Project Report: Education Engagement Site Pilot

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A small group of community organizations in Louisville, Kentucky worked for more than a year to develop a strategy to serve middle and high school students living in disinvested neighborhoods who are experiencing challenges to school attendance. For seven weeks of the 2023-24 school year, partners launched a unique program in the Portland neighborhood during school hours, operating 3 days a week. This document outlines what we learned about the young people participating, the effectiveness of the program model, and the next steps for the project.

The Issue

Youth who become disconnected from school, whether due to suspensions, missing the transition to middle or high school, or other reasons, face steep challenges to graduating from high school. Community partners can support the youth, families, and schools by supporting the transition back to school with additional supports to help the youth succeed.

The Intervention

The Education Engagement Sites offer programming for middle and high school students who are facing challenges that lead to absences, suspensions, or leaving school before graduating. Programming supports the young person's return to school. At the Education Engagement Site, youth and their families:
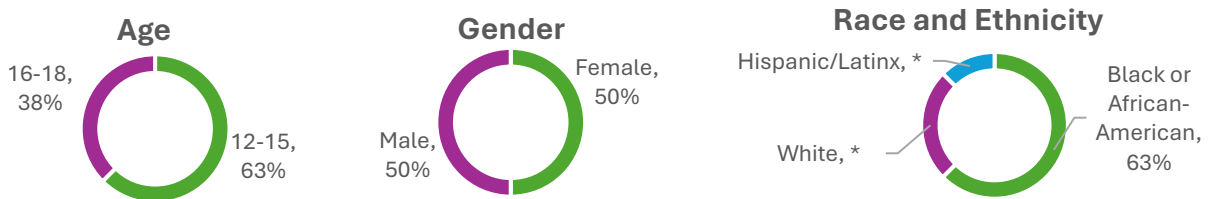
- Set and reach education goals;
- Find support to improve attendance, grades, and behavior;
- Develop mental wellness skills; and
- Explore options for re-enrolling, if they are not currently in school.

Participants

Demographics
During the pilot phase, 18 youth were referred and 16 youth participated in the program. Nearly all youth were from Louisville, though some staying at YMCA shelter house were from other Kentucky counties. Among youth from Louisville, the following zip codes were represented: 40203, 40210, 40211, 40215, 40216, and 40217. For all participants, English was their primary language.

Data on the ages, gender identity, and race/ethnicity reported by youth are represented in the following charts.

Age: 16-18, 38%; 12-15, 63%

Gender: Female, 50%; Male, 50%

Race and Ethnicity: Hispanic/Latinx, *; White, *; Black or African-American, 63%

* Numbers not shown for fewer than 6 occurrences
Note: Numbers may not total to 100, due to rounding.

Education Experience

The education level and status of each youth was obtained through school records when parent permission was obtained or through self-reports. All youth participating were still working toward a high school diploma. The last grade completed is represented in this chart.

Last Grade Completed

9-12th grade, 50%

6-8th grade, 50%
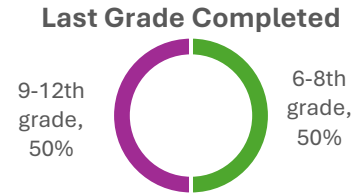
The Book Works Education Advocates identified the school status of each learner in the engagement site during the intake interview. The status of most youth were complicated by the multiple challenges they experienced that contributed to their dis-engagement from school. To illustrate, the following represent the school statuses of learners participating:

- Have not been enrolled in school for 3 or more years;
- Enrolled, but learning online and need additional supports;
- Enrolled, but cannot attend or are not attending as frequently due to safety issues at school or on the way to school;
- Enrolled, but have been chronically absent due to a variety of barriers;
- Enrolled, but are experiencing suspensions;
- Enrolled in an out-of-county school, but have temporary residence in Jefferson County; and
- Enrolled and not disconnected from school but attended the site solely due to placement at YMCA Safe Place.

