through work or education, it would be important to vastly increase the capacity of communities with large numbers of dropouts to provide and/or oversee paid work when other options are not available.

RESEARCH

The field needs a better understanding of how to assess a youth's potential to achieve a GED or high school diploma. For example, it may make sense for some youth NOT to pursue these. But at this time, it is difficult to make this determination in a way that is accurate and fair.

Because of costs, programs find it difficult to sustain their involvement with youth beyond the point where contracts no longer cover them. It would be helpful to know whether longer periods of support result in better outcomes. Related to this, can lower levels of support be beneficial if sustained after core services are completed—for example, weekly check-ins by a counselor.

PRACTICE

Most young people I interviewed saw their goal as the GED, and were not aware of other options, or of interim options, such as a training certificate. Providing more information to young adults about the limits of the GED for obtaining employment, and showing them additional options for moving on a path to economic independence will help them make informed decisions about the best routes to follow.

The sites are funded at too limited a level to provide and oversee community service options to any significant extent, yet these would offer a way for young people to become engaged constructively in their communities. These activities can help youth develop skills to become economically self-sufficient and meet the broader purposes of education in our democracy.

Too rarely was program staff aware that there is a defined field for work with young adults, with best practices, research, and a history of programming efforts. Making them aware of the field and providing training and other supports for professional development of staff will improve skills and professional identity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Dropout data is from *High School Dropouts by Age, Race and Hispanic Origin, 1980 – 2009*, in The American Community Survey 2010, or <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/1250272.pdf>. For anticipated impacts of the Common Core, see, L. Hamilton and A. McKinnon, *Opportunity by Design: New High School Models for Student Success*, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Spring 2013, New York, NY: "...if the research on the effects of course failure on student persistence to graduation holds true, we can expect to see a near-term growth in dropout rates for schools that do not both recuperate and accelerate student learning." P. 3.
- 2 While there are efforts in some states to create an alternative to the GED, it is not yet clear what these will require of young people and programs, nor when they will be ready.
- 3 See, for example, S. Ayres, *The High Cost of Youth Unemployment*, (Washington, DC: The Center for American Progress, April 2013). This paper provides an excellent summary of key data.
- 4 For a description of the impact on personal income, see L. Treschan and D. Fischer, *From Basic Skills to Better Futures: Generating Economic Dividends for New York City, New York City*, (The Community Service Society, September, 2009).
- 5 *The High Cost of High School Dropouts*, (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, November 2011) or <http://www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf>.
- 6 Op. cit. 1.
- 7 While both of the programs described in this report began as local efforts, each went through a period in which federal dollars were paramount. They have since returned to rely more on local and philanthropic support.
- 8 See, for example, the comprehensive summary of evaluations of national initiatives and their implications for future work in D. Bloom, "Programs and Policies to Help High School Dropouts in the Transition to Adulthood, The Future of Children, Vol. 20, Spring, 2010 or <http://futureofchildren.org/publications/journals/article/index.xml?journalid=72&articleid=522>.
- 9 Examples include YouthBuild and New York City's Transfer High Schools, both of which developed in significant part from community-based programs. A useful addition to the research about local programs is the current MDRC study of Project Rise: *Reconnecting Disconnected Young Adults: The Early Experience of Project Rise*, Michael Bangser, (New York City, MDRC, October 2013).
- 10 In a report prepared for the US Department of Labor, *Preparing Youth for the Future: The Literacy of America's Young Adults*, the American Institutes of Research found that among dropouts aged 16–24, 69% have basic or below prose literacy and 84% have basic or below quantitative literacy. The report, based on a 2003 study by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, describes these levels as "quite limited." Y. Jin and J. Kling, (Washington, DC, AIR, June 2009), or http://wdr.doleta.gov/research/FullText_Documents/Preparing_Youth_for_the_Future_The_Literacy_of_Americas_Young_Adults.pdf
- 11 *An Issue Brief* from the National Center on Educational Statistics describes how long it takes to get a GED. It states that even after eight years more than 40% of youth who enter programs with low skills, or who are from low-income families do not acquire the GED, *Educational Attainment of High School Dropouts 8 Years Later* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, DC 2004), or <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2005026>
- 12 The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities collects and reports data about youth with disabilities: <http://www.ndpc-sd.org/>.
- 13 Site B serves adolescents 14 and up. All of the youth interviewed for this paper were 17 or older.
- 14 "In the 2001–02 school year, nationally, only 51 percent of students with disabilities exited school with a standard diploma." Of students with any kind of disability, nearly 38% dropped out in in the 2001- 2002 school year. Reported in http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_DropoutPrevention_052507.pdf. Unfortunately, information about the status of participants who have disabilities is difficult for programs serving dropouts to obtain. Even when they do obtain it, there are almost no resources available to support them for specialized work with these youth.
- 15 A. Wigfield, J. S. Eccles, "Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation," *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, (2000).
- 16 For a discussion of self-management and other factors, see, E. Toshalis and M. J. Nakkula, "Motivation, Engagement and Student Voice." *Jobs for the Future*, Boston, MA: April 2012.
- 17 YO! provided large grants to 36 high poverty communities, for serving in-school and out of school youth from 14 –21 with a range of services such as sports, recreation and opportunities for community service. For the US Department of Labor-funded evaluation of YO!, see: http://wdr.doleta.gov/research/FullText_Documents/YO%20Impact%20and%20Synthesis%20Report.pdf
- 18 <http://www.ncee.org/>
- 19 Published by The Youth Development Institute, New York, NY 2009. See the website for a range of program descriptions and guides about working with young adults. <http://www.ydinstitute.org/resources/index.html> For the evaluation of CEPS: P. B Campbell, T. R. Kibler and J. L. Weissman, *Community Education Pathways to Success, Final Evaluation Report*, (Brockton, MA). April 2009; or <http://www.campbell-kibler.com/2009%20CEPS%20final%20evaluation%20report%20with%20appendices.pdf>
- 20 Csikszentmihalyi, in his classic study of engagement, *Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, points to the pleasure in activities that are challenging, but not out of reach; require skills, that are goal-directed and bounded by rules. M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience*. (New York, NY: Harper, 1991), P. 48.
- 21 <http://www.thrivefoundation.org>
- 22 R. Hackman, *Six Common Misperceptions about Teamwork*, HBR Blog Network, June 2011.
- 23 A. J. O'Shea and R. Feller, *CDM Career Decision-Making System Revised, Level 2 Survey Booklet*, Hand-Scored Edition,

(Minneapolis, Pearson, 2003).

- 24 Site B has used two different online programs, E2o2o and Penn Foster. The work I observed was with E2o2o, as Penn Foster had been discontinued due to lack of funding, but the site plans to resume Penn Foster.
- 25 The UNICrew Assessment is a test that many big box and other employers use with online applicants. The purpose of the training in online applications by Site B is to make sure that applicants do not answer questions in a way that ruins their future chances of being considered for a position.
- 26 The person who was Supervisor of Workforce Development Services has taken a different position at the organization. Now, she is responsible for setting up adaptation sites for Site B's community-based services.
- 27 See the section on Primary Person in the Youth Development Institute's publication, *Promising Practices in Working with Young Adults*: <http://www.ydinstitute.org/resources/publications/PromisingPractices.pdf>.
- 28 For a detailed discussion of self-management, E. Toshalis M. J. Nakkula, *Op. cit* 15.
- 29 *Op. cit.* 19 *Community Education Pathways to Success, Final Evaluation Report*, (Brockton, MA). April 2009 *Op. Cit.*, 18.
- 30 Jobs for the Future has established a website, *Back on Track*, which has much practical guidance as well as program models. For a list of resources, see: <http://www.jff.org/projects/current/education/back-track/1354>.
- 31 In New York City, the Center for Economic Opportunity has conducted several promising initiatives for young adults that are being evaluated rigorously: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/ceo/html/home/home.shtml>. For an early report about Project Rise, see *op. cit.* 9.
- 32 H. Bloom, R. Unterman, *Sustained Positive Effects on High School Graduation Rates Produced by New York City's Small Public High Schools of Choice*, (New York, MDRC, January 2012) or <http://www.mdrc.org/sustained-positive-effects-graduation-rates-produced-new-york-city%E2%80%99s-small-public-high-schools.pdf>
- 33 *Op. cit.* 1: *Opportunity by Design: New High School Models for Student Success*.
- 34 Tom Hilliard, *Innovations in Workforce Development*, (New York, Center for an Urban Future, NYC, July 2013) or <http://nycfuture.org/research/publications/innovations-in-workforce-development>.

FOR YOUNG ADULTS WHO DROP OUT: PATHWAYS OR MERELY STOPS ALONG THE WAY?

APPENDIX I

SITE A: DETAILED DESCRIPTION

I can say that [the program] gives you a feeling like even if you feel it's discouraging and you leave and you're not doing nothing — say you're sitting on your bed and not doing nothing, you just start to think like, you know you're welcome here. You know the arms are open, you know, where you can just get your education and get on with your life and really reach your goals. It's up to you. And that's how they make you feel. So even when I was feeling really discouraged and I wasn't coming here, I wound up coming back. Because I knew it was just my own mind. It was just me fighting myself. — Joanna, Program Participant (21)

GOAL

The organization describes the program at Site A as providing “comprehensive programming to out-of-school, unemployed young adults to help young people to meet their personal, educational, and professional goals.”

HISTORY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Site A was established in 2002 in a major US city, and expanded with a large grant from the US Department of Labor, part of the \$280 million Youth Opportunity Initiative! (YO!).¹ After YO! funding ended in 2005; the program was modified to concentrate on youth who had dropped out. The program moved to its current location in 2006. Today, the site operates several programs under unified leadership. This includes a foster care component — some of these youth are still in school — and an internship program that serves youth with high school diplomas and GEDs. The description below concentrates on services for youth who are not in school and do not have a diploma, about 450 annually. These services are supported by a mix of local government and private funders.

Parent Organization

Site A is part of a multiservice organization founded in 1934 to help individuals, many of whom were recent immigrants and refugees, to seek employment in the United States. Since then, it has grown and today serves more than 100,000 people annually. Clients represent a wide range of adults and youth including mentally ill, developmentally disabled, new immigrants and refugees, elderly, youth, and families. The stated mission is to help each person achieve greater independence at work, at home, at school and in the community. It has 3,500 employees and an annual budget of more than \$260 million. The organization's interest in the education and employment of young adult stretches back more than 40 years.

The large size and capacity of its parent organization provides several benefits to Site A: It has a weighty voice and high visibility among public policy makers and private funders in its home city. As one example, the organization was able — with the assistance of a policy advocacy organization — to convince the city's largest private funder to pay on interim outcomes of literacy gain for young adult dropouts, despite the funder's longstanding practice of paying only on diplomas and jobs.

With the help of its strong fund development capacity, the organization wins contracts in a wide range of areas for adolescents and young adults, expanding resources available to the site. Additionally, since 2006, the city in which it is based has increased investment in services targeted to older adolescents who are at risk of dropping out, or have done so. The organization has capitalized on its history and reputation for work with this population to attract numerous grants and programs for Site A, as well as related work at its other sites. Also in 2006, the organization received private funding to develop an education and workforce program for youth in foster care. These changes have contributed to the expansion of the site. Today, Site A has a large staff to work with the young adult population. Its size enriches the number of offerings available, providing multiple levels of academic instruction as well as staff with a range of specialties. The site also participates as a partner with several intermediaries that provide training and innovative practices to its staff. Its large size and capacity make it an attractive partner.

The organization has invested funds from private foundations in training staff and has made a point of building its capacity to serve youth dropouts who are at both ends of the skill scale, those who are low-skilled, reading and doing math below the eighth grade level, and those who have passed the GED and seek to enter college.

It has a well-developed infrastructure which supports fund-raising, technology, personnel management, and payroll. This reduces somewhat the diversity of demands on site staff and offers resources, for example, in the customization of the site's data-management system, which is used to manage contracts and track participants

Human Resources Management

The quality and management of staff is very important for youth-serving programs. Youth interviewed at all sites for this paper cited staff positively in describing their experiences in the programs. Youth identified traits such as “explains things well,” “in your face if you screw up,” “greet me with a smile every morning.”

In a study of programs for youth who have dropped out, Public/Private Ventures highlights the importance of strong staff who can win the trust of young adults:

Across all ages and program types, supportive relationships with staff appear to be the most important reason youth stay in programs.²

At Site A, most hiring is initiated by a private contractor that recruits, conducts initial screenings, and refers promising candidates to the site where they are interviewed by the Program Director, appropriate supervisor, and occasionally by others. The site itself may initiate this process if an attractive candidate is identified by staff. The staff say that they look for people who “can connect to the population;” combine caring and toughness with knowledge of the population; and related strengths. New staff members are on probation for six months and meet weekly with their supervisor during this time.

Starting salaries for direct service staff range from \$30,000-\$40,000, while supervisors earn \$60,000 or more.

The organization provides a standard benefits package, with time off for holidays and vacation days. It contributes to an employee pension plan, provides opportunities for paid education for staff as well as other supports. Additionally, its large size and aggressive fundraising mean that there are opportunities for staff to move up. Indeed, while I was visiting the site, three staff were promoted to positions of greater responsibility.

From interviews, it was clear that several staff in important roles lacked extensive experience or impressive credentials when they were hired, but had performed well and moved up. The organization is willing to hire individuals who show promise, but who may not be highly experienced. In some cases, this increases its ability to reflect the backgrounds of the population it serves. Both the education coordinator and the college coordinator live in the neighborhood and are African American. The education coordinator had been hired initially to support computer technology and has a background in music. Eventually, he became the program's math teacher and has since moved to his current position while continuing to teach. The college coordinator joined the program as a counselor. These two were cited frequently by the youth I interviewed for their skills as an instructor for the education coordinator, and as a counselor for the college coordinator.

College Coordinator: *I'd just graduated from college when I got this job... Coming into this setting was a complete shock, because the kids were bigger than me, they were my age... I had really good staff support: ... I had a previous program manager ... excellent. But he definitely prepped me and stuff, and he was a great support .and I felt that compounded...with the staff as a whole—I got the gist of it fairly quickly but I felt myself winging it at times because there is no training manual for this...You can have kids who come in and say, “Miss, I’m homeless,” ... Or, a kid that can come in and say, “Listen miss, I might go to jail.”*

The start-up process for new staff includes a three-day formal orientation conducted by the organization. At the program level, the process is largely informal. Staff cited the importance of learning from each other on the job. Staff occupies cubicles that are adjacent and interaction is frequent, something that was highlighted as a means to learn and solve problems.

College Coordinator: *It was more so leaning over the cubicle. ...I lived in [names another staffer] cubicle for about a week...*

The staff I interviewed, including four who had been there less than six months, expressed an understanding of the program's commitment to youth with a wide range of skills and needs, the goal of educational advancement, and the role of a caring adult counselor. All the supervisors of direct service staff had worked previously at that level. They were familiar with the work they supervised and even knew some of the students who were now the charges of their supervisees. Several kept some of these students as counselees even after they moved up, and — as mentioned above—the education coordinator continues to teach some math classes. I believe this familiarity helps them to oversee work with a sound understanding of how to support line staff.

