

OPEN DOORS SUSTAINABILITY PROJECT



CO-CREATING A STRONG FUTURE
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

SPRING 2021



United Way of King County

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Introduction: Starting with Students

Youth and young adults aren't just the future of our communities. They are already leading, continuously showing up as resilient and creative truth-tellers with a clear vision for a more equitable future. Our job as funders, as system-builders, as policy and decision-makers, and as adults in young peoples' lives is to support and co-create that vision so that all young people can live the lives they deserve.

At any given time, an estimated 14,000 young people between the ages of 16-24 in King County are not in school and not employed. These young people are disconnected from the economic opportunities that educational and employment opportunities provide. By our region's failure to invest in the success of all youth, we suffer the loss of enormous potential, progressive ideas and creative solutions to our most pressing problems.

Our most important job as adults
is to listen to young people.

When we look deeper at the data on who exactly is not finishing, we see that students of color are pushed or pulled out of school at higher rates than their white peers. These disparities are driven by systemic and structural racism and demand approaches centered in racial equity to ensure all students truly do succeed, and to correct a long history of educational inequity.

On an individual level, there are many reasons young people don't graduate. Often, multiple circumstances converge to create conditions where a youth leaves school, including things like needing to care for family members, having to get a job in order to support the family financially, homelessness or foster care placement, bullying, and experiences of racism or discrimination. We recommend the following local resources to learn what students of color say they need in a school setting and to gain insight on what is not working for them about education currently:

[Latinx Youth Reengagement Project Report](#)

[Creating Pathways for Change Report](#)

[Start With Us: Black Youth in South Seattle and South King County](#)

Students who leave school have just as much potential as those who stay, but the system lacks the strength, resources and will to keep them engaged. Until classrooms can support the brilliance of all our young people, alternatives are and will remain necessary.

One of those alternatives is Open Doors programs.

Building on Successful Work

OPEN DOORS REENGAGEMENT (HOUSE BILL 1418)

Open Doors (WAC 392-700) is a reengagement program that provides education and services to young people, ages 16-21, who have left school without graduating or are not expected to graduate by the age of 21. Enacted by the Washington State Legislature in 2014, Open Doors provides the funding mechanism for programs to serve credit-deficient students through partnership with a school district. The legislation requires case management support and program funding is outcome-based rather than based on seat-time. Students are required to meet a minimum number of Indicators of Academic Progress (IAPs) in order for the program to bill for them.

Open Doors provides a pathway to capture critical education resources in service of opportunity youth.

United Way Reconnecting Youth Initiative

In 2015, United Way recognized the opportunity to both leverage state dollars and help create an Open Doors reengagement system that was youth-informed and connected existing programs. United Way launched Reconnecting Youth with the goal of supporting reengagement of 9,600 youth, with 50% graduating. The Reconnecting Youth initiative successfully raised \$20M between 2015 and 2019. Reconnecting Youth dollars bolstered the King County Open Doors reengagement network in the following ways:

- Grants toward startup of new programs
- Emergency financial assistance for students—uses included books/mandatory class fees, helping paying bills, transportation, fines
- Community-based-organizations partnering with Open Doors programs to provide culturally relevant programming supporting students of color, especially Black and Latino students
- Scholarship program for students transitioning to college from Career Link at South Seattle College
- Participation of five programs in the Open Doors Improvement Network
- King County’s [Latinx Student Listening Project](#)
- King County ReOpp staff ([Reconnect to Opportunity](#), the outreach arm of the reengagement network)
- AmeriCorps Vista position at United Way creating student engagement opportunities
- Public policy advocacy

The network has grown from three Open Doors programs to well over 20 reengagement programs in King County. To date, Reconnecting Youth has engaged more than 17,000 young people through Open Doors in King County, and 3,557 have received a credential. Racial disparities persist however, as 1,169—roughly just 1/3—of those who received a credential were young people of color, whereas 70% of those engaged in the program are youth of color.

Next Phase: Open Doors Sustainability Project

Closing out the stewardship of \$20M in investment requires intentionality and strategy. We want to ensure that, as our initiative moves on from this initial phase, the reengagement network in King County is in strong condition, moving toward equitable outcomes for students. We want to put forward our strongest policy recommendations based on our local experience.

This report is the culmination of the initial phase of Reconnecting Youth body of work. It includes the following:

- Program snapshots of four reengagement programs in King County, designed to give a glimpse into who these students are and how the programs operate.
 - Detailed descriptions of four programs with different location models: **Career Link**—a community college campus; **Federal Way Open Doors**—within a school district; **Southwest Education Center**—a community-based organization (CBO); and **Youth Source**—local government.
 - A summary of common themes discovered through the program snapshots
- Finance Study conducted by BERK consulting
 - Deep dive into Open Doors program finances and potential paths for financial sustainability
- Overall recommendations
 - Directed toward multiple stakeholders, including funders, school districts, OSPI, local, and state elected officials and other decision makers

Program Snapshots

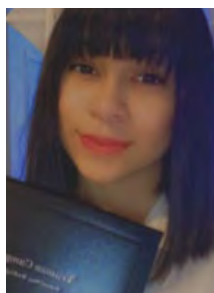
The following snapshots give a glimpse inside four different Open Doors programs. We talked with students, teachers and staff in order to share details of how they work. Because Open Doors allows for flexibility in program design, no two programs look exactly alike. Here, we feature programs from four different types of locations where we see Open Doors reengagement occurring in King County:

- On a community college campus
- Within a school district
- Onsite at a community-based-organizations
- In partnership with local government

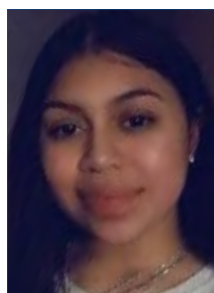
Each contains one school year's worth of data. Programs worked in partnership with United Way on the construction of these snapshots.

A note about data: We chose what data to include in the program snapshots based on where we had parallel data for all four programs featured. The data points give some useful information about the number of students coming in and out of programs, as well as some of their characteristics. We also include data such as credential earning rates, which serve to show that students who were previously disconnected from education are both consistently engaging in and graduating from these programs. While credentials earned is clearly a key measure of success for high school reengagement programs, it tells just part of the story and must be considered along with important contextual information such as the particular population of students served by a program, how many credits away from graduation they are when they enroll, what life circumstances they have that influence their ability to dedicate the necessary time to school, etc.

Student Voices: We partnered with two young people to source student interviews from each of the programs. Read more about our incredible youth voice co-leads below:



Katerin Beukema was a youth voice co-lead for the United Way Open Doors Sustainability Project. She has experience working for King County, interviewing young people for a study called the Latinx Listening Project. Katerin earned her high school diploma from Federal Way Public Schools in 2020. She has worked at Amazon and as an intern for King County Reconnect to Opportunity. In the future, she plans to join the Navy and eventually become a neurologist.



Marcia Ugalde-Santiago was a youth voice co-lead for the United Way Open Doors Sustainability Project. She graduated with her high school diploma in 2018 through Running Start. She is currently exploring future career options, including computer science and the Air Force. She enjoys cooking and her favorite dish to cook is chicken.



Career Link High School Program Snapshot

Location Type	Community College
School District Partnership	Highline Public Schools
Credential Pathway	High school diploma
Classroom Schedule	12-4 p.m., Monday–Friday
Classroom Style	Traditional
Number of Teachers*	8
Enrollment Schedule	New cohort starts quarterly
Students Served in 2019/2020	243

PROGRAM HISTORY

Career Link (formerly Career Link Academy) opened in 1994 as a GED and career readiness program. This program model continued for ten years. In 2004 the state graduation requirements changed to require all students passing standardized testing. Meanwhile, Career Link students had expressed the desire to get a high school diploma rather than a GED, and there was an increasing sense that OSPI did not want K-12 dollars to support students getting GEDs. These and other factors led Career Link to change their model entirely from GED to high school diploma and re-brand as Career Link High School, in partnership with Highline Public Schools, in 2005. In 2014, Career Link High School became an Open Doors program, continuing its partnership with Highline.

Listen to student Khamaron describe the Career Link experience.



Students aren't out of school because they're missing a PE credit or they just can't get fractions. There's a million other reasons why they didn't show up and a lot of that is solved by coming to a place where a bunch of adults are caring about you and there's some structure."

—Curt Peterson, Career Link director

*Teachers double as case managers, which fulfills the case management requirement.

Career Link High School Program

INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH

The hallmark of the Career Link program is *structure*. A new cohort begins each quarter with the 1st Quarter Experience Course, which students need to pass in order to move on in the program.

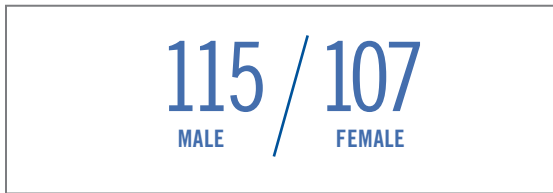
Classes follow a schedule and students are expected to attend regularly. While at Career Link, students can take college classes and/or try technical programs.

Jaylene, a Career Link student, shares her experience of education interruptions due to moving around while in foster care.



