RESEARCH REPORT

Opportunity Works Implementation Report

Lessons from the Back on Track Model for Opportunity Youth

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Executive Summary

The Opportunity Works intervention replicates and scales up the Back on Track framework to help opportunity youth—young people ages 16 to 24 not in school and not meaningfully employed—progress along secondary and postsecondary pathways. Back on Track is characterized by three program phases, each of which consists of a set of features, to help opportunity youth move toward postsecondary and career success. The first phase, enriched preparation, helps students complete their high school equivalency credentials through a focus on creating a college culture through reinforcing interactions and pro-college physical spaces, offering college- and career-ready curricula and instruction, customized and accelerated instruction, and personalized guidance and support. The second phase, postsecondary/career bridging, helps students bridge to college and/or careers through supported dual enrollment, sharing of college knowledge and success strategies, personalized guidance with connections to "best bets," mentorship from program graduates, and supported transition to college. The final phase, first-year support, encourages staff members to continue working with students through their first year of college or career, particularly focusing on developing an attachment to postsecondary education. The first two phases are the focus of this intervention.

Managed by Jobs for the Future (JFF), the Opportunity Works effort involves implementing the Back on Track framework in seven communities from across the country: **Boston, MA; Hartford, CT; Philadelphia, PA; New Orleans, LA; San Francisco, CA; Santa Clara County, CA; and South King County, WA**. Each site chose one of the first two Back on Track phases as the primary focus of its Opportunity Works effort. The Urban Institute is conducting an independent evaluation of the sites' interventions for youth to understand how the interventions are working and what lessons can be drawn for the field through an implementation study. The Urban Institute is also estimating the effect on key educational, employment, and social outcomes through an impact study. This mixed-methods evaluation effort will produce valuable evidence about the promise of the Back on Track framework to improve the lives of opportunity youth.

The Opportunity Works effort is funded by a Social Innovation Fund (SIF). SIF is designed to fund innovative interventions to improve the social conditions of communities and build evidence of effectiveness. SIF grantees are required to engage third-party evaluators to conduct implementation and impact research to produce rigorous and meaningful evidence.

This report contains the final findings of the implementation research, which was informed by document review, logic model mapping in coordination with the sites, quarterly calls, and site visits in

fall 2016. The implementation study provides information about program fidelity and describes the sites' efforts in order to inform others that may be interested in implementing similar interventions. The evaluation approach recognizes the flexibility of Back on Track while ensuring that the programs bear some fidelity to Back on Track framework.

Nature of Communities

- Overall poverty rates across the seven communities range from 10 percent (Santa Clara County) to 33 percent (Hartford), with an average of 22 percent, compared to the US average of 16 percent. Child poverty is particularly high in Hartford and New Orleans (45 percent and 41 percent, respectively).
- Every site reported that program participants come from communities experiencing significant economic hardship and instability and that they are primarily people of color. Common challenges included housing instability, access to services, lack of transportation, child care challenges, and exposure to crime and violence.

Key Findings

Opportunity Works Programs

- The seven sites in this study built their Opportunity Works programming from the Back on Track framework, adapting the framework to their local resources and context. **All of the sites have all or nearly all of the framework elements and often go beyond the requirements** of the phase of Back on Track on which they focus. They used the grant funds to fill in service gaps, primarily through hiring coaching and navigation staff.
- In all sites, Opportunity Works brought some new or enhanced services, but typically **features of the Back on Track framework already existed in the sites**. In three sites, the new funds allowed more youth to be served.
- **Staff define program success along five dimensions**. Four are youth-focused dimensions, and one is systems-focused. The youth-focused dimensions are (1) building personal/academic

skills and aspirations, (2) developing the ability to live independently, (3) attaining educational benchmarks, and (4) embarking on a career pathway. At the systems level, the sites aspire to create a youth focus where organizations and institutions develop and structure education and training programs and social services systems. The systems-level goals are partially supported by the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund collective impact effort for opportunity youth.

- **The concept of "disconnected" for opportunity youth is not simple.** The working definitions used by the sites reflect a continuum of engagement around school, work, and career pathways.
- **The primary outreach and recruitment methods vary across sites** depending on the characteristics of the target population of disconnected youth. Some sites are embedded within partner programs that enroll youth who have previously dropped out of high school, and Opportunity Works recruits directly from that program's student population.
- In all sites, **the bulk of funds support staff positions**, primarily to provide or enhance education-related support services and to improve on the ability of organizations to help youth navigate support and education systems. In some sites, there is an intentional effort to hire staff whose backgrounds make them more relatable to the youth.
- Sites report that limited funds require them to make a trade-off between funding staff at sufficient levels to individualize supports or directly supporting services that meet the basic needs of youth; they rely primarily on community resources for supportive services. **Most communities are unable to meet the basic needs of youth** in the areas of housing, child care, transportation, food security, crime/safety, and mental health; these are the reasons that youth tend to leave before finishing the program.
- **Sites use multiple strategies to improve retention of youth** including frequent contact with youth, relationship-building, and monetary incentives. Three of the seven sites also articulate "recovery" strategies to reenroll youth who stop out of the program.
- Although the education-related services are the most clearly articulated part of the Back on Track framework, the fact that sites have incorporated elements and features of the framework across phases suggests **the phases of the Back on Track framework may not be separable**. JFF has taken steps to address this through a revised program model, released in draft form in late 2016.

Lessons

Design

- When first thinking about program design, various sites emphasized the importance of having a **strong understanding of the local labor market and the population to be served**. One valuable way to get this insight is to engage program partners at multiple levels and possibly also young people themselves to provide feedback.
- Many sites found **recruitment to be an unexpected challenge**. The difficulty was often less about finding target youth who were *ready* for meaningful program engagement, especially intensive postsecondary bridging experiences. Anticipating and planning for recruitment and retention challenges can save the energy of shifting focus partway through implementation.
- Sites cautioned that it is important to ensure that **program components are logistically coordinated and that young people are supported in accessing them**. Academic institutions in particular often have inflexible procedures and schedules. It is good to recognize and try to work through the alignment of program elements early in planning.
- Offering **nonacademic content,** such as opportunities for socialization and cultural capital-building, college- and job-readiness skill development, and personal confidence-building can provide a useful complement to standard programming.
- Ensuring that new interventions are embedded seamlessly into existing programming can offer an **uninterrupted continuum** for youth that may increase retention and improve outcomes.
- Strong **technical support** from the funder or another organization well versed in the framework can be valuable at the planning stage and throughout implementation.

Selecting and Working with Partners

- Backbone organizations cautioned that it is important to **select partners carefully**. It is valuable to have partners with a range of service offerings and strengths to address the young people's various needs.

- It is also helpful to **define the roles and expectations of partners clearly** from the outset.
- When new partners come to the table, **establishing trust is often a necessary first step**, but it can take time.
- **Regular partner meetings** organized by backbone organizations can give partners a chance to create a common language, alignment, vision about the program, and data/tracking procedures. These meetings may be particularly effective when they allow for interaction on multiple levels, among leadership, management, and direct service staff.
- It may be necessary to offer **training to partners** on the program goals, data collection and usage, and other key issues or skills.

Data

- It is valuable to build a **data culture**, which is an iterative and interactive process. Partners need to capture useful and usable information that can be used to inform programming, not only to meet reporting requirements. Shared data can allow staff across organizations build a "conspiracy of support" for participants.

Staffing and Working with Youth

- The Back on Track framework is personnel intensive, and **hiring the right staff members is a critical ingredient for success**. Key characteristics of successful staff members are that they are relatable, set and maintain high expectations for youth, understand young people's backgrounds, and demonstrate that they care.
- It is valuable for staff to have an opportunity to **build trusting relationships** with the youth as part of the program design. Establishing a relationship takes time and attention.
- Ensuring a reasonable **staff-to-student ratio** may maintain quality services and minimize the chance of staff burnout.
- Young people's **barriers loom large**, especially around housing, transportation, debt, the need for income, hunger, mental health, transportation, and unsupportive social networks or family members.

Framework

- It is difficult to have meaningful postsecondary bridging without strong enriched preparation elements. Conversely, it is hard to promote an attractive enriched preparation program without identifying postsecondary bridging opportunities as a next step. In the original Back on Track framework, **the phases may be inherently intertwined**. In response to this lesson, the revised framework incorporates redundancies into each phase.
- The framework may need to incorporate some **earning opportunities for youth**. The pressing need for income is a fundamental barrier that affects program progress and success.

Participant Perspectives from Focus Groups

Youth perspectives highlight some of the most salient lessons from the implementation research and provide valuable feedback for future programming. The young people who attended the focus groups shared that they and others in the programming come from difficult backgrounds, discussing their history and current challenges with the justice system, transportation, pregnancy and parenting, personal violence, housing/homelessness, illegal activities, and mental illness.

Some youth were unclear about their goals initially, and the program helped them see a path or a purpose. Others wanted to go to college all along but did not know how. Many have to balance the need for a job with the desire to advance their education so that they can pursue a range of professional, long-term interests. Youth in programs with a financial incentive expressed that this feature was important to help them stay engaged in the programming. Those who were in programs without stipends or paid work experience opportunities wished there was more financial support.

Overall, most expressed positive experiences with the program. Almost universally, enrollees said that it helped them find direction or explore avenues they had not previously considered, such as college offerings aligned with their substantive interests. Many expressed pride and satisfaction at their accomplishments in the program.

Youth expressed the importance of relatable and caring staff, being held to high expectations, having peer support networks, having a voice in program design, and a safe place with sufficient space. They valued the support services offered, but some wanted additional supports, such as transportation, child care, more income, help with time management, and mental health support.

Introduction

The Back on Track framework describes a multiphase intervention to help "opportunity youth"—young people ages 16 to 24 who are not in school or meaningfully employed—into pathways to postsecondary and careers. Opportunity youth have been a growing focus of poverty alleviation, workforce development, and social inclusion efforts across the country. In early 2015, Jobs for the Future (JFF), in collaboration with the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, contracted the Urban Institute to evaluate a seven-city demonstration of the signature Back on Track framework. The demonstration was sponsored by a grant from a Social Innovation Fund (SIF) and branded Opportunity Works. This report describes the Opportunity Works intervention at the program sites. It is the first public report from the evaluation effort.

Opportunity Youth

Between the critical ages of 16 and 24, many low-income youth risk becoming disconnected from school and the labor market. In 2015, 6 percent of young people ages 16 to 24 were not in school and did not have high school credentials; among youth from the lowest-income families, it was 10 percent.[1] Males are about 40 percent more likely to have dropped out than females.[2] More than 30 percent of high school dropouts in this age range are unemployed,[3] because they lack postsecondary credentials, labor market experience, and other forms of human capital. Consequently, social interventions can have an important impact on the outcomes of these opportunity youth.

The national and global economy has a high demand for an educated labor force. Within the US labor market, jobs that require at least some postsecondary education are projected to increase substantially within the next 10 years.[4] In this sense, the employment prospects for opportunity youth are encouraging if they gain the necessary postsecondary credentials and skills.

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[1] U.S. Department of Education. 2016. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_219.75.asp.

[2] U.S. Department of Education. 2016 https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_219.80.asp.

[3] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2017. http://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.t01.htm.

[4] "Occupational Employment Projections to 2022." December 2013. *Monthly Labor Review*. http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2013/article/occupational-employment-projections-to-2022.htm.

The Back on Track Framework

The Back on Track framework fosters the growth and scale of programs aimed at improving the postsecondary success of opportunity youth. Back on Track is characterized by three program phases, each of which consists of a set of features. These are designed to help opportunity youth move toward postsecondary and career success.

- The first phase, **enriched preparation**, helps students complete their high school equivalency (HSE) credentials through a focus on creating a college culture through reinforcing interactions and pro-college physical spaces, offering college- and career-ready curricula and instruction, customized and accelerated instruction, and personalized guidance and support. The enriched preparation phase recruits high school noncompleters ages 16 to 24 and provides them with the curriculum, support, and coaching essential for educational success and career readiness.

- The second phase, **postsecondary/career bridging**,[5] helps students bridge to college and/or careers through supported dual enrollment, sharing of college knowledge and success strategies, personalized guidance with connections to "best bets," mentorship from program graduates, and supported transition to college. This phase recruits opportunity youth who already have or are very close to obtaining high school credentials and helps them build the skill set essential for postsecondary achievement. In this context, "postsecondary" refers to both academic-track college courses and career-oriented professional training courses offered at the postsecondary level by higher education institutions or other training providers.