Site A provides a range of professional development to its staff, some by internal units and managers and some by external organizations brought in to provide support on topics such as youth development. The value of training for the education staff in working with youth who

enter with low academic skills was cited by the staff during interviews and was evident from observations of the classes. The education coordinator as well as other instructors have been trained and received coaching in both math and literacy instruction. Several classes are described below. One new area of training cited by staff is the Transition Framework, a program of the Andrus Foundation.³ Staff said they found this helpful in their work with young adults who are by definition “in transition.”

Supervisors can monitor staff through the customized data-management system where the participation and performance of youth is recorded and in which staff writes case notes. Supervisors are responsible for conducting an annual evaluation of each person under them.

Location

The building that houses the site is 2.5 blocks off a busy commercial area, the intersection of several major streets and transportation lines. While the section is among the poorest in the city with a median income of about \$23,670, according to data from the 2010 US Census, the streets and sidewalks are busy with hurried pedestrians, local store keepers showing off their goods, and national chains like McDonald’s, Dunkin’ Donuts, and Subway. There are many outward signs of economic and social stress reflected in dress and sometimes troubled behavior of those walking the sidewalks.

Site A occupies the 4th floor of a five-story building. Young adults, who mix with older clients in the reception area after getting off the elevator, sign in with a receptionist and then are buzzed into their half of the floor.

KEY STAFF ROLES

Site A has 25 staff, including 10 counselors (called advisors at this site), who have caseloads comprising youth from a mixture of backgrounds including youth in foster care and those who have a high school diploma or GED. This reflects the presence of several programs at this site, and a commitment not to separate any group in a way that might make them feel stigmatized.

The Senior Director for the entire site oversees more than 20 contracts and is responsible for quality management, hiring, and other key elements of the program. The role is primarily one of administration and contract management.

The Assistant Program Director is responsible for most of the programmatic elements including Case Management and the “Career Clinic.” She shares oversight of the college program with the education coordinator. She reports to the senior director.

The Education Coordinator oversees the work of five instructors and is responsible for development of the academic program and GED testing.

The Coordinator for Foster Care manages liaisons with up to 26 foster care providers that send youth to the site.

The Compliance Coordinator maintains computerized records of participants to make sure they are complete and up-to-date. She identifies and flags issues that need to be attended to, such as declines in student attendance.

Instructors: in addition to their teaching duties, often, instructors take on informal counseling roles.

Career Clinic: two staff members prepare youth for getting and keeping jobs. They provide coaching to individuals and group workshops. They also develop relationships with employers. A third sets up and manages internships.

Social Worker: in addition to having her own caseload, she and the assistant program director support the advisors, helping them make difficult judgment calls, for example, about when to take punitive actions or how to guide a youth when unfamiliar issues arise.

Advisors: according to the job description, they “provide comprehensive support services” and “prepare youth for jobs, the GED, college, and internships.” For many of the young adults, the relationship with their advisor is the glue keeping them in the program. An advisor works with each young person from the time they enter the program until they finish and, often, follows-up with them after they complete or leave the formal program. They help new students develop their initial goals and a plan to achieve them, access benefits such as Medicaid, and deal with obstacles along the way, such as a need for specialized counseling. Different from traditional school counselors, these staff members work with adults and institutions with which youth have relationships to address conflicts, challenges, or build support for the young person among family members, parole officers, foster care counselors, or others.

In describing their roles, advisors emphasized the following activities.

- * Encouraging youth and reminding them of where they are in relationship to their goals and the journey ahead. Encouragement is one of the functions that was echoed most frequently by youth as being important.
- Helping young adults address practical needs, such as a loss of child care, getting Medicaid, an encounter with police, or even homelessness.
- Referring youth for higher level classes, GED testing, and the Career Clinic—major steps up the ladder to a successful outcome — and income. Advisors consult with instructors and the Education Coordinator about a given youth’s readiness for moving to higher level classes or taking the GED predictor. Actual changes occur at the end of each cycle.
- Documenting their interactions with youth by writing case notes in the organization’s customized database. These can be shared with other staff through the computer network and help with coordinating the work of all staff around each youth.

RE-ENGAGING YOUNG ADULTS

Intake and Orientation

The intake and orientation are used to assess young people’s commitment to participate, determine in which educational tier they should be placed; develop a written plan for their goals and pathway; introduce them to the staff, the program’s key elements and expectations.

The Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) is the academic assessment instrument at this site. Young adults who test below the fourth grade reading level are not accepted, but these are few in number. Students cited the test results frequently in interviews as a means of measuring their progress in the program and how much farther they had to go.

The program has extended the time for intake and orientation from one to two weeks. The additional time helps to assess whether young adults will sustain their involvement over a long enough time to achieve an outcome. Staff emphasize that the process involves choices not only by the program, but also by the youth about whether or not this is the right place for them.

Social Worker: *The orientation has changed over the last year or years from a one to a two-week period... a nice time for the students to decide if they're really interested in the program and want to continue with it, and for us to see who's serious about coming every day. So we get a good idea from their attendance, their performance and their behavior as to what it will be like if they continue.*

Connecting with Key Adults

Shortly after the process begins, advisors make appointments to interview each youth individually in order to understand their reasons for wanting to attend and help them reflect on their prior experiences in school and other programs. These conversations are designed to help youth think of the program as a new beginning and to develop the expectation that they will succeed. The initial meetings with advisors are very important for most of the young people. Of the 13 at this site who were interviewed, 12 said they speak to their advisor daily. Advisors also use the meetings to identify and reduce obstacles that might inhibit participation in the program

The site puts the educational staff in a visible role from the beginning of the orientation. At orientation, these staff members describe the program and conduct assessment tests.

Education Coordinator: *From this point forward, the student is actually with the instructors a lot more...It gives us a chance to assess different personalities so that by the time they get to class, we know them, they know us — it's not that much of a shock.*

Advisors review test results with young adults and work with them to develop their goals. The TABE tests provide a basis for initial placements and the creation of a program schedule. Some youth may be ready to fast forward to the GED predictor test, but the largest number will be assigned to classes below the eighth grade literacy and math levels.

One issue that comes up frequently is that students expect to move to the GED before they are ready. As test results are reviewed and the pathway ahead laid out, youth get a realistic sense of what will be required to pass the GED. The test results are helpful in enabling them to understand that the pathway may be longer than they anticipated.

Others may want to move to employment quickly, without classes. As a rule, program staff seeks to renegotiate this goal so that youth start their work in academic classes.

Ron, Student (23): *Actually, when I first came it was — cause I didn't like school at all, I couldn't stand school — my whole thing about coming here was help with my resume and help getting a job. Then later on I started going to class for like a month or so and then I started liking it and then I see the work it was giving me and it was like, "Oh, I know some of this stuff," so it was kind of easy. So then later on a couple of months go by and I told them that I wanted to enroll in the school instead of just doing the job programs. So that's when I started coming to class.*

Advisors make it clear that they are available whenever youth need support and that they will reach out to them regularly. They also seek to strengthen young adults' sense of responsibility for their own success by helping them anticipate obstacles that have prevented success in the past and plan strategies to stay on the pathway they have laid out.

Advisor: *...and then explain my roles and our roles here as staff members in this program and how we're here to support them, but how a lot of the success and accomplishments in this program are largely up to them.*

A question at this stage is whether youth are interested in college:

College Coordinator: *The college conversation is always up in the air. And with the kids who do want to work I put out the message that working is cool, everybody needs an income. But the way the economy is now, college is the best place to be if you want to get a heads up in the work field, because you can't make \$7.25 for the rest of your life. Nobody can live off that — you're below the poverty level with that. And so when I do numbers and I break it down for the kids like that, they get the realization of how important furthering your education past the GED or high school diploma is...*

Some job preparation activities occur during orientation, including having youth complete resumes and practice interviews. This brings a degree of concreteness for a highly desired outcome for the young adults at an early stage. It also helps to prepare them for the later stages of the program, which can cause anxiety because of the high stakes and the imminence of separation.

Social Worker: *I think the orientation is also a good time to equip them with a lot of basic job readiness skills — some of them work on a resume for the first time — so at least they have that basic framework for when they ... meet with their advisor or the career counselor.*

Numerous foster care agencies place youth at this site and each with a counselor assigned from their agency, but not based at the site where Site A's advisors have the lead role. While the majority of these young people are in-school, and use the site primarily for its work related support and internships, some are out of school, and can benefit from the full panoply of academic and work-related support. The supervisor responsible for foster care oversees these relationships. She makes sure that information, such as attendance data, is made available to the foster care agencies and contacts the agencies in cases when problems arise.

Metro Cards are handed out at the end of each day and serve as a measure of support and of control. If youth do not attend or leave early without an excuse, they do not get the card.

ESTABLISHING A CULTURE OF CARING AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY:

It's like a little small town.

The program seeks to combine explicit expectations with caring. *The Student Handbook* includes this statement: *One thing that you should always remember about our program is that: if you should stop attending or have obstacles that come up that stop you from being able to come, this does not prevent you from coming back. We are always ready to support you and help you reach the goals you have set for yourself!*

Many of the young adults I interviewed named their advisors, cited their value to them in addressing practical issues and, in many cases, for their caring. Frequently cited also is the presence of the staff in the hallways. They greet youth when they enter in the mornings and acknowledge them as they move about. This is appreciated and, together with other aspects of the program, helps create a positive culture. By its presence in the halls and by strict rules about threats or anything else that might open the possibility of fights the staff establishes a sense that this is a safe place. Many young adults have experienced threats or worse in schools they attended in the past.

Edna, Student (19): [Speaking about the orientation] *it's a whole new atmosphere basically. It's like a small little town—everybody knows everybody, you know. ... It's just a whole new environment. You don't have to worry about a lot of things when you come here — a lot of problems are nothing at all. Not even the girls fight.*

During the orientation process, youth meet most of the program staff as they participate in the various activities. The process establishes the expectation that youth can reach out to multiple staff. The following was said at a meeting of all young adults during orientation by an advisor who is present in the space, but will not have any of these youth in her caseload as she works in a different program:

I am not an advisor for you, but you can always come to me...

Several students have established valued relationships with advisors other than the ones to which they are assigned at the beginning. Still other changes may occur because of changes in staff. The sense that there are several adults available to them was cited by several of the youth as something they look forward to and take advantage of. Two youth complained about staff changes, but it did not seem to be a major issue for them.

The site places great emphasis upon young adults taking responsibility for their success in the program. This is communicated in many ways; for example, in the test of commitment reflected in the prolonged period of intake and orientation. It is explicitly and repeatedly noted in the *Student Handbook*. Youth must be present a minimum of 70% of the time, which is reviewed each month. Otherwise, they are placed on probation.

The importance of personal responsibility is highlighted at the full group meeting which ends the orientation period. Most staff is present.

Education Coordinator: *I am the point person for everything to do with education and your teachers. I think I am the best teacher in the world. ...But you can help each other more than I can help you. [He then describes ways that youth can help each other.]*

He is a compelling presence: a thin, dark-skinned African American male who makes it clear he comes from the neighborhood near the program where many of the youth live. He is dressed informally, today in a long-sleeved greyish shirt, not tucked in, and dark pants. He moves around the room and speaks with an easy sense of his own authority. He is serious, but not heavy-handed or threatening, unlike the harsh tone which occurs in some programs for young adults. He describes his role and authority, stressing that he determines when youth may take the GED. He points to where his office is and then asks:

What do you have to do to make this a strong program?

Participants cite motivation, working hard, participating in class... One boy says, *No Slacking.*

Education Coordinator: *I like that!*

After other comments, he says, *Have fun. We don't have to be serious the whole time here.*

Then he asks, gesturing toward staff that is standing around the room. *What do you want from us?*

Different individuals piped in: *...guidance, respect, communication... be committed... be supportive.*

The participant and staff comments are written in large letters on two separate sheets. The Education Coordinator then asks staff if they can agree to what the youth have asked, going around to each one:

Staff Members, each separately: *I agree...*

Education Coordinator: *I am going to put this up in my office.*

He has young adults to sign their list and staff to sign theirs. Before ending the session and the orientation, he asks, pointing to the two lists and referring to everyone in the room, including program staff: *Are you sure there is nothing you're going to have a problem with?*

People nod and then speak their assent.

Participants receive their schedules from staff. Youth start classes the following Monday.

New cycles begin every 13 weeks, but there are many young adults that seek to enroll before a new one begins. The staff determined that if they require them to come back at a later time, they might not come back at all. They do not put them into regular academic classes, however, as this would be disruptive. The staff has set up a special class in which these youth are exposed to key components of the program and can begin regular classes with the beginning of the next cycle.

THE CLIMB: ACADEMIC TIERS AND PERSONAL SUPPORTS

Thirteen students were interviewed from Site A, of whom seven were female. The average age was 21 and the average months of participation in the program were 18, with a range of nine to 30.

Once youth enter classes, the heavy work begins. Now, what is required is sustained effort toward building skills, a long journey especially for young adults who are many months or even more than a year from their goal. For many, determination is fueled by impatience with their past and fear that the future is getting beyond them, foreclosing the future. The desire to get control of their life's journey is deeply felt.

Lanny, Student (19): *So that's how I started to see life when I was younger and when I went to jail, I used to get letters and at certain times I couldn't read the letters. I tell you, I still can't read script. I don't read script or I don't read a lot of peoples' handwriting so it's like, it really made me feel bad that people sent me letters but I couldn't send them letters cause I didn't know what they were talking about at all. So I felt bad and my whole motivation was, come home, go to school, and let's move on from there... Every day I wake up, my first [priority] is to go to school and after that, if I have homework, do homework and after that my life just flows.*

Youth cited challenges from external problems that distract or prevent them from participating in the program, from memories of previous frustration in school, or from ingrained patterns of behavior, or combinations of these. Some manage to keep themselves on track despite these obstacles. And some require several new starts to do so.

Role of Personal Support

...they call you and ask you, "Why haven't you come in?" and they do home visits. So they stay on you.

Each day, when young adults arrive at the site, they take the elevator to the fourth floor and check in. A few come early for a breakfast provided in the program's pantry. As they pass into the program area, with its classrooms and offices, the narrow hallways encourage contact. Program staff comes out to greet them, with a brief hello or make an appointment for a fuller meeting when needed.

Social Worker: *When classes begin — when students come into the program —we try to make a presence in the hallways or in the pantry when the students are there. So just seeing a friendly face saying, "Hi! Good Morning! Welcome!"*

[Speaking of Ron, see below] *It felt like cheering him on, letting him know I knew he was here every day, and impressed that he was coming [despite the problems he was facing in his life], and that's helpful to start.*

Students commented on these warm greetings and like them.

Lanny: *I fell so in love with this program because...everyone comes...with a smile on their face...*

Advisors are the rooks of the program. They move between all the points of connection for the young adults—instructor, homeless resource, foster care counselor, parole officer, career counselors and, in rare instances, family members. They track levels of engagement and performance, provide encouragement and intervene as required to keep them on track, moving up the tiers. While they are expected to contact individuals on their caseloads biweekly, contacts are often more frequent. The requirement that young adults attend classes daily encourages contact and close monitoring of their levels of participation and engagement.

When students are absent, the reception staff notifies advisors who call them. After several days, they will visit homes.

Jennie, Student (21): *Yeah cause they stay on you. You can't miss more than four days. You can't come in here late. You come in here late you gotta go home and you don't get no Metro Card. ... And if you don't come in they call you and ask you, "Why haven't you come in?" and they do home visits. So they stay on you.*

Caseloads are about 60 active youth each. Advisors must balance their time, focusing on youth who are most in need, while acknowledging, through greetings or other brief interactions, others who are on track.