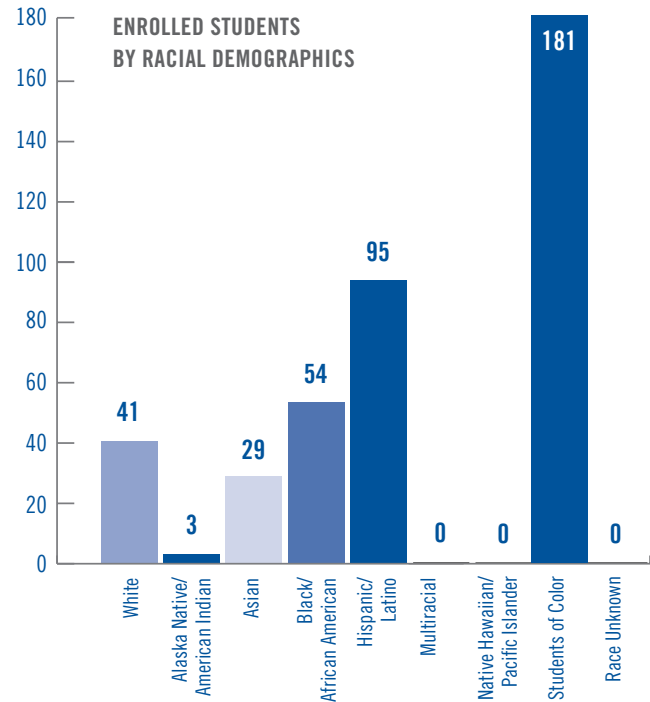
MORE ABOUT OUR CAREER LINK STUDENTS

ENROLLED STUDENTS BY GENDER



STUDENT BARRIERS

Low-income	84%
Homeless or housing unstable	14%
Foster system involved	5%
Pregnant or parenting	4%
English language learners	22%
Special education	11%
Students who are (or have been) justice system involved	3%



CAREER LINK OUTCOMES DATA 2019-2020 SCHOOL YEAR

Total number of students served	222
Students exited w/ credential	67
Stick Rate (staying in program even w/out credential completion)*	83%

The multiple challenges that reengagement students face often means that the path to graduation is not a straight line. Sometimes it is life circumstances that cause students to need to take breaks from their education. Other times it takes several tries to find a program that can meet the student's particular needs at the time.

*Teachers double as case managers, which fulfills the case management requirement.

“ Our students are just as capable as any other student, they just have challenges that other students don’t have. So we need to address those challenges but still make sure they’re as prepared as any other student entering college or entering another program.”

—**Molly Ward**, Career Link director

STUDENT SUPPORTS

At Career Link, most instructors serve as advisors in addition to their role as teachers. This is how Career Link fulfills the case management mandate of Open Doors. The teacher-student relationship is fostered through daily classes and students meet with their teacher at least once a quarter, one-on-one. Classes are paused in order to create time for these meetings.

“ Students say, ‘This is the most a teacher has ever talked to me when I wasn’t in trouble.’ Most students have never had a one-on-one meeting with a teacher and we require it with all their teachers every quarter.”

—**Curt Peterson**, Career Link director

Career Link has an education advocate from [Northwest Education Access \(NWEA\)](#) supporting students in pursuing post-secondary education on-site 2 days per week. The education advocate visits the 1st Quarter Experience Course, ensuring students have the opportunity to begin thinking about college from the very beginning of their Career Link journey.

Career Link previously had King County staff from [Career Connect](#) on-site 3-4 days a week to help connect students with internships, jobs shadows and employment opportunities. This contract ended in 2019.

Students like Jaylene are looking for more support around internships and job placements.



Through United Way’s Open Doors Sustainability Project, Career Link embedded a mental health specialist in partnership with Southwest Youth and Family Services. While students do have access to counselors through the college, they are more skilled in academic advising than in therapeutic, social-emotional support. Career Link believes that having on-site mental health support embedded within their program offerings will better enable student access to meaningful support. Career Link recognizes that students are better equipped to learn when their social-emotional needs are met.

Students can also access other supports across the South Seattle College campus, including the math lab, the writing center, tutoring and child care. Staff note that services embedded at Career Link are more likely to be utilized by Career Link students because students feel more comfortable in that space.

Jaylene describes the difference in feel between the Career Link space and other educational spaces.



TRANSITION AFTER GRADUATION

Career Link starts conversations about what's after high school early on in a student's journey. Students take a career exploration class, where they're exposed to all kinds of different jobs. They also learn about different pathways to viable careers, not all of which require classroom-based education.

Most Career Link students take at least one class on the college campus outside of the Career Link program prior to graduation. This allows them to experience a college course while maintaining the connection and support of Career Link. Some can finish nearly half of their degree requirements this way. The goal is a smooth and successful transition to college.

NWEA runs a workshop for students identified as seniors, to help them get their financial aid started if they want to go to college. NWEA also supports students one-on-one through the transition to college and beyond, whether they stay at South Seattle College or choose to attend elsewhere.

Career Link supports students who are taking college courses as part of their high school completion pathway through paid sponsorships. Graduated Career Link students have the opportunity to get a scholarship called Jump Start to support college after graduation. This is the result of a United Way of King County grant. Career Link recently developed a peer mentorship program for Jump Start students with United Way support. The hope was that students can transition into the Seattle Promise Program following Jump Start, which pays for two years of college tuition and includes specific supports. However, Career Link students are not currently eligible for Seattle Promise because the program is affiliated with the Highline School District even though it is located in Seattle.

VALUES

- Relationships with caring adults
- Structure and consistency
- High expectations paired with lots of support
- Exposure to multiple options and pathways



[Students] will do algebra not because they need algebra, but because Susan is asking them to do algebra. Right? That's how all the classes are. [Students] value the relationship more than they do any subject. So if we can't get that, I don't think we have a school."

—Curt Peterson, Career Link director

STUDENT CREDENTIAL EARNING BY RACE

Looking at rates of credential earning and disproportionality by race is one way to try to understand where programs may be closing or exacerbating gaps. This chart shows what portion of total annual enrollment each group makes up and what portion of all credential earners each group makes up. The extent to which a racial group is over- or under-represented in credential earning is shown in the last column, labeled “difference.”

Race	Meeting Credential	Total enrolled	Difference
White	17.9%	18.4%	-5%
Alaska Native/American Indian	4.4%	1.3%	+3.1%
Asian	16.4%	13%	+3.4%
Black/African American	14%	23.8%	-9.8%
Hispanic/Latino	46.2%	42.3%	+3.9%
Multiracial	0%	0%	0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0%	0%	0%
Race Unknown	0%	0%	0%

*Career Link’s system includes Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander under Asian and does not have a multiracial option.

Unique count of students connected to a job	17
Unique count of students connected to an internship	17
Unique count of students connected to a post-secondary navigator	All
Unique count of students who did college Try-A-Trade program in Auto Tech, Culinary Arts, or Welding	20

It’s important to note that all students are included in the credential earning calculations, regardless of where they are in their educational journey. For example, some students enter the program at a 9th grade level, and so can expect to remain in the program for a number of years before graduating, but are still included in that credential earning rate. The average number of credits students enter with varies from year to year at Career Link, and can have a major effect on the outcomes. A more accurate calculation would be to consider the graduation rate for just those who are technically “seniors” by credits.

YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Career Link conducts a student survey every quarter. While instructors are required to have students fill out South Seattle College's standardized course evaluation form, Career Link has created their own course evaluation forms that are more meaningful to the students and more useful to staff. Leadership and instructors review the feedback and implement changes based on this feedback on a regular basis.

Career Link has a student-led Leadership Club. Examples of things this group has done include creating a "relaxation room" during finals, as well as hosting a game night and a Halloween party. For students who missed out on the traditional high school experience of pep rallies or prom, these activities are particularly important. They foster social connectedness and promote engagement on campus, which can translate into better educational outcomes.

Students have access to and occasionally get involved on the broader campus in activities like the Black Student Union, student government, or by initiating on-campus clubs.

RACIAL EQUITY

Career Link recognizes the importance of hiring staff that represent the identities of their students, however the majority of the staff and teachers are white. A particular challenge related to this goal is the inability to offer full-time employment. Career Link has one teacher who is Native Hawaiian and Filipino. This teacher designed and teaches an Indigenous science course. Career Link's office manager is Mexican American and fluent in Spanish. Teachers pay particular attention to students' cultural identities, allowing students to be the experts in their own experience. Curriculum is created based on this tenet.

Career Link leadership and staff work to create an environment where students know they have a voice, that their voice matters, and that they should be free to call out what's not working for them. Because many students haven't felt they had a voice in their mainstream high school, Career Link believes that cultivating this culture is an important piece of advancing equity.

The program serves a large number of Latino students, who perform strongly. Many of these students heard about the program from their peers or family members who had experience with it. Staff have identified, in particular, the need for a strategy to better support Somali male students, a small cohort of which are enrolled in the program but which the program hasn't successfully engaged. Career Link identifies that a multi-year dataset indicates variation in graduation rates across race/ethnicity and is a more accurate representation than a single year of data.

IMPROVEMENT AND INNOVATION

Career Link program improvements and innovation have included:

- Piloting “Career Link Foundations,” a math and English boot camp, designed for students who are testing around a third-grade reading level. This pilot encouraged Career Link to reflect on and refine their strengths as a program. They have determined they are less well-suited for students with that set of needs.
- Career Link has recently intentionally focused on trades and expanded what post-secondary education can mean for students. Open Doors allows the flexibility for students to take classes that aren’t required for graduation. This has given room for students to explore trades and learn skills that they couldn’t before. The program has become more intentional about ensuring students know that their options include short-term or long-term trainings, certifications, apprenticeships and everything in-between. Many students need options that will enable them to be able to support themselves financially quickly, often primarily due to tenuous housing circumstances. The program emphasizes trainings that link to living wage careers.

