YOUTH, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

# Effective Approaches to Reengaging Young Adults

**Partner** Annie E. Casey Foundation

**Team** Jacob Williams, Libbie Brey, and Ming Yin

In the United States today, more than four million young adults have disengaged from the K–12 education system without earning a diploma or GED and have not yet entered the workforce. School closures, the shift to virtual learning, and the pandemic-related economic slowdown are likely to increase this disengagement. Programs to help young people reengage with education exist, but there is not much available research about what makes such efforts effective.

To help address this gap in the research, the Annie E. Casey Foundation partnered with Education Northwest to evaluate young adult reengagement program models. The evaluation examines what outcomes the programs seek to achieve, what approach they use in pursuit of those outcomes, and how they have adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Evaluating what works for youth reengagement

To evaluate program effectiveness, we conducted two phases of investigation. In phase 1 we studied six programs—one program run through a school district and five operating independently. In phase two we investigated two programs run within school districts more closely. Selection criteria for both phases included serving a diverse population, engaging in passive or active outreach, and representing geographic diversity in the U.S.

In both phases of the project, the evaluation team conducted interviews and focus groups with program leaders, staff members, participants, alumni, and other interest holders. The interviews were held over Zoom or in person and lasted 45–90 minutes. While phase 1 collected only qualitative data, in phase 2 we obtained quantitative data from the school districts to further investigate trends in program participation over time and program participant outcomes. In addition, evaluators reviewed program documents such as theories of change, logic models, implementation materials, and financial reports to gain additional context.

## Two factors for program success

The young adults we interviewed overwhelmingly identified two factors that supported their reengagement and continued engagement in education. First, they said supportive relationships with staff members of the reengagement programs were crucial to their success. Second, they cited program flexibility in scheduling, timelines to reach milestones, or differentiated support options.

We recommend the programs review and reform policies that pose accountability, eligibility, and funding barriers for participants. We suggest programs facilitate strong support for participants without overly burdening staff members. Such support should recognize the nonlinear nature of the reengagement path, include financial aid for participants, and better incorporate participants' voice in the process. Finally, the overall K–12 education system should improve support for young adults to reduce the number of people requiring reengagement in the first place.

## Data is a critical area for program improvement

Our research also uncovered another important area—data system capabilities. Reengagement programs often lack efficient ways to track young adults and provide continuous and connected support. This inhibits them from efficiently identifying and monitoring student progress and status as well as from engaging in continuous program improvement. Improving and standardizing data systems will help overcome these issues and allow reengagement programs to more effectively support young adults.