

Denver WIOA Out-of-School Youth Services: Using Evidence-Informed Practices to Advance Youth Self-Sufficiency and Well-Being

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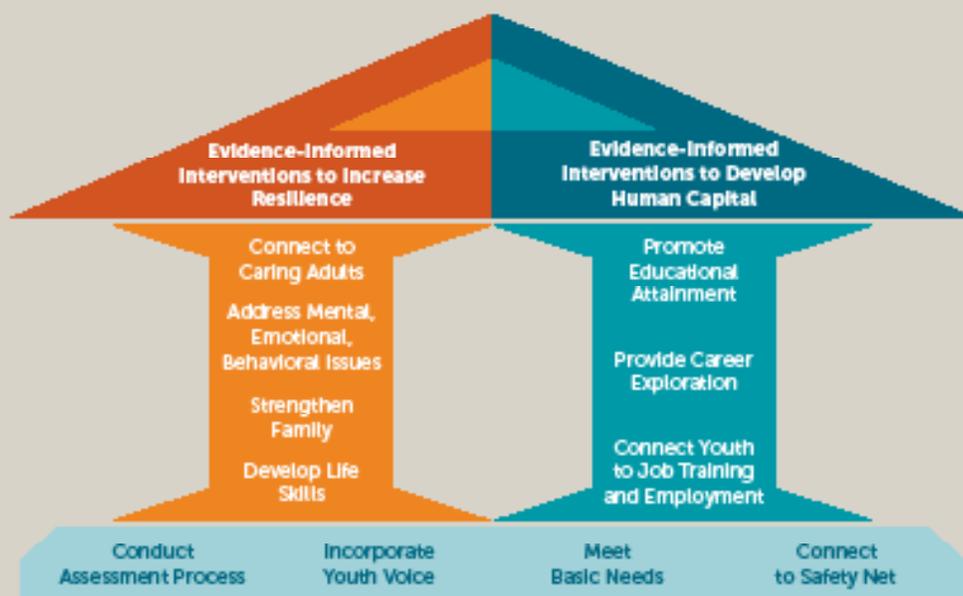
In June 2017, the Denver Office of Economic Development (OED) launched a collaborative partnership with Denver Public Schools (DPS) Family and Community Engagement (FACE) to provide comprehensive career and educational support services to out-of-school youth. Supported with funding from the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the partnership provides Denver youth, parents, and families with wraparound services designed to support them in meeting their employment, education, and personal aspirations.¹

The Centers for Family Opportunity (CFOs) in the College View and Montbello neighborhoods form the core of these wraparound services.² Designed to incorporate research and best practices in multi-generation strategies, the CFOs provide a seamless service experience for youth and families. They have a variety of staff on site—including case managers, social workers, and co-located staff from partner organizations. The Montbello and Castro workforce centers and community-based organizations serve as additional points of intake for out-of-school youth.

OED contracted with Mathematica Policy Research, a nonpartisan research organization, to examine the services offered through this new partnership and assess the extent to which they incorporate the key features of evidence-informed interventions for advancing the self-sufficiency and well-being of youth. (Figure 1).³ *Mathematica's assessment indicates that Denver's WIOA-funded services for out-of-school youth mostly or fully incorporate all these key features (Table 1).*

Consistent with best practices for working with this population, the services are more comprehensive than simply placing out-of-school youth into jobs. Instead, staff first assess a youth's strengths, needs, and current circumstances, then strive to address basic needs, including behavioral and mental health, right away. These same services are then extended to the youth's peer networks and family members. Staff give youth a voice in their service planning, rather than directing youth. And youth build life skills as well as work skills through workshops and one-on-one meetings with case managers and social workers. Establishing trusting relationships with staff lays a foundation for this successful engagement.

Figure 1. Features of evidence-informed youth programs



¹ Under WIOA, out-of-school youth are ages 16 to 24, are not attending school, and have one or more barriers to employment, such as school dropout, homelessness, or involvement with the justice system.

² CFOs are collaborations with Mile High United Way, Denver's workforce centers, Denver Public Schools Foundation, and other partners. In addition, DPS has formal subcontracts with several community-based organizations to reach special out-of-school youth populations, such as gang-involved, homeless, and refugee youth.

