

YOUTH, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

Effective Approaches to Reengaging Young Adults

Partner Annie E. Casey Foundation

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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 chose six programs to study. Selection criteria included serving a diverse population, engaging in passive or active outreach, and representing geographic diversity in the U.S. The chosen programs were:

DC ReEngagement Center

Washington, DC

Gateway to College, Front Range Community

College *Westminster, Colorado*

FastForward Re-Engagement Center

Dayton, Ohio

Gateway to College and Career Academy

Riverside, California

Opportunities for Young Adults

Phoenix, Arizona

NXT Level Young Adults Opportunity Center

San Antonio, Texas

Recognizing individual contexts for program success

Participant responses indicated youth are intrinsically motivated to reengage to obtain a high school diploma or GED. Programs' ability to differentiate support to meet individuals' unique contexts was key to participants' perceptions of success. Staff members did identify this need to differentiate, however, as a heavy burden.

Based on the evaluation, 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.

Future investigations might identify successful candidates for each type of program and clarify theories of change. A second phase of this project will focus on participant outcomes in the DC ReEngagement Center, including what student population is served, what outcomes participants experience, how those outcomes compare with those of young adults who reengage with education by other means, and how the outcomes vary by student characteristics. This work will be completed by the end of May 2023.