

YouthBuild USA Postsecondary Education Initiative

Creating Pathways to Success

Background and Rationale

With \$6 million in funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, YouthBuild USA (YBUSA) is supporting seven local YouthBuild programs over three years so that more than 1,500 low-income young adults who have dropped out of high school can earn GEDs or diplomas and go on to complete postsecondary programs, including two- and four-year colleges, technical schools and apprenticeships.

The initiative is based on the recognition that it is no longer sufficient for young people to complete high school and *access* postsecondary programs. In order for the future of young people and the health of our nation to improve, it is necessary to dramatically increase the rate at which low-income young people *complete* postsecondary education and obtain meaningful career credentials.

Toward this end, YBUSA has set appropriately ambitious goals for outcomes achieved through this initiative. By the third year of this grant, more than half of all students in the seven participating YouthBuild programs will enroll in postsecondary education and career credential programs. And more than half of the YouthBuild graduates enrolling in these postsecondary pathways will complete their respective programs. While a 50 percent postsecondary completion rate leaves considerable room for growth, it represents tremendous promise relative to recent national postsecondary completion rates of 10-15 percent for low-income youth who have previously dropped out of school.

With the Gates Foundation funding, YBUSA will provide technical assistance, training, funding and support to YouthBuild Brockton, Mass.; Metro Atlanta YouthBuild AmeriCorps, Atlanta and Marietta, Ga.; YouthBuild Columbus, Ohio; YouthBuild McLean County Inc., Bloomington, Ill.; Operation Fresh Start Inc., Madison, Wisc.; YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School, Philadelphia, Pa.; and Portland YouthBuilders, Portland, Ore.

These seven participating YouthBuild sites were selected based on their readiness and capacity to strengthen postsecondary partnerships, deepen graduate supports, improve academic offerings, and ultimately increase the numbers of YouthBuild graduates who complete postsecondary credentials on their way toward building family sustaining careers and demonstrating leadership within their communities.

Reform Strategies

Creating successful pathways to postsecondary completion and credential attainment for students who have traditionally had limited access to such opportunities requires a comprehensive set of intervention strategies undertaken with multiple partners.

Building meaningful, formal, mutual and accountable relationships with postsecondary partners: Participating YouthBuild sites are deeply engaged in the process of establishing, deepening and maintaining meaningful partnerships with postsecondary institutions. These partnerships usually entail memorandums of understanding that outline respective roles and responsibilities, articulation agreements that align curriculum and allow students to earn college credit during their YouthBuild experience and to matriculate to credit bearing courses upon entry into college, data sharing agreements that promote more effective and immediate knowledge of student performance and

progression in postsecondary settings, and formal resource sharing commitments (including dedicated staff time, space, grant dollars, etc.) that ensure more integrated and efficacious services for students.

Ensuring sufficient levels of academic rigor to prepare students for postsecondary work without remediation: Sites are focusing necessary time and attention on the core instructional relationships between students and educators to improve the academic content knowledge, skills and behaviors that YouthBuild students have upon entry into postsecondary settings. The initiative supports efforts to provide relevant instruction which integrates occupational and core academic content, provides opportunities for experiential learning, incorporates technology throughout the curriculum, deepens critical thinking skills, establishes a strong culture of reading, writing and numeracy and aligns well with college entry requirements.

Providing a broad range of meaningful incentives and supports to help more students complete the postsecondary programs they enter: All sites are implementing a variety of financial and non-financial incentives, including laptop computers, school supplies, cash stipends, curriculum-related materials and college tutoring. By providing these awards at strategic milestones during students' postsecondary experience, sites will improve student retention and completion rates. Transition Coordinators and Graduate Support Coordinators at each site will also provide students with additional emergency supports (unrelated to incentives) to respond to pressing un-met needs for child care, transportation, and various living expenses.

Increasing access to financial aid, scholarships and other education awards: Graduates from the participating programs earn Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards of up to \$2,300 for postsecondary education expenses in return for their community service. Graduates from participating sites are also eligible to participate in the Individual Development Account (IDA) Program. If a participant saves \$800, YouthBuild can match that 5:1, resulting in a total of \$4,800 to be used for attending college, buying a home, or starting a business. The YouthBuild National IDA Program also offers financial literacy education and mentors.

Strengthening the non-cognitive abilities of students to succeed in postsecondary settings: All sites are helping students develop the non-cognitive skill set which an increasing body of research is demonstrating as a more realistic and holistic evaluation of students' readiness skills and abilities than more traditional measures (e.g. GPA, SAT/ACT, etc.) Many of these non-cognitive skills (positive self-concept, successful leadership, demonstrated community service, availability of strong support person, etc.) are points of consistent focus across YouthBuild sites.

Codifying, documenting, improving and sharing promising practices to influence the national conversations in higher education, workforce development and criminal justice systems: YBUSA is working with participating sites to build an interactive community of practice (including face-to-face and online interactions). This community will help to document effective practices that link multiple intervention strategies with student persistence at individual programs through a data driven analysis. Learning will be shared with the larger YouthBuild network and beyond with a goal of leveraging lessons learned through this initiative. These results and trends will impact state and national policy in systems that support the success of low-income youth.

For more details regarding specific implementation plans and progress across the initiative, please contact Scott Emerick: semerick@youthbuild.org.