Participant Needs

During the intake interview, Education Advocates identify factors that impact school engagement and assign a "need level." The assessment considers the extent to which the student has experienced suspensions, gaps in enrollment, learning online only, absences, as well as identifies barriers to successful engagement in school. Youth are identified as having high needs if they describe multiple or urgent concerns, repeat suspensions or multiple absences, system-involvement, or unmet needs for English as a Second Language, Exceptional Child Education, or other supportive services.

Needs Assessment

High needs, 44%

Low or medium level needs, 56%

The chart indicates the need levels assessed by Education Advocates, using a Needs and Investment Matrix created by the program team. Here's what we learned about the factors leading to dis-engagement from school.

- Youth reported experiencing bullying at school which contributed to:
  - Bringing weapons to school to protect themselves at the bus stop, on the bus, and in school
  - Fighting back against bullies when the administration does not offer any solutions or support to the young person who is being bullied
  - Skipping classes or days of school to avoid bullies
- Youth shared they do not have access to appropriate mental health resources in schools or outside of schools which contributed to:
  - Substance use
  - Self-harm/suicidal ideation
  - Behavior changes including "acting out"

- Youth shared learning challenges that have been unaddressed including delayed special education assessments or IEP services not provided which contributed to:
    - Falling behind academically
    - Behavioral issues/suspensions
- Youth demonstrated gaps in literacy and other academic skills that may have been missed in earlier grades. Because middle and high school students without special learning needs often do not have access to literacy supports once outside of elementary school, reading below grade level contributed to:
    - Falling behind academically
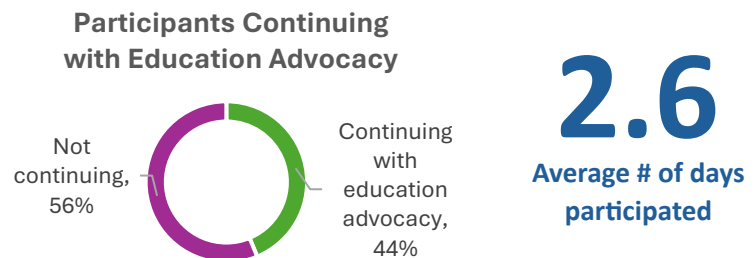   - Behavioral issues/suspensions

Protective Factors of Participants

Participants completed a survey (launched on 5/8/2024) on their first day of the program about perceived support at school, home, and in the community; skills they identified within themselves; and self-efficacy. A number of positive factors were noted in those responses. All respondents agreed to some degree with statements about having support and/or feeling safe at school and away from school (home/community). The lowest levels of perceived support were access to adults at school with whom they could talk about something in their personal life. Other positive notes were that youth identified skills they possess and scored relatively high on the self-efficacy scale included in the survey. On average, youth identified 4.6 social-emotional and academic skills in themselves. In a scale from 1 to 5 (1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree) to assess self-efficacy, the average score was 4. The positive results students reported about skills and self-efficacy provide a strong foundation to build upon to strengthen their identity as successful students and learn to engage with their education more fully.

Evaluation: Participation Level and Feedback

Program Engagement

Participants joined the program throughout the course of the pilot. Participation ranged from 1 day to 6 days with the program, with average participation lasting 2.6 days or 11.6 hours. Of those who left the program prior to the end of the pilot, 85% returned to school. The remainder were re-enrolling in school after lengthy gaps in enrollment. Even as youth left the program to return to school, many youth opted to remain connected with The Book Works by consenting to receive education advocacy support.
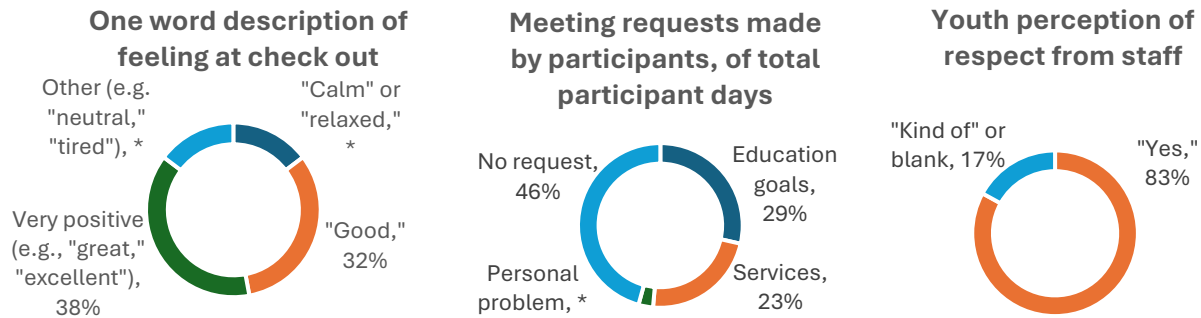
Participants Continuing with Education Advocacy