- The final phase, **first-year support**, encourages staff members to continue working with students through their first year of college or career, particularly focusing on developing an attachment to postsecondary education.

The SIF grant required each subgrantee site to choose one of the first two phases (enriched preparation or postsecondary bridging) as a primary focus of their Opportunity Works intervention. This grant effort treats first-year support as an extension of postsecondary bridging, but it is available at most program sites.

[5] As shorthand and in recognition of the primary short-term goal of postsecondary enrollment, the report will refer to "postsecondary/career bridging" as "postsecondary bridging."

FIGURE 1

Back on Track Enriched Preparation Logic Model (Original 2014 Framework)

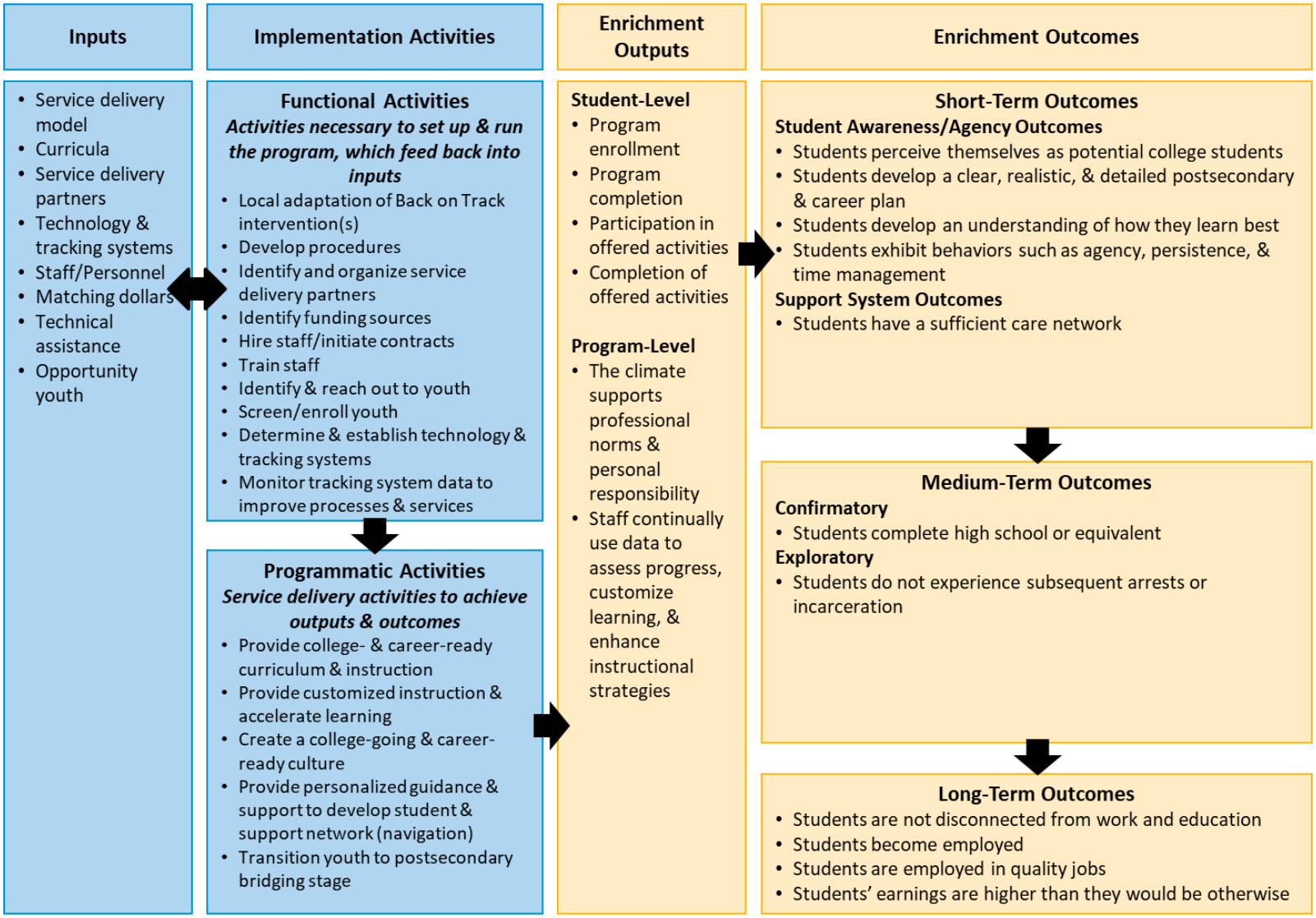
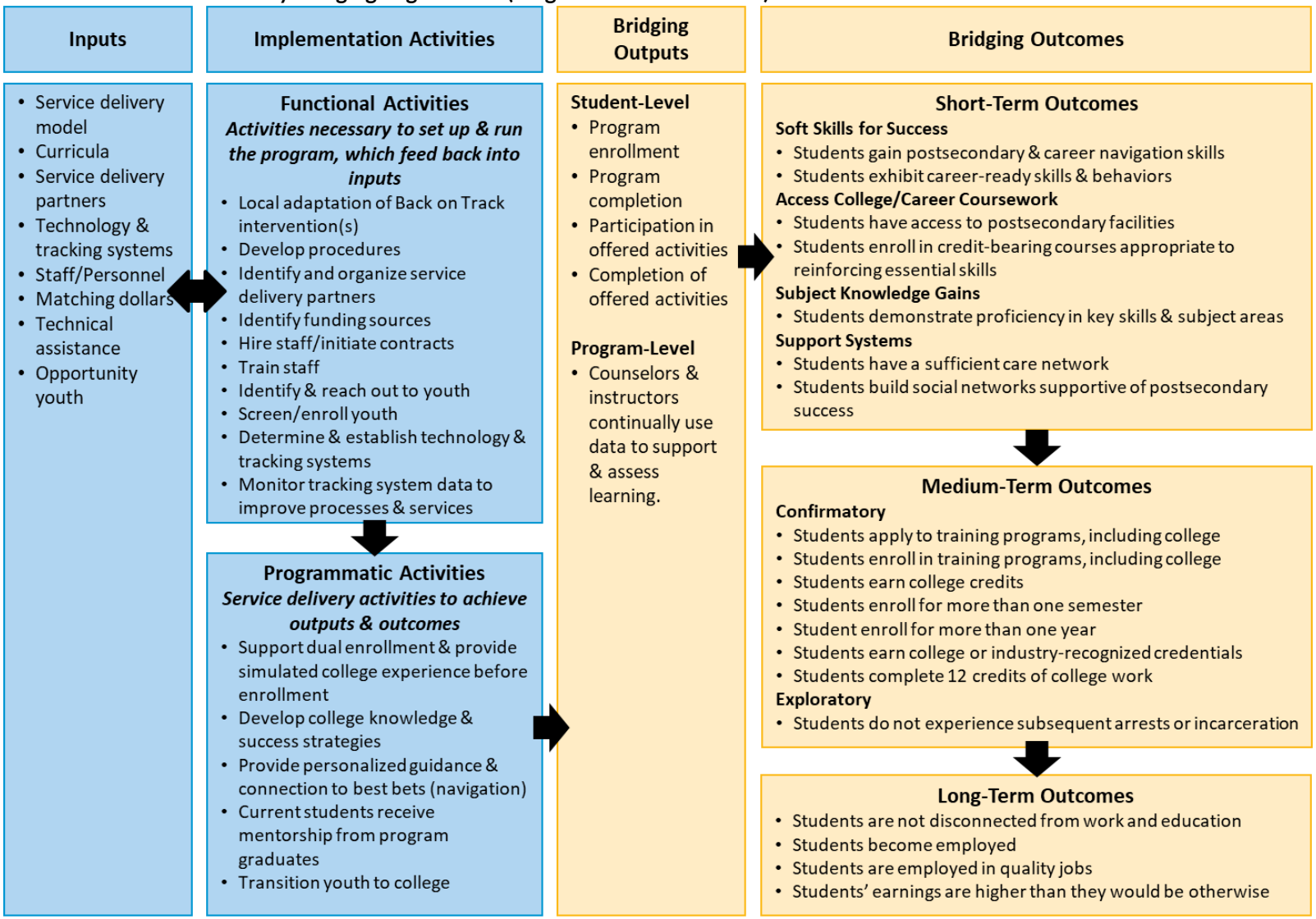


FIGURE 2

Back on Track Postsecondary Bridging Logic Model (Original 2014 Framework)



Both the enriched preparation and postsecondary bridging phases of Back on Track help at-risk youth achieve postsecondary success while simultaneously helping fulfill the labor market needs of the national and global economy, but they are designed to serve youth at different stages of school progress and career readiness. Thus, the overarching logic models for the two stages of Back on Track have similar features, as demonstrated in figure 1 and figure 2. In particular, the long-term outcomes of both stages of Back on Track are the same but the enriched preparation participants would need a longer time horizon and different intervening service components to meet them. In addition, in the ideal structure of the enriched preparation model for Back on Track, participating youth will go on to participate in the postsecondary bridging model and will receive first-year support to continue their academic and career journey. However, JFF designed the features so they could stand in isolation if necessary.

Back on Track serves as a framework that programs can use to structure their service delivery in order to help young people obtain secondary, postsecondary, and employment success. JFF purposefully conveys Back on Track as a framework rather than a rigid model, and individual programs may adapt Back on Track to their local context. Though JFF introduced further refinements to the Back on Track framework in late 2016, this report considered the original framework based on JFF (2014), since that is the model that the sites were working from at the time of implementation data collection.

The SIF Evaluation

JFF received a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service's SIF program to implement Back on Track in **Boston, MA; Hartford, CT; Philadelphia, PA; New Orleans, LA; San Francisco, CA; Santa Clara County, CA; and South King County, WA.** This effort is "Opportunity Works." Since the Corporation for National and Community Service requires rigorous, independent evaluation of funded activities,[6] JFF hired the Urban Institute as a third-party evaluator to document implementation and to assess impacts of Back on Track programs.

The evaluation takes a mixed-methods research approach across the seven sites.[7] This report shares results of the implementation study, which produced case studies and cross-site analyses. The

[6] See CNCS (2014) for a description of the evaluation requirements for SIF grants.

[7] A "site" in this report refers to the backbone organization and collection of partners implementing Opportunity Works in each city. See table 2 for a list of partner organizations in each site.

purpose of the implementation study is to assess program fidelity and to describe the sites' efforts in order to inform others that may be interested in implementing similar interventions.

The evaluation will ultimately use quasi-experimental methods to estimate the impacts of the Back on Track framework on participant education, training, and employment outcomes at three impact sites (Hartford, Philadelphia, and South King County). The study will also quantitatively describe outcomes for the participating youth based on program data across all seven sites. In SIF terminology, the research team intends for the evaluation to meet a "moderate" level of evidence. The plans for the quantitative analysis are included in the Quantitative Analysis Approach and Data Sources Appendix.

Qualitative Findings: Program Experiences

The seven sites in this study built their Opportunity Works programming from the Back on Track framework, adapting to their local resources and context. This chapter describes the qualitative program experiences, including the nature of the communities involved in the grant effort, the nature of the partnerships, the variations in implementation experiences, participants' perspectives, data systems and usage, and lessons and plans for the future. This information and analysis came from document review, quarterly calls with each site, semi-annual two-day convenings, and two-day site visits in fall 2016. While this chapter synthesizes information across sites, the site summaries included in the separate Site Summary Appendix provides detail about each site's Opportunity Works effort.

Nature of Communities

Opportunity Works programs operated in seven metropolitan areas and counties with varied economic characteristics. As shown in table 1, the population in these areas was poorer on average than the national population (22 percent versus 16 percent). The child poverty rates were particularly high in Hartford, New Orleans, and Philadelphia; Hartford's child poverty rate was more than twice the national average (45 percent versus 22 percent). While these sites had lower overall unemployment than the US (5.7 percent versus 6.2 percent) in 2014, the youth unemployment rate was higher (17.4 percent versus 14.3 percent). San Francisco and Santa Clara County had relatively stronger economic indicators, while Hartford had some of the weakest indicators.