Multi-week hiatuses in attendance are common. Yet, all but two of the youth I interviewed at this site who had stopped attending returned eventually. Even among youth who were no longer involved in the program, the site had lost contact completely with just two over the nearly 18 months I was observing. This rate of successful follow-up and reflects both a culture of commitment among staff and the rigorous system for tracking youth. It reflects also the commitment of this site to stick with youth who may require more than one opportunity to start on the pathway to a diploma and/or paid work.

The advisors told me that the majority of their contacts with young adults were on specific issues such as attendance, or involved affirming their availability and continuity of caring. Providing practical help in the face of problems that youth find vexing, such as Ron's issue with his mother's apartment (see below), is the type of assistance cited most frequently by youth. Advisors may also get involved in other ways. This one, the college coordinator, read a book with a young person as a way to encourage her involvement in classwork.

College Coordinator: *So during this time she was reading a book [Native Son] in class so what I did is team up with her and read it too, so we could have conversations. So she knew she had to read, because I'm one of those advisors who'll be in your face. "Did you read the book? Oh, you didn't read it? I'm going to tell the teacher today. You have to read the book!" So it's that kind of conversation with her. [The student said to me:] ... "Miss, I did it! I went from a 5-7 to a 7-7 [grade level improvement] and P.S. It was because of the book." So it's stuff like that...*

For youth in foster care, the site coordinates the support of the foster care agencies with that of its staff:

Assistant Program Director: *What's nice about the model is that [foster care supervisor] is our point person - and then the agency sets up someone who's their point person. And then, we've got all the youth advisors who'll talk to [the foster care] caseworkers or social workers.*

The staff person responsible for supervision of the foster care component orchestrates the key supports for youth in foster care.

Foster Care Supervisor: *I would say making sure I was in constant contact with [the student] as well as his foster care agency to let them know the progress he was making or issues that arose in programming. So that way we could tag team and maybe find out things that were going on at the residential treatment center that we were unaware of [so that we could also be prepared to address them here].*

During the course of my work, the site strengthened the collaboration between advisors and instructors, creating teams of those who work with the same young people. Monthly meetings bring together the two staff roles so that they share what they are doing with youth on their caseload and create a coherent effort, with each pausing in the same direction.

Education Coordinator: *We now pair up a teacher with an advisor and that caseload now is their caseload, they're meeting on Fridays in their cohort group... This is the forefront of what our next evolution is.*

YOUNG ADULTS AND THEIR ADVISORS: EXAMPLES

Ron was 23 years of age at the time I met him. He began the program a year before our first interview, at the lowest academic level, but moved up to the GED-level in his classes. His realization that his individual needs are noticed and addressed is recurrent in the interviews. He was employed by the time I interviewed him. The program helped him find a job early in his participation so that he would have an income since both his parents had died recently. He scheduled his work hours so that he could continue to prepare for the GED. Occasionally, he has stopped attending and had not yet passed the GED as of April of 2013. At his worksite, a store in large clothing chain, he has been promoted to a position with customer contact. The program also helped him to deal with several other issues that would have affected his ability to pursue work and his studies, such as keeping his mother's apartment after she died:

Ron: *Actually, this year has been a crazy year for me too and they [program staff] helped me out too a lot. They called me everyday ... to see how I'm doing. Like the teachers, the advisor. Cause last year my aunt passed away, and then my father passed away. Then his sister passed away, and then my mother passed away. So they saw that I missed a couple of days, sometimes I would be in class and I'd be zoned out and not paying attention. They used to call me every day and say, "Ron, are you okay. If you need some time off, just let us know." They even asked me if I wanted to go see the therapist across the hall and they told me they'd make an appointment—like even my advisor [social worker] was like, "I'll make an appointment and I'll sit there with you. I just can't be there the whole session because it's a private thing." ... but I was all right. I was just happy that they was calling and I was okay so I came back to class and started doing things.*

My last issue was I had to go to court to get my mother's apartment so they was telling me I had to bring documents and stuff. I came here and asked her [advisor]. So we were going over the papers and she was like, "Yeah, you should bring more papers" and stuff— more letters that was coming to the house. So I did that and I wined up going to court with the stuff and I wined up getting the apartment so that was helpful.

I'm not even going to lie, sometimes I would sit in class and if I didn't know something I was scared to ask the teacher cause I didn't want to look stupid and stuff and sometimes I'd go home and think I didn't want to go anymore. But then one of the teachers would call me, or the advisor, "[Ron] why did you miss class? You're doing good progress in here. You shouldn't be missing class if soon you're going to take the test." So that gave me more confidence — if they keep calling me instead of letting me leave class like that, and let me know that I'm doing good, then I should come back. So that's why I come here a lot too.

In talking with Ron, it is notable how he is able to engage in close and sustained relationships, as evidenced by his long connection to the program staff and his girlfriend, now of six years.

Lissette, 20 years of age when I interviewed her initially, had been placed in a school program for youth with learning disabilities. She dropped out because she felt she did not get adequate attention in the large classes. She is in foster care also and living with a foster parent, though in touch with her biological mother. After starting at the lowest academic level in the program, she has moved up to GED-level classes, but she has failed to pass the GED twice. She is concerned that she will soon age out of foster care and lose her financial support. Thus, she left the program to take a job managing a Laundromat. She is still in contact with the program and hopes to complete the GED.

Lissette: *And I saw that I went up I went down, I went up I went down [referring to her attendance and academic performance]. Then one day my advisor sat down with me and said ... "During the month you could be absent Monday, Tuesday — the whole month if you'd like. But is that really benefiting you? What are you doing on these days that's so important that you're not coming to class?" ...Then she kept*

on pushing me and pushing me and it just came down to the point when I realized I've got to do it not for her, not for nobody — but for me. And then I got back on track and I started coming every day.

The following statement reflects her desire to become more independent, which she states is inhibited by being in foster care as her decisions must be reviewed with her foster care agency. The advisor is aware of this concern, and supports her.

Lisette: *And it's like if I want something, or I want to go somewhere, I have to go through the [foster care] agency, for the agency to go through my foster parents. And the thing with Miss [advisor]... I want to set a goal, I want to take my GED test. She'll show me what are my scores from the past, to what I have now. And she'll explain to me what I've got to work on, or what isn't letting me move on from that one side. So I'll set up a goal with her and it's like I actually accomplish it.*

And she [advisor] told me, she said — it was really funny because I never would have thought she would have said it, but she said, "... it's just that I've seen you coming more to class and doing what you need to do, and I don't want to be on top of you because I know you're taking care of what needs to be taken care of." ...So I took it as I was proud of myself because I was actually acknowledged.

Some of the advisors described helping youth to address deeper issues than just their current program success. Lisette's advisor, now the college coordinator, had told me of her effort to balance the twin goals of staying very close to each client with building their independence. Here she comments on helping young people become more aware of their own identities.

College Coordinator: *I'm proud of her because I felt like I've been here long enough to see her grow ... I feel like a lot of these participants have a voice and they just need somebody who's just going to help them to bring it out and... Maturity is always something that I've seen in her but it's definitely been expanded on. ... a lot of kids come into these programs and they don't necessarily know who they are. And people don't think that's a skill, but that is a skill... I don't think she realizes that and that's why she doesn't give herself enough credit.*

Evan is 23 years old and living with his mother. Like several of the youth I interviewed, he had tried different programs before coming to Site A. His comments highlight how the comprehensive design and culture of Site A works well for young people.

Evan: *In the couple of programs I was in, I would just stop going. And when I had came to this one, I had saw that they would help you find jobs as well, would help you with your job training, you know, basic skills like resumes and stuff...So the help I could find in this program, I didn't find in other programs I had went to. So I really appreciated that. And it [class schedule] was 9:15 to 12 — not that bad of a schedule. They help you more. They make sure you're joining stuff, make sure you come to class, make sure you get your Metro [Card] when you need your Metro, make sure you do good on your tests. Even though it's annoying when they say that we cannot take our tests unless we take our predictors, you understand me, I've been here a couple of months.*

Evan was returning from prison when he joined the program. Now he has a job that came through the program. Eventually, however, he became impatient with what he feels is the program's high level of control over when he could take the GED and said that he could have advanced in his GED preparation without the program. On the other hand, he expresses appreciation for the program's help keeping him on track. He is conflicted between needing and using its support and resenting the degree of control it exercises over his decisions about testing. The program is still in touch with him, but he no longer attends.

How Advisors Are Supported .

It's easy to take it very hard while they take it lightly.

Advising staff of the sites I visited confront serious problems within their caseloads. Often, youth with whom they are working experience setbacks, or may disappear from the program. Loss is a consistent aspect of what advisors and other staff experience. Here, the college coordinator, talks about how she deals with the emotional challenges:

College Coordinator: *You can't internalize the work. It's very easy to see a kid and just be so focused on having them be successful that their success kind of feels like your success. And when they don't follow through, it's easy to take it very hard while they take it very lightly. And I think that's a big thing. The other big thing is understanding — it happens a lot — like I live up the block so this is my community so I'm very aware of some of the stuff that these kids go through because it's obvious. I see it. Some of the kids live in my building. Sometimes you can't put yourself in someone else's shoes because you really don't know what's going on... My job isn't to look down or criticize. It's to assist and help, because you want to see them do better.*

Advisors get support in several ways. Supervisors meet with them weekly as a group to discuss issues, and individually on a regular basis. The site has a social worker who works closely with the advisors, and along with their supervisor, helps them think through issues when they feel uncertain, or have to make a difficult judgment call, for example, to suspend a youth.

Site A's Academic Tiers:

This place is different.

Site A has four levels of classes:

- 4th through 6th grade
- 6th through 8th: pre-GED
- 8th and 9th: GED preparation
- College Prep for youth who have passed the GED or have achieved a high enough score on the GED Predictor that they are considered likely to pass.

A student's initial placement is based on scores on the TABE. This site is large enough that it can place students in classes that are targeted to their skill levels in both language arts and math. Retesting occurs at 13 week intervals, at which time youth can move up to higher levels in the tiers. Both sites consider teacher input as part of the assessment for moving students to higher level classes, recognizing that TABE results are not that accurate and that student commitment is an important indicator. The readiness for the GED test is determined by the GED predictor.

Education Coordinator: *The TABE test isn't a good barometer of the GED test. So, the TABE test, yes, for the initial assessment, but then it goes into meetings with teachers about the progress of the students. So if the TABE test says one thing, but the teacher says, "I think the student will benefit greatly by being in the GED class," then [we will follow the teacher's advice].*

In interviews, young people from all the sites complained about their previous classroom experiences in high schools and middle schools, citing large classes, disruptive classmates, and lack of personal and timely attention. They liked the small class sizes at Site A, usually from eight to 12 students. What they stressed above all was the attention of teachers and advisors to them as individuals, whether this meant being singled out for attention at their seat during a class or meeting an instructor outside of class-time. I observed that all of the instructors at Site A come to student desks during class and make themselves available to work with them after classes. Tutoring was also available in the afternoons.

Lanny, Student: *This place is different because classes are smaller. And because classes are smaller really one teacher can get around to help everybody instead of everybody — like instead of 30 or 25 kids just staying in one room trying to get one teacher's attention, and if they don't get the teacher's attention, now they're screaming across the room and so when you have problems like that, a lot of people become mis-focused.*

Robert, Student (23): *You know — in the middle of the class if you don't get it, they'll help you get it—in the middle of the class. And that's what some people need. ... Some people don't need to wait til later. A lot of teachers blow you off, you know? "Well, it can happen later." ... If one person doesn't get it, they're going to help you get it right then and there. Because if one person don't get it, there could be another person who don't get it but they don't want to say nothing. You know? So they'll help you get it.*

Students were very appreciative also when they received encouragement:

Luz, Student (21): *A lot of the kids who come to this program, they don't see what they're capable of doing. And sometimes the teachers remind them, like "You don't know what you can do yourself." Sometimes I'm doing my work and I think I'm doing a good job. In their eyes it's a great job. So to get that in return, like to have a teacher telling you you're doing a good job, that means a lot. To do a wonderful job—and for them to say that—is a big push, you know? Like if you come one day and you do your job, and you come a second day and they tell you, "Look, you did a great job," you're going to want to keep coming cause they're telling you positive things."*

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

Relearning and new learning.

Often, when I observed classes, they would begin with few young people willing to participate, heads down or turned to others in conversation. Instructors drew upon their personal charm, teasing, jokes, and went to student desks, usually succeeding in drawing out resistant youth. In the most highly-structured classes, low-level literacy and GED- and college-prep math, the instructors relied more upon highly structured classroom agendas and engaging academic content to get the classes moving. In most of the classes in which students were close to passing the GED, youth would first practice on GED worksheets. Instructors would then discuss these sheets with them and move around the classroom checking answers or have youth share them out loud. In these classes, students named and applied parts of speech or practiced comprehension skills by reading stories or articles and answering short questions about them. Instructors reminded them: "This is the type of question you get on the GED." Most youth had some knowledge of this content already: pronouns, sentence completion, etc. Several told me that they saw these classes as combining, in the words of one, "relearning with new learning."

The low-level literacy class and the math classes I observed were different. What distinguished them was the high level of structure and that students were required both to solve problems and show their process for doing so. In math, when youth applied math operations or rules to problems, they were required to explain how they had come to a solution rather than just giving their answer. The process of solving problems seemed to engage them and the classes had a heady feel as they worked together. In Literacy, students were expected to develop and support predictions in response to questions such as how a story would end, again explaining "why" they

thought this and giving evidence from the story. The emphasis on thinking was a consistent element of these classes. While not absent from other classes, it was far more evident in the classes taught by two of the instructors, both of whom had received training in the CEPS program.

OBSERVATION OF LOW-LEVEL LITERACY CLASS

Why do I hate reading?

There are seven students in this class, including four males. The instructor has worked at the program for several years.

When students enter the classroom, the Agenda which details activities and time allotments for the day, is written on the board. The first activity is Independent Reading. Youth choose their books from an allotment provided by the instructor and selected to assure that the content is mature despite the low-level reading skills required. These youth may be a year or more away from obtaining the GED, thus removing from the instructor's engagement toolkit the carrot of quick GED passage.

The instructor points to the Agenda and then sets a timer; students read and then "Share Out" about what they are reading to the class. While some are reluctant, eventually most speak. Books have titles like: *Tears of the Tiger*; *Junie B. Jones is a Graduation Girl*; and *The Dead Man in Indian Creek*.

Read Aloud follows Independent Reading. The instructor reads to the class from a short novel, *Search for Safety*. The story describes a family in which the father is abusive and the adolescent son seeks to protect the mother from the father's violence, bringing the father's rage onto himself. After the reading, the instructor works on the skill of prediction. She writes the names of certain characters on the board and asks students to predict what will happen to them. The emphasis in her discussion is not what they predict, but why — what makes you think that the story will move that way? What is your evidence? In the discussion, the instructor points to another list on the board, of Strategies of Effective Readers, highlighting the strategies she is asking them to use today:

- Make connections—text to self, text to text, text to world
- Determine importance
- Summarize
- Synthesize (retell in your own words)
- Visualize
- Question the text
- Monitor—use sticky notes or other means to track the content

Eventually, nearly all express interest in the characters. Heads and hands come up. Several state with conviction how they think the story will develop for each character. Often, when one speaks, others shake their heads in response. One girl, who at first had her head down on the desk and was complaining bitterly about how cold the classroom was (it was), switches to helping her tablemate analyze the story, together writing out predictions of what will happen

for each character. The transformation is striking. Cups of hot chocolate, provided to the students by one of the advisors may have helped. I have seen this student in other activities and the level of engagement here is much higher. The student begs the instructor to read more from the “read aloud” story so that she will know what happens to the characters at the end. The instructor responds, with a smile, that the next part of the story will await next day’s class.