STRENGTHS

- Preparing students with skills to be successful in life
- Relationships
- Staff retention and staff satisfaction
- Location on college campus helps students transition
- Positive culture
- Strong graduation rate

CHALLENGES

- Open Doors is structured in a way that programs receive 93% of the Basic Education Allotment. For this reason, programs like Career Link have fewer resources to give kids the supports that typical schools provide, like transportation and food. Career Link believes that a rate higher than the BEA is justified considering the barriers and challenges facing Open Doors students.
- Finding qualified, diverse teachers willing to commit to less than full-time positions presents a huge challenge.
- There is no unified system for Open Doors programming. Programs are operating differently across King County and across the state. The flexibility is in many ways appreciated, but having a system where programs talk to each other and share a framework could support the network.



Federal Way Open Doors Program Snapshot

Location Type	School district
School District	Federal Way Public Schools
Credential Pathways	GED Competency-based High school diploma
Classroom Schedule	8 a.m.–8 p.m., Monday–Friday
Classroom Style	Drop-in
Number of Teachers	4
Number of Reengagement Specialists	5
Enrollment Schedule	Rolling
Students Served in 2019/2020	478

PROGRAM HISTORY

Federal Way’s high school reengagement program started as an [Acceleration Academy School](#) in 2013. Acceleration Academies partner with school districts to operate a web-based high school diploma program. Federal Way’s program operated out of a storefront prior to moving to the Truman Campus. As understanding of the needs of Federal Way’s reengagement students evolved, so did the program model, expanding to include GED instruction in partnership with a community-based organization, Multi-Service Center. Eventually the program fully divested from Acceleration Academy in favor of a competency-based high school diploma model, still including the GED option.

Listen to a full interview with Federal Way Open Doors student, Joey.



We still make kids come to the schoolhouse and tell us what they know. That’s old thinking. My push to the teachers is to capture the learning... We know that kids are out there doing stuff and learning stuff. Go watch them. Learning happens outside of school. Competency-based [education] is about attaching learning to what’s happening.”

—Ashley Barker, former principal

INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH

Federal Way Open Doors values accessibility and flexibility in their instructional approach. Offering extended hours allows students to come to school around their personal obligations and schedules. However, it is challenging to strike the right balance of flexibility and structure.

In this program, students generally work independently under the supervision and support of teachers. Students gather for “Advisory” daily at 10:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m.. These advisory groups are part of the program’s efforts to build social cohesion and promote restorative justice practices. The program moved to a cohort model in the fall of 2020.

“ Our students are good at managing their time. Many of them have jobs and other responsibilities and they still manage to come in and work on their diploma.”

—**Mayra Lopez**, reengagement staff

Students often enter the program wanting to earn their GED because they have been counseled in that direction. Program staff work with the student to determine their goals, and students often end up instead using GED tests as projects for the competency-based high school diploma credential.

The shift from being an online-only educational model to a competency-based high school diploma model has been a huge transition and a major challenge for Federal Way Open Doors. In the competency-based model, students guide their own learning projects designed to fulfill the competencies and graduation requirements. Teachers support students to create projects, and these can include anything from internships, work or volunteer experience, to GED tests.

The program is shifting to align with a [Big Picture](#) model and recently became a Big Picture School. This transition brings a network, training opportunities, connection and shared learning with other similar schools.

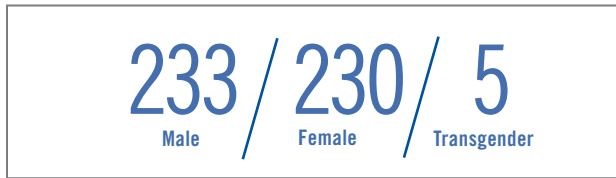
The Truman Campus of Federal Way Public Schools, where Federal Way Open Doors is located, is also home to other alternative high school programs, including an online option, Career Academy and Running Start. The site is co-located with a youth center, which students can access, and a Head Start program.

Staff describe both drawbacks and strengths to being located on the Truman Campus. Advantages include cost-savings to the district, easy access to district resources including food, and the support of community-based organizations that can serve students across the multiple programs. However, staff are concerned about the image of locating all the students marginalized out of traditional high school in one place. The optics could read as institutionalization, or separation, of students who the larger system failed.

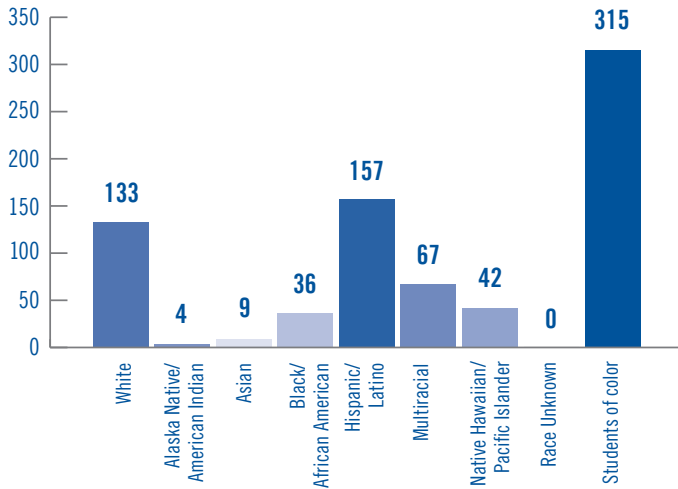
Federal Way Open Doors Program

MORE ABOUT FEDERAL WAY OPEN DOORS STUDENTS

ENROLLED STUDENTS BY GENDER



ENROLLED STUDENTS BY RACIAL DEMOGRAPHIC



STUDENT BARRIERS

Low-income	62%
Homeless or housing unstable	7%
Foster system involved	3%
Pregnant or parenting	5%
English language learners	10%
Special education	13%
Students who are (or have been) justice system involved	7%

“Our students are the magic. It’s your job as educators to work hard at supporting them and understanding their needs.”

—Melissa Pederson, school social worker

STUDENT SUPPORTS

Students are organized into groups of 60. Each group has one assigned instructor and a reengagement specialist (RS). RSs, who fulfill the Open Doors case management requirement, support up to 30 students at a time. There is one school social worker who meets with every student at entry and also provides ongoing support.

Students have access to food, gift cards and McKinney Vento resources. Federal Way Open Doors is creative about garnering resources for college tuition, including the Basic Education Allotment or Running Start. For students interested in the trades, Federal Way Open Doors has partnerships with [YouthBuild](#) and [AJAC](#).

Federal Way Open Doors partners with community-based nonprofit organizations (CBOs) to support students. The first of these partners was [Multi-Service Center](#), which is still on-site offering GED instruction and case management. In 2017, United Way supported [El Centro de La Raza](#) to begin providing culturally-relevant supports to Latino students on campus. [Northwest Education Access](#) (NWEA) supports students seeking post-secondary education.

Beginning in 2019, two more CBOs were funded by United Way. [Good Shepherd Youth Outreach](#) was funded to provide mentorship and services to African American young people and [Open Doors for Multicultural Families](#) was funded to provide services to immigrant and refugee students with developmental delays and disabilities. Both partners have since pulled their services. El Centro, Multi-Service Center and NWEA are still providing services onsite.

Some students, like Kesiah, find support outside of school to be more motivating.



Federal Way Open Doors Program

“ Our students carry lots of trauma and come in heavier. It’s our job to help remove the barriers and provide opportunities.”

—Melissa Pederson, school social worker

TRANSITION

Through the competency-based model, students do an exit exhibition, which is a project focused on their post-high school plan. Every graduate exits with either employment or college acceptance. Multi-Service Center and NWEA can continue to support students directly through their transition and up to age 24.

United Way currently funds a partnership with Federal Way Open Doors and NWEA to create a “college-going culture” in the program. This includes ensuring access to a range of career and education options to all students at entry, hosting a variety of workshops for students, as well as training teachers and staff in post-secondary transition support. A key piece of this work is increasing equitable outcomes for students of color, who often have fewer resources and more systemic barriers to entering and being successful in college.

VALUES

- Inclusivity
- Adaptability
- Hopefulness
- Equality
- Second chances/open door policy (i.e if you leave, you can come back)
- Access to resource and opportunities
- Student agency

RACIAL EQUITY

When Federal Way Open Doors started as Acceleration Academy, student demographics mirrored those of Federal Way Public Schools, which meant a larger proportion of white students. As time went on, the demographics began to actually mirror the demographics of the population of students leaving school, who are disproportionately students of color.

Former principal Ashley Barker indicated that the engagement of community partners increased culturally relevant outreach channels to bring scholars of color into the program and support them once enrolled. Referrals from community-based organizations also increased the number of justice-involved students accessing the program.

Staff identify restorative justice practices and trauma-informed instruction as keys to increasing equity. Advisories are part of the intentional relationship and community-building foundational for restorative justice to be effective. When there is harm caused between people at Federal Way Open Doors, they implement restorative justice circles rather than resorting to traditional discipline and punishment interventions. Because there is a connection between discipline practices that disproportionately impact students of color and students leaving high school, restorative justice practices, which aim to keep students in the classroom rather than punish them out, can be an effective tool for increasing equity.

All of Open Doors’ teaching staff is white. The program has English language learner support on-site once a week. Staff notes that, because the curriculum is competency-based, most projects can be completed in the student’s native language.