TABLE 1

Community Characteristics

	Poverty rate	Child poverty rate[a]	Unemployment rate	Youth unemployment rate[b, c]	Est. # of Opportunity Youth[d]	Opportunity Youth as % of youth pop.[d]	High school completion rate—public schools[e,f]
Boston	21.5%	29.8%	5.6%	16.5%	10,240	7.6%	68.7%
Hartford	33.4%	44.8%	6.6%	11.7%	10,755	11.9%	N/A
New Orleans	27.0%	41.0%	6.4%	N/A	8,265	16.6%	N/A
Philadelphia	26.4%	37.2%	6.2%	20.4%	45,860	19.9%	79.5%
San Francisco	13.2%	12.7%	5.2%	21.2%	7,010	8.6%	79.5%
Santa Clara County	9.5%	10.9%	5.3%	N/A	20,450	9.8%	88.7%
King County	22.6%	32.1%	5.3%	17.0%	25,145	11.1%	73.5%
Average	21.9%	29.8%	5.7%	17.4%	18,246	12.2%	73.8%
United States	15.5%	21.7%	6.2%	14.3%	5,252,896	13.2%	78.2%

Sources:

- Poverty Rate—2015 American Community Survey One-Year Estimates
- Child Poverty Rate—2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
- Unemployment Rate—US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics December 2016 Local Area Unemployment Statistics
- Youth Unemployment Rate—US Department of Labor 2014 Geographic Profile of Employment and Unemployment
- Number and Proportion of Opportunity Youth—2016 Opportunity Index Data
- High School Completion Rate, Public Schools—National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data 2009–2010 Cohort

Notes: N/A = not applicable.

a. The child poverty rate represents the poverty rate for those individuals under age 18.

b. The youth unemployment rate represents the unemployment rate for those between the ages of 16 and 19.

c. The US Department of Labor's 2014 Geographic Profile of Employment and Unemployment did not include the youth unemployment rate for New Orleans or Santa Clara County.

d. Opportunity youth statistics are presented on a county level. For instance, the figures for the estimated number of opportunity youth and the proportion of opportunity youth in the youth population in Boston are the figures for Suffolk County, MA, as a whole.

e. The high school completion rate for Hartford "does not meet NCES data quality standards" and is therefore not reported here.

f. The data point for the high school completion rate in public schools for New Orleans was omitted because over 90 percent of the city's schools are charter schools.

The sites have some qualitative similarities in the conditions and challenges experienced by youth. Every site reported that participants come from communities experiencing significant economic hardship and instability. Most sites described serving participants from communities that consisted primarily of people of color. More than half of sites reported that the communities lacked affordable

housing, which contributed to homelessness and housing instability. More broadly, several sites, including San Francisco and Santa Clara County, reported that the cost of living was high relative to income levels of those with low educational attainment. More than half also reported that participants were exposed to crime and violence in their neighborhoods. Difficulties with transportation both in terms of access to a means of transportation and distance from available resources were commonly reported as a challenge for these communities. Other challenges described were access to affordable child care, exposure to substance abuse, and access to social services.

Organizations Involved

At each of the sites, Opportunity Works programming is nested within a collective impact effort directed at serving opportunity youth.[8] These collective impact efforts build on existing community resources for low-income populations to coordinate partner organizations and agencies to better serve opportunity youth in the community. The Opportunity Works programming usually fills a gap in the programming within this network (e.g., providing a postsecondary bridging intervention where there was not one previously) and increases the capacity or the coordination of existing partners. Participating organizations in Hartford, New Orleans, and Santa Clara County explicitly discussed the effort as part of a larger opportunity youth initiative that includes approaches, programs, and organizations beyond those participating directly in the Opportunity Works effort. In Philadelphia, Opportunity Works adds a next step to an existing effort to prevent youth from dropping out of high school and to reengage youth who have dropped out already. Similarly, in Boston, Opportunity Works plugs a gap in a continuum of initiatives that focuses on preventing high school dropouts, reengaging dropouts, creating postsecondary bridging opportunities, and supporting youth enrolled in college for success. In San Francisco, Opportunity Works enhances an initiative focusing on reconnecting Latino youth ages 13–24 and expands the effort to African-American youth. Finally, in South King County, Opportunity Works is part of a cradle-to-college initiative to improve outcomes for all children and youth.

Opportunity Works is defined by the intervention services that touch SIF-funded youth, in this case education and support services. However, for the descriptive analysis, the research team primarily focuses on organizations and services that receive SIF funds because the range of services

[8] Collective impact refers to a group of actors from different sectors committed to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. See Kania and Kramer (2011).

that SIF youth interact with would be too broad to be meaningful. Table 2 summarizes the collective impact effort, the backbone organization, and the programming partners that receive SIF funding in each site. The organization type is listed in parentheses after the name. Sites have many partners funded by other sources, which are not included in this table.

TABLE 2

Opportunity Works SIF-Funded Partners

Site	Role	Organization
Boston	Collective impact effort	▪ Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative
	Backbone organization	▪ Boston Private Industry Council (subgrantee) (WIB) ▪ Boston Opportunity Agenda (Inter)
	Primary partners	▪ X-Cel Education (CBO) ▪ Asian American Civic Association (CBO) ▪ College Bound Dorchester (CBO) ▪ Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (CBO) ▪ Jewish Vocational Services (CBO)
Hartford	Collective impact effort	▪ Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative
	Backbone organization	▪ Capital Workforce Partners (WIB)
	Primary partners	▪ Blue Hills Civic Association (CBO) ▪ Our Piece of the Pie (CBO)
New Orleans	Collective impact effort	▪ Employment and Mobility Pathways Linked for Opportunity Youth
	Backbone organization	▪ Cowen Institute at Tulane University (URO)
	Primary partners	▪ Youth Empowerment Project (CBO) ▪ ACE Program at Delgado Community College (PS) ▪ Earn and Learn Career Pathways Program (URO) ▪ Bard Early College of New Orleans (PS)
Philadelphia	Collective impact effort	▪ Project U-Turn
	Backbone organization	▪ Philadelphia Youth Network (Inter)
	Primary partners	▪ Center for Literacy E^3 Center (CBO) ▪ Communities in Schools of Philadelphia, Inc. E^3 Center (CBO) ▪ Congreso de Latinos Unidos E^3 Center (CBO) ▪ JEVS Human Services E^3 Center (CBO) ▪ Community College of Philadelphia (PS)

Site	Role	Organization
San Francisco	Collective impact effort	▪ Roadmap to Peace
	Backbone organization	▪ Bay Area Community Resources (CBO)
	Primary partners	▪ Black to the Future (Inter)[a] ▪ Communities in Harmony Advocating for Learning and Kids (CHALK) (CBO)[a] ▪ Five Keys Charter School (K12)
Santa Clara County	Collective impact effort	▪ Opportunity Youth Partnership
	Backbone organization	▪ Kids in Common (Inter)
	Primary partners	▪ Opportunity Youth Academies of the Santa Clara County Office of Education (K12) ▪ Conservation Corps (CBO) ▪ Fresh Lifelines for Youth (CBO) ▪ Silicon Valley Community Foundation (CBO) ▪ ConXión To Community (CBO)
South King County	Collective impact effort	▪ Road Map Project
	Backbone organization	▪ United Way King County (subgrantee) (Inter) ▪ Community Center for Education Results (Inter)
	Primary partners	▪ Seattle Education Access (CBO) ▪ Youth Source Renton (CBO) ▪ Seattle Interagency (CBO) ▪ iGrad (CBO) ▪ Highline Open Doors (CBO) ▪ Acceleration Academy (CBO)

Note: In most cases, the identified backbone organization is the SIF subgrantee. When more than one backbone organization is listed or the backbone is not the grantee, the table identifies the subgrantee. CBO = community-based organization; inter = intermediary; K12 = K–12 education provider; PS = postsecondary institution, SIF = Social Innovation Fund; URO = university research organization; WIB = workforce organization.

[a] The partner organizations reported through the qualitative research differ from those identified in the implementation plans reviewed by Jobs for the Future.

Backbone organizations are most often nonprofit intermediaries, although higher education institutions and workforce investment boards serve as backbones as well. At every site, the backbone organization convenes and connects partners to support the Opportunity Works programming, and it is often the fiscal agent for SIF funding. The backbone organization for the SIF grant also often has a leadership role in the local opportunity youth collective impact effort. In addition, many backbone organizations collect and share data across organizations or provide administrative and technical support to programming partners.

Backbone organizations generally do not provide services directly for Opportunity Works; rather, their service-providing partners deliver the Opportunity Works intervention. Most commonly, programming partners are community-based nonprofit organizations, although backbone organizations also partner with community colleges and dropout reengagement centers. In a few cases, they also have formal relationships with school districts, local departments of education, or higher education providers to help deliver programming. All backbone organizations have more than one programming partner, and it is common for each partnership to consist of four or five service-providing organizations.

Programming partners deliver the Opportunity Works intervention through education and/or support services. The services delivered vary considerably across partners, as described in more detail below. These services may build on organizations' existing resources, such as transportation assistance, child care, mental health support, or housing assistance. Some also offer employment supports like job readiness training, career coaching, mentoring, job search assistance, and job placement. Many programming partners did not have programs directed specifically at opportunity youth prior to the SIF grant, but they had experience serving this population through their existing services and programming, which were often oriented toward low-income populations more broadly.

Match Funds and Leveraged Support

SIF regulations require the grantee (JFF) to match 100 percent of the federal award. Subgrantees (the backbone organizations) are also required to match the total amount of their awards. The additional funds raised through matching grants increase the total amount of the program dollars by 160 percent. Many programs received matching funds from philanthropic and charitable organizations, the local business community, and state government entities.

In addition to the formal match contributions, Opportunity Works programs augment the available services by leveraging existing support programming to provide needed resources to participants. Several programs have strong buy-in and support from local government entities, such as a Mayor's office (Boston, San Francisco, and Santa Clara County) or a school district (Philadelphia and Santa Clara County). These organizations may offer political or financial support, even if they are not formally contracted partners. In some instances, these local entities have been identified as potential partners to carry on work serving opportunity youth after the SIF funding ends. The public social assistance systems, such as housing, cash assistance, mental health services, or child care, often play a

role in supporting participant needs. Most Opportunity Works efforts benefit from existing informal networks of service providers, intermediaries, and other actors that already served low-income populations prior to the start of Opportunity Works programming. Programming partners at several sites indicated that these informal networks helped with the formation of collective impact efforts around opportunity youth and with coordination among partners after these efforts coalesced.

Variation in Implementation across Sites

Each site had to determine which phase of the Back on Track framework they would develop and fund with SIF support for their Opportunity Works intervention. Within that phase, sites adapted the framework and the program features to their local context and programming. Each site approached the design and implementation of their Opportunity Works programs somewhat differently. Existing community efforts and resources, identified community gaps, and the suggested solutions of collective impact partners influenced the phase of the Back on Track framework each site chose. In several cases, other services within the community included elements of Back on Track, funded through other sources. For example, in Boston, Hartford, Philadelphia, and South King County, where the focus of Opportunity Works is postsecondary bridging, enriched preparation services existed not only in the same communities but within the same partner organizations providing the Opportunity Works services. Detailed information about the package of services offered and the context that shaped them in each site are available in site summaries provided in the separate Site Summary Appendix.

These overlaps within communities and organizations create some challenges in teasing out the effects of the SIF-funded Opportunity Works programs. The SIF funds strengthened existing services in several sites instead of supporting a separate and unique program. While staff may be aware that they can charge certain functions to the SIF grant and not others, a bundle of funding streams may support the programmatic activities they offer, making it difficult to identify the boundaries of Opportunity Works. By design, it is even less distinguishable for the youth receiving services. Youth access a continuum of services that are often well integrated so that participants do not know which funders are supporting which services they receive. The evaluation team has tried to identify which parts of the system are supported by the SIF funds and which parts are not supported by SIF funds but are still integral to the Back on Track framework.

Framework Features and Alignment

Five of the seven sites identify themselves as focusing on postsecondary bridging: Boston, Hartford, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and South King County. Two of the sites identify themselves as focusing on enriched preparation: San Francisco and Santa Clara County. These sites layer SIF-funded services with non-SIF-funded services to provide a range of framework features and elements. Table 3 summarizes the features of Back on Track offered to youth at each site, delineated by those that are partly or wholly SIF-funded (marked with X's) and those that are funded through other sources (marked with O's).