One student comments to me when I interview her:

Joanna, Student (21): *I never liked to read, but I like this book. [Referring to the Read Aloud book in the class.] I like stories that are familiar to me from my life.*

This student had just mentioned that her boyfriend is abusive.

The theme of interesting material came up several times:

Joanna: *Honestly, I’m going to tell you the truth. I was just asking my teacher yesterday — why do I hate books? I read so well. Why do I hate reading? [The teacher said,] “You just didn’t find a particular book yet, that you like.” And I’m like, books just really make me go to sleep.*

Interviewer: *Really?*

Joanna: *Yeah! They really make me go to sleep. [But] I can read something interesting and I’ll read about it throughout the whole day but then, you know — if it’s not interesting...*

Luz: *I like [low-level literacy class] class. She has us do like reading and before I didn’t used to do a lot of reading. And I love reading. I remember back then that I used to love reading. So now I go to her class and I read a lot and she gives us these paragraphs and some of the students complain like, “Oh God it’s a lot,” but me, I’m loving it. And then the fact that we talk about it after, you know, she tells us to highlight the important things in the paragraph and stuff like that. Hours can pass and I’ll still be doing it.*

When asked to describe what is happening in the story, most of the youth struggle. Several seem to search their memories for information about the story they have just read and for the words to describe it. Yet all make predictions eventually and justify them. Several communicate pleasure in addressing this question.

At the end of the two-hour class, the instructor asks students to write their reflections about the lesson. They have to state a key idea they heard in the class, why it “matters” and then summarize the story.

The high degree of structure in this class is applied every day so that students know exactly what the activities of the class will be. This is part of the strategy of the CEPS program, called Rituals and Routines.

Lisette described to me how she experienced the low-level literacy class:

Lisette: *I felt like I was — that there were other people who related to me, as the learning disabilities. Some people you can explain and explain and explain and they just don’t get it, but it’s not that they’re doing it on purpose — it’s just everybody has a different pace for them to process things. I didn’t feel frustrated. I didn’t feel like the teacher was frustrated with me every time I*

raised my hand to ask a question. She was just really open and she would explain why that answer was that answer. She just made me feel open and everybody was so welcoming. Like they — I didn't even feel like I was at school, I felt like I was at home. That's what helped me, what motivated me to do way better.

Interviewer: *Was the teaching itself any different?*

Lisette: *Yes. It was more interesting...*

Interviewer: *Why?*

Lisette: *It was more interesting because they would give you real life situations. But then they would also give you nonfiction situations in where they had you think about what was going on, in life and in cartoons and stuff like that. [She is alluding to the practice of “making connections,” having youth relate what they read to either their lives or to something else they have read.] And then they'd help you understand certain things that not only in books happen, but that also in real life happen.*

Interviewer: *Did they work on any skills?*

Lisette: *Well, I didn't learn no skills but I bettered the ones that I had which was reading and writing.*

Later, she moved up to the Pre-GED class.

OBSERVATION OF A MATH CLASS

Algebra — I didn't know what it was.

There are eight students in this college prep math class including three males. All have achieved a high score on the GED predictor test and are waiting to take the GED, or have taken it; several have passed the GED. The instructor, also the education coordinator, is respected by the students, many of whom say that he has helped them overcome difficulties with math.

The class meets around a table in a small conference room. The instructor posts problems from a worksheet on the board and has students work on them at their seats and then come up to demonstrate.

Example: $7(9+k) = 84$; solve for k .

There is little start-up activity. Students focus on the problems he presents. I am sitting close to the students and can hear that their conversations with each other are focused on the math problem. I do not see any electronic devices, a sign that they are not distracted from the class. As they work through the material at their desks, hands go up, and there is a sense of urgency about who can put the correct solution on the board first. A student calls out and the instructor says that he will not call on them if they call out. A girl asks, referring to the problem: “What kind of shit is that?!” While rough sounding, it feels at the time like a spirited or spontaneous response to the problem. The instructor moves on, ignoring it.

As he walks around behind the chairs, the instructor asks a student, softly, “How are you doing?” referring to the work. She says, “I do not know these things here.” He asks her to stop by and see him so that he can work with her individually. Four youth commented to me that this instructor asks to work with them individually outside of class.

A student calls out an answer, to the problem on the board, “3.” The instructor: “I don’t care about that, I want to know how you did it.” Youth go back to their sheets. Another youth goes up to the board, demonstrating a solution to the problem. What is striking to me is the high level of engagement in solving the problems. And that is characteristic of each class I witness of this instructor.

He solves a problem for them: $2(2x-4) = 65$. Then, “*Are you with me?*”

He goes over several problems, increasingly difficult, demonstrating of the rules for this type of problem, such as which operations to do first. The class is good-humored and working. Students speak to him and to each other, but almost always about the content of the problems.

$$2(x+2x)-6=30.$$

He explains: *Get numbers with numbers and letters with letters.*

Youth work on this problem, making small sounds of frustration or triumph as they do.

Ron: *Yeah, like the first couple of times I took the TABE test, like the math part, I just looked at it, and I was like, there’s a whole bunch of numbers that I don’t understand. Like algebra, I didn’t know what it was. Until [the education coordinator] showed me. And he showed me an easy way, so he broke it down for me. That was easy for me to remember. So there were certain things that he taught me to remember for myself, instead of teaching the rest of the class. Everybody has their own technique that he shows what he thinks will work for them, and that worked for me. So I think I’m doing better now.*

Interviewer: *Do you enjoy algebra?*

Ron: *[education coordinator] helped me figure out math for my brain only. Like, the way he taught me math, if he taught somebody else, maybe they might think, “Oh, that’s too hard, it’s confusing.” But for me it was good for me.*

Interviewer: *Were you able to use the classes or was it mostly individual work that was helpful?*

Ron: *It was both actually. The classes and the individualized work together... And sometimes when you’re in class and doing work the teacher will come around and help you individually. So sometimes you get individual help in the class.*

Interviewer: *Has any classroom work been helpful to you outside of here?*

Ron: *Yeah, the math—with the [cash] register [at work].*

At one point, several youth are getting the problem-solving processes and the answers wrong. It is clear that they do not understand. The education coordinator tells them: *The thing is you have to say something if you do not understand. You have to advocate for yourself and speak up or the teacher in a college class will just move on.*

Of the classes I observed at this site — the Literacy class and math classes — despite being at different ends of the skill spectrum, are most similar because in each students must supply not only correct answers but also must explain their process for getting there.

Observation of GED Language Arts and Social Studies Classes:

I observed several classes for youth who read above the sixth grade level and are in sight of passing the GED.

In a Language Arts class, with 16 youth present, the instructor hands out sheets copied from a commercial GED text. The instructor, a man of about 40, is highly experienced and supervises tutoring at a local community college. He moves from desk to desk constantly. He chats with the students, teasing or questioning. Referring to a worksheet, he asks: “What’s a pronoun?” As youth go over the pronoun worksheet, there is talking in small groups. “I do not mind talking, but keep it down,” he says.

Ron is in this class, discussing basketball with several other boys. They are good-humored, writing on their worksheets and then stopping to chat. One boy says: “I already took the test. I’m not doing nothing.” The instructor does not respond. Most students are cooperative. The instructor works to keep the students on task, reminding them that this is what they will find on the GED. They struggle with pronouns and have difficulty answering the questions on the worksheet.

In another class, the same instructor hands out a three-paragraph excerpt from an Ambrose Bierce story about the Civil War. In the story, a young man opts to join the Union, and is viewed by his father as a traitor to their home state of Virginia. Most students become engaged and read it at their desks. The instructor focuses on questions about mood and tone. He asks questions that seek to personalize the story: *If you were having a last conversation before the war, what would you say—what would be the tone?*

Eddie, Student: *He gives his son a salute.*

Another Student: *I would be proud of him.*

Another Student: *I would tell him, No! [meaning, I do not want him to go to war].*

Later, the instructor asks: *If you were a soldier, having your last conversation before the war, what would you say, what would be the tone?*

One boy responds that he would be proud if his son was to serve in the Union during the war. Another responds that he will keep the decision about going to war away from the boy’s mother. Some of the responses demonstrate understanding of specific passages. There is little discussion of the story as a whole. Other classes follow a similar format.

In a class focused on Science and Social Studies, the instructor moves around the room, looking at the work on student desks, and talking quietly to them. She asks, “Why are gas and oil called fossil fuels?” A young person starts to explain, opening with “Back in the days...” But she does not explain correctly and the instructor goes over how the fuels originated. In another class, she has students review a lesson on evolution. She encourages them to work together at their desks. She expresses excitement about the content: evolution and DNA. As she seeks to engage the students, she talks about the Henry Louis Gates TV series, *The Faces of America*, citing the ancestry of prominent African Americans, including Chris Rock who was featured in one of the shows. She draws a genealogical chart and asks them what it would look like for their families. Some youth pick this up, citing their own backgrounds; others are not engaged. In these classes, the instructor tries to keep the focus on broad questions, rather than filling out worksheets. This seems to spark interest in the content.

Later, she tells me, “Motivation is huge. A big challenge is that they can be passive.” She has a theatre background draws upon it and 24 years of experience teaching. She seeks out content she thinks will be interesting. I ask if she would find the pedagogical strategies from the low-level class useful, and she responds that she does not need them.

What Makes a Difference in Instruction?

The education coordinator is known by students to be “tough,” uncompromising around the purpose of his classes, and youth respect this. As education coordinator, he has great deal of power because he determines when students move to higher level classes and take the GED test. But it is evident that his authority stems also from his effectiveness as an instructor. He pointed out to me that he has been at the site for nine years, beginning in computer support and then moving to a teaching position. Recently, he opted to continue teaching on a reduced schedule, even though he has been promoted to an administrative position. The long experience enables him to: *[Paraphrasing] ...anticipate how youth will respond, both correctly and what errors they will make, and this helps the teaching. As a result, I can largely control the conversation by the problems I pick for the class.*

He describes an intuitive understanding of the classroom process suggesting that, often, he does not have to think about it, but can anticipate their questions and how to help them. This enables him to respond rapidly, understanding what they are mastering and what they are struggling with, even though students may not have fully grasped or articulated it themselves. He promotes a competitive atmosphere in the class, urging students to come up with explanations and demonstrate them on the board.

He cites his training in CEPS which is based on research about learning by adolescents. A major emphasis in CEPS is to have a highly structured classroom with “rituals and routines.”

I think that goes back to all that CEPS training I had when I was coming up. ... I want students to have a certain expectation about what's going to happen every minute of every day, and that's kind of my biggest push is the rituals and routines because the class is ritualized like that, it almost teaches itself and everything flows so nicely from one piece to the next piece, all the students know

what they're doing from one piece to the next piece. ...once the students know what the structure is... they come to appreciate it. And it makes the instructors' lives easier as well because they teach to the structure and as long as you stick to the structure you know what you're going to do each minute of the day. So, rituals and routines — definitely the big thing.

ADDRESSING THE LOW SKILL LEVELS OF YOUTH WHO DROPOUT

The Youth Development Institute (YDI) developed CEPS to engage and build the skills of youth whose academic skill levels are below the eighth grade. For transparency, I was the director of YDI during the initial development of CEPS. The initiative is based on research about reading and math instruction and content and draws partly upon the work of America's Choice, now The Center for Education and the Economy.⁵ It combines a highly structured approach to reading and math, highly structured counseling with extensive training and program-level assistance. The model has since been incorporated by two New York City government units for several initiatives with low-skilled young adults (The Center for Economic Opportunity and the Department of Probation). Below is an outline of key elements of the model excerpted from *Community Education Pathways to Success: Preparing Young Adults for GED programs: A Guide to Implementation*.⁶

It is important to note, as the evaluator pointed out, CEPS is not a Chinese restaurant menu where you can pick and choose those elements that you like. It works as a whole as detailed in the *Guide*.

In both areas, instructors establish clear rituals and routines for the classroom. In Reading, each class includes explicit instruction in comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency.

- Independent Reading (10–15 minutes). Students enter class and immediately settle in to read books they have selected themselves from the classroom libraries. Latecomers follow suit.
- Read Aloud/Think Aloud (up to 15 minutes). The instructor reads aloud from a book they all are reading.
- Daily Word Study—Vocabulary (5–10 minutes).
- Classroom Conversation (5–15 minutes). Students engage in spirited discussion following the Read Aloud. The instructor will have presented a topic or questions.
- Mini Lesson/Whole Class Instruction (up to 15 minutes). A short lesson varies daily and may focus on comprehension, vocabulary, writing, or syntax. It is followed by a work session in which students apply the lesson at their desks.
- Work Period (at least 30 minutes). Students work individually or in small groups with the instructor moving between them.

Math focuses on:

- Deep study of a few critical concepts.
- Language-rich environment. Students read, discuss, and talk through the math concepts.
- The algebraic structure of arithmetic. Algebra is the fundamental language.
- In the math segment of the class, the rituals and routines include:
- Skills Practice (5–10 minutes). Instructors emphasize patterns and strategies for computation.
- Lesson (20–25 minutes). A math task is presented by the instructor with students reading and understanding the problem. The work period includes “SoloWork,” where students are on a task for a few minutes, followed by “Partner Work” in which students work in pairs to refine and edit their work.
- “Probing for Understanding” and “Closing the Lesson” (5–10 minutes). Students reflect on their reasoning and that of their peers. They ask questions.

A benefit of the strict consistency in how the classes function is that it gives the young people confidence because they are always on familiar ground, even as the problems push them into new territory; whereas mastering the content gets them closer to their goal of the GED. Theories of motivation and engagement (*For Young Adults Who Drop Out: Pathways or Merely Stops Along the Way?*, page 4) stress that young people must both value the goal of their studies and feel confidence in their ability to reach it.⁷ Research on young adults highlights also the importance

of the caring relationship with an adult. These elements are all present in the math and low-level literacy work at this site.

Developing the kinds of energy I observed in these two classes requires also that youth care about the content. Certainly, the selection of content in the literacy classes helps to create interest. The energy that went into solving math problems seemed to derive also with the youth's engagement in the puzzle presented by the problems, a kind of headiness that comes with working on a puzzle they know they can solve, but is a bit beyond them. This instructor has helped students get past the feeling that the math is too difficult and gain confidence. Several students say that this success comes from his availability to them on a one-on-one basis. They know he will see them through when they are stuck.

Beyond these two instructors, students appreciate the encouragement they receive, citing each of the instructors.