There is a campus-wide equity team that meets weekly. The equity team is working to create a referral body where staff and students can bring complaints. The Federal Way Public School District itself also has an increasing focus and support on racial equity.

Federal Way Open Doors identified the following needs regarding equity:

- Training for staff in implicit bias and micro-aggressions
- Larger systemic issue of finding teachers of color

Federal Way Open Doors Program

OUTCOMES DATA 2019-2020 SCHOOL YEAR

Total number of students served	478	
Students exited w/ credential	156	33%
Stick Rate (staying in program even w/out credential completion)	66%	

STUDENT CREDENTIAL EARNING BY RACE

Looking at rates of credential earning and disproportionality by race is one way to try to understand where programs may be closing or exacerbating gaps. This chart shows what portion of total annual enrollment each group makes up and what portion of all credential earners each group makes up. The extent to which a racial group is over- or under-represented in credential earning is shown in the last column, labeled “difference.”

Race	Meeting Credential	Total enrolled	Difference
White	21%	28%	-7%
Alaska Native/American Indian	1%	1%	0%
Asian	5%	2%	3%
Black/African American	18%	8%	10%
Hispanic/Latino	36%	33%	4%
Multiracial	12%	14%	-2%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	7%	9%	-2%
Race Unknown	0%	0%	0%

Unique count of students connected to a job	300
Unique count of students connected to a post-secondary navigator	67
Unique count of students were connected with mental health service or a mentor (or peer mentor)	25

It is important to note that all students are included in the credential earning calculations, regardless of where they are in their educational journey. For example, some students enter the program at a 9th grade level, and so can expect to remain in the program for a number of years before graduating, but are still included in that credential earning rate. The average number of credits students enter with varies from year to year, and can have a major effect on the outcomes. A more accurate calculation would be to consider the graduation rate for just those who are technically “seniors” by credits.

YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Federal Way Open Doors employs former Open Doors scholars as outreach workers, which gives them experience and connects disconnected young people to the program.

Students complete an interview at exit and their feedback from those interviews is regularly considered.

The school principal and school social worker meet with every student who comes through the doors.

The reengagement specialists help them create an initial, individualized plan for their education.

Staff noted that on the school climate survey, Federal Way Open Doors receives high marks for creating a sense of belonging.

IMPROVEMENT AND INNOVATION

Federal Way Open Doors has implemented major programmatic shifts with the intent of better serving students. The biggest of these shifts is moving from online-only diploma instruction to now the competency-based model. Becoming competency-based pushes educators to see learning both in and outside the classroom, and allows students to exhibit their knowledge in out-of-the-box ways. It's not all tests, papers and assignments.

From previous years' exit interview data, staff discovered that students who are on campus at least three days a week tend to be more successful, so efforts are made to encourage student attendance at that level. Staff note that students who are more closely connected with their reengagement specialist tend to be more engaged. Students also say that community-building circles (advisories) are really important to them.

STRENGTHS

- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- CBOs on site
- Model of teachers and RAs working alongside
- Open concept space—flat, no perceived hierarchy
- Relationships

CHALLENGES

Making the change to the competency-based model has presented challenges for both students and staff. It is a paradigm shift. A cookie cutter model is easy for everyone to understand, but also perpetuates inequities for marginalized students. Students have voiced the challenge with the competency-based model is they don't always see a straight line from start to finish (i.e. earning a credential) because it is completely individualized. Staff have had the idea to create examples of students' journeys that all look different but have achieved their goal, so students can get a sense of what a potential path looks like.

Mark, a former student and intern at Federal Way Open Doors, describes advantages and drawbacks of the competency-based and more individualized program.



Staff sometimes work long hours supporting students because they're willing to go that extra mile. But that can be really challenging, and specific support for teachers is not readily available.

Balancing flexibility with accountability and preparing students for what is next is another identified challenge. While expectations for students certainly exist, they can drop-in when it works for them and will be welcomed back even if they have not attended for some time. Systems like college and the workforce don't typically allow for that same flexibility, so the struggle is to ensure students are prepared for what they're moving to next.

Mark articulates the need for enhanced structure.



The physical space of Truman Campus can be challenging because there are several different but similar programs co-located. Some resources are shared and some are specific, and the expectations are very different for each of the programs. In addition, being in a separate building can give the perception of secluding or, as Ashley described, "institutionalizing" students for whom the traditional system didn't work.

While CBO partnerships have been valued by Federal Way Open Doors leadership, partnership can be challenging. School staff have viewed CBOs as working on competing rather than complementary goals, while CBO staff have experienced racism and a lack of understanding about the critical nature of their work.



Southwest Education Center (SWEC) Program Snapshot

Location Type	Community-based organization (CBO)
School District Partnership	Highline Public Schools
Credential Pathways	GED Competency-based High school diploma Young Parent Program, designed for students who are pregnant or parenting
Classroom Schedule	9 a.m.–3:15 p.m., Monday–Friday; flexible attendance policy
Classroom Style	Drop-in, non-traditional
Number of Teachers	5
Number of Case Managers	2
Enrollment Schedule	Rolling
Students Served in 2018/2019	116

PROGRAM HISTORY

Southwest Youth and Family Services (SWYFS) has a long and unique history as one of few community-based organizations continuously operating an education program. Beginning in 1986, SWYFS hosted Interagency School, an alternative high school program of Seattle Public Schools. Over time as SWYFS observed that this program model was not effective for all students, they created their own, which helped students prepare for the GED through a tutoring model.

SWYFS maintained a partnership with Seattle Public Schools until the passing of Open Doors legislation. After the Southwest Education Center (SWEC) became an Open Doors program they began to work exclusively with Highline Public Schools. Located in the city of Seattle, SWEC serves Seattle Public Schools students through the inter-district transfer process and Highline students without a transfer.

In 2000, SWEC received a federal grant through the Private Industry Council that afforded the opportunity to expand the education center. This resulted in the hiring of additional teachers and opening of new classrooms. SWEC became an Open Doors program in 2014. In 2016, they opened a new classroom in White Center, near their case management and administrative offices.

Steve Daschle, executive director of SWYFS, and Bryan Hayes, program director for SWEC, were engaged advocates in the development of Open Doors legislation and outlining the program concept. They see the relationship between case management (i.e. social-emotional support) and education as the key cornerstone of the Open Doors concept.

Listen to a full interview from SWYFS student, Julian.



INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH

Students are expected to attend daily. However, SWEC values flexibility, allowing students to drop in around their personal schedules. Case managers are in touch with students weekly and encourage them to attend regularly, but the program model is meant to accommodate the real circumstances of students' lives like employment, family responsibilities, tenuous housing circumstances and legal-system involvement.

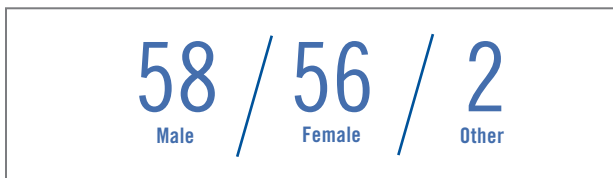
Due to the drop-in nature of the model, SWEC's instructors may be teaching students at a variety of different grade levels with a variety of learning styles at any given moment. Therefore the model is highly flexible, and the curriculum is not rigidly designed or reliant on consistency. Teachers meet whichever students show up in the classroom "where they are" every single day.

SWEC student, Vivien, describes how the size of the school works for her.



MORE ABOUT SWEC STUDENTS

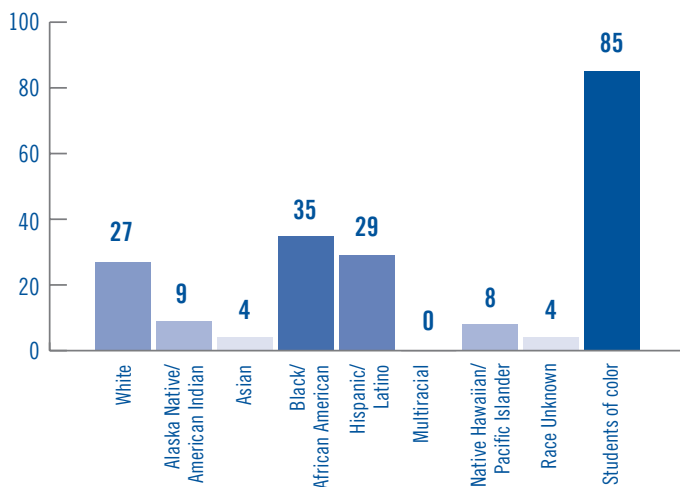
ENROLLED STUDENTS BY GENDER



STUDENT BARRIERS

Low-income	88%
Homeless or housing unstable	10%
Foster system involved	3%
Pregnant or parenting	14%
English language learners	9%
Special education	9%
Students who are (or have been) justice system involved	15%

ENROLLED STUDENTS BY RACIAL DEMOGRAPHIC



Our students are aware of what's going on in society. We have great discussions about the justice system, social services... They know what's going on, and they have a sense of awareness about where they're at in relation to all that. They have strong voices but not the access to be heard."

—Lisa Gascon, lead instructor



We don't punish students for their plight, we support them. We try to be as flexible as we can to accommodate their needs, not ours."