TABLE 3

Back on Track Features and Site Alignment to Features

	Enriched Preparation				Postsecondary Bridging					
	College-going and career-ready culture	College- and career-ready curriculum and instruction	Customize instruction and accelerate learning	Personalized guidance and support	Supported dual enrollment	College knowledge and success strategies	Personalized guidance and connection to best bets	Mentorship from program graduates	Transition to college	First-Year Support
Enriched Preparation (EP)	X	X	X	X						
Postsecondary Bridging (PB)					X	X	X	X	X	X
Boston (PB)	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X
Hartford (PB)	X	X	O	X	X	X	X		X	O
New Orleans (PB)	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	O
Philadelphia (PB)	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X
San Francisco (EP)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Santa Clara County (EP)	X	X		X	X		X		X	X
South King County (PB)	X	O	O	X	O	X	X		X	X

Note: This table represents the evaluation team's assessment of site programming, supported by site confirmation, aligned with the Back on Track framework. Assessments were made by comparing statements made by interviewees and documents provided by sites with the features of the Back on Track framework presented in JFF (2014). An "X" indicates the feature is paid for partially for fully with SIF funds, and an "O" indicates other community partners provide services for this element as part of the site framework but are not supported SIF funds.

In this table, the first four features (columns) are primarily associated with enriched preparation. In the Back on Track framework, these are envisioned to have occurred when youth are in high school or

are pursuing HSE credentials. The second five features (columns) are primarily associated with the postsecondary bridging phase. In the Back on Track framework, these are envisioned as occurring after youth finish their high school diploma or equivalency. First-year support is considered a third phase of Back on Track and is envisioned as helping youth successfully complete their first year of college or the first year of postsecondary efforts. However, in the Opportunity Works effort, first-year support is generally an enhancement on postsecondary bridging services.

Both the enriched preparation and the postsecondary bridging sites draw from features of the framework beyond their self-designated focus phase; all sites have adopted three features of the enriched preparation (college-going and career-ready culture, college- and career-ready curriculum and instruction, and personalized guidance and support) and three features of postsecondary bridging (dual enrollment or simulated college experience, personalized guidance and connection to best bets, and transition to college). Most features of the Back on Track are partially or wholly supported with SIF funds, but some key features are supported with resources from other sources. For example, Hartford uses Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds for first-year support.

It is notable but not surprising that many sites provide features of the Back on Track framework across multiple phases. There are at least two explanations for this. First, JFF designed the original Back on Track framework with purposeful redundancy to support students at their various stages on their pathway to complete high school and enter postsecondary and training programs. Second, the original framework was envisioned as a whole, with all three phases; separating them for this grant and evaluation effort makes it somewhat more challenging to map the sites' activities onto the framework's features. The newer Back on Track framework, developed in late 2016, is more streamlined with more detail on the features that characterize enriched preparation and postsecondary bridging, but that is beyond the scope of this report.

Many sites expand on the original Back on Track framework by defining "college" more broadly and including opportunities for paid work experiences. The original Back on Track framework uses language suggestive of traditional college pathways, including references to credit-bearing courses, college pedagogy, college life, and college completion rates. In many cases, Opportunity Works sites promote other postsecondary training and employment experiences, such as shorter-term industry-recognized credentials, alongside traditional college pathways. Some sites also offer paid work experiences, such as explicit employment support in Boston, paid apprenticeships in New Orleans, and paid work experiences as part of dual enrollment in an earn and learn program in Santa Clara. JFF notes that this was an optional component for sites from the beginning of the initiative.

Key Findings

The remainder of this section explores the variation across sites along six dimensions: difference from existing programming; ways that sites define program success; requirements and priorities of the target population; functional activities; educational and support services to youth; and completion, attrition, and retention activities. Most of this information is garnered from the site visit interviews and participant focus groups, but some is supplemented with program documentation.

Key findings highlighted in this section include:

- In all sites, Opportunity Works brought some new or enhanced services, but typically **features of the Back on Track framework already existed in the sites**. In three sites, the new funds allowed more youth to be served.
- **Staff define program success along five dimensions**. Four are youth-focused dimensions, and one is systems-focused. The youth-focused dimensions are (1) building personal/academic skills and aspirations, (2) developing the ability to live independently, (3)attaining educational benchmarks, and (4)embarking on a career pathway. At the systems level, the sites aspire to create a youth focus in the way that organizations and institutions develop and structure education and training programs and social services systems. The systems-level goals are partially supported by the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund collective impact effort for opportunity youth.
- **The concept of "disconnected" for opportunity youth is not simple.** The working definitions used by the sites reflect a continuum of engagement around school, work, and career pathways.
- **The primary outreach and recruitment methods vary across sites** depending on the characteristics of the target population of disconnected youth. Some sites are embedded within partner programs that enroll youth who have previously dropped out of high school, and Opportunity Works recruits directly from that program's student population.
- In all sites, **the bulk of funds support staff positions**, primarily to provide or enhance education-related support services and to improve on the ability of organizations to help youth navigate support and education systems. In some sites, there is an intentional effort to hire staff whose backgrounds make them more relatable to the youth.

- Sites report that limited funds require them to make a trade-off between funding staff at sufficient levels to individualize supports or directly supporting services that meet the basic needs of youth; they rely primarily on community resources for supportive services. **Most communities are unable to meet the basic needs of youth** in the areas of housing, child care, transportation, food security, crime/safety, and mental health; these are the reasons that youth tend to leave before finishing the program.
- **Sites use multiple strategies to improve retention of youth** including frequent contact with youth, relationship-building, and monetary incentives. Three of the seven sites also articulate "recovery" strategies to re-enroll youth who stop out of the program.
- Although the education-related services are the most clearly articulated part of the Back on Track framework, the fact that sites have incorporated elements and features of the framework across phases suggests **the phases of the Back on Track framework may not be separable**. JFF has taken steps to address this through a revised program model, released in draft form in late 2016.

Difference from Existing Programming

The SIF funds for Opportunity Works support various program features across the sites, though many sites already had aspects of the Back on Track framework in place. Six of the seven sites (all except San Francisco) may have become exposed to the framework prior to the SIF grant through their involvement with the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund.

Table 4 displays eight SIF-funded interventions SIF funding allowed sites to add to the existing service environment. These were either different from or enhancements to existing services for opportunity youth. More detailed information about the difference from existing programming in each site may be found in the summaries in the Site Summary Appendix.

Leadership in Hartford, New Orleans, and South King County indicated that the funds allowed them to **serve more youth** in existing programming, while the other sites indicated that services were differentiated or enhanced. Six of the seven sites indicated that a **more purposeful focus** on serving opportunity youth in existing programming was an important aspect of the program. Four sites used funds to **streamline processes for opportunity youth** in some way. In Boston, they created a centralized recruitment and referral infrastructure to help opportunity youth become aware of the array of existing services and to provide initial screening to help youth determine their best

postsecondary bridging options. In Santa Clara County, one participant talked about how much it meant to him to have a navigator "synchronize his service plan" across his many service providers. Some sites have been able to provide **more individualized support**, add **navigation of support services or postsecondary options**, or supplement **case management services**. For example, Santa Clara County had case management services prior to the grant, but caseloads tended to be around 150 youth; the SIF funds create the opportunity to reduce caseloads to around 30 youth, enabling more individualized support. Finally, almost all sites that focused on postsecondary bridging **added new features or enhanced existing features of their postsecondary services**. In Philadelphia, the addition of the "warm transition" was referenced as a particularly important feature, whereby the Opportunity Works navigator physically accompanies the young person to the local community college campus. San Francisco began a career and technical education dual enrollment pilot in fall 2016 for youth enrolled in enriched preparation services.

TABLE 4

Difference from Existing Programming

	Increased capacity to serve more opportunity youth in existing programming	More purposeful focus on opportunity youth in existing programming	More streamlined process for opportunity youth	More individualized support or additional service navigation	Navigation of postsecondary options	Case management services	New or enhancements to existing postsecondary bridging services
Boston (PB)		X	X				X
Hartford (PB)	X	X					X
New Orleans (PB)	X	X	X	X	X		X
Philadelphia (PB)				X	X		X
San Francisco (EP)		X	X	X	X	X	X
Santa Clara County (EP)		X	X	X	X	X	
South King County (PB)	X	X		X	X	X	

Defining Program Success

Partner organizations define program success across multiple dimensions. Successes may occur while youth are in the program, but most program successes will occur as youth complete the program and after exit. Based on the sites' stated goals, successes for youth fall across four dimensions: building personal/academic skills and aspirations, developing the ability to live independently and support their

families, reaching educational benchmarks, and embarking on sustainable career pathways. In addition to helping youth succeed, some sites also discuss the importance of creating systems change to focus more effectively on young people's needs in designing education and training programs, outreach, and other service delivery. They note that many educational institutions and support service programs are designed with adults in mind rather than youth. The Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund collective impact effort for opportunity youth supports many of these systems-level goals. Table 5 summarizes the definitions of program success. Information about how staff in each site define success may be found in the summaries in the Site Summary Appendix.

TABLE 5

Defining Program Success

Dimension of success	Description
Building personal/academic skills and aspirations	▪ Youth have a stronger sense of self, identity, and confidence ▪ Youth are resilient; they can pick themselves up and keep going ▪ Youth have developed strong decision-making skills ▪ Youth think critically ▪ Youth can express themselves verbally and in writing ▪ Youth are proficient in time management ▪ Youth think of themselves as leaders ▪ Youth think they deserve more in life ▪ Youth believe they are "college material" ▪ Youth change their outlook from "impossible" to "I'm possible" ▪ Youth feel happy and respected ▪ Youth are mature and able to develop relationships with diverse individual.
Developing the ability to live independently	▪ Youth obtain a driver's license ▪ Youth are able to self-advocate ▪ Youth become productive, self-driven adults ▪ Youth get out of jail and are able to remediate their justice involvement ▪ Youth are prepared for an independent lifestyle ▪ Youth have support systems in place or know where to turn if they need help ▪ Youth can support their families
Attaining educational benchmarks	▪ Youth complete high school or their high school equivalency ▪ Youth complete or pass out of developmental coursework before they start college ▪ Youth enroll in a postsecondary degree or training program, including a liberal arts degree ▪ Youth complete their postsecondary degree or training program ▪ Youth enroll in graduate degree programs
Embarking on a career pathway	▪ Youth can compete for middle-skill, middle-wage jobs ▪ Youth earn a living wage and are able to live sustainably ▪ Youth are working in a long-term, stable career pathway ▪ Youth enjoy their chosen career pathway

Dimension of success	Description
Creating systems change	▪ Education and training systems in the community develop a youth-centered focus to better serve youth (rather than an adult-centered focus) ▪ All agencies serving youth recognize their unique needs in designing outreach and services ▪ Organizations can replicate the Opportunity Works framework across the country

Note: Items listed on this table were identified by at least one site through interviews. Dimensions of success were compiled from leadership and staff responses to questioning about the goals of Opportunity Works programming for youth on one year, two years, and five years. Some sites also discussed systems-level goals, which are reflected in the table.

These successes are consistent with the features of the Back on Track framework. The success areas of "building personal/academic skills and aspirations" and "developing the ability to live independently" are key short-term outcomes. These explain why the postsecondary bridging sites may fold in features of the enriched preparation phase (table 3), because they align with enriched preparation's emphasis on "building a college and career-ready culture" and "providing personalized guidance and support." Interviews with staff at all sites reveal that they think these two dimensions are important in the short term because they build the foundations for youth to expect more in their lives, develop the personal agency to meet their expectations, and develop the resilience to keep moving forward even when they have setbacks. "Attaining educational benchmarks" and "embarking on a career pathway" are intermediate and long-term outcomes for both the enriched preparation and postsecondary bridging phases. Finally, "creating systems change" extends somewhat beyond the Back on Track framework's more limited systems change goals. The sites that identify these goals have intertwined the Opportunity Works effort with their other collective impact/systems change work.

Target Population

Being "disconnected" is an important characteristic of opportunity youth. Sites determine their own definition of disconnected. They may also have eligibility criteria or priorities for service based on age, amount of education completed, race/ethnicity, gender, or some other characteristics.

DISCONNECTED

One characteristic of opportunity youth is that they are disconnected from education and employment, but sites vary in their conceptualization of what this means. Disconnection from employment, for example, may mean that the young person is working part-time in a low-paying job that lacks advancement opportunities—or it may mean that they are not employed at all. **The common thread in disconnection is that the youth are not working toward, do not aspire to, or do not know**

how to connect to a career pathway where there are opportunities for advancement and through which they could sustainably support themselves (and their families) in the future. Table 6 summarizes some of the different types of disconnection that an opportunity youth may experience, as described by the site staff.