Not continuing, 56%

Continuing with education advocacy, 44%

2.6
Average # of days participated

Youth Perceptions

Information was gathered from youth each day they participated in programming using a check-in and check-out form, with 35 completed forms received. Participants were asked to share one word to describe how they were feeling at the end of the day, and the majority of youth used a positive or very positive word on their check out form. Additionally, youth were able to request individual meetings with program staff when they checked in. Of all the days attended, youth requested an individual meeting on more than half the days. Of great relevance for the

I learned I am in charge of my future.
- Participant, age 17

approach being taken at the program site, when youth were asked if they felt that "the facilitators respected me and followed their agreements," 83% of youth responded "yes."

One word description of feeling at check out

Other (e.g. "neutral," "tired"), *

"Calm" or "relaxed," *

Very positive (e.g., "great," "excellent"), 38%

"Good," 32%

Meeting requests made by participants, of total participant days

No request, 46%

Education goals, 29%

Personal problem, *

Services, 23%

Youth perception of respect from staff

"Kind of" or blank, 17%

"Yes," 83%

* Numbers not shown for fewer than 6 occurrences

Staff Reflections

Staff members completed weekly reflections during the pilot phase and responded to questions at the completion of the pilot to capture input on what components of the site were successful with students and areas for improvement or focus. Staff reflections on success reflected themes about the value of engaging with students, learning about their interests, as well as activities that they found worked well with participants. Overall, staff offered some suggestions about activities, the structure of the day, or improving processes, the majority of reflections shared that they had no suggested improvements.

> *I think engaging with youth on the activities they enjoy most was very beneficial in getting them to open up and participate effectively.*
> - Pilot site staff member

Evaluation: Impact

The project reaches beyond those who show up at school or in programs by taking a community approach to supporting youth and offering a welcoming space to transition back to school. The program is reaching some youth with deep disconnection from education and who are getting lost in transitions.

The Project Evaluation Team is currently identifying a comprehensive process for documenting the impact of the education engagement sites. One early indicator is the education status of learners following participation.

> 85% of learners returned to school immediately following program involvement. The remainder were re-enrolling in school after lengthy gaps in enrollment with the ongoing assistance of an Education Advocate.

Specifically, learners left the engagement site with the following education statuses.
- Returned to school with a safety plan;
- Still an online learner, but now have additional supports;
- Exited temporary residence at YMCA Safe Place and returned to school;
- Returned to school after their suspension period ended;
- Returned to their permanent residence county and school.

Evaluation: Key Practices Promoting School Re-Engagement

One of the primary goals of the Education Engagement Site Pilot was to identify effective program structures and practices that support re-engagement with school and youth/family connections with community resources that mitigate challenges impacting academic success. Preliminary results indicate the following practices in the sites contributed substantively to the process of re-engaging learners.

1. Building relationships with skilled adults and trained near-peers in safe spaces for youth is the first step to effective re-engagement.
2. Encourage peer skills development in small group activities.
3. Set goals and problem solve with youth through one-on-one advocacy and self-advocacy skill building.
4. Offer activities supporting self-acceptance and a growth mindset.
5. Build a neighborhood-based network of support that includes ways for every member of the community to support youth and for youth to connect with resources that are nearby.