—Bryan Hayes, program administrator

STUDENT SUPPORTS

As a multi-service community-based organization, Southwest Youth & Family services (SWYFS) is uniquely positioned to offer a variety of supports to students in-house. These include:

- Dedicated case management focused on academic success, employment and college readiness
- Mental health counseling and group programs
- Aggression Replacement Training
- Youth development programs
- Family resources services (including one-on-one family advocates services)
- On-site child care¹

SWYFS refers students out for the following services: substance abuse services, legal assistance and housing supports.

TRANSITION AFTER GRADUATION

SWEC's case management staff provide transition support to students who have graduated with a GED or high school diploma. This includes a series of field trips to local colleges to introduce students to advisors and start the financial aid process.

VALUES

Hope • Voice • Community connection • Knowledge and skills

RACIAL EQUITY

SWEC describes itself as confronting structural racism head-on. When you walk into the classroom there are stickers that say “Decolonize Education,” “Black Lives Matter,” and a poster on the wall about the school-to-prison pipeline. These are examples of how the environment is intentionally curated to embrace the identities and experiences of marginalized students. Other ways racial equity is implemented at SWYFS include:

- Staff that reflect the race/ethnicity, culture and languages of students
- Culturally relevant, student-centered, empowering curriculum
 - Including explicit instruction on systems of oppression
 - Including a people's history with a critical lens
- Restorative justice practices
- Trauma-informed practices
- Staff training on equity
- Quantifying success in terms other than credits and credentials

“ We recognize the world they live in. That's what's different from other schools. [Other schools are] devoid of economic and social realities these kids live under. We recognize that things are designed against them.”

—**Ramon Jimenez**, instructor

¹The child care center is funded by the City of Seattle and is partnered with the agency's Family Resource Center. Parenting students can utilize the child care while they are on-site and engaged in school or other services at SWYFS. This is the only reengagement program offering child care on-site in King County.

Southwest Education Center Program

SWEC teachers are certified, but are not a part of the school district’s collective bargaining, do not receive a school district teacher salary, and don’t have access to in-services and trainings or materials that district-supported teachers receive. This could make it challenging to retain talented, diverse teachers at SWEC, but their current teaching staff has been retained for many years because they are passionate and connected to the students they serve. SWEC serves a community of students who are some of the furthest from educational justice, and yet its teachers receive some of the fewest resources because SWEC is a community-based organization and not a district program. United Way funded SWEC to increase teacher salaries under their Program Enhancement Project beginning in 2019.

Program staff expressed that many students are caught up in and often failed by mainstream systems, including the education system, foster care and juvenile justice. For example, students that have been tracked into special education inappropriately or the reverse, students who would benefit from special education services but were not connected. Instead, these students tend to be labeled with behavioral issues, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline.

OUTCOMES DATA 2019-2020 SCHOOL YEAR

Total number of students served	116	
Students exited w/ credential	10	9%
Stick Rate (staying in program even w/out credential completion)*	85%	

STUDENT CREDENTIAL EARNING BY RACE

Looking at rates of credential earning and disproportionality by race is one way to try to understand where programs may be closing or exacerbating gaps. This chart shows what portion of total annual enrollment each group makes up and what portion of all credential earners each group makes up. The extent to which a racial group is over- or under-represented in credential earning is shown in the last column, labeled “difference.”

Race	Meeting Credential	Total enrolled	Difference
White	30%	23%	7%
Alaska Native/American Indian	0%	8%	-8%
Asian	0%	3%	-3%
Black/African American	30%	30%	0%
Hispanic/Latino	20%	25%	-5%
Multiracial	0%	0%	0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	20%	7%	13%
Race Unknown	0%	0%	0%

SWEC students are some of the furthest from educational justice, as exhibited by the large percentage of students facing multiple barriers. The fact that SWEC’s stick rate is so high is a huge accomplishment. It’s also important to note that all students are included in the credential earning calculations, regardless of where they are in their educational journey. For example, some students enter the program at a 9th grade level, and so can expect to remain in the program for a number of years before graduating, but are still included in that credential earning rate. The average number of credits students enter with varies from year to year , and can have a major effect on the outcomes. A more accurate calculation would be to consider the graduation rate for just those who are technically “seniors” by credits.

YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Because of the strong relationships and the smaller scale of the student body, SWEC staff hear from youth “all day every day.”

SWEC staff state that students drive what their education looks like, meaning they each have a significant voice in how their individual education is administered. When students suggest changes to curriculum or assignments, they are heard, and those suggestions are implemented. It’s a powerful experience students typically haven’t had in mainstream high schools.

SWEC is currently developing its own formal youth council, which will give students leadership opportunity and a voice in the program.

SWEC has conducted a Young Writer’s Workshop in the summer in partnership with the City of Seattle’s Youth Employment Program. Young people receive stipends to learn about social justice and how to express themselves through writing. The program culminates in a live performance and a printed publication called “The Boot.” Student writing is uncensored, and students are encouraged to explore their identities, systems of oppression, their personal history and express themselves freely through the process. SWEC is offering the Young Writer’s Workshop year-round as part of the United Way Program Enhancement Project for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. They find that students stay engaged and attend school regularly under this program, because the program fosters social cohesiveness among the young writers and allows freedom of expression.

Hear SWEC student, Vivien , talk about how her voice is heard through The Boot.



IMPROVEMENT AND INNOVATION

- SWEC previously partnered with both Seattle Public Schools and Highline Public Schools. It was a major shift to go from contracting with both districts to exclusively partnering with Highline. There were at one point several community-based organizations with education programs through Seattle Public Schools, including United Indians of All Tribes Foundation, Peace for the Streets by Kids from the Streets and the YMCA. Some of these sites became interagency (alternative high school sites) sites, and some left the work of education programming altogether. SWEC has maintained its programming long-term but is unique in doing so.
- The decision to have one case manager per site instead of one that shares both sites was a significant change. SWEC decided it worked best to have one case manager for each site, with smaller caseloads and increased, dedicated focus.
- SWEC was a part of the Open Doors Improvement Network and learned to test and implement changes rapidly. Examples of that work included creating peace circles and increasing orientation sessions from once a quarter to every Thursday.

“One of the things I’ve always said about our ed center is that, in a typical school you have an academic focused environment with a few social services thrown in. We’re the reverse. We have a social services environment with academics thrown in. And I think the contrast expresses itself in how the students engage.”

—Steve Daschle, executive director

STRENGTHS

- The wide array of on-site services as a result of being located at a multi-service, community-based organization gives students easier access to needed supports.
- As a nonprofit, SWYFS employs fund development staff dedicated to garnering resources to support the education center. These resources augment Open Doors funding, which is insufficient to meet the needs of students.
- SWYFS is relatively small in staff size and not part of a larger bureaucracy. As a result, making programmatic changes involves fewer challenges and can happen more rapidly.
- SWEC staff identify flexibility as a critically important strength in supporting students how they need to be supported.
- When a young person is asked to wait to enroll, they may lose momentum. SWEC is able to engage students when they're ready with a rolling enrollment model.
- Instructors are dually-credentialed, understand the community and are truly invested. It's more than a job for them, they're passionate about social justice.

Hear Vivien share how she enjoys coming to school now.



CHALLENGES

- SWEC identifies both challenges and benefits to the outcome-based funding of Open Doors. It can feel more restrictive than funding based on seat time. However, SWEC agrees that student outcomes are a better way of measuring success than seat time and understands the intent of this in legislative design.
- SWEC carries with it the challenges of being confused with or associated with charter schools. SWEC is clear internally in its identity as a supplemental program to mainstream education, without intention to undermine that system. SWEC is serving students that are some of the furthest from educational justice. Their outcomes may be perceived as lower than other programs, but they see themselves as making inroads and graduating a proportion of students that the mainstream system never would.
- SWEC faces challenges as being one of very few community-based organizations operating an education program. They are not equipped with the level of resources that schools receive through districts. This creates an equity issue as students who have the highest needs and experience the most marginalization are attending a school that, while richer than other environments in social-emotional programs, can't afford the same compensation and supports for its staff that districts do. Additionally, leadership describes a steep learning curve in entering the education space as a human service organization. Over the many years they have become adept in understanding education policy and systems, but entering the arena from human services was a challenge.



YouthSource Program Snapshot

Location Type	Government
School District Partnership	Renton School District and Tukwila School District
Credential pathway	GED Competency-based High school diploma (new as of 2019)
Classroom Schedule	9 a.m.–12 p.m., 12:30 p.m.–3:30 p.m. Monday–Friday
Classroom Style	Drop-in
Number of Teachers	2 (1 GED, 1 High School)
Number of Case Managers	5
Enrollment Schedule	Rolling
Students Served in 2018/2019	108

PROGRAM HISTORY

YouthSource is one of the longest-standing high school reengagement programs in King County. The original YouthSource model was to create a one-stop employment and training navigation center for young people, inspired by the one-stop center model that existed for adults. The program was rebranded in 2003 with its current name.

Prior to state Open Doors funding, YouthSource operated a GED program funded through Adult Basic Education dollars for students ages 16-21 in partnership with Renton Technical College. Students who wanted to earn their GED would withdraw from their high school and enter into the program, which leveraged WIOA and county resources to pay for case management and support services.

After the passage of Open Doors 1418 legislation, YouthSource struggled to find a school district to partner with in order to operate as an Open Doors site. School districts were hesitant because of YouthSource’s GED-only model. The GED was not viewed by districts as a positive outcome and they felt this pathway would negatively affect graduation rates. Ultimately, Renton School District agreed to partner with YouthSource and Renton Technical College to become an Open Doors program in 2013.