TABLE 6

Types of Disconnection According to Site Staff

Type of disconnection	Possible disconnection characteristics
High school	▪ Dropped out of high school before receiving diploma ▪ Enrolled in a HSE program or alternative high school
Postsecondary pathway	▪ Finished high school or HSE credential, but has not connected to a postsecondary career pathway ▪ Does not have postsecondary career goals or aspirations ▪ Enrolled in a college or other postsecondary program but dropped out or stopped out before completing
Employment	▪ Unemployed ▪ Underemployed ▪ Employed full-time, but with no opportunity for advancement and/or no clear career pathway
Other challenges	▪ Justice Involved (e.g. on parole, arrested but not detained, in custody) ▪ Pregnant or parenting ▪ Homeless ▪ Emerging from the foster care system

Interviews with staff reveal that disconnection is not represented by a particular period of time for being out of school or out of work. Some of the programs tried to create a minimum timeframe for disconnection, like six months, but found that too difficult to enforce and counterproductive to what they were trying to achieve.

The nature of disconnection that Opportunity Works youth experience varies across and within sites. The section "Outreach, Recruitment, and Admissions" discusses more of the cross-site variation.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS AND PRIORITIES

As shown in table 7, although all the youth served across the sites are between the ages of 16 to 24, only Hartford, New Orleans, and Santa Clara County serve the full age range. Boston has limited their services to the 20-to-24-year-old group because there are other initiatives in Boston focused on youth up to age 19. Philadelphia and South King County limit services to youth ages 16 to 21 based on restrictions from other funding streams. Only San Francisco limits enrollment based on race/ethnicity; initially, they also served only males but eventually dropped that limitation. Hartford

prioritizes young men of color. Although all sites serve vulnerable populations, San Francisco and Santa Clara County prioritize some of the most vulnerable youth.

TABLE 7

Opportunity Youth Priorities and Requirements

Location	Age range	Race or ethnicity	Education completed	Prioritized characteristics[a]
Boston (PB)	20–24	None specified	High school diploma or equivalent	None specified
Hartford (PB)	16–24	None specified	High school diploma or equivalent; small proportion without	Young men of color
New Orleans (PB)	16–24 [b]	None specified	Track dependent: (1) completed 2-3 sections of HiSET; (2) 5th–8th-grade level on TABE; (3) high school diploma or HSE	None specified
Philadelphia (PB)	16–21 [c]	None specified	On a good HSE completion track[d]	None specified
San Francisco (EP)	17–24	Latino and African-American	Do not have a high school diploma or equivalent	Justice involved; majority men
Santa Clara County (EP)	16–24	None specified	Do not have a high school diploma or equivalent	Pregnant and parenting, homeless, foster care, justice involved, violence involved
South King County (PB)	16–21	None specified	Completed 2nd GED test or are 6–9 months from attaining high school diploma [e]	None specified

Notes: HSE = high school equivalency credential; GED = General Education Development credential; TABE = Test of Adult Basic Education.

[a] Young men of color was a priority population or the SIF grant, and all sites committed that a percentage of their service population would fall into this demographic. However, some sites naturally met this goal based on the demographics of the eligible population in their cities (a passive recruitment of this group), while others reemphasized a commitment to young men of color in the recruitment process and took concrete steps to address this population (an active recruitment of this group).

[b] One of the programming sites within New Orleans can only serve youth 18 years and older.

[c] Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funding used to support the program restricts the top age to 21 years.

[d] A "good high school equivalency completion track" is defined as a student scoring at least at the ninth-grade level on the math and literacy portions of the TABE or has passed two high school equivalency subtests. However, staff have not strictly enforced these requirements for students who show a high level of motivation or potential.

[e] This is the priority population, but it is not a requirement that youth be this advanced in their work toward a high school diploma.

The educational attainment expectations vary in important ways. The two enriched preparation sites enroll youth without a high school credential, regardless of how close they are to completion. Three of the five postsecondary bridging sites enroll youth who have not yet completed a high school

credential, but they require participants to be close to completing. Postsecondary bridging sites' targeting of youth who have not yet completed high school may be another reason many postsecondary bridging sites include features of enriched preparation in their services.

Functional Activities

The functional activities of formalizing partnerships; designing curriculum; staffing the project; and conducting outreach, recruitment, and admissions are critical for sites to build capacity to provide program services. There are substantial variations across and within sites particularly around strategies for outreach, recruitment, and admissions. Existing programs in the community tend to drive variation in this activity more than a site's focus on enriched preparation or postsecondary bridging. More detailed information about how each site implements these functional activities may be found in the site summaries in the Site Summary Appendix.

FORMALIZING PARTNERSHIPS

Sites have taken different approaches to formalizing Opportunity Works service delivery partnerships. All sites have primary partnerships with formal contracts or memoranda of understanding with the organizations that receive SIF funding, summarized in table 2. Nearly all sites also have secondary partners without whom delivery of the model would not be possible, but which do not receive SIF funds to deliver the services; these partnerships may be codified through a memorandum of understanding or they may rely on informal agreements. In some locations, such as Boston, the backbone selected partners through a competitive bidding process after the SIF grant award. In other locations, the backbones formed partnerships prior to submitting a proposal for SIF funding. Many of the primary partners deliver some SIF-funded and some non-SIF-funded services as part of the Opportunity Works intervention for youth.

DESIGNING CURRICULUM

A large part of the start-up for many education or training-related programs is designing meaningful and effective curricula. However, only Philadelphia designed a brand-new curriculum for Opportunity Works. Philadelphia backbone leadership hired a curriculum design specialist to help bring their program to fruition. However, this was not a smooth process; after challenges due to a short startup period and philosophical differences among staff, they brought in another curriculum design specialist one year later to try to ease some of the difficulties of the first design. Boston, Hartford, Santa Clara County, San Francisco, and South King County either contracted with organizations already providing

postsecondary bridging services or embedded enriched preparation services within existing programs that provide alternative pathways to obtain a high school credential. These partners' curricula already aligned with the elements of the Back on Track framework, so they did not need to complete a new design for this effort. New Orleans took a middle approach, where a liberal arts curriculum was adapted to the Opportunity Works student population. They are seeking to develop a "playbook" for delivering liberal arts education to opportunity youth.

For sites serving youth without a high school credential, there was a potential weakness in relying on existing curricula for HSE credential attainment. Although this programming is typically individualized, it is not necessarily accelerated as specified in the Back on Track framework (discussed in more detail in "Education Services"). This lack of acceleration at the time of the site visits explains places where sites did not achieve a check in the column "customize instruction and accelerate learning" in table 3, for which acceleration is a key element.

STAFFING

This section summarizes the types of positions supported by Opportunity Works, variations in how staff are assigned to program participants, the level of staffing funded by the SIF, the numbers of youth served per staff member, and the relatability of staff to the youth (including the intentionality of sites in creating this relatability). The staff positions supported by the SIF for Opportunity Works are similarly oriented across the programs and do not tend to vary by the phase in the Back on Track framework they have emphasized.

Overall, sites tend to be similar in the types of staffing positions they have developed with their SIF funds. This should be expected, since the sites provide many of the same services. The original Back on Track framework includes in its description several items that "staff will" do, providing a basic job description for some of the staff positions. The framework, however, does not discuss the qualifications of the staff who will do the work. Relatability of the staff to the youth is one of biggest differences that emerges across the sites. Some sites are very intentional in selecting staff who have overcome the same barriers that the youth are trying to overcome while others do not make this an explicit hiring strategy.

Types of Positions

Staff who work with the Opportunity Works participants have active and intensive roles. Their job titles reflect those roles, including words such as "advisor," "advocate," "coach," "navigator," "development," "instructor," "recruitment," or "retention." The job titles also focus on the dimensions

of success that each staff member focuses on supporting—"youth," "workforce," "career," "college readiness," or "education" and sometimes the more general "success." Examples include "success coach," "career navigator," and "youth advocate."

Assignment of Staff

In Philadelphia and South King County, Opportunity Works staff are paired directly with youth attending programs in specific service locations. In Santa Clara County, the youth are paired with Opportunity Works staff either by a particular challenge that youth are experiencing (justice involved, foster care, homeless, or pregnant/parenting) or by the convenience of the location of the Opportunity Works staff member to the youth.

Funding of Staff

Much of the SIF funding supports staff, which is not surprising because most of the features of the framework focus on personnel-intensive processes such as building strong relationships, teaching, helping navigate needed supports, and helping develop goals with youth. In some cases, SIF funds pay for 100 percent of staff time, but in other cases, the staff members work on Opportunity Works in addition to other projects. Some funds also support supervisors of the direct service staff, data managers, and grant managers. Most SIF funding supports staff in direct-service organizations, but some funds also support backbone organization staff time.

Caseloads

Variations in the intensity of the support provided to the youth may be garnered from the "caseloads" of the staff. Caseload is not always a term used by the sites, but here it refers to the number of participants that a direct service staff member is responsible for supporting at any one time.

In most of the sites, caseloads tend to be in the 20–32 youth per direct service staff member range.[9] In San Francisco, each staff member typically served fewer than 10 young people, but staff members are not devoted to Opportunity Works programming for 100 percent of their time. In Hartford, the number of youth per staff member varied the most within site—one partner reported serving a range of 16–60 youth at a time, while another partner reported having 35 youth in the "active" stage and 35 youth in the "follow up" stage. The numbers can be more difficult to estimate in programs where youth are self-paced and continuously enrolled, such as Hartford.

[9] Note that typically neither staff nor leadership were in the mindset of thinking about caseloads. In some sites, the evaluation team calculated a number based on numbers of youth served and number of staff. In other cases, sites estimated a number, but they did not seem to have firm target caseloads in mind.

It is important to note that in some sites caseloads are lower than they are expected to be in the future due to difficulties in obtaining expected levels of enrollment, and therefore youth may have been receiving a more intensive service than they would in a fully-enrolled program. In addition, not all youth on a caseload receive the same intensity of interactions and services. There are two reasons for this. First, all the sites offer some level of individualization whereby youth who need more support get more support. Second, youth may be at various stages of the program. Youth first entering the program often need more support than those who have established a routine. Also, some participants enter a "follow up" phase when the staff member checks in periodically to make sure they are still on track, but the staff member is not working as actively with the participant.

Relatability

All sites acknowledge the importance of having staff members who can relate to the youth. Some sites are more explicit than others in making staff reflective of and relatable to the youth they are serving. For example, Boston and Hartford made a purposeful choice to hire staff who had overcome the same kinds of barriers the young people in the program were facing. These staff members frequently had grown up in the same neighborhoods as the youth. In these two locations, leadership, direct service staff, and the youth talked about the importance of staff relatability. Other sites did not discuss this type of intentionality in hiring, but the evaluation team interviews with and observations of staff indicate that some sites are more reflective of the populations they are serving than others. In San Francisco, for example, the original approach was to focus on Latinos, and the staff and the partner organizations are reflective of that focus; the new African-American service population is not well represented in the staff and partner organizations (some of which only serve Latinos). The "Participant Perspectives" section, below, contains some reflections by program participants about the role of staff and the importance of relatability.

OUTREACH, RECRUITMENT, AND ADMISSIONS

The Back on Track framework does not address issues of outreach and recruitment or specify particular assessment and screening instruments. However, it does indicate that such instruments should be used as a means of collecting data about the youth to improve decision-making about needed services and instruction.

Recruitment procedures range from the use of embedded programs that funnel eligible youth directly into the Opportunity Works program, to referrals from various community organizations, to direct appeals to youth in the community. These differences in recruitment also reflect differences in youth (dis)connection. Some programs, such as Boston and Hartford, engage in broad community-level

recruitment, which may attract more actively disconnected youth. Other program, such as Philadelphia and South King County, require that youth are already connected to an alternative high school credential program to be considered candidates for Opportunity Works. The presumption is that these youth were previously disconnected and therefore qualify for enhanced reconnection services through Back on Track, since the reengagement centers only serve youth who dropped out of high school. San Francisco, Santa Clara County, and New Orleans take mixed approaches.

Screening and admissions procedures across sites tend to be more similar than the outreach and recruitment strategies. Screening and admissions are designed to be inclusive, rather than exclusive, in that sites administer a number of screening and assessment instruments but with the primary intention of enrolling as many people as possible and then using the information to individualize the work with youth.