³ Mathematica's assessment was grounded in "A Framework for Advancing the Well-Being and Self-Sufficiency of At-Risk Youth" (Dion et al 2013). In conducting the assessment of out-of-school youth services, Mathematica researchers developed a rubric from this framework, used the rubric to independently rate each component, and averaged scores to calculate a final rating. See Dion, M. Robin (2013). A Framework for Advancing the Self-Sufficiency and Well-Being of At-Risk Youth, OPRE Report # 2012-14, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Table 1. Extent to which evidence-informed practices for out-of-school youth are implemented in Denver

Engagement and stabilization	 Foster trust between staff and youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Youth receive consistent support from a single case manager throughout participation. ✓ Case managers communicate with youth informally between regular check-ins through texting and phone calls. ✓ Case managers frequently travel off-site to meet youth in locations that are convenient to them and accompany youth to meetings and referred appointments as needed.
	 Meet youth's basic needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Youth are assessed early to determine whether their basic needs (such as food, health care, and shelter) are being met. ✓ Staff work with youth to ensure any crisis needs are attended to immediately.
	 Connect to safety net	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ At the Centers for Family Opportunity (CFOs), an on-site enrollment specialist from Denver Human Services (DHS) is co-located at least two days per week at each location. ✓ The DHS worker educates youth on available benefits, helps them navigate benefit systems, and helps them apply for benefits.
Initial and ongoing service planning	 Incorporate youth's voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Case managers use motivational interviewing techniques to actively engage youth in their own service planning, which is recorded in a Family Success Plan. ✓ CFOs actively solicit input from all participants on quality of existing services and service needs.
	 Conduct assessment process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Assessments conducted at intake focus on basic needs, including (1) risk and protective factors; (2) life skills; (3) career readiness; and (4) mental, emotional, and behavioral health. ✓ Assessments are readministered every three months to inform ongoing Family Success Plan.
Increase resilience	 Connect to caring adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Case managers serve as informal mentors and receive trainings focused on establishing healthy relationships with youth. ✓ To further develop the youth support network, Denver out-of-school youth service providers could establish a formal mentorship program that connects youth to long-term mentors from the community.
	 Address mental, emotional and behavioral issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ At the CFOs, youth with emotional, mental health, or behavioral issues are referred to a full-time, on-site social worker for additional assessment. ✓ As needed, youth are referred to the Mental Health Clinic of Denver for clinical support. A Master of Social Work intern assumes the role of case manager to provide specialized ongoing support.
	 Strengthen connections to family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ On an informal basis, social workers support estranged youth in reconnecting with family members. ✓ Case managers provide multi-generation services to family members of out-of-school youth. ✓ To further support efforts to build family connections when appropriate, the CFOs could establish family-based interventions or workshops for building the family.
	 Build life skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The CFOs offer a variety of in-house courses designed to build life skills, such as financial literacy classes and workshops on healthy habits. ✓ Additional courses on building coping and decision-making skills are offered through Mental Health Center of Denver.
Develop human capital	 Promote educational attainment and job training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The CFOs offer GED and ESL programs free of charge. ✓ Youth pursuing education and training can access training funds (on average, \$750 per participant) and participate in six- to eight-week "quick-start" trainings in occupations such as construction and culinary arts. ✓ Youth set short-term SMART goals; to enhance this, case managers could work with youth to develop more formal long-term career plans.
	 Promote career exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Youth are offered up to 120 hours of paid internships, funded through WIOA. ✓ Case managers conduct in-house career development workshops and connect participants with community resources, such as citywide career fairs. ✓ To further support career exploration, case managers could administer career interest inventories to youth.
	 Connect youth to employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ A job developer matches youth to available jobs through an online database of work opportunities. ✓ Ninety-five percent of youth who participate in "quick-start" trainings gain employment in the field of the training. ✓ About half the youth who participate in paid internships are subsequently hired by the company.

 = Fully implemented.
  = Mostly implemented.
  = Partially implemented.