Lanny: *So one day I had this test—we were doing this Pre-GED test, and [the Language Arts instructor] saw me put on my jacket, and he grabbed me to the side and said, “Honestly, just write anything. I don’t care if it has a million mess ups, I don’t care if everything is spelled wrong. Just write what’s on your head.” And I actually wrote what he was telling me and as I wrote it and he showed me my own work and he was proud because I didn’t really have as many mistakes as I thought I would have. So it made me feel good and proud of myself that I could see myself improving, and reading and writing. I feel good to come every day.*

Lisette: *The thing about Miss [the instructor of the low-level literacy class] is I guess she sees potential and whenever she sees I’m about to give up, she always hangs in there and she’ll tell me, “Listen, it’s easy. You know this already.” She’ll keep telling me that. “You know this. You know this.”*

While mostly positive, several students cited the problem of distraction from other students:

Joanna: *And that’s what I don’t like about it at times. Cause people don’t take you seriously. And when I go to class, there’s at least one student that will be a main distraction.*

Interviewer: *When you say people don’t take you seriously you mean the other students.*

Joanna: *The students don’t take you seriously.*

Interviewer: *What about the teachers?*

Joanna: *I love my teacher. She is the greatest because she actually reviews over the problems that we need. And she actually won’t leave the subject until all of us get it.*

CAREER TRANSITIONS

Why should I hire you?

Site A's Career Clinic

The Career Clinic is staffed by three women. Two conduct workshops and coach individuals on how to locate, obtain, and keep a job. The other is responsible for setting up and monitoring internships. Internships are available to all youth in foster care and to two separately funded non-foster care programs at the site.

Young adults are introduced to the Career Clinic during their orientation. At the beginning of their participation in the program, the Career Clinic staff provides workshops on interviewing and other job preparation activities. Once classes begin, students must be referred to the Career Clinic by their advisors.

Advisors refer youth to the Career Clinic when they believe that they have demonstrated their readiness by their attendance and effort in classes. Some, however, may be referred because they are insistent on moving to employment rapidly, though this is discouraged by the program. The communication between advisors and Career Clinic staff helps to assure that there is a mutual understanding and coordination between the advisors and the Career Clinic staff for each participant.

The program's student handbook outlines expectations for working with the Career Clinic.

- Respect
- Be on time for appointments.
- Call if you are going to be late.
- Make an appointment. Please do not drop in.
- Do not interrupt others.
- No use of cell phones during meetings and workshops.

Safe Space

- No cursing or abusive language.
- Use appropriate and professional language.

Preparation

- Complete the Work Readiness packet and referral from your advisor.
- Have an updated resume.
- Have proper interview clothing.
- Be well groomed.
- No hats, sunglasses, or headphones.
- Cell phones on vibrate.
- Make the time to be here.

Youth prepare to enter the Career Clinic by filling out a small booklet: *The Work Readiness Packet*. Here, they answer in writing questions about how to present themselves at an interview and complete a resume. It warns youth that it may take 10–12 interviews to obtain a job, and that it “can be a really frustrating process.”

Once a youth has completed these steps, s/he meet with the career counselor who reviews their paperwork, including the resume, discusses their employment goals and then, if ready, coaches them on the interviewing process.

In reviewing the employment goals of youth who have not passed the GED, staff urges them to take jobs that allow them to complete their educations. Thus, scheduling work hours is part of the discussion.

The coaches practice the interviewing process with them multiple times, helping youth get the answers right and building confidence for when they meet an employer.

Edna was at the lowest level reading at the time she began the job search process. The conversation with the coach focused on a job that will be in the afternoon or evening so that the GED can continue to be her priority. The coach worked with her at one table in a large room, while another worked with a male about 20 feet away. Edna has done the preparatory work and is ready to go to the next step. She wants a job in child care. She has experience in that area and says, “I love kids.” The coach tells her that the program does not have child care jobs available currently, and that the best option is retail. Edna has some experience in stock work, and they agree to focus on that. After discussion, the coach tells her to write down some of the ideas they have discussed about her strengths for a retail position.

Edna goes out of the room and then re-enters as if coming for an interview. She shakes hands with the coach, who is acting as the interviewer. The coach asks: “Why should I hire you?” and, “What are your strengths and weaknesses?” These are questions that Edna has been briefed on in advance of the practice interview. The girl struggles, however, to apply her experience in early childhood and stocking to the questions. The coach steps out of the role and helps her to think about how her experience might be “translated” into assets for a job in retail and what she might say in an interview. Coach: “You have to demonstrate patience to work with children.” “You have to be well-organized to do stock work,” says the girl.” And so on. They practice the interview again. Again, the girl is helped to “translate.” Slowly, Edna warms to the challenge: “I am a person who does not like to start anything unless I can finish it,” she says. The coach urges her to show more enthusiasm: “On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you rate your enthusiasm about this job.” “Five or six,” says she girl. The coach urges her to smile more. The girl says she will practice that night and come back the next day. “I will be a different person,” she says. This student, who is still in the lowest level academic class, was placed in a job about three months later.

Beyond placing young people, Sites A and B work to secure the programs’ relationships to employers in order to keep doors open for more young people. Relationships are built carefully. By screening and preparing young people well, the programs reduce the level of risk an employer must take on hiring. Site A seeks constantly to expand its network of cooperating employers and is working with many both large and small such as TJMAXX, the GAP, Marshall’s, and others. These are some of the same employers that Site B works with, albeit in a different city. During the past year in 2011/2012, the program reported 70 job placements.

College Placements

For youth who choose to pursue college, the college coordinator prepares them and arranges college visits. The program works with a network of eight community-based organizations (CBOs), established by a local intermediary that seek to support their participants in preparing for, enrolling in and completing at least one year of college.

The intermediary raises funds and connects the CBOs to local community colleges. It supports summer courses conducted by each organization that are designed to minimize the need for remediation. Programs support participants during their first year in college. At this time, the college effort is new, and it is not possible to assess how effective it is in helping youth graduate. The education coordinator has mentioned the need to provide assistance and support to youth beyond the first year and is examining the retention and performance of students with an eye toward a longer period of support.

RETENTION:

Even then it's not totally over.

Many young adults maintain contact with the program even after they have been placed; and the program, for its part, continues to be available. Youth may return to chat with a staffer or seek assistance. The program will arrange additional rounds of GED testing if that is necessary for youth. Youth may be shifted to a new contract if they have aged out of one in order to continue to receive full services.

Interviewer: *The exit point for you, technically it's when they're in college—when they're placed in a job... even though they might stay in contact?*

Advisor: *And even then it's not totally over if they end up contacting us and are interested in utilizing some of the services. It's possible to just put them back on a [another] contract.*

PROGRAM INTEGRATION

There's a lot of communication.

There are several practices at the site that are designed to strengthen the work with young adults by increasing communication among staff and the quality of services. Some are highly developed and routinized, such as supervisory meetings. There is also an extensive regimen of weekly meetings among staff to discuss their work and to make sure everyone is apprised of what others are doing.

Advisor: *We have morning meeting [among] advisors ... And then every Thursday we have meetings, and then every Wednesday at 3:15 we have full staff meetings... And then our cubicles are lined up all next to each other so I mean, there's a lot of communication.*

Staff input student information, including attendance, test results, and case notes into a database which can be accessed by all staff in order to track student progress and issues. The compliance coordinator is responsible for setting up each student file when students begin the program and for checking that files are kept up to date. If a student is absent, those at the reception desk inform the advisor who is responsible for follow-up. Staff consults these electronic

files when issues arise with youth, when they have to follow-up on absences, or when they have to contribute to a decision about whether youth will advance at the beginning of a new cycle. Additionally, as cited above, there is a great deal of informal consultation among staff. Information about test results is reviewed by the education coordinator for making decisions about whether students are to move up in the education tiers. He looks also at patterns of test results to inform his work supporting instructors.

I would describe the culture at this site as both orderly and personal.⁸ The fact that youth sign in each morning and must also sign out exerts a degree of control with sanctions when attendance falls down. Youth and staff are well aware of the attendance rules which have become more rigorous recently and are believed to have contributed to better attendance. The centrality of attendance record-keeping and processes for follow-up help to assure that there is consistency within the program with regard to this issue, a prominent one for youth who have dropped out of school.

The space itself contributes to a feeling of connections among those who are part of this program. The daily comings and goings of youth and staff in the hallways and reception area appear good-natured, with lots of informal exchange. The program provides breakfast, although only a small number of youth attend. The caring aspects of the program become clear as one spends time there. Youth are told early that if they do get off track, they can always come back; and staff follows up on individual needs. While individual and personal counseling time in this and the other programs is limited by the size of the caseloads and extent of youth needs, youth know who their advisors are and will take advantage of them:

Ron: *I think that's good that you know the advisor's faces and they know your faces because there are a lot of students that walk in here and most of the people look similar to the next person so it's kind of cool that they can come up to you and know your name off the top.*

Lisette: *The staff. They're really interested in helping you learn. And I think that's one of the most important things ... [in] any type of office that deals with kids.*

Joanna: *I can say that [the program] gives you a feeling like even if you feel it's discouraging and you leave and you're not doing nothing — say you're sitting on your bed and not doing nothing, you just start to think like, you know you're welcome here. You know the arms are open, you know, where you can just get your education and get on with your life and really reach your goals. It's up to you. And that's how they make you feel. So even when I was feeling really discouraged and I wasn't coming here, I wound up coming back. Because I knew it was just my own mind. It was just me fighting myself.*

SITE A: SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Thirteen students were interviewed of whom seven were female. The average age was 21 and the average months of participation in the program was 18, with a range of nine to 30. According to data provided by the program, three of the young adults were in foster care and one was court-involved (though several others cited course-involvement during interviews). Program data indicated that 11 of these young adults entered the program reading at the Pre-GED level; five of these at the ABE level in reading. During the course of their participation, eight went up at least one level in their reading, advancing to a higher level class. Six stopped attending classes, and, of these, four continue to be in touch with the program. By the time I stopped observing the program, one student had passed the GED and four were employed.

SITE A: SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Strong parent organization that has influence among policymakers and funders
 - Services to nearly the full range of young adult dropouts, from low skilled to college ready, and continued development of capacity to serve each subgroup
 - Rigorous use of data to track and follow-up on youth
 - Expectation of daily attendance for classes which provides a means to closely monitor young adults
 - Limited resources to provide internships or vocational training to young adults who have dropped out of school.
-

ENDNOTES

- 1 YO! sought to test whether concentrating services in selected census tracts which are home to large numbers of youth from economically disadvantaged families could help them enter the economic mainstream. The federally-funded program provided large grants to 36 high-poverty communities to be used for serving in-school and out-of-school youth from 14–21 with a range of services such as sports, recreation, and opportunities for community service. For the US Department of Labor-funded evaluation of YO!, see: http://wdr.doleta.gov/research/FullText_Documents/YO%20Impact%20and%20Synthesis%20Report.pdf.
- 2 Public/Private Ventures: *Serving High-Risk Youth: Lessons from Research and Programming*, (Philadelphia, PA: September 2000), P. 16.
- 3 This training helps staff to understand the “the internal emotional process of how you respond to and come to terms with that change,” offering specific approaches that Site A staff say they find useful in understanding and helping young adults. For information on The Transition Framework, see: www.transitionandsocialchange.org/01understanding.shtml.
- 4 Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS) is a program developed by the Youth Development Institute, The final report of the three-year evaluation is available from the evaluator, Campbell-Kibler Associates in Brockton, MA: see <http://www.campbell-kibler.com/2009%20CEPS%20final%20evaluation%20report%20with%20appendices.pdf>
- 5 <http://www.ncee.org/>
- 6 The guide is available from The Youth Development Institute, New York, NY. See the website for a range of program descriptions and guides about working with young adults. <http://www.ydinstitute.org/resources/>
- 7 Csikszentmihalyi, in his classic study of engagement, *Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, points to the pleasure in activities that are challenging, but not out of reach; require skills, are goal-directed and bounded by rules. M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience*. (New York, NY: Harper, 1991) P. 48.
- 8 R. W. Rumberger, *Dropping Out: Why Students Drop Out of High School and What Can Be Done About It*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). See especially, Chapter 8, the section on What Works.

FOR YOUNG ADULTS WHO DROP OUT: PATHWAYS OR MERELY STOPS ALONG THE WAY?

APPENDIX II

SITE B: DETAILED DESCRIPTION

They care about you a lot. Put you on the right path. When I first came I thought it would just be help to get jobs. But it's [also]...schooling, education, a person you can talk to, friendship — a lot.— Donald, Program Participant, 22.

GOAL

The organization's mission is to "help urban youth become successful adults." To that end, it "has structured its programs and services to lead at-risk or disadvantaged youth, ages 14–24, toward the goals of achieving a college degree or vocational credentials and/or obtaining rewarding post-education employment."

History and Organizational Context ¹

The organization, based on a Northeastern city of about 150,000, opened in 1975 as a neighborhood-based service provider, offering child care and services to youth and the elderly. In 2000, it was the recipient of federal Youth Opportunity! (YO!) funds to its city.² As these funds declined over six years, the organization faced large reductions in size and capacity. With support from local and national foundations and the city in which it is based, it developed a plan and transitioned its elderly services to other organizations. It restructured its youth programs to what is now called the Pathways to Success program, a design that provides services to youth from 14 to 24 years of age, differentiated based on age and need.

These changes occurred under the current president and some of the current staff who have now moved up to leadership positions. Changes continue into the present, with an increased focus on services to youth who are in school, but overage and under-credited, as well as youth in foster care, most of whom are still in school as well. In 2009, the organization initiated a project with the city's school district to start a partnership school, a collaboration between a community-based organization (CBO) and the district, for overage and under-credited (OAUC) youth, drawing upon New York City's transfer high school model. At the time, partnership schools involving community organizations were new to the state. New private foundation grants in 2012 and 2013 will enable it to start schools in two different cities in its home state. In 2011, it initiated an adaptation of its non-school programs for youth in foster care in another part of the state.

Parent Organization

Unlike Site A, Site B serves youth only, about 800 annually, not including the large influx for its Summer Youth Employment program. About 10% are between 16 and 24, out of school and not working. It recognizes that many of these young adults are much like OAUC youth who are still in school, treating the two groups as on a continuum, and seeking to move younger dropouts into schools so that they can get a regular diploma.

The organization's total budget averages about \$5 million annually, with half in public dollars, including WIA Title I funds, some of which are used for youth who have dropped out. The organization's structure comprises administrative services and direct services. The administrative unit includes leadership and program management; external affairs including fund raising and finance; and a unit dedicated to strengthening performance through evaluation and staff development.

The organization's size, longevity, respected leadership, and its engagement with both practice and policy give it a visible role in its home city and state. The leaders are active in local, state, and national policy issues affecting adolescents and young adults. They participate in forums, prepare papers, and work with leaders. These activities have lent credibility and given visibility to the organization and helped to create a responsive policy environment for its work. Two examples: first, the organization has convinced the city's education department to increase the per student funding rate for OAUC youth, weighting it, similar to what is done for youth with special needs. This benefits the schools that the organization has established. Secondly, for youth who are in foster care or are court-involved, the organization has gained flexibility in the use of funds from the state agency that provides funds for these youth. This has enabled it to serve them for longer periods of time, albeit not at increased levels of funding.

The engagement with the field influences program development internally. The organization credits work in NYC and elsewhere that it has learned about through its engagement with similar organizations, national intermediaries and research with helping to shape some of its programs. Recently, for example, it began to include the Thrive Foundation for Youth's work on youth development in its training for staff.³

The organization has been aggressive in raising funds, and has been able to bring in dollars from both local and national foundations, as well as public dollars from state and local government. This has resulted in expansion in recent years with the new sites being established. At the same time, it has consolidated or dropped some programs as it refocuses on OAUC youth.

Human Resources Management:

Actually, the longer members stay together as an intact group, the better they do.