Outreach and Recruitment

Most sites began enrolling youth in July 2015, but Santa Clara County began enrolling in October 2015 due to delays in the start-up of their embedded partner program. Across the seven sites, outreach and recruitment to identify interested and qualified youth occur through three primary mechanisms: embedded programs (New Orleans, Philadelphia, Santa Clara County, South King County), outreach through community agencies and partner programs (Boston, Hartford, New Orleans, San Francisco, Santa Clara County), and direct outreach to youth—centralized (Boston) and noncentralized (Boston and Hartford). The embedded program models rely on establishing a relationship with programs that opportunity youth would already be participating in and embedding Opportunity Works (often in the form of designated staff members) within these existing programs. Opportunity Works staff then recruit youth directly from the programs in which they are embedded. Outreach focuses on making sure community agencies and organizations (government or nonprofit) are aware of the Opportunity Works program and either refer youth directly or suggest to youth that participation may be an option for them. Direct outreach to youth relies on getting the attention of youth (or their families) in the community.

Embedded Programs. Opportunity Works efforts in Philadelphia, Santa Clara County, and South King County are embedded within existing high school completion programs, and Opportunity Works staff rely primarily or exclusively on the program in which they are embedded to recruit and populate their Opportunity Works programming. New Orleans relies on this approach for one of their three primary partners.

In these sites, youth become disconnected while in high school and subsequently enroll in a program that will help them obtain their high school equivalency. This program directs them into Opportunity Works, which gives youth an opportunity to continue with their HSE credentialing programs while at the same time receiving Back on Track enhancements from Opportunity Works staff members. The Opportunity Works staff form relationships with staff and enrollees in these programs and identify youth who would be appropriate for the Opportunity Works program. They recruit and screen youth who show an interest in supported postsecondary pathways and then ensure a smooth transition and/or dual enroll them into Opportunity Works programming. Part of the recruitment process relies on building relationships with the potential Opportunity Works participants before recruiting them. Students in both Philadelphia and South King County may also self-refer, or teachers at the reengagement centers may refer them.

Outreach through Community Agencies and Partner Programs. Sites using this strategy may either use a strong partnership approach or a light touch approach. San Francisco and Santa Clara County use a strong partnership approach, Boston employs a hybrid approach, and Hartford and New Orleans use a light touch approach. In a strong partnership approach, the community agencies making referrals have been contracted to provide services as part of the Opportunity Works or have been engaged through a formal memorandum of understanding. The relationship of Opportunity Works with the county jail and sheriff's department in San Francisco is an example of a strong partnership; if youth meeting the criteria have been arrested or are in custody, they are referred for a visit from an Opportunity Works staff member. In the light touch approach, seen in Boston and New Orleans, Opportunity Works staff provide general information to various community agencies, postsecondary education institutions, and bridging programs and ask for referrals. These programs refer youth to Opportunity Works who need additional supports that Opportunity Works can provide.

Direct Outreach to Youth. The primary method of recruitment in Boston and Hartford is direct outreach to youth. Boston uses both a centralized and a decentralized approach, whereas Hartford uses a decentralized approach. Boston's centralized approach is one of the cornerstones of their Opportunity Works program. They created the Connection Center to serve as an information and referral hub for older youth where they could receive information about the many postsecondary bridging opportunities and postsecondary options available.[10] In the decentralized approach, each organization providing the postsecondary bridging opportunities advertises for its own program. In

[10] Per Boston Opportunity Works staff, "postsecondary bridging opportunities" help youth explore their career interests and prepare for and apply for college. "Postsecondary options" include attending two-year or four-year colleges, participating in training that yields industry-based credentials, and similar activities.

Hartford and Boston, centralized and decentralized direct outreach activities include posting flyers, posting to social media, running bus advertisements, knocking on doors, and stationing staff at tables in malls and in communities, including at community events. Program participants noted in focus groups that posting flyers was a good idea, though it may seem outdated, because not all young people have regular access to the Internet, smart phones, or social media.

Recruitment Challenges. Several sites faced unexpected challenges filling their program slots. The provider networks in San Francisco and Santa Clara appear to have the capacity to expand the number of youth and young adults served in each site, assuming participants meeting the eligibility criteria can be identified. Philadelphia had been operating the program below capacity for almost the entire grant period as of late 2016, both because of age restrictions imposed by other funding streams to the service partners and because the staff have had difficulty identifying young people who are ready and able to undertake an intensive postsecondary bridging intervention. Without the strong enriched preparation pipeline, there are few young people ready for the challenge of college-level work and expectations. In addition, the Philadelphia program staff have realized that the initial intervention may have been too long and rigid for young people to commit and meet expectations. They have continuously modified the programming to try to provide youth the right level of service and improve program enrollment and retention.

Screening and Admissions

The screening and admissions process across all the sites is designed to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Other than determining that youth meet the basic eligibility criteria, as described earlier, the process is mostly about assessing needs and interests to create a customized plan. There is very little "screening out" of potential participants. All sites, however, are trying to screen for some internal motivation or drive that will help the applicant succeed in the program because the programs are intensive and require a certain level of commitment. Within-site variation is common at this stage because partner staff often screen youth separately for each service offered as part of Opportunity Works partners. Application requirements may include attendance at information sessions, written applications (sometimes including essays or personal statements), interviews, and letters of recommendation.

Once young people are accepted, Opportunity Works staff administer various assessments to determine the applicants' strengths, barriers, interests, and goals to provide the foundation for developing an individualized plan. Some sites have formal assessments to identify potential barriers. For example, Hartford has developed an instrument for all partners to use at intake called the Life

Domain Profile. In Boston, one of the partner sites developed a tool assessing 17 characteristics of social/emotional development; youth continue to work to improve in those areas throughout their time in the program. Sites that require an HSE credential for program entry still administer the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS), or Accuplacer testing to assess if youth need to take developmental literacy or math classes before enrolling in college. Although they might be accepted to college without taking the developmental courses in advance, sites are concerned that youth may use up their Pell Grant eligibility on developmental courses if they do not take them before college enrollment.

Providing Services to Youth

Opportunity Works services fall into two broad categories: education-related services and support services. Education-related services help youth prepare for and engage in academic or training activities. Support services help youth meet their basic needs to care for themselves or their families. Support services effectively supplement income either directly or by offsetting costs of needed supports. These services may be necessary because students give up income in the short term to prepare for or engage in education and training activities or because their earnings from employment are inadequate to financially support themselves and their families. In all sites, part of the philosophy of service delivery is to assess proactively what the youth need, identify barriers to success, and create plans to overcome these barriers. One way that the sites help youth succeed is by giving "warm referrals" or "supported referrals," in which staff directly connect program participants to the organizations and services that can help them. This approach contrasts with a "cooler referral" approach of providing young people with a list of places to go for help on their own.

This section maps closely to table 3 (in the section "Framework Features"), and it may be useful for the reader to refer to that table throughout the discussion.

EDUCATION SERVICES

Education-related services are clearly articulated in the Back on Track framework. Nonetheless, across sites, the services that support current and future education vary. The differences between programs are largest when comparing sites that serve youth without a high school credential with sites that require them for admission. Of the five sites offering postsecondary bridging, Boston and Hartford are the only sites that fall into this latter category, though a small percentage of youth in Hartford enter without a high school credential.

This analysis focuses only on the aspects of the intervention considered part of Opportunity Works; it does not examine the whole package of services provided in the community. More information about the services provided by site may be found in the case summaries in the Site Summary Appendix.

Enriched Preparation Services

As shown in table 3, all seven sites offer three of the four enriched preparation services articulated in the Back on Track framework: "college-going and career-ready culture", "college- and career-ready curriculum and instruction", and "personalized guidance and support." Only two sites offer "customized instruction and accelerated learning," though not with SIF funds. When postsecondary bridging sites offer enriched preparation services, this can be understood as an enhancement of the postsecondary bridging intervention and/or a reflection of the "redundancy by design" in the framework.

College-going and career-ready culture. The Back on Track framework is designed for students to build up their identities as "college material" through familiarization with college concepts and expectations. This feature includes five elements:

- Staff deliver consistent messages, from intake through graduation, that students are "college material" and postsecondary credentials and career success are attainable goals.
- Staff continually assess progress through strategic use of data, using postsecondary access and completion as the key measures of program success.
- Staff create a climate focused on acculturation to academic and professional norms, mindsets, and practices as well as personal responsibility for one's own learning, career and life goals.
- The physical setup and artifacts in the building, and opportunities to experience college classes and college life, enable students to perceive themselves as college students.
- Staff support students to explore a range of career options and to understand their connections to postsecondary programs of study.

The inclusion of this feature in the enriched preparation stage reflects the intention of the Back on Track framework to start students thinking about college even when they are still primarily working toward an HSE credential. This feature also emphasizes the use of data by staff members to assess student progress. The focus on building data capacity and usage has been an important focus of the Opportunity Works effort (see "Data Systems" below).

All seven of the sites emphasize this culture-building as a key characteristic of their models, and site staff discuss these features as key job responsibilities. The feature that fewer programs could meet is the college-oriented nature of the physical setup of the building and artifacts in the building. Some sites have limited physical space for Opportunity Works programming, sometimes offering all Opportunity Works-specific programming in a single room within another organization. One site offers programming in an old house, which youth characterize as "homey." Another site offered services in a location that resembled a school building and was decorated with college pennants; this seems more similar to the physical space envisioned in the Back on Track framework.

College- and career-ready curriculum and instruction. This Back on Track feature has the following five elements:

- Curriculum emphasizing deep learning rather than test preparation, incorporating key concepts of technical fields and core disciplines and focusing on key 21st century skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, self-directed learning, collaboration, and effective communication.
- Curriculum alignment and sequencing toward increasingly challenging subject matter, building skills needed for credit-bearing college coursework or career pathway programs of study.
- Emphasis on substantial reading and writing daily across the curriculum that is scaffolded through collaborative group work, literacy circles, digital literacy activities, and other strategies to allow youth to support and challenge their peers.
- Pursuing purposeful questioning that will develop youth thinking, listening, speaking, and inquiry skills through project-based and work-based activities.
- Practicing college-ready and professional skills and behaviors such as time management, team work, and problem-solving through the curriculum.

The two enriched preparation sites provide these services to SIF-funded youth through their local partners to help students complete their HSE credentials. All postsecondary bridging sites also report activities consistent with these strategies, though South King County supports this feature with other funding streams. In the postsecondary bridging sites, this feature prepares youth for enrollment in credit-based or industry-based credentialing programs. In some sites, Opportunity Works staff work one-on-one with the youth to develop skills, and in other sites they take a cohort-based approach. The only element not mentioned in discussions with any site is the "Emphasis on substantial reading and

writing daily," though Philadelphia offers Opportunity Works enrollees a twice-weekly supplemental English class.

Intentional use of time, technology, and assessment to customize instruction and accelerate learning. The Back on Track framework emphasizes customized and accelerated learning as youth pursue an HSE credential. This feature is characterized by five elements:

- Curriculum emphasizes deep learning over test preparation, focusing on a solid understanding of key concepts within the core disciplines as well as in technical fields within high-demand career sectors, and on key 21st century (meta-cognitive) skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, self-directed learning, collaboration, and effective communication.
- Curriculum is aligned/sequenced toward increasingly challenging subject matter, building skills needed for entry into credit-bearing college coursework and/or career pathway programs of study.
- Substantial reading and writing takes place daily across the curriculum, and is scaffolded through collaborative group work, literacy circles, digital literacy activities, and other strategies that enable learners with diverse skill levels to support and challenge their peers.
- All students develop thinking, listening, speaking, and inquiry skills through purposeful questioning, opportunities to talk about their learning, and project-based and work-based learning activities.
- Staff embed in the curriculum ongoing opportunities to practice college-ready and professional skills and behaviors such as effective time management, team work, and problem solving.

The Opportunity Works sites that do not require students to have a high school credential at entry use existing community services to help participants earn their HSE credentials. In New Orleans, Philadelphia, and South King County, the Opportunity Works programs partner with existing reengagement programs. In Santa Clara County and San Francisco, the Opportunity Works programs partner with other alternative high school programs. In Hartford, a small number of youth enter the program without an HSE credential through one of the contracted partners. Through the program, young people are connected to a community-based organization that provides secondary education services. However, in only three sites are the HSE credential completion services accelerated or customized in any way for Opportunity Works students. Surprisingly, two of the three the sites that offer accelerated or customized HSE credential completion are postsecondary bridging sites. In San

Francisco, the site customizes the curriculum, but it is not necessarily accelerated (though the high school completion curriculum for youth in custody is offered at their own pace). In Santa Clara, the other enriched preparation site, the curriculum of the HSE credential completion services is similar to what other young people receive who are not part of Opportunity Works and they are not necessarily focused on deep learning, scaffolded through innovative pedagogical approaches, inquiry-based, or embedded in other related opportunities. Instead, Opportunity Works students at enriched preparation sites are generally supported in their HSE completion efforts through other elements of the framework.