[Listen to a full interview of a YouthSource graduate.](#)



INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH

Attendance ebbs and flows. Some days and times the classroom is full, other times it's relatively empty. YouthSource previously tried hosting set class times by subject, but there wasn't always the critical mass of students that would have made that schedule practical. The flexible, drop-in classroom has been the best fit because many students have multiple other obligations that make a rigid attendance schedule unworkable. Unlike most other programs, YouthSource can enroll students during the summer months.

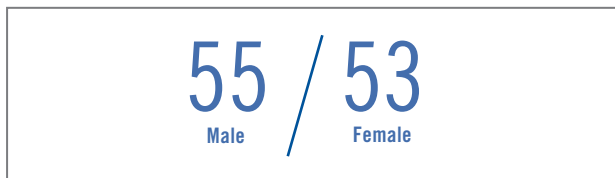
Instruction often happens one-on-one, but depending on the students in attendance, can be done in groups. The GED teacher instructs in Spanish, as needed. YouthSource is considering formalizing a Spanish-language GED program.

YouthSource student, Natalia, describes the individual attention at YouthSource that is such a contrast to her previous school.



MORE ABOUT YOUTHSOURCE STUDENTS: 108 STUDENTS WERE SERVED IN THE 2018/2019 SCHOOL YEAR

ENROLLED STUDENTS BY GENDER*

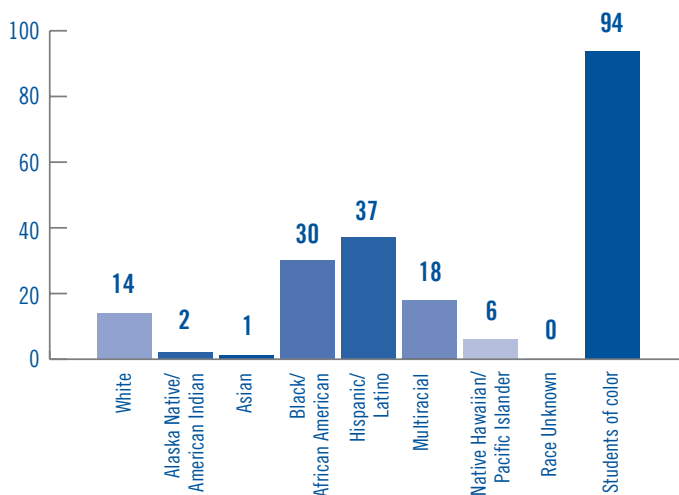


*YouthSource does not collect data on whether students identify as transgender or any gender identity other than male or female.

STUDENT BARRIERS

Homeless or housing unstable	1%
Foster system involved	4%
Pregnant or parenting	3%
English language learners	1%
Special education	16%
Students who are (or have been) justice system involved	10%

ENROLLED STUDENTS BY RACIAL DEMOGRAPHIC



“My title is technically case manager, but it's not the traditional sense of the role. I consider myself a cheerleader. I'm not there to tell kids what they have to do... the kids know what they need to do, they just need to know that someone believes in them.”

—Quiana Williams, youth case manager

Young people tend to come to YouthSource having been out of school longer than at other reengagement programs. YouthSource leadership suspects this is because the program is less directly connected with a school district, where students are more likely to be referred by a counselor or other school staff directly to an Open Doors program.

STUDENT SUPPORTS

YouthSource intentionally keeps its case management caseloads relatively small in order to provide comprehensive and individualized support to all students.

YouthSource partners with two community-based organizations to provide services on-site: WAPI Community Services and Northwest Education Access (NWEA).

[WAPI](#) provides substance abuse prevention and support for students, including leading a Girls' Group, led in partnership with a case manager and the YouthSource director.

[Northwest Education Access](#) provides support to students interested in pursuing post-secondary education. This includes assistance applying for financial aid, transitioning to college and continued support through post-secondary.

King County leverages federal [WIOA](#) (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) funds to provide case management, paid internships, job readiness training, job placement and job retention services to a subset of young people also enrolled in Open Doors. WIOA funds also provide support services to help with items such as tuition, books and registration fees when young people are ready to enroll in post-secondary education.

TRANSITION

YouthSource wants to inspire students to think beyond high school, so the transition conversation begins on day one. As students get rolling on passing GED tests, YouthSource instructors and case managers continually talk with each student about the next steps they could take in order to reach their goals. YouthSource staff find that successfully passing a GED test can inspire confidence to continue further in education achievements.

The case managers create transition plans with each student and ensure they are connected with NWEA if college is part of that plan. Other common transition referrals include WIOA, Career LaunchPad and paid internships.

VALUES

- Meeting students where they are
- Acceptance
- Youth-focused



In so many other settings, youth are forced or told what they have to do or can't do, but we give them a choice.”

—**Jamalia Jones**, YouthSource manager

OUTCOMES DATA 2018-2019 SCHOOL YEAR

Total number of students served	108	
Students exited w/ credential	45	42%
Stick Rate (staying in program even w/out credential completion)*	65%	

STUDENT CREDENTIAL EARNING BY RACE

Looking at rates of credential earning and disproportionality by race is one way to try to understand where programs may be closing or exacerbating gaps. This chart shows what portion of total annual enrollment each group makes up, and what portion of all credential earners each group makes up. The extent to which a racial group is over- or under-represented in credential earning is shown in the last column, labeled “difference.”

Race	Meeting Credential	Total enrolled	Difference
White	18%	13%	5%
Alaska Native/American Indian	0%	2%	-2%
Asian	2%	1%	1%
Black/African American	20%	28%	-8%
Hispanic/Latino	40%	34%	6%
Multiracial	16%	17%	-1%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	4%	6%	-2%
Race Unknown	0%	0%	0%

It is important to note that all students are included in the credential earning calculations, regardless of where they are in their educational journey. For example, some students enter the program at a 9th grade level, and so can expect to remain in the program for a number of years before graduating, but are still included in that credential earning rate. The average number of credits students enter with varies from year to year, and can have a major effect on the outcomes. A more accurate calculation would be to consider the graduation rate for just those who are technically “seniors” by credits.

YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH LEADERSHIP

YouthSource is looking to better formalize how it collects and acts on student voice. With United Way funding, they are working to create an internship to formalize a student focus group structure and integrate feedback into planning. Staff have noticed that students enjoy giving feedback in group settings rather than on an individual level.

Staff want students to have voice not just in the YouthSource program, but to be empowered in speaking their truth about how they’re experiencing the world as young people of color.

““ We want to help [students] feel like they have a voice that matters, they’re valued and they value themselves. We need to work on how we help them intrinsically really believe that they can succeed... Especially for Black youth, when you look at the community-wide data, Black youth are still struggling more than any other group.”

—Jamalia Jones, YouthSource manager

RACIAL EQUITY

YouthSource promotes equity by hiring staff that represent the students in their program. 80% of the students are youth of color, and 77% of their staff are people of color. Staff of partner community-based organizations (WAPI and SEA) who interact with YouthSource students are also people of color. The staff hasn't always been so representative, however. In 2013, program leadership made a conscious effort to diversify, and the program has remained vigilant in guarding this diversity, recognizing the critical importance of having staff that reflect the student population.



You have to decide in your mind that you want a diverse staff and then you have to strive to do it. It's harder... but in this community it's not impossible. You just have to set your mind to doing it."

—**Jamalia Jones**, YouthSource manager

YouthSource is a part of King County's data system, which is an advantage in terms of data capacity. They are able to disaggregate student outcomes by demographics, like race or gender, and they do so on an ad hoc basis. As data demonstrates, the largest proportions of YouthSource's student population are Black or Latino, and the vast majority are students of color.

Because YouthSource receives direct referrals from King County Superior Court, they serve a larger percentage of legal-system-impacted students, who are disproportionately Black and Brown. YouthSource would like to offer specific programming supporting Black youth in the future. Staff notice that students are comfortable within the YouthSource environment because they are truly accepted, but when placing students in internships or other situations in the outside world, students need support to navigate environments that are not guaranteed to be accepting.

IMPROVEMENT AND INNOVATION

When YouthSource started utilizing Open Doors as the funding stream, they focused on recruiting and serving a large number of students. Open Doors is structured such that programs receive more funding for having more billable students, which incentivizes quantity. YouthSource's numbers were around 100 students per month.

After operating that way a number of years, YouthSource concluded it is better to serve fewer students and serve them really well rather than serve high numbers of students and have lower outcomes. YouthSource currently bills for close to 45 students at a time, which they feel allows for right-sized support for their student community.

YouthSource credits resources they have from King County, WIOA and United Way for making serving fewer students viable.

STRENGTH

- Case management and support services/incentives onsite
- Diverse team that young people can see themselves in, especially men

CHALLENGES

- YouthSource has struggled to receive appropriate referrals from school district staff. School districts at times make decisions to refer students based on how the districts' graduation rate may be impacted as opposed to what is in the best interest of the young person. YouthSource's education programs should be viewed as a legitimate alternative to traditional school. YouthSource routinely hears about 18- or 19-year-olds students who are very credit-deficient and yet the district is still hesitant to refer them.
- Open Doors funding allows programs to bill for students for 10 months out of the year. Students who have been billed for 10 months then need to take a break and return. Sometimes students lose momentum and don't return after that two-month break. YouthSource believes being able to serve students for a continuous 12 months would result in better outcomes for students.
- YouthSource sees their position as part of King County government as both advantageous and a challenge. While they have strong capacity around data and access to resources due to their position, there are specific county rules and regulations that make things like having a social media presence difficult.
- Because they're not as directly connected to a school district, YouthSource finds it more difficult to get the word out to students, and their families, who could benefit from the program. YouthSource believes the system should better equip students' families to be able to advocate for attending the right reengagement program, not necessarily within their original school district.