Building Relationships
As indicated by the intake assessment, participating youth can identify people who support them - whether at school, home, or in their community. However, these supports are often not available when they are missing school. In the engagement site, participants felt like the program offered a safe and supportive space, as indicated by their check out form responses. Participating youth reported feeling like the staff were respectful and cared about them, and their reflections on the activities of the day suggest they felt the activities and assistance offered was supportive of them.

Skills for Social Emotional and Academic Development
Participating youth have strengths to build on despite struggling in school. They can identify skills that are valuable for success in school and life and report they feel confident they can achieve what they set out to do. In the Education Engagement Site, students have opportunities to strengthen tangible skills to support their mental health and build healthy relationships that can be tapped into and utilized across settings.

I learned I can use multiple skills to calm myself.
                    - Participant, age 13

Through the pilot, facilitators learned that new skills could be developed in a variety of activities that target different interests including physical activities, one-on-one and group discussions, and structured games. Incentives and youth choice are all vital components of engaging learning in the program.

Operations and Evaluation
The Project Implementation team of community partners (Kentucky Youth Advocates, YMCA Safe Place, Neighborhood House, Americana Community Center, and coordinated by The Book Works) created comprehensive processes for learner intake, tracking, and orientation to ensure parent permissions are secured and student records are securely maintained. Additionally, consistent staff and daily schedules established clear expectations and put youth at ease. The Implementation Team also established operations policies and procedures for sites consistency and safety.

The Education Engagement Pilot Evaluation Team, led by Kentucky Youth Advocates and comprised of program evaluation experts from Spalding University and Kentucky Department of Education, are creating

a long-term plan for tracking and analyzing data documenting the impact of the program. The team are creating pre- and post-assessments of youth needs and beliefs, monthly reports and a timeline for periodic analysis of trends, and other program evaluation tools. The program staff will continue to use daily youth-input tools to collect immediate feedback from participants.

Partnerships for Programming and Referrals
Identifying and connecting learners to a comprehensive network of support is the community's role and responsibility. Partnerships with referring agencies, site hosts, and schools are pivotal to the success of this project. While most referrals during the pilot were received from community partners, public outreach to parents and grandparents is considered an effective strategy and will be expanded in the next phase.

Next Steps

The partners collaborating on the Education Engagement Hubs remain committed to this community-based model of comprehensive support for youth on days they are not attending school due to suspensions, chronic absences, online learning only, or other barriers to regular attendance. The program is scaling up to serve 200 youth in two community sites in the 2024-25 school year. The following actions will implement the lessons learned in the pilot program.

1. There is a high need for literacy support for middle and high school learners in community-based settings. The project has secured funding to hire a literacy coach to assess the reading levels of youth attending the engagement sites and connect learners with ongoing literacy support in-school or in the community as needed. Additionally, The Book Works has secured a planning grant to develop an AmeriCorps program that could offer tutoring onsite.
2. Staying connected with learners and families after they return to school is critical. The project will implement a text outreach system for parents and learners who have participated to provide encouragement and connect with support.
3. To ensure the onsite teams are equipped to attend to complex needs, we are implementing a comprehensive and collaborative staff training plan. Specific training will include Youth Mental Health First Aid and effective behavior support for students with ECE needs.
4. The team will continue to expand programming that builds on Social-Emotional and Academic Development (SEAD) Skills that are useful to learners in school, work, and life such as problem solving, focus and memory, and information gathering and analysis.
5. Partnerships are central to this model. The project will continue to expand on established partnerships and create new connections in the neighborhoods in which the sites are located. Additionally, the sites will expand programming through partner organizations offering topics like life skills, mindfulness, team building, cooking, and college/career planning.
6. To expand the number of young people, families, school and community partners aware of the Education Engagement Sites, the team will implement a comprehensive outreach and marketing plan. We will create messages that highlight the support available to get back on track to school.
7. Fundamental to this model is youth voice. The team will continue to gather input from participants, neighborhood youth, near-peer team members and young people working with community partners to identify interesting programming and effective re-engagement strategies. Part of the evaluation of the program will also include a post-assessment to assess changes in beliefs and resources over time.