As noted in the section on Site A, the selection and development of staff is important in services to young people. A striking feature of Site B is the length of tenure among its senior leaders, several of whom have been there 10 years or more at the time I was observing in 2012; while the president had been there for 18 years. These staff members have worked together on the development of the organization so that many components were established with their involvement. This experience gives them a sense of ownership as well as authority internally beyond mere rank. During interviews, they described being familiar with each other and with the different programs. They were comfortable citing problems as well as new developments, reflecting a strong culture in the organization of continuous improvement and security about its status and future. Research by Richard Hackman and others points to the advantage of such long-term relationships seems to apply for this organization:

Actually, the longer members stay together as an intact group, they better they do. As unreasonable as this may seem, the research evidence is unambiguous. Whether it is a basketball team or a string quartet, teams that stay together longer, play together better.⁴

Staff cited several reasons for the long tenures. One is loyalty to the youth. Nearly all of them grew up in the same city as the youth, some from the same neighborhoods. Most are either African American or Hispanic, reflecting the population served. Several said that the organization enables them to help youth who need them and that the president does a good job keeping an ear to the staff while developing the organization. The most recent strategic plan, prepared in 2012, had extensive staff involvement reaching down to direct service staff. Tenures may be influenced also by the relatively small size of the city in which it operates, meaning that there are few comparable opportunities. Finally, the organization's salaries are competitive relative to others in the field.

The salary ranges are:

- For direct services counselors and workforce developers: \$37,000 to \$42,000;
- Supervisor: \$45,000 to \$50,000;
- Director: \$55,000 to \$75,000.

The personnel policies place a strong emphasis on both performance and growth of staff. The organization invests in learning about research and practice and using that knowledge to improve services. Included in its leadership team are three senior positions concerned with organization and staff development:

- Director of Performance Management, who works with unit heads and senior leadership to review program data including comparing actual outcomes against expectations.

Director of Performance Management:...it's the development of program staff's thinking in terms of... young people and the utilization of... services, how we can improve quality and set systems of program measures to ensure we get the outcomes we intend to get. And we do that through [the] data management system that we use that's called Efforts to Outcomes.

- Senior Director of Research and Organizational Performance, who develops and oversees formative and summative evaluations conducted by external organizations.

At the time I was conducting my field research, Site B had just received funding to conduct a formative evaluation with an outside evaluator. Staff plans to use this to set the stage for a summative evaluation. Among other things, this study will look at how the Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) data compares with what is actually happening in the programs and how to make adjustments to ensure alignment of the services with the ETO data fields, as well as how to strengthen performance.

- Director of Talent Development, who orients new staff and works with current staff to design and support unit and individual development plans.

Director of Talent Development: *Obviously those who meet the mark stay, and those who don't meet the mark, we mutually agree to separate. But within that, I will also reinforce that the*

same way we are committed to increasing competency with the young people we're also about increasing the competency of our staff. So we do have talent development and training where we are reinforcing what we feel are the youth development competencies that a staff person needs in order to work with these youth.

In hiring, the initial interviews are conducted by the relevant program manager and the staff who will work with the new hire. As part of the interview process, candidates are asked to respond to scenarios from the program in order to understand how they think about situations they might encounter on the job. In the second round of interviewing for direct service positions, youth and direct service staff participate.

New direct service staff receives extensive training before they are given their caseload. This training includes shadowing of a current employee. Topics covered during the orientation are:

- Mission and Vision
- Agency Value Statement
- Full Value Contract (see below)
- Pathways to Success Overview.

New staff must complete the orientation and sign a statement that they are ready before they can engage with young people.

Supervisors meet with their direct reports weekly. They consult the ETO data to help assess how staff is performing. Among issues that are considered in assessing direct service staff are the frequency of their interactions with youth, their willingness to follow up on youth who need extra support, and the outcomes of youth in their care.

The organization makes monthly trainings available. These can be targeted to specific positions or entire units. Training might address content such as youth development or the legal issues that youth face.

Some of the staff biographies reflect the organization's willingness to hire people who have unusual backgrounds, provided they are likely to have a strong connection to the populations that they serve:

Supervisor of Workforce Development: *I actually started because I met one of the youth of the agency at the library and he was doing homework and I was doing something and he said, "Sorry, but do you think you could look ..." and I did and I helped him. I saw him about a week later and helped him there, and we became friends. I would help him with homework at the library. And he said, "You know what? I like you. You should come to my program. We don't have tutors." So he advocated for me and I wasn't looking for a job so basically I was volunteering. And he started bringing his friends, and basically he created the need — and that's how it started. I then transitioned from being a hired tutor to being in the educational department and I was given a cohort [of] 40 individuals [who] were high school seniors [who] were going to transition to college.*

This woman had just emigrated from South America when she encountered the youths at the library. She became supervisor of the Workforce Development Services unit and now has a new position in which she is charged with setting up adaptations of Site B in other communities.

Edwin, a Youth Development Specialist (YDS)—the organization’s title for primary person — began as a youth in the program, a dropout who eventually obtained a GED:

Edwin, YDS: *It’s real helpful to me when I talk to my students. I always tell them that I will never regret anything I did ... And I’m able to express my experiences with the students and I tell them, “This is what I went through and if you and if you don’t do a, b, and c you may end up in the same kind of route.” I always tell them: “A smart person learns from his own mistakes and a wise person learns from other people’s mistakes.” ...So just this whole experience of being promoted several times within the agency and stuff like that is a way for me to connect more and more with the youth.*

Location

Currently, the organization has five sites; two are located in its home city, the main site and the school. Three have been initiated recently in smaller cities in the same state, one with support from the state’s social welfare agency to serve youth in foster care, adapting the pathways model to the new sites; the other two are school-based programs which are the first stage of a model for new charter schools for OAUC youth.

The main site houses the major programs and administrative services. Formerly a factory, and now populated with numerous programs and offices, it is about seven minutes by car from the city’s main railroad station. Site B occupies most of one floor. Across the street are a row of three-story wood-frame houses. The area is quiet with few pedestrians or cars passing by.

The floor on which the site is located is quite large. Doors to administrative offices, classrooms, and other program spaces run along a brightly painted hallway. The space has a feeling of openness and quiet. Many of the rooms have large, colorful murals created by the youth depicting activities at the site.

Youth must ring a bell in order to be buzzed into the building. They come by elevator to the second floor, pass several doors until they reach the door indicating “youth services.” This large space has several rooms off of it. These include one for computer training; one where youth work on fabrics and other visual art projects; the office and program space for the organization’s Youth Business Services unit (YBS), which includes a room with keyboards and other devices for making music; a small cafeteria which is used by youth and staff; and other rooms. A small table in the central area displays greeting cards made by the youth and sold by the program. A receptionist sits at the entrance and directs everyone to where they need to go. The feeling is informal, as youth and staff enter, chat, and then go to one of the rooms.

STRUCTURE OF THE SITE

Pathways to Success

Site B’s services are organized into four “pathways,” each targeting a different adolescent sub-population. “Pathways” is both a way of structuring its services and a metaphor for the experience of youth. While, in this paper, I will focus on Pathway 1, below is a summary of each pathway.

Pathway 1: 16 to 24 years of age; out of school, no diploma

Pathway 2: 14 to 18 years of age. In-school, two or more years behind, retained once, or academically — or developmentally — behind or delayed. About one third of these youth, out of a total of 150, attend the school developed by Site B with the city education department. Site B provides counseling and related youth development services within the school. The goal is a high school diploma and college enrollment. Other youth who are overage and under-credited are served through counseling and other supports and are included in afterschool and Summer Youth Employment programs. Significant numbers of youth are in foster care (210) and court-involved (100).

Pathway 3: 14 to 18 years of age; in school, on track to graduate. These youth are served in afterschool and Summer Youth Employment programs.

Pathway 4A: 18–24 years of age; has a high school diploma or GED and is enrolled in training or college. Here the goal is graduation from college or attainment of a certificate.

- **Pathway 4B:** 18 – 24 years of age out of school, with a diploma; not employed full-time or in college. Here the goal is full-time employment.
- **Pathway 4T:** 18 to 24 years of age; out of school, with a diploma; not employed full-time or in college. Here the goal is full-time employment or college enrollment and graduation.

The Site's YBS provides experiences in music, visual arts, and boatbuilding, the latter with a focus on woodworking. These are available primarily to youth who are in school through after school and summer programs. Several of the Pathway 1 young adults cited experiences in YBS when they were still in school as important in making them feel that the organization had something special to offer. Often, I found Pathway 1 youth using program spaces in YBS during the day when they are not in use by afterschool programs. They compose, play music or work on visual arts activities.

The entire Pathways to Success program is under one director. Reporting to her are the supervisor of youth development, who oversees the YDSs; the supervisor of workforce development, who oversees the workforce development specialists (WDS); and the supervisor of youth business Services (YBS). This encompasses all of the community-based services. School-based services are under the director of educational initiatives. The director of pathways to success and the director of educational initiatives report to the COO.

The organization's youth development philosophy and approach shapes each pathway, reflecting a conviction that every youth can achieve a positive outcome. There is an explicit emphasis on combining caring with high expectations. These ideas were voiced consistently by those I interviewed, 16 staff at all levels in the organization.

Membership

After completing the intake process, youth become “members” of the organization. No matter which pathway they enter, they have access to three core services, depending on their needs:

- An adult counselor, the YDS, similar to the concept of “primary person,” is responsible for guiding each participant towards an outcome: a job, college, or both. The YDSs have great flexibility and can plug youth into a wide range of services, including those conducted by the organization, by other organizations, or combinations. One YDS is dedicated to helping youth enter and succeed in college. Another is outsourced to a nearby community college to support youth who attend that college.
- Academic tutoring, college planning, and — for students who enter college — continued support through “retention” services.
- Employment preparation and support provided by a workforce development specialist (WDS). This includes preparation for seeking work, job placement, internships, and — through its Youth Business Services—hands-on experiences in woodworking, visual arts, and multimedia production. Youth also receive follow-up support once they are employed.

The WDSs consult with each young adult’s YDS, and staff in both roles meets as a group. They exchange information about the youth in their caseloads, get help with issues that arise, share resources for their work, and provide personal support to each other

As part of its approach, the organization is committed to long-term relationships with its participants—of a year or more. This requires it to commit discretionary dollars, largely from private sources since public dollars rarely cover such commitments. It also requires adept management so that these long-term relationships do not drain core program dollars.

RE-ENGAGING YOUNG ADULTS

Thirteen students were interviewed of whom one is female. The average age was 20. The average number of months of participation in the organization’s programs (which include Summer Youth Employment and Afterschool) was 38 with a range of seven to 124 months.

Chief Operating Officer: *One of the biggest failures is using a cookie cutter approach to try to get young people to succeed. It just does not work anymore. I know it’s sometimes costly to get these services individualized.*

Intake and Orientation

Site B’s services to Pathway 1 young adults, as well as other youth, are highly individualized. From the time youth join the program until after they move on or leave, the primary services are provided by YDSs and WDSs. Unlike Site A, at Site B the main academic support is provided by tutors, online programs, or through referrals to other organizations.

Just as in Site A, the orientation and intake are designed to assess young people’s commitment to participate, determine their skill level and how they will be placed, and introduce them to staff and key programs.

Young adults who are not covered under a specific contract (i.e., juvenile justice) will go on a waiting list until openings occur. Applications are reviewed by an administrative assistant and referred to the supervisor of youth development services. When there is a space, she assigns them to a YDS. The YDS interviews each young adult and develops a program plan with them, called an Individual Service Plan (ISP). Parental involvement in this process is required if the youth is under 18.

The intake process requires that youth come to the site on four different occasions. The repeated returns test the commitment level. Those who miss these meetings may restart the process at a later point.

Assessment

The assessment includes the Harrington O’Shea Career Decision Making System and an adult education exam for academic skills required by the state. The Harrington O’Shea results help the YDS and the young adult to identify career interests. Staff described this as an especially meaningful part of the process, saying that young adults demonstrate a high degree of interest in the assessment’s guidance about what the potential matches with jobs might be. The process of reviewing the results is helpful also to the YDSs in establishing their relationship with the participant.

For Pathway 1 youth, Site B prioritizes returning to school for a regular high school diploma. For those who are too old or not willing, the site provides several options, described below.

Connecting with a Key Adult:

Hope. The care and the support.

Often, when young people show up for intake, they are continuing a long and twisting route toward what they hope will be economic independence. Many of the youth I interviewed from all sites had tried several programs and had a wide range of experience with key adults in their lives, some of it bad. YDSs seek to establish a secure relationship and to continue it over time to an outcome. Staff commented on the fragility of these relationships, citing youth who were inconsistent or had walked away. This is a common challenge that staff work hard to address through their conversations, follow-up, and encouragement.

Donald was 22 when I first interviewed him in April 2012. He has had a rough ride through much of his life, in and out of foster homes, no regular school after middle school, incarcerated, and now has a daughter—she does not live with him. When he began at Site B, he was 20 years of age.

Donald, Student: *When I finished middle school, I was incarcerated... [Then] I was in a halfway house... I got out of that... I was still in the system, DCF (foster care). They got me into Job Corps. From when I was in Job Corps I was doing automotive. I finished my automotive, got kicked out, and I came into YouthBuild. I found YouthBuild on my own. From YouthBuild I found adult ed., on to adult ed.*

Now he is seeking his GED by taking classes in adult education and the online education program at Site B, E2020.

Donald: *Whatever I’ve got to do — get above things, stay out of trouble, stay on the right path. I’ve got a daughter so she’s bringing my future up. She’s bringing my eye up to better things, stay away from things I should be far away from. She’s a big factor in my life right now, for where I need to be... Because I’ve been here [at Site B] so long I know everybody and familiar with everybody and well connected with everybody*

In the months that followed, his desire to stay connected with and help his daughter proved a touchstone, even as he struggled to complete the GED and earn income. While he expressed some distrust of the organization, he was appreciative of the staffer who was working with him:

Interviewer: *Any person, any event, anything that will be memorable to you?*

Donald: *Hope. The care and the support.*

Interviewer: *So you feel you got those things?*

Donald: *Yeah. Very good support. Very honest. Trustworthy.*

Interviewer: *And you feel they care about you.*

Donald: They care about you a lot. Put you on the right path.

Planning the Journey

The Individual Service Plan (ISP) for each youth describes their goals and the activities to help achieve them. The plan is flexible and changes are made over time to reflect changes in the situation or thinking of the youth.

The process for creating the ISP is described for staff in great detail in the organization's *Field Guide*. The *Guide* provides guidance, with a strong focus on how to articulate goals so that they are clear and measurable. For Pathway 1, goals include high school or GED completion, enrollment in college, training, and/or employment. There is also a section in the *Guide* on youth development goals including items such as "improve grades," "improve social skills/self-esteem," "stop using drugs/alcohol," and so on. Meetings with young adults are recorded in the ETO database, providing a basis for tracking progress as well as documentation for contractual purposes.

The YDS orients each young adult by describing the services that are available, their ongoing support role, and expectations of the youth. The YDS then takes them through the facility. New enrollees are introduced to several staff in an intentional strategy to give each youth a sense that they have a family of supports. Of the 13 youth interviewed for this site, six said that they had worked with more than one staffer.