Personalized guidance and support. In the Back on Track framework, this feature is characterized by five elements:

- Students develop a clear, realistic, and detailed postsecondary and career plan
- Students develop an understanding of how they learn best, reflecting regularly on what they still must accomplish to achieve college readiness
- Students build agency, self-advocacy and key academic and career behaviors, such as persistence and time management through leadership, service, and work opportunities
- Students increase their ability to have greater responsibility and voice in their own learning and life choices through their interactions with staff
- Students experience a strengthened care network to overcome barriers such as child care and mental health which impede learning.

All seven sites provide services aligned with this element. Similar to culture-building, these features appear to reflect key activities in the jobs of Opportunity Works staff. The discussion in the "Support Services" section of this report demonstrates how staff help the youth build their care networks. Many of these features are discussed by staff as desired short-term outcomes that lay the foundation for future success.

Postsecondary Bridging Services

As shown in table 3, all seven sites provide some postsecondary bridging services, even the two sites designated as enriched preparation. The Back on Track framework articulates five features of its postsecondary bridging stage. Three Back on Track features, provided universally by the sites, are "dual enrollment or simulated college experience," "personalized guidance and connection to best

bets," and "transition to college." All but one of the sites offers "dual enrollment or simulated college experiences," and all postsecondary bridging sites offer "college knowledge and success strategies."

Supported dual enrollment. In the Back on Track framework, four elements characterize this feature:

- Students enroll in credit-bearing courses to gain exposure to college experiences and expectations. First courses may include prerequisite math or English courses, coursework toward a technical certificate, or courses that reinforce essential skills.
- Program provides streamlined or accelerated developmental education coursework.
- First college courses explicitly model college instruction through the use of syllabi, out-of-class assignments, college-style pedagogy and assessments.
- Program provides formal, intense academic supports to ensure students are successful.

All seven sites offer some version of dual enrollment or simulated college experience, including the two sites operating with an enriched preparation approach. In New Orleans, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, youth are given the opportunity to enroll in actual college coursework. In New Orleans, a liberal arts course is offered specifically for Opportunity Works students, and they can dual enroll at the local community college while receiving personal support. In Philadelphia and San Francisco, students can attend existing introductory college courses. In San Francisco, a course in critical thinking is also available to students. In Santa Clara, youth may co-enroll in vocational training related to recycling. In Hartford, youth must either participate in a two-week, intensive career development training with one partner or financial literacy and customer service training with a different partner. Staff in Boston and Hartford work with area colleges to assess youth math and literacy skills to determine if youth will need to take remedial classes in college; if their scores indicate they need remedial coursework, the coaches create a plan for the youth and provide tutoring to raise their skills to appropriate levels. It appears that all the elements of this feature are implemented in at least one site, but all elements are not necessarily present across all sites, even those that identify as postsecondary bridging.

A focus on college knowledge and success strategies. This Back on Track feature is defined by three elements:

- Staff help students "to develop college and career-ready skills and behaviors, including study and other self-directed learning skills, digital literacy skills, time and stress management, persistence and awareness of performance."

- Staff help students "develop the mindsets and key cognitive strategies and content knowledge required for college success, such as formulating hypotheses, problem-solving, analyzing and evaluating findings, and understand key foundational content in core subject areas."
- Students "gain postsecondary and career navigation skills, learning about general and technical programs of study, admissions requirements, financial aid, college culture, campus resources, and building relations with professors."

All five of the postsecondary bridging sites implement these features in their program models. In Hartford, for example, one partner focuses heavily on building the social/emotional skills that students need to succeed in college and future careers. All postsecondary bridging sites focus on helping the students understand and engage in the steps needed to apply for college and financial aid and to enroll in coursework. When sites talk about short-term successes for the youth, they talk about many of the skills and behaviors listed here. Only Philadelphia has explicitly tried to help Opportunity Works participants build relationships with their professors.

Personalized guidance and connection to best bets. In the Back on Track framework, this feature is characterized by three elements:

- Staff use data to monitor student participation and progress toward the goal of entry into credit-bearing coursework or technical programs.
- Programs utilize a cohort model to leverage peer connections and build a postsecondary support network.
- Programs integrate intentional career exploration and planning taking into account the youth's career aspirations as well as local labor market demand to drive toward "best bets".

All seven of the sites work to identify the career pathways and postsecondary options that are most suited to each Opportunity Works participant. This is a key aspect of the intervention for all sites. Hartford has adopted the most targeted approach with an explicit focus on careers in manufacturing and allied health. These are considered best bets because these are the fields that are growing locally and provide "middle skill level jobs" that earn "middle class" wages. It is worth noting that although Hartford has taken this targeted approach, both staff and youth would like to see more pathways offered, because not all youth are interested in pursuing those options. San Francisco also mentioned guiding youth toward fields that labor market data indicate will grow and be stable in the region, such as technology, transportation, distribution and logistics, healthcare, public service industries, and construction. In Santa Clara County, youth are encouraged to pursue recycling and

solar power, but they are also supported to pursue other interests. In Boston, the Opportunity Works program takes a broader-based approach but they indicate that is because jobs are growing in many fields and they help youth find a career that makes them happy. Philadelphia and New Orleans emphasize helping the youth explore their own career interests, but are less focused on steering youth into particular career pathways and more focused on getting them into a traditional college track.

Mentorship from program graduates. This is an element of Back on Track rather than a feature, but it is separated here because it is substantively different from the other elements of the feature "Personalized guidance and connection to best bets." It is also very uncommon. Only San Francisco has adopted this element, though South King County has talked about connecting youth to program alumni. JFF has indicated that they envisioned at the outset of the Opportunity Works effort that the "mentorship" element of Back on Track would be replaced by strong navigation from Opportunity Works staff and therefore did not require that sites incorporate mentorship.

Transition to college. This is not a formal feature of the original Back on Track framework, but it is apparent in all sites, even those focused on enriched preparation. Staff at all sites work with young people who are ready to navigate the college entry experience, including applications, financial aid, and course registration. In Philadelphia, the staff members meet with youth before class on their first day to ensure they show up on time and know where to go. This characterizes the final aspect of a meaningful bridge to postsecondary.

First-Year Support Services

The third phase of the Back on Track framework is the first-year support services, which help youth who have begun a postsecondary pathway persist. Four Opportunity Works sites report providing first-year support through their SIF funds: Boston, Philadelphia, Santa Clara, and South King County. Hartford offers first-year support through WIOA funds, and New Orleans provides it through various other funding sources. Interviews with sites did not focus primarily on these services, so it is difficult to say exactly what parts of the Back on Track framework have been implemented and which have not. All of the sites engaged in this phase monitor student progress and remain in regular contact with the youth, offering them access to additional supportive services as needed. In Boston, Hartford, and South King County, first-year support services existed prior to introduction of the SIF funds; the programs did not indicate any change in the ways that they support youth in the first year of postsecondary enrollment. In Philadelphia, the first year of postsecondary support was a new program element.

SUPPORT SERVICES

The original Back on Track framework does not emphasize supporting basic needs of youth except to indicate in the "personalize guidance and support" element of the enriched preparation stage that "the program works to strengthen students' care network, such as child-care and mental health resources, so they have adequate support to address barriers that impede learning." The revision of the framework in 2016 emphasizes supportive services more heavily, but that is beyond the purview of this analysis.

Opportunity Works staff members connect youth with other organizations that have missions to provide the types of support that youth need. These other organizations can be positioned in different ways relative to Opportunity Works:

1. Located within Opportunity Works organizations and supported with SIF funding.
2. Located within the same organizations that are partnering to provide the Opportunity Works services, but funded by non-SIF resources.
3. Provided by other organizations that are not part of the Opportunity Works partnerships and funded by non-SIF resources.

SIF funds can be used to support many basic needs, but sites vary in how much they draw from these funds for direct supports. Leadership indicate that the total funding available is not enough to meet both the basic needs of the youth and provide them with a caring adult that helps prepare them for a career pathway and postsecondary avenues, such as a coach or navigator. In addition, the SIF and matching funds have some restrictions; for example, they may not be used to purchase food. Several sites indicated that food is one support they would offer if it were allowed because the youth are frequently hungry, food helps build relationships, and sites cannot hold long or mealtime events without offering food.

Some youth face other barriers that are not related to basic or educational needs but that challenge them to achieve career advancement or to normalize their place in society. For example, some youth need their driver's license to pursue their careers of interest. Others with former gang involvement need tattoos removed. Justice-involved youth frequently need help expunging their records. Youth who dropped out of high school sometimes need help with mitigating court-mandated truancy fines and community service requirements.

The success of the programs in meeting youth needs depends largely on the availability of needed services in the community. Staff indicated in interviews that despite referrals to the agencies that provide services, some basic needs could not be adequately met; the barriers in table 8 were typically

cited as reasons for youth attrition from the program. Inadequate housing or homelessness was noted as a barrier in all sites. Child care was noted as a barrier in four sites. Transportation was noted in four sites, while mental health and food insecurity were noted in three sites each. Crime/safety was noted in two sites. Barriers not checked in table 8 may also present challenges in the sites, but they were not cited by staff as a major reason for participant attrition.

TABLE 8

Barrier Cited as Reasons for Youth Attrition

Location	Housing	Food insecurity	Child care	Transportation	Crime/ safety	Mental health
Boston	X	X				
Hartford	X	X	X	X		X
New Orleans	X			X	X	X
Philadelphia	X	X	X	X	X	X
San Francisco	X					
Santa Clara County	X		X	X		
South King County	X		X			

Transportation tends to be an issue of both cost and time. In some communities, most youth travel within the community using the public transit system—either the subway or buses. While this may be cheaper than using a car, it requires that the rider have daily funds and it constrains the rider to the routes provided, which do not always align with the locations where services are delivered. In some places, it is virtually impossible to get to the service locations without a car. Fortunately, transportation tends to be one issue that Opportunity Works sites can address as they support youth. Some sites provide bus or subway passes. Other sites escort the youth on the transit systems or drive them directly. However, some internal organizational policies restrict the type of transportation support provided (e.g., foster care organizations in Santa Clara cannot provide transportation, while other partners can).

The Opportunity Works direct service staff frequently serve as *de facto* case managers for the youth, even if the site does not provide formal case management services. They help identify appropriate service providers, coordinate across services, brainstorm with the youth when emergencies happen or services fall through, and serve as emotional supports. As described in more detail below, participants in focus groups tended to identify the relationships built with Opportunity Works staff members as one of the most important elements of the program. In some sites, staff refer to the relationship as being like a big brother/big sister.

In some sites, the Opportunity Works staff expressed concerns that they did not have appropriate training to handle the trauma and mental health needs of the youth. Their jobs were not intended to include this counseling component, but because youth trust them and rely on them for emotional support, they found it challenging to draw the line.

Given the insufficiency of community services to meet the basic needs of youth, it may be important for the Back on Track framework to consider a higher level of support to meet these basic needs. The 2016 revised Back on Track framework has a stronger focus on support services.

EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

The Back on Track framework does not include a work component while the youth are in school. However, many youth participating in Opportunity Works need income to support living expenses for themselves and sometimes their dependents while they attend school. In Boston, the program supports a youth employment specialist to help the participants obtain part-time work that will have minimal conflict with their postsecondary bridging and postsecondary career pathway endeavors. The New Orleans Opportunity Works program provides an opportunity for paid work experience and on-the-job training through part-time apprenticeships. In Santa Clara County, youth may participate in an earn and learn program that allows them to simultaneously work on their high school credential and obtain paid job experience in recycling services. Some other sites noted that conflicts with work are one of the primary reasons that youth drop out/stop out of the program because work may take priority over school when youth are responsible for supporting themselves and their families.

If the community services to meet basic needs were more robust, youth may not need as much income while in school. Given the state of community services to meet basic needs, however, the Back on Track framework may need to consider some source of income for youth. San Francisco has been able to provide some monetary incentives and stipends to youth through SIF dollars, as well as other leveraged funds from a corporate partner.

Completion, Retention, and Attrition

The Back on Track framework and Opportunity Works programs are designed to serve youth with multiple barriers to success. The entire Back on Track framework is geared toward improving the rate at which youth complete their high school and postsecondary credentials, so any features of the framework may be construed as supporting retention and completion. However, some strategies are conceptualized as being particularly focused on keeping youth in the program until they complete.