School buildings in King County remain closed, and programs continue to operate virtually for the 2021 school year. Program enhancement projects are continuing this year.



Program Snapshot Themes and Analysis

The program snapshots reveal several common themes. Read on to see what we learned.

1. FLEXIBILITY AND STRUCTURE

All of the programs value flexibility, knowing that students have different needs and carry different challenges with them every day in coming to school. However, the programs also described the work to balance flexibility with structure in order to help prepare students for the world beyond high school.

SCHEDULE

- All but Career Link have open “drop-in” style classrooms, allowing students to come around their schedules.
- Federal Way Open Doors’ campus is open extensive hours—8 a.m. to 8 p.m.—to provide a maximum range of time students can come to school.
- Career Link was the only program of the four featured that has set, daily class times.

CURRICULUM

- SWEC and others adapt curriculum based on current events and student interests.
- Some programs allow students to design projects that fulfill competencies. These can relate to activities students participate in outside of school.

ENROLLMENT

- Programs have open enrollment with the exception of Career Link, which enrolls a new cohort quarterly.

2. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRACTICES

Students of color face disproportionate rates of discipline and even expulsion from high school . When students experience exclusionary discipline, they often receive the message that they’re not wanted, that school is not the place for them. Exclusionary discipline is one of many factors that pushes students of color out.

Programs featured highlighted restorative justice practices as key to creating a supportive environment and to increasing equity. In contrast to traditional discipline practices, restorative justice prioritizes keeping students in the classroom through a relationship-based approach. Everyone in the school environment (students, teachers, staff, etc.) is accountable to each other, and when wrongs occur, space for healing is created.

² Public School Review, Students of Color Disproportionately Disciplined in Schools, updated August 19, 2019 <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/blog/students-of-color-disproportionately-disciplined-in-schools>

3. LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS THAT AFFIRM STUDENTS' IDENTITIES

Many students have left traditional high school settings at least in part due to how they were treated there. When students' identities, goals, interests and passions are affirmed, young people are much more likely to stay in school.

Programs describe creating affirmative environments in different ways. YouthSource talked about the importance of greeting every young person with dignity and respect. SWEC classrooms are decorated with Black Lives Matter signs and other social justice-related items reflecting the race and cultures of the student population.

Affirmation can also come in the form of representation. A Career Link teacher described adapting her health class curriculum to feature the diets of the various cultures of students in her classroom. Another teacher created an Indigenous science class. YouthSource and SWEC have Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) teachers and majority BIPOC support staff, including Black program directors. CBO staff supporting students at Federal Way Open Doors and Career Link are BIPOC.

Finally, programs can affirm students' identities through culturally-relevant support and programming. For example, El Centro de la Raza has seen success in Latino-specific programming. These types of supports increase engagement and foster connection among students as well as between students and staff.

This also means not shying away from discussions of structural racism and other forms of oppression. Anti-racist education builds power for young people by contextualizing the system in which they find themselves. They can then become leaders as agents of change, using the expertise of their own experiences to push for the more equitable systems all students deserve.

4. ON-SITE SERVICES: BIPOC COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION OFFER STRONG SUPPORT

BIPOC community-based organizations play a key role in supporting young people. They are often able to foster trusting relationships in ways that institutions cannot. Most effective is when organizations supporting students are rooted in the cultural identities of students they serve, staff are reflective of those identities, and students' identities are actively and explicitly affirmed. United Way has also [collected data](#) that demonstrates the effectiveness of BIPOC organizations to support BIPOC students in particular.

Programs noted that when students have access to these services on-site at school, they are more likely to utilize them than if they must travel somewhere else or don't experience a warm hand-off from staff. For example, Career Link notes that although there are myriad services across campus at South Seattle College, students prefer and most utilize what can be offered in the Career Link space.

5. PARTNERSHIPS ARE CHALLENGING

Students benefit from community-based organizations' support in addition to what they receive from their Open Doors program. That being said, partnerships between CBOs and Open Doors sites have not been without challenges, and some partnerships did not last. CBO staff faced implicit and explicitly racist interactions, pressure to perform work outside their roles, and, at the same time, school staff not truly valuing their unique relationships and ability to connect with students.

These challenges can be mitigated in part by establishing strong relationships, boundaries and roles prior to implementing services. Consistent communication between CBO and program staff is key to maintaining these relationships. Open Doors programs must respect the unique set of strengths that CBOs bring. An alternative is for CBOs to run Open Doors programs themselves. Ideally, all funding would flow directly to the CBO rather than go through a school district (see Finance Study).

6. MULTIPLE PATHWAYS FOR STUDENTS

Several programs noted that opportunity youth benefit from genuine support navigating high school options that honors their goals and strengths. Mention of this included the districts, staff and therefore, students themselves often feel a stigma against the GED. For some students this is a great option, but they may feel that it is “less than” the high school diploma. On the flip side, programs mentioned that some school staff encourage students to do the GED rather than the high school diploma when the student’s desire is a high school diploma. Federal Way Open Doors noted that through their competency-based model, students often come into the program through a GED track but end up earning their high school diploma, using some GED tests to demonstrate some competencies. YouthSource recently began a high school diploma program in their formerly GED-only site. They regularly met young people who wanted to get their high school diploma but YouthSource did not offer that. The closest Open Doors high school diploma program geographically is Renton Tech. This is a great program for many students but not all thrive on the community college campus. YouthSource’s new high school option is catching young people that were falling through the cracks.

This is not to say that every program needs to have both a GED and high school diploma pathway. It is to say that all students deserve access and support navigating to the program that will work best for them. Additionally, effective program models include career and college exploration along with transition support to ensure that young people not only graduate from Open Doors, but successfully transition to college or career. South King County was one of seven communities selected to participate in Opportunity Works, a national effort to help disengaged youth transition to postsecondary education. A [rigorous evaluation](#) by Urban Institute found that Open Doors programs providing postsecondary navigation support through Northwest Education Access had a “consistent, large and positive impact” on postsecondary enrollment, and a particularly strong effect on young men of color.



Student Interviews Themes and Analysis

United Way worked with two young people, Katerin and Marcia, to gather interviews of current and former Open Doors students to use in the program snapshots. Katerin and Marcia designed the interview questions and edited the recordings. Each student interviewed consented to the use of their interview for United Way's purposes and received a \$50 gift card in exchange for their time and expertise. The interviews took place between February and May 2020. Below are themes that emerged from the interviews.

Students expressed that being able to talk with teachers and have one-on-one time was important to them.

Students talked about this both as something they did not experience in their mainstream high school and something that they did experience more often in Open Doors. This was closely related to several students stating they preferred the smaller class size of their Open Doors program to a larger high school environment.

Students value teachers who care, engage and communicate authentically, and are willing to listen and support even with concerns outside of academics.

Flexibility in terms of being able to attend school around other obligations as well as being able to complete work at a pace and on a schedule that worked for them was mentioned several times. Open Doors students often have a lot of other obligations outside of school, making the typical daily schedule a barrier. However, some students thought that there was too much independence expected from their program and thought more structure would help.

All of the students interviewed were **either attending college or planned to go to college** and felt their program was supporting them with those goals. One student described their Open Doors program as a “sturdy bridge from high school to college.”

Students appreciated being able to participate in activities beyond academics. Examples included creative writing, identity-based clubs like Gay-Straight Alliance or Black Student Union, prom and volunteering opportunities to give back. These opportunities helped students feel connected to their reengagement program and motivated them to engage in the school community.

Culture and environment are very important to Open Doors students interviewed. Students appreciated a school that felt “home-like” and friendly. In addition, students talked about the importance of staff and teachers genuinely hearing students and not suppressing student voices.

Sustainability Project: Program Enhancements

As part of the overall work of the Sustainability Project, United Way is supporting a Program Enhancement Project from each of the four highlighted programs. These projects included work that would be beneficial to the entire network of reengagement programs, rather than so program-specific that it would not be applicable to other programs. The grants began in July of 2019. This summary includes information from the first year of the two-year projects.

About nine months into the first year of project funding, schools in Washington state closed as the community scrambled to respond to the coronavirus. Reengagement programs were significantly impacted by closures and by the pandemic overall. United Way made sustainability grant funds flexible to meet emergent programmatic needs, if necessary, related to the pandemic. As a result, programs were able to provide technology (e.g. laptops) to students, help with basic needs and re-assigned staff to supporting emergent needs.

CAREER LINK

- Project funded an on-site, low-barrier mental health counselor and a peer mentorship program for students starting college

Mental health counselor highlights: We continue to highly recommend finding a way to provide students access to a counselor without the long intakes, insurance requirements and general paperwork that is typical. We've found that being able to engage with students "in the moment" is invaluable. Getting the counselor to get out of their office and mingle with students also is critical to building relationships. We can't wait to get back into a somewhat normal environment to continue to see this work. Forty-nine students were formally supported by the mental health staff. Many more were supported informally by her presence on campus.