Supervisor of Youth Development: *Because most of them don't have a caring adult in their life, so when they come to [our organization] and walk through the door, [we] assign a caring adult. And then they find out they have more than one caring adult. Because you go to Employment, you've got one. You've got [names head of YBS], I mean [names CEO] doesn't mind coming around, messing around with them, [names president] peeks in and messes with the kids... you come in wanting one caring adult and you end up with twenty!*

YDSs develop a variety of "hooks." Here is the strategy that one YDS uses:

Edwin, YDS: *You have to have hooks for students to have them come in... I want to say my biggest hook to getting them in here to develop their resume, to develop their researching skills as far as the market and stuff like that. And then try to increase their employability skills [in the organization's Career Competency Development Training].*

As part of the intake process, the YDS helps to remove barriers that might prevent progress — these could include homelessness, lack of care for a child, or many others.

Often, what Pathway 1 youth want first and foremost is a job with an income. The organization will nudge them toward a program to complete their education.

Donald: *When I first came I thought it would just be help to get jobs. But it's mostly like schooling, education, a person you can talk to, friendship — a lot.*

Director of Pathways: [If the young person wants to go directly to work, the YDS may raise the following]: *"Okay, whatcha want to do with that money?" And it's translating to that if you*

had your GED or a high school diploma you'd earn a little more. So it's always bringing back the message that you need to go back to school. One of the strategies that we have is we have case conferences between the workforce development specialists and the youth development specialist and the youth. So that we can make sure we get them back on track to education. We try to show them the difference between someone who is a drop out and how much money they would earn vs. someone who would get at least a high school diploma — what they would earn...

The frequency of a young adult's contacts with Site B can vary, generally at the discretion of the youth, from day to day interactions to staff-initiated check-ins on a biweekly basis. Of the young adults interviewed, 10 out of 13 said that they are in touch with their YDS or WDS several times each week. YDSs are expected to check in on their new enrollees during the first week after enrollment and on a biweekly basis thereafter. Should a young adult be assigned to a program at the site, the YDS is expected to speak with the program staff working with the youth at least monthly. When young adults do not show up and fail to respond, then YDSs conduct home visits. The frequent checking in with the youth is a means to offer support and also to identify and address changes in life circumstances or thinking.

Sandra, who was 20 when I first interviewed her in early 2012, wanted to be a social worker. She had just completed the Penn Foster⁷ online program and through it obtained a high school diploma. Now she is thinking of college and beyond:

Sandra, Student: *I would like to be a DCF [Department of Children and Families] worker. I feel that a lot of DCF workers around now, they kind of like — you know, they take kids from their home and they overlook things... so I feel that I could make a change in the DCF — little circle. You know, I can do it. Because I don't feel like they see everything. They overlook a lot.*

During several conversations over a six month period, Sandra always communicated a great deal of self-assurance to me. But just three months later, after starting at one college, and then moving to another, she changed her goal and now wants to be a homicide detective. Not only did she change her goal, and her college, but also moved to a new part-time job.

For youth who are in foster care or on probation, the site works with the foster care case workers and probation officers. Its staff takes the lead role in helping youth advance as they offer most of the programmatic support in education and employment. They keep the foster care workers or probation officers informed.

Robert, YDS: *I'm connected with whoever's connected with the kids. So if they're in a group home then I'm connected with the counselor there who I can call. Even the driver who brings them out here, just to make sure, "are they coming, are they going to be on time," those kinds of things. And with the foster parents if they're in a foster home.*

When the PO sends a referral over, and the kid's fully engaged with [Site B], the majority of time is going to be spent with us [not with the PO]. They may have to see the PO maybe about once a month, you know what I mean, but [we go] year round [and are in contact more frequently].

Support for Staff

From “zest” to “persistence and digging in.”

Staff at both sites described how challenging it can be when young adults they are trying to help have setbacks or become difficult to reach, even after they have established what they feel is a strong bond. One YDS, a woman of about 35 who had worked at the site for about a year and a half, described how these experiences were different from what she had expected before taking the job. She described her initial “zest” for the work, and how it had gradually been replaced by a commitment to “persistence and digging in.” Staff cited the importance of support from fellow staff and the successes that some of their participants have had as a way to keep up their spirits.

SITE B'S EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT TIERS

He really appreciated me being hard on him and keeping tabs on him.

The program reported that by the end of the period of my observations four students of the students I interviewed had received high school diplomas from Penn Foster and one a GED. Five had moved to post-secondary institutions, two of these to certificate programs and three to degree programs. Six were still involved with Site B programs. Four were employed.

The supports that are available to help young adults increase their skills are:

- An internal online educational program taken at the site with support from a counselor, or an external program, such as YouthBuild or adult education, to help them obtain a diploma or GED.
- Training on how to apply for and remain in a job, called Career Competency Development Training (CCDT).
- Training in Manufacturing Technology at a community college.
- One or more internships.
- Assistance in preparing and meeting with employers.

Internally, the organization offers tutoring toward the GED and has been providing E2o2o, an online program of Edgenuity.com, for boosting academic skills to help young adults prepare for the GED exam. Site B is about to restart Penn Foster, another online program that offers a high school diploma. (It had to end Penn Foster at an earlier time due to lack of funding.) Students who work online in the Penn Foster program will receive help also from live tutors. Youth that I interviewed said that Penn Foster was a better route for them than the GED.

Staff pointed out that organizations to which it refers externally, such as YouthBuild and Job Corps, have extensive resources to support youth and provide a rich array of educational and employment preparation experiences. The program has a relationship also with the city's adult education program which refers young adults to Site B. The site provides wrap-around supports while the youth attends adult education classes. These are paid for by the city's WIA program. In decisions about where to place youth for skills development, YDSs said that their primary consideration is the goal of the young person. But other factors are in play as well. For example, if the YDS judges that the young adult may not attend consistently or has other concerns, s/he may refer the youth to an internal program for work experience. This way, the youth's progress and commitment can be monitored and addressed more readily than at an external referral.

Scheduling is important as well. If the young person has part-time work or child care obligations that cannot be changed, then referrals are designed to reflect that.

Supervisor of Youth Development Services: *You have some kids whose comfort zone is here so they'll say I'll do [an online education program]. But this is a conversation you have to have with the kids, you've got to look at time and flexibility with time, and then you also have some kids where you have to say—you can tell before you enroll them how they were with their appointments—so before sending them to somebody else, “Let me get you here and get you room to attend something on a daily basis...start you off with [something internal] and maybe I'll refer you to somebody else later.”*

The referral process happens quickly for young adults who have a clear idea and are ready to get down to work. Often, however, the young adult may not be ready to make a commitment, may still be uncomfortable with an education program, or may fail to show the level of consistency that the YDS expects for an external referral. YDSs described having to talk with youth multiple times, “lots of stops and stops. You have to keep having the conversation.”

Even then, initial referrals may not work. Youth will start a program, and then pull back. YDSs cited the importance of persistence on their part.

Edwin, YDS: *[Speaking of a youth who had got a job before completing the Penn Foster program]: When he came in he wasn't connected to any of these services, so what I did was connect him with the high school diploma portion [Penn Foster]. And even though it's taken him a long time he still has been able to work on it...I got real tough with him and he told me that he really appreciated me being hard on him and keeping tabs on him... [But] recently I wasn't able to get in touch with him, and one of the employment specialists ... he took a trip down to [another town] to Home Depot and actually spoke with his supervisor and let him know, “You know we're trying to get in contact with this kid.” I'm not sure if he was actually able to speak with him, but then I called the store manager and I actually spoke with him. That's what we do. We track them down.*

Keeping track of young adults can be difficult. Referring to another young adult who succeeded at Penn Foster but moved away, Edwin described how he located her: *Facebook is a wonder. Facebook is a tool I would recommend to every youth worker out there. [The girl] ... made a post the other day she obtained a job ... Sometimes you have to give them time—you don't want to always be “on” them. But that was something I found out on Facebook and [now] she's obviously focused and in school and in employment...*

He also cited a caution about using Facebook:

Edwin, YDS: *You find out so much about the students, and it's almost like being aware of their culture. And sometimes you don't want to cross that boundary [of privacy] or burst that bubble, but you also get to learn a lot about them.*

The site maintains communication with staff of organizations to which its participants are referred. They can also track them on the ETO database where staff enters information about their interactions with each youth. The ISP is updated by the YDS as goals or circumstances change.

Internal Online Education Program:

Here, if you stay stuck on the same page for no matter how long they will sit there and help you until you finish that page.

Sandra obtained the Penn Foster certification in December 2011.

Sandra: [Referring to her experience in high school] ... *[I did not pay] attention to my work as much as I should have ... [the high school] allowed me to be fooling around. So I felt that Penn Foster was more of a smaller room, more attention for me to focus. So once I got here ... I started getting tutors... It took me a long time because I didn't want to just submit because Penn Foster has a rule that once you take all their tests and you get down to the final exams, if you fail, there's no diploma. You don't get a second chance. That's that. So I wanted to take my time, because I was having trouble with my maths so I had a ... tutor ... I had a lot of help.*

During my research, young adults were working on E2020 as Penn Foster had not yet been reinstated. Young adults appreciated the combination of computer work with tutoring support:

Roberto, Student (17): *I think it's easier here because in the high school they will teach you, but after a little bit of teaching you have to go on your own from there on. Here, if you stay stuck on the same page for no matter how long they [tutors or other staff] will sit there and help you until you finish that page. In a high school if you stay stuck on that page for so long they would just fail you...*

Another reason for preferring the online programs that came up several times, similar to Sandra's point about struggling in the high school setting, was Roberto's concern about staying out of trouble with other youth:

Roberto: *I'd rather do E2020 on the computer cause if I go to high school I could get in trouble.*

I observed youth working by themselves on computers, with a WDS nearby whom they could ask for help, though they did not. Roberto was working through the Language Arts section. The material in the section seemed quite good to me, with poems by Ezra Pound, Langston Hughes, and other major writers. He read the poems and answered questions; when successful, he moved to more demanding content. The math section focused on graphs, using word problems. For example, he was asked to "create a scatter plot" describing the percentage of benefits that employees put into life insurance.

Here is Donald, who was taking both adult education and E2020 classes at the time I interviewed him, hoping to hasten his route to GED passage.

Donald: *Adult ed you have people come in every two months or so and you move up and you go back every time people come in — you move forward and you come down. But with 2020, it's a big hook for me because I move on. I keep moving forward and going up. With E2020 you can keep going up.*

Employment Preparation and Placement

They tailor it to your interest.

The majority of young adults interviewed at Site B (9 out of 13) mentioned the site's strong support for obtaining employment. As noted above, the site conducts the Harrington O'Shea assessment during orientation to help identify aptitudes and clarify interests, and then sets up a sequence of support that includes preparation for applying and remaining in a job, internships, placement assistance, and follow-up for a year.

Sandra: *[After being asked what she remembers as most important to her at Site B] At [Site B] since I was 14—job readiness program was most important. They tailor it to your interest; they helped [me] get OSHA [certification].*

Donald: *Came to [Site B], interviewed us, gave us our own job readiness training to see what we know before stepping into the field and being interviewed in a business.*

CAREER COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT TRAINING (CCDT)

...no one wants to see your boxers.

CCDT is a prerequisite for getting an internship and beginning the job placement process. It is extensive, running anywhere from two weeks to one month in length, in two-hour workshops. Shorter durations are available for youth who have had similar training.

As the market has changed, the staff has adjusted the CCDT curriculum, and now more emphasis goes to online job search and applications. Youth learn, for example, to be careful when answering questions in an online application:

Ralph, a WDS: *For example, they [the online application] might ask, "Do you show it when you are upset?" And [youth] will put down, "Yes, I do." ... [As a result of this answer] they don't get called back because they failed the online test. And they don't know it.*

He pointed out that once a youth's application is in the "failure file," that company may never respond again.

While the CCDT curriculum is extensive, during my observations and interviews, I was able to observe and hear from young adults on the following topics:

- Developing a career plan which includes using the Harrington O'Shea results to identify options;
- Finding a job: marketing yourself and ways of communicating with potential employers, such as resumes and cover letters;
- Getting a job: UNICrew Assessment Review to prepare online applications (UNICrew is used by large retail businesses to electronically assess applications);
- Keeping a Job: problem-solving and decision making, customer services; balancing school/work/family and friends.
- Other areas of the curriculum include: Customer Service, Interpersonal Communication & Skills, Personal Qualities and Financial Literacy.

I observed a workshop in which a spirited WDS was conducting a CCDT session on Finding a Job for nine youth, six of whom are female. He discusses their resumes, pointing out problems without naming specific young people and indicating he would talk with them individually. He explains that the “resume is [your] marketing tool.” They discuss how they should dress for an interview: **David, WDS:** *What is acceptable attire? No distractions—no big bangles. Guys, no hats or baggy pants—no one wants to see your boxers. Girls, cover your cleavage. Boys, get a haircut. And no purple suits.*

The presentation is both serious and fun. There is a long discussion about piercing and what they should do if they cannot remove rings easily. One young woman says the ring in her lip is difficult to remove. There are no ready answers for her. Tattoos should be covered if possible. He urges them to research their potential employer online and to show up for the interview 10 or 15 minutes early. The group then practices interviews: he stresses firm hand shakes, looking people directly in the eye, speaking in complete sentences, and practice.

David is an African American male, in his late 20s or early 30s. He has a small beard, and is smartly dressed. He speaks with energy, often evoking laughs from the participants, who give him rapt attention and participate actively.

Edwin, YDS: *[comments on how the site prepares youth] You’d be surprised, when you go to a retail store, when you provide them with a resume and a business card and you ask the employer for their business card. It makes them think twice — “this 17-year-old has a resume and a business card? Wow, it looks great and they’re all dressed up ready for an interview,” you know it’s all about that detailed stuff.*

He goes on to point out, however, that the challenge is not merely in preparing youth with the skills and documentation they need, but their motivation.

Edwin, YDS: *[Yet] you’d be surprised how many students don’t follow [up] ... I’ve had students say, “Oh, I’m looking for employment.” [I ask] How many job applications have you done in the past week, two? Two times four is eight so you’re talking about eight job leads in a month. How many calls are you going to get back? “Hmmm. Probably none.” Look for 20, that’s 80 job leads in a month—and I break it down like that...*

Vocational Training

Both Donald and Sandra have received training for specific skills. Sandra cites the training at Site B for computer skills.

Sandra: *I am trained and have skills; and already have part or most of the skills I need. Learned to work on the computer and that was most helpful; learned PowerPoint and data entry.*

Donald’s certification helped him get temporary work with local contractors:

Donald: *Nah. I finished YouthBuild as a trade...[There] I picked up my trade of carpentry. I’m certified carpenter with OSHA and OSHA10, OSHA20. Certified carpenter, still depending on [getting] the GED.*

Recently, the program has established a relationship with a local community college to provide training to its participants in “Manufacturing Technology.” The college has agreed to take up to 40 youth, including 10 who lack high school diplomas, but intend to get them or a GED.

Internships

We really try to personalize the student’s interest with the internship.

All young people at Site B can have an internship once they have completed CCDT. These are set up by the WDS in consultation with the YDS and the youth.