Typically, sites also have strategies to "recover" youth who have stopped out of the program.[11] Like the screening and assessment process, the retention and recovery process is designed to be inclusive rather than exclusive; staff want youth to stay and succeed rather than exit due to standardized rules or sanctions for not completing activities. Table 9 summarizes each site's definition of completion and their key retention strategies.

TABLE 9

Program Completion and Retention Strategies

	Completion is when a participant…	Retention strategies
Boston[a]	▪ Begins attending college or other postsecondary option through an identified career pathway ▪ Completes the first year in their chosen postsecondary program (college or training program)	▪ Develop a relationship of mutual accountability ▪ Text or call youth weekly to twice per month ▪ Respond to youth texts and calls quickly, even beyond the scheduled work day/week ▪ Provide assistance obtaining part-time employment that does not conflict with program activities or school ▪ Give celebrations and awards at key milestones and the end of the program
Hartford	▪ Begins attending college or other postsecondary option through an identified career pathway	▪ Develop a relationship of mutual accountability ▪ Text or call youth daily to weekly ▪ Respond to youth texts and calls quickly, even beyond the scheduled work day/week ▪ Provide incentive gift cards for certain milestones ▪ Give celebrations and awards at key milestones and the end of the program
New Orleans[b]	Depending on program: ▪ Completes a one-year apprenticeship ▪ Completes a three-semester series of courses that yield industry-based credentials ▪ Leaves the program to pursue an employment or postsecondary opportunity ▪ Completes a liberal arts seminar for college credit	▪ Develop a relationship of mutual accountability ▪ Set attendance and participation standards and follow up when youth do not meet them

[11] "Stopping out" refers to a temporary lapse in program participation.

	Completion is when a participant…	Retention strategies
Philadelphia	▪ Completes a semester of community college courses (and ideally enrolls for a subsequent semester)	▪ Develop a relationship of mutual accountability ▪ Text or call youth daily to weekly ▪ Respond to youth texts and calls quickly, even beyond the scheduled work day/week ▪ Provide incentives based on youth behaviors rather than outcomes ▪ Give celebrations and awards at key milestones and the end of the program
San Francisco[c]	▪ Obtains a high school credential ▪ Links to either reemployment or a training program ▪ Clears or moves past one's previous criminal record	▪ Respond to youth texts and calls quickly, even beyond the scheduled work day/week ▪ Transport youth personally ▪ Give incentives for attending classes and meeting particular program milestones ▪ Help youth gain income through part-time supported employment
Santa Clara County[d]	▪ Obtains a high school credential and employment ▪ Enrolls at a postsecondary institution for three months	▪ Meet with youth at least once per week ▪ Spend time with youth as needed ▪ Respond to youth texts and calls quickly ▪ Transport youth personally ▪ Include family members in some support discussions ▪ Provide specialized support for pregnant and parenting, justice involved, homeless, and youth in foster care
South King County	▪ Attains a high school credential and successfully enrolls in postsecondary education	▪ Develop a relationship of mutual accountability ▪ Respond to youth texts and calls quickly ▪ Refer to needed community resources to remediate barriers

Notes:

[a] Boston has both a postsecondary bridging component and a first-year support component. Completion is different for each component. Some youth will successfully exit from the program after only receiving postsecondary bridging because the only funded part of their participation is with the Connection Center services. Other youth will successfully exit when they participate in both parts of the service.

[b] New Orleans has four avenues for program participation, and each has its own completion standard. Earn and Learn requires completion of a one-year apprenticeship; Delgado Community College requires the completion of three semesters of courses for an industry-recognized credential; the Youth Empowerment Project requires exiting the program for employment or postsecondary; and Bard Early College requires the completion of a liberal arts seminar.

[c] San Francisco has a number of participation pathways and therefore youth complete the program when one or more of these statuses is obtained.

[d] Santa Clara County has multiple agencies providing services. Staff working for the foster care organization are not allowed to transport youth personally. Youth may complete the program after attaining a high school diploma or they may choose to enroll in a postsecondary institution; if they enroll in postsecondary, their navigator continues to provide support for three months.

Some sites do have clearly stated expectations about participation and behavior, and if youth do not meet those expectations, they are exited from the program. Youth may be exited from the program if they stop responding to their designated staff person for a period of time; have irregular attendance at appointments, trainings, or meetings; do not participate the minimum required number of hours or days per week; or exhibit particularly harmful or inappropriate behavior. Sometimes youth initiate exit from the program because of changes in life circumstances like eviction from their home, a sudden illness of a family member that requires their assistance, incarceration, disruption in child care, or a death in the family. Some youth exit due to conflicting employment schedules, and some leave due to academic struggles. Primary reasons for exit vary across and within sites.

Boston, Hartford, Santa Clara, and South King County have "recovery" strategies to reach out to youth who exit the program before completing. Recovery strategies include calling, texting, social media outreach, and home "pop up" visits. The youth may be readmitted to the program if they can demonstrate they are ready to fulfill their program responsibilities; the criteria for readmission are not as strict as the initial admission criteria in place for most programs. The other sites did not emphasize specific "recovery" strategies.

Many of the strategies used by the sites may relate to "personalized guidance and support" in the Back on Track framework. The May 2014 articulation of the framework does not operationalize what this means in detail. The strong emphasis by many of the sites on building relationships with the youth may be part of their interpretation of this element or it could be another dimension they have interpreted as missing from the framework. Some sites also have adapted techniques articulated in the Back on Track framework's first-year support stage for use in other stages of the program to improve retention: engagement with youth using social media tools and use of monetary incentives appear to draw from descriptions in this part of the framework.

Overall Assessment of Fidelity

As noted, Back on Track was always intended to be a framework more than a rigid model. It has also evolved over time, with new "key elements" identified in late 2016. Nonetheless, it is still valuable for evaluation purposes to give an overall assessment of fidelity.

Based on table 3 and the discussion, it is clear that all of the sites have all or nearly all of the framework elements and often go beyond the requirements of the phase of Back on Track on which they focus. The sites have largely built out the elements of their existing programming that align with

the Enriched Preparation and Postsecondary Bridging goals of the framework. They used the grant funds to fill in service gaps, primarily through hiring coaching and navigation staff. It does not appear that any sites have systematically implemented alumni mentorship, but this was also absent from the revised key elements released in 2016, suggesting that it may not be a core element in the program theory.

It is important to note that implementation on the ground varies widely across sites. While South King County has used the funds primarily to strengthen the postsecondary bridging focus across an array of existing reengagement centers, Boston created a brand-new service navigation channel for college and career preparation options. Philadelphia designed and embedded a curriculum-driven program leading into supported college experiences within high school completion service providers, while Santa Clara County leveraged and enriched a new adult education resource that was planned by the county to help particularly disadvantaged youth complete high school. New Orleans focused on building capacity across four service providing partners, allowing for a diffuse set of bridging options for youth. San Francisco enhanced the work of a nontraditional charter school to help youth complete high school equivalences and navigate their postsecondary options inside and outside of custody. Finally, Hartford filled a gap in the supportive services offered by the workforce system to move nontraditional high school completers into postsecondary pathways. The New Orleans approach may be the least streamlined, while Philadelphia and Santa Clara County demonstrate some more streamlined and programmatic approaches. Through regular coaching by JFF, these models have reflected the range of Back on Track adaptations in a way that not only represents the framework but has informed its further evolution. Given this inherent flexibility, it is possible to say that all of the sites have established programs with high fidelity, albeit with different emphases and program structures.

Participant Perspectives

During the fall 2016 site visits, Urban Institute researchers convened one to two focus groups with program participants at each site to gain their viewpoint on Opportunity Works. Take-aways from these conversations inform various areas of this report. However, a specific emphasis on the stories told by youth participants helps highlight some of the most salient lessons from the implementation research and provides valuable feedback for future programming.

The young people who attended the focus groups shared that they and others in the programming come from difficult backgrounds. Focus group participants reinforced the stories told by staff and by

the program data, sharing their history and current challenges with the justice system, transportation, pregnancy and parenting, broken homes, personal violence, housing/homelessness, illegal activities, and mental illness. They also talked about the pressing need for income to help them overcome the conditions that impose these barriers and to support their families, including their parents and their children. Several admitted that they often have trouble asking for help because they have had to make it mostly on their own for much of their lives.

Opportunity Works enrollees have varying goals. Some were unclear about their goals initially, and the program helped them see a path or a purpose. Others wanted to go to college all along but did not know how. Many have to balance the need for a job with the desire to advance their education so that they can pursue a range of professional, long-term interests. Though many had not yet decided on a career, some shared their desire to become teachers, psychologists, and other types of professionals. Youth in programs with a financial incentive expressed that was important to help them stay engaged in the programming. Those who were in programs without stipends or paid work experience opportunities wished there was more financial support.

Overall, many expressed positive experiences with the program. Almost universally, enrollees said that it helped them find direction or explore avenues they had not previously considered, such as college. The program diverted some from illegal activities, the military, or other paths. Many had negative experiences in high school, so they liked the aspects of the program that differed from their prior school experiences, such as professional training opportunities. In fact, young people were the most enthusiastic about training and work experience, as long as the offerings aligned with their substantive interests. Many expressed pride and satisfaction at their accomplishments in the program. Others shared that the program helped them think about all aspects of their lives differently, such as one young man from Philadelphia, who shared a salient lesson:

"The college culture concept and the concept of emerging adulthood itself—there were all these things we had never thought of. To have not only the academic part of college but also the other part, like 'Oh snap! You might be super late or your son might be sick [but you have to be able to deal with it].' It was critical to have that part too."

A resounding theme among the focus group participants was that the staff are critical. Students at every site expressed how important it is to have staff who they can relate to, meaning that they come from a similar background or at least understand where the youth come from, and who really care. The young men especially emphasized this theme. In New Orleans, a young black man shared:

> *"I feel like next year we should be working with people more relatable to us in being from New Orleans and young and being black because they would know how we feel."*

Another agreed and wanted the staff to include, "people that can relate to you… black American males that have been through hell and high water." Across sites, youth described the need for staff who have a range of characteristics, including that they are committed, put in time and energy, are flexible, are like a friend or family member, give adequate attention, are respectful, are genuine, are cool, are validating, are not judgmental, and like their jobs. Staff who go out of their way to keep track of students' personal and academic progress and provide support are particularly valued; this is very distinct from earlier school experiences. In addition, it is highly valued when staff treat the program participants like "adults," setting high expectations. A young person in Hartford said, "In other programs they treat you like a kid with childish rules. Here they treat you like an adult. The way an advisor will help an adult—that's how they help us." At the same time, high expectations need to be balanced with understanding, embodying the notion of a "caring adult." Some focus group members expressed a desire for more staff, especially in support roles.

Relatedly, one of the most poignant themes was that students take on personal responsibility. The young people emphasized in several sites the critical role of personal motivation. They want staff to hold them accountable and to be treated like adults and be pushed to do higher-level work. A young person in Hartford praised the program by saying:

"They don't sugar coat it…You have to have good behavior and act like a mature adult. If not, you have to leave…They don't treat you like you're in high school or elementary [school]."

Another young person in Philadelphia explained that the high standard means that the staff see potential:

"That's what inspired me…Regular teachers see kids from the ghetto, they see no potential, why teach you? The teachers here didn't make us feel that way; they didn't care where we are from. So we can see bigger and better things."

Beyond staff, young people also serve as supports for each other. In programs with cohorts, most students shared that they relied on and valued their peer group. In several programs without cohorts, focus group members indicated that they would like more peer support.

They also really valued when their voice was heard in programming decisions. Young people in San Francisco noted that they felt particularly empowerment to give input on programming. One explained:

"It's more youth led youth voices. Other organizations have adults set up to be the main person. [Here] even the youth are supervisors. It's youth led. Other organizations don't know how to—that it's always an adult being the top person. But here we're all youth and on top."

Another theme that emerged from the group discussions was the importance of place and space. Having a "safe space" that is like a second home was critical for youth in several sites, especially in areas with a large amount of gang activity. Several focus groups expressed the need for larger physical spaces for programming.

Young people valued the support services offered, but some wanted additional supports, such as transportation, child care, more income, help with time management, and mental health support. Many appreciated it when supports were tailored to their personal needs/barriers and others wanted more customization. In general, however, their biggest desire for the programs was for them to expand to serve more