Mentorship challenges: For the mentor program, we don't have a lot to work from right now. We feel like this program was just getting its legs under it when we closed. We look forward to growing it when we return to some kind of in-person program. We had much lower numbers of students taking college classes—and therefore less need for mentors –and the online format just didn't work as well. If students felt like they needed to reach out for help and the only option was online, they chose to go directly to staff instead of a new mentor that they had no relationship with.

Career Link “pivoted” some of these funds for these uses:

- Technology for staff to work and teach/support students remotely
- Purchased computers for students
—“Some students were planning to write English essays on their phone for the whole quarter”
- Purchased and distributed grocery gift cards to students to meet basic needs

FEDERAL WAY OPEN DOORS

- Project funded the creation of a “college-going culture,” including student workshops, staff training and development of a menu of options, in partnership with Northwest Education Access

With the encouragement and support of NWEA, Federal Way Open Doors recognizes the need for foundational equity and anti-racist cultural shifts to occur in order to have a truly equitable “college-going culture.” The second year of the work will include a consultant focused on assessment, accountability and evaluation around racial equity.

Project activities thus far have included: design and implementation of a data tool, staff training and “cultural norm setting” with a consultant, re-vamp of student intake, creation of a “tuition waiver checklist” and resource maps.

With COVID-19, NWEA actively supported Federal Way Open Doors in getting resources to students for a wide range of needs, both those related to academic outcomes and more generally.

- 40 students complete FAFSA
- 107 met with a college success coordinator
- 56 enrolled in college
- 56 passed a college course

SOUTHWEST EDUCATION CENTER

- Project funded the year-round expansion of a student writer’s workshop, a data specialist position and teacher salary increases

The Writer’s Workshop went year round, and had its first virtual reading in the summer of 2020. Students reflected that writing helped them cope with current events, such as COVID-19 and the on-going uprising against white supremacy in the wake of George Floyd’s death. The summer workshop was held virtually, including a Zoom reading. Writing continues to be an important outlet for students to cope with the pandemic. A website for the program has been developed: <https://swboot.org/>.

SWEC needed to shift the role of its data specialist position to part-time case management in order to ensure all students had their needs met during the stay-at-home order—academically, physically and social-emotionally.

This shutdown made it very clear how few of our students have computer access at home, and how even fewer have reliable internet access at home. This challenge showed us where we, as an education center, have opportunity to grow and develop and initiated conversations about how we can much more effectively proceed both short- and long-term in terms of meeting student needs in a digital capacity. While our department has discussed this at multiple, different points in the past, we recognize how many students come to us BECAUSE they would not be successful in an exclusively online learning environment.

SWEC held a “drive-through” graduation celebration in June 2020.

YOUTHSOURCE

- Project funded a new high school diploma model in partnership with Renton Technical College

YouthSource enrolled 39 students to the new model in the first year, higher than the anticipated goal of 24 students. This is a huge achievement, especially considering the challenges presented by going entirely remote due to COVID-19 partway through the first year.

14 students received diplomas in the first year!

“We have learned that many youth of color are seeking alternative options to complete their high school credential in an environment that has instructors and staff that reflect them and their community. They perform better with instructors of color and similar lived experience, and also smaller classroom size and supportive environment. Most have been systematically targeted and discouraged from attending their traditional high schools. In addition, many have competing priorities that prevent them from attending school on a consistent basis”.

COVID-19 was a challenge and some students found it difficult to stay in school. YouthSource was able to get students technology so they could work virtually, and some continued to earn credits and credentials.



Next Steps: Looking Forward for United Way and Open Doors

The work of Reconnecting Youth has revealed both bright spots within Open Doors and its programs and issues that need to be addressed. Open Doors programs are attracting and retaining students who otherwise would not be engaged in education and moving them along a path to credential earning, a point that cannot be overstated. Until traditional programs can support the talents and resilience of all youth, reengagement programs will be the necessary soft landing for students pushed or pulled out of traditional high schools. Washington state's Open Doors structure is unique nationally and is proving its potential to be a game-changing model for supporting reengaged students with state dollars.

That said, there's also general consensus that the current model of Open Doors is limited in its ability to truly meet the needs of all students, particularly in terms of the billing structure. This presents barriers to equitable service, especially for students of color.

The race inequity that exists within reengagement is among the most resonant findings of Reconnecting Youth, and United Way's next phase of work in this arena will focus on addressing that directly through both program and policy approaches. Doing right by opportunity youth of color within this system is one way of beginning to make reparations to Black, Indigenous and people of color communities that have been most harmed by education systems and policy. To that end, our most salient policy recommendation is:

- **Create a sustainable pathway to invest Open Doors funds directly in community-based organizations** rather than passing the funds through school districts. This would allow CBOs full access to the Basic Education Allocation (BEA) dollars and control over their use, which is critical, in particular for the success of BIPOC-led CBO programs. Planning and start-up resources need to be included so that programs can get off the ground successfully. United Way plans to support the opening of one or more BIPOC-led, community-based reengagement programs in King County in the coming years. We are committed to this effort because:
 - The mainstream education system produces disparities for students of color. Because the funding passes through school districts, Open Doors programs are extensions of a system that has already failed youth.
 - [There are serious concerns](#) that students are pushed out of traditional high schools into Open Doors programs in order to improve district graduation rates. A [recent report](#) shows that 59% of Open Doors students were still enrolled in high school when they enrolled in their reengagement programs, rather than enrolling after being separated from school. Students deserve options that will best help them meet their goals, not what will impact a district's graduation rate.
 - BIPOC CBOs produce stronger results for students of color than mainstream CBOs, as data from United Way's Supporting Youth initiative [demonstrates](#).
 - BIPOC CBOs have the expertise in their own communities. United Way's [Racial Equity Technical Assistance](#) report supports this.
 - BIPOC CBO programs are rooted in positive cultural identity promotion, which helps build resilience in youth to navigate a world that often doesn't support them.

Our other recommendations cover both program and policy.

The Reconnecting Youth initiative illuminated a number of promising practices at the individual school level with the following programmatic recommendations rising up as critical to increasing equity in the design of Open Doors programs:

- **Utilize best practices for students of color**, including restorative justice, trauma-informed practices, culturally tailored curriculums and services, and positive cultural identity frameworks. Centering the needs of the most marginalized students will ensure that all students benefit. The programs featured in this report are implementing some of these practices. Students will benefit from their becoming universal.
- **Listen to and give leadership to young people** in learning how to design and improve programs, as well as in policy advocacy efforts. Students know what they need in order to succeed in school. In partnership with young people, adults can create environments where youth thrive.
- **Engage whole communities to truly create the equitable education spaces students deserve.** This goes beyond family engagement. BIPOC CBOs are key trusted resources to involve in these processes.
- **Ensure programs have the capacity and resources to prioritize college/career exploration, readiness and transition support.** All students, especially those who reengage, need to see the connection between completing their GED or diploma and achieving their future goals in order for school to be relevant.

There are also structural, policy changes that would improve Open Doors and its fiscal sustainability. Our key policy recommendations are:

- **Provide a clear mechanism for BIPOC CBOs to receive sustainable funding** for the critical support services they provide students. These services often including mentoring, case management, disability services and social-emotional skill building, all from a lens of positive cultural identity. This funding could come directly from OSPI or as a subcontract through an Open Doors program. This will ensure that these services are consistently available to students and that the organizations providing them are equitably compensated.
- **Create sustainable funding streams for critical social-emotional supports that enrich the learning environment.** Flexible funding to reduce student barriers has proven effective for providing more holistic services and helping students stay engaged. Programs currently have to find dollars to supplement public funding in order to provide these needed supports.
- **Change the billing structure to fund programs for 12 months of the year rather than 10.** This will give programs the flexibility to engage students the moment they reach out and ensure there are no disruptions in support that can lead to disengagement.
- **Allow programs to bill for activities such as outreach, helping students complete the enrollment process, and supporting students even when they are not “billable.”** This is some of the most critical work that Open Doors programs and CBO partners are doing and they are doing it without sustainable resources. This work directly contributes to engagement and retention of students.

- **Examine and alter the billing structure to eliminate the potential for creaming**, which can have racially disparate impacts. The “pay for performance” structure incentivizes serving students more likely to be billable, and strains resources of programs who commit to serving students regardless of their ability to bill for them. This recommendation is linked to the following recommendation.
- **Re-evaluate the list of Indicators of Academic Progress (IAPs)**. The current set of IAPs provide a narrow view of a student’s achievements, for example, earning a high school credit or passing 1 or more tests. These are important milestones but fail to capture the myriad other successes students may have along the way. We recommend seeking community feedback and making revisions to IAPs with a racial equity lens.
- **Change the billing structure so that smaller programs can be viable**. Open Doors requires a high volume of students in order to be financially viable, and still requires additional funding to truly support students well. This incentivizing of quantity means that only large organizations are able to open and sustain Open Doors programs even though size does not equate with effectiveness. It also effectively negates the opportunity for most BIPOC organizations to provide these education services

Conversations about how to implement the recommendations related to billing structures and mechanisms are complicated and fraught, but the reengagement field needs to continue to grapple with the issues and test alternatives. United Way is committed to remaining involved in these discussions in the coming years, even as our role shifts. We will keep our finger on the pulse of Open Doors-related policy advocacy and continue our efforts, in partnership with many others in the community, to elevate the need for specific changes to the Open Doors framework and approach. We hope that this report has provided a helpful glimpse into Open Doors programming, both its triumphs and its flaws, and we encourage the field to take action on these recommendations. Our youth deserve it.

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Appendix

Finance Study