Supervisor of Workforce Development: *It really depends on the student. We really try to personalize the student’s interest with the internship. ... [The] Individual Service Plan pretty much drives everything for the student. So if the student ... wants to work in retail or they’re interested in business or something like that, so we try our best to fit the internship around those needs. Now, where students can get caught up is in the fact that some internships, after they’re done, they won’t get hired. Because there’s not a high enough demand ... We do have many connections throughout our city and [nearby towns] with Price Chopper and other places where they will actually hire our students after they complete the internship.*

Internships usually run a total of 90 hours over six to eight weeks. The organization has developed relationships with a large number of employers, both for-profit and nonprofit:

Director of Pathways: *So a lot of employers are on board, they like the “Try Before You Buy” model, if you will, and some of them just want to allow that to be an experience or exposure for the young person.*

Donald and Sandra have each had two internships. Donald worked in a local park association where his job was in maintenance, including using his carpentry skills to do repairs. Later he worked at Burlington Coat Factory where he dealt with customers and learned about the different roles at the store.

Donald: *They train you — they go the way with layaway, registering, ticketing, merchandising...*

In reflecting on the internship experiences, Donald said:

Donald: *Keeping me on track, keeping me out of trouble, keeping me busy, finding a bunch of productive things to occupy my time instead of being in trouble out on the streets... Better experiencing different things. Better to look at different things. Expanding, expanding.*

One of the ideas in his response — keeping busy — turned up frequently in comments by youth as they confronted boredom and temptations to spend time on the streets, which, often, is where trouble begins.

For Sandra, in addition to what she has learned about working, the internships suggested ways to enrich experiences for other young people, consistent with her interest in working with youth.

Sandra: *If I were to start my own business or school similar to this, I would definitely — like if I had internships — I would have kids go all over — go to different towns and stuff like Petco and you know, there’s kids who want to do everything.*

Many youth are willing to accept unpaid internships to gain the experience of working. Site B provides gift cards if there is not enough funding for stipends.

Internships are monitored closely. This includes site visits by a WDS who speaks to the youth and the employer and follows up on issues that emerge. Internship supervisors fill out a weekly timesheet and provide it to the site.

Supervisor of Workforce Development Services: *The weekly time sheet has an evaluation and an area where employers can write notes. And time sheets come in weekly. And the areas that are evaluated are attendance and punctuality, communication, completion of work, the way they present themselves, problem solving, customer service, accuracy in their work...*

Internships may be extended if the employer expresses interest. In some cases, youth will have multiple internships while seeking employment.

Director of Pathways: *We entertain extensions when there is a possibility of hire, and the conversation or the negotiation now comes into play. By the third week or fourth week of the internship, the workforce development specialist is starting to say "Oh, so how's it going? What are you seeing, what are the benefits?" And [we're] starting to tweak a little bit of how we're talking to them. When we start to get a sense that there is a possibility [that they] have some openings.*

For Donald, it was hoped by his WDS that he might be hired by Burlington Coat Factory. His WDS urged him to ask his supervisor at the site:

Ralph, WDS: *So have you spoken to them in the midst of all these people getting let go: "What are my chances now?" Because you said your chances were pretty good two months ago. So we're here in May. What are your chances now? Have you spoken to [employer]?*

Donald: *Joe said I'll know in two weeks or four weeks before my internship is over with. I don't know.*

The job did not materialize and Donald moved on. He has been able to use his internship experiences to help with getting part-time work. He says the internships gave him greater confidence in approaching employers. By January of 2013, he still had not passed the GED and had stopped attending classes, but was in touch with his WDS.

Meanwhile, Sandra obtained a succession of jobs in retail and is now working at a hamburger joint and starting college, her second college within about eight months. She is still in touch with the program.

Job Placement

Show them they can't get discouraged.

Neither the city nor the state economies where Site B is located have fully recovered from the recession of 2007. Like the rest of the country, they have seen sharp decreases in labor market participation by young adults, especially those who lack credentials.

Ralph, WDS: *It is not a time like when I was a teenager I could go to McDonald's and I didn't have to worry about online stuff. I could just impress a supervisor or manager, fill out the application, and I had a job. ...But now... I have to break that down to [the youth] consistently and show them they can't get discouraged. They still have to keep trying. It's not easy as it was... And that's my fear. Frustration and despair. Because when you're frustrated and you're desperate, now your common sense won't help you a lot because you're going to do silly things... We place them in a lot of internships [even when] we know they're not going to get hired.*

Site B staff has developed a variety of strategies and messages to engage youth more fully as well as the employers:

Edwin, YDS: *I tell my students all the time, "You want a full-time job or part-time?" [And they might say:] "I want a part-time job, 25 hours a week." [So, I would say:] "Okay, so you need to be out there looking for a job 25 hours a week. If you can't put 25 hours a week into looking for a job, what makes you think you could work 25 hours a week?" They start thinking. I'm like, "You could easily fill out five applications in like three or hours on the computer. You could easily go to the mall and spend five hours and do five or six applications in the stores. If you're not willing to do that, you're not looking for a job." Point blank. So I tell them, "Your job is a job seeker. That's your title — a job seeker. And you should be able to know how to look for employment. And you should be able to track how many jobs you locate and who you talk to, you should have a stack of thank you notes." It's about the detailed stuff.*

The program has put in place a strong set of connections with employers to strengthen their efforts finding placements:

Supervisor of Workforce Development Services: *The employers that we've been working with for a long time... the Marshalls, the TJ Maxx's, the AJ Wrights, Home Goods. So it was an umbrella of different organizations — clothing, shoe — so we started with one store with that model and mentality and right now our collaboration with them is everybody within the ... area, they collaborate with us. So they hire their entry-level population from us.*

Site B has also highlighted its commitment to stay with each youth for a year after placement.

Supervisor of Workforce Development Services: *[Employers] were noticing that the turnover rate was really high ... they would stay there for the first paycheck, for the second paycheck and that was IT. That was three years ago, going on four ... So the conversation with the other [Site B] staff was that instead of going to employers to talk about placement, because everybody is placing kids these days, how about we talk to them about retention... So our conversation changed. We told employers we were not being measured by how many people we placed but were being measured by how many individuals retain employment. And that was kind of the signature that we had and it worked well for us.*

Often, the young adults who have dropped out start their jobs at positions in they have limited exposure to customers.

Supervisor of Workforce Development Services: *A lot of the dropouts... it's more of a back end kind of job. And we're trying to shift and move that mentality for [youth]... because you can move up. They do have a career track within the company where you can move up.*

College Placement

Site B is placing increased emphasis on college. Five of the 13 youth I interviewed enrolled in community colleges, two in certificate programs and the others in degree programs. Like the other organization profiled in this paper, Site B has created several different kinds of arrangements to support young adults toward a certificate or graduation. The college world presents special difficulties both to students and to staff:

Edwin, YDS: College? ... *Colleges are real tricky to get into and [work with cooperatively]. You really have to build connections. I want to say that there [are] only one or two colleges that I can pick up the phone and talk to someone—[names two].*

Director of Pathways: *It's very difficult... to change their [college's] mindset. We had met with one of the deans... And her attitude was, "They're adults, they're 18, they're coming into this system, they should know how to advocate for themselves, they should know how to access services."*

The organization has created a position for a YDS who focuses entirely on preparing students for college by helping them go through the application process, apply for financial aid, and providing follow-up support once they are enrolled. As part of this effort, it has also placed a counselor at one community college that helps youth at the site. Sandra notes the help she has received:

Sandra: *Actually, I'm involved with [site B] at [a local college] now, because there's a lady — [names her] — she works over there and she's a YDS for here and, she works over there also. She helps kids like me set up financial aid, do their FAFSA, get everything out of the way fast, get into schools fast as possible, you know, keep our heads straight on.*

Asked about college, Donald said:

Donald: *I want to go to college, but not immediately. I want to pick up on my trade and getting into carpentry, construction.*

While more youth are getting into colleges from Site B than in the past, keeping them there until they graduate requires constant attention. YDSs cited several success stories, but also frustration at the failure of some youth to do even the easy things: get paperwork in on time, seek help before the end of a semester when it is too late, and so on. The College YDS, fairly new to the position, is drawing upon these experiences to place more emphasis on timeliness and related issues in his work with youth. The organization intends to continue expand its college placement efforts.

Retention

They know that we don't give up.

For Pathway 1 youth, the site's commitment to at least a year of follow-up is especially important and serves as a protective factor in the period after they have completed their core services. Seven of the 13 youth I interviewed at Site B were either court-involved (5) or in foster care (2). Often, they lack the most fundamental of supports from families. They are vulnerable especially to further encounters with the police and to sustained unemployment.

More than half of the youth I interviewed had been involved at the site earlier through afterschool programs and Summer Youth Employment. In combination with post-program support, young

adults I interviewed at this site averaged 38 months in one or another program of the site. While these relationships vary in intensity, they provide a touchstone, a source of consistent adult contact with staff that is trained to address issues that arise and demonstrate caring.

The extent of Site B's follow-up services is unusual. Despite the difficulty in obtaining financial support for these sustained efforts, the organization continues to guarantee at least a year of follow-up, drawing upon general support and other discretionary dollars.

Director of Pathways: *Upon placement, our job now is to do retention services... There's two things in our retention services. It's a conversation with the individuals, so we continue to follow up with them now as a twice-a-month reach-out to the young person to make sure that things are still working out for them [if they are] at the job, and explaining to them that if at any point it's not what they want to do before they quit, let's work with you to find something else so that at least you're still getting a paycheck...*

Beyond just following up with the young person, staff checks in with employers that have hired them:

Director of Pathways: *And it's also a conversation with the employer to find out from the employer's side, is this working out, is this not working out, is there anything you need us to do to support this individual? But it's at least being there so that the young person knows that you can still call us. Of course, in the current environment with high levels of unemployment, many are not employed. And here the follow-ups are especially important.*

Supervisor of Youth Development Services: *I guess what's important is that they know that we don't give up so because we have you from 14 to 24, we know that it's not going to happen that by your 17th or 18th birthday you're going to graduate... We never said, "Let me just close the door and we're not going to work with you no more." We're going to continue to do this until we get there. I think what was important for them, what we do a lot, is that there IS a big goal, but we break it down into mini-steps to get to the goal, so that we don't lose them along the way. And I think that's a strategy that works for us.*

I mean, you've got to keep trying. You can't give up on kids. I have kids who took three or four years to obtain a diploma. But by you being a supportive system and sticking behind them — you have some organizations in the city, if the youth's not moving then they close them. We try not to close them. We'll close them if they're MIA and we can't locate them. But we don't close you because you're not moving. People move at a different pace.

In addition to the organization's reaching out, it encourages youth to continue using the site:

Sandra: *I spend time, like if I need to update my resume, or if I need to go on the computer to fill out a job application and educational stuff, I might come here for a little help from other offices in the building because I just don't cooperate with this office, I cooperate with all offices in [Site B].*

The organization has worked with the state agencies that fund its work in foster care youth and juvenile justice. This has resulted in greater flexibility, but funding is still quite limited.

President: ... the Child Welfare Agency, Dept. of Children and Family ... several years ago agreed with us that we should work with these young people they assign to us over a long period of time, and they like our Pathways strategy. So, we work with them five years, six years — what it takes... They're very supportive. Our challenge is...they give us an amount of money, and for that amount of money they let us work with the individuals to determine what ... services they need... The Court Support Services, another state agency deals with it the same way. Their limitation is they cannot fund after they don't have jurisdiction over that individual anymore. So once they lose jurisdiction over the individual our commitment is we'll continue to serve that individual. And... about 40% or 50% are choosing to stay, something like that... which creates problems for us because [the young adult is] not directly funded by that entity anymore.

Supervisor of Youth Development Services: [Speaking of court-involved youth] we keep in contact with them. We don't close them unless they're sentenced to more than a year. If it's more than a year... but if they're going to trial or pre-trial, we hold on to their case. Because basically if we close a file when a kid's been arrested, we're saying, "You're guilty." So we hang on until they send us something saying they've been proven guilty, then it's time for us to close the file. Because you can get out and make bond, not enough evidence and case thrown out and walk back in the door wanting services.

Integration

...the spirit of holding ourselves accountable.

There are several ways in which the organization seeks to build coherence and rigor into its services. "Pathways" is a strong organizing concept, providing a structure, flexibility, and a means for youth to find a way into and through the offerings of the organization. The youth I interviewed were aware that there are several different alternative tracks. All 16 staff I interviewed mentioned Pathways. There was also a great deal of consistency in their comments about how the organization is structured and how it supports youth.

As indicated above, the organization has developed a detailed *Field Guide* for staff to use. It describes the major services that the organization offers and contains letters and forms, such as the Individual Service Plan.

Especially important for developing a common approach and building the organization's capacity is the combination of a rigorous data management system with a team of three senior staff (described above, page 3) who are dedicated to assessment, continuous learning, and talent development. They interact with senior staff, program managers, and line staff to highlight the relationship between the organization's goals and its performance.

The organization is also committed to have staff use Full Value Contracting (FVC) both in their own meetings and in meetings involving youth. FVC is a practice in which, at the end of meetings among staff or activities with youth, all participants have an opportunity to identify their concerns, any remaining issues, what they liked and so on — it is an effort to create openness and community.

Supervisor of Youth Business Services: *Part of the Full Value Contract is the spirit of holding ourselves accountable, holding each other accountable, but then when we mess up, a spirit of*

forgiveness and at the end of every day we'll go through wrap up where we'll go through amends, gratitude, credit, concerns and we'll ask for help. So, we'll save five or 10 minutes at the end of every session and one of the youth in the class will get up and say, "Does anyone have any amends?"

The FVC process establishes rules of behavior for the organization's meetings and other group activities, providing a structure for both positive and critical comments.

Direct service staff uses an ETO database to input and track the participation and progress of young people. Supervisors use the data in their supervisory meetings with staff. This helps to create a common language and expectations around staff's work with youth.

Direct service staff cited the ways that they try to overcome the discouragement of losing a young adults of finding that one does not progress. They highlighted that staff share a lot of practical advice and emotional support. This is helped by the layout of the space, in which YDSs sit near each other; in another room, WDSs sit near each other as well.

Finally, the long tenures of staff in leadership positions assure that there is a core of personnel with a deep commitment to the organization and detailed knowledge of its work.

SITE B: SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

Thirteen students were interviewed of whom one is female. The average age was 20. The average length of participation in the organization's programs (which include Summer Youth Employment and Afterschool) was 38 months with a range of seven to 124 months. If the youth with 124 months of participation is excluded from the data, the average number of months of participation was 29. According to data provided to me by the program, two of the youth were in foster care and five were court-involved. The program did not provide data about changes in academic skills. The program reported that four students had received high school diplomas from Penn Foster and one a GED. Five had moved to post-secondary institutions, two of these to certificate programs and three to degree programs. Six were still involved with Site B programs. Four were employed.

SITE B: SUMMARY POINTS

- Aggressive and growing parent organization with strong local influence that has influenced state and local youth policies.
- Programs are clearly laid out and there is explicit, written guidance to staff
- Long tenures of much of the leadership team
- Large investment in continuous improvement
- Commitment to long-term relationships with participants
- Limited internal education capacity for youth who have dropped out
- Limited vocational training opportunities for youth who have dropped out.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Some information in this summary was drawn from a report prepared by Bridgespan.
- 2 YO! provided large grants to 36 high poverty communities for serving in-school and out-of-school youth from 14-21 with services ranging from sports to community service opportunities. For the US Department of Labor's description and evaluation of YO!, see http://wdr.doleta.gov/research/FullText_Documents/YO%20Impact%20and%20Synthesis%20Report.pdf.
- 3 For information about Thrive, see <http://www.thrivefoundation.org/>.
- 4 R. Hackman, *Six Common Misperceptions about Teamwork*, (Harvard Business Review, HBR Blog Network, June 7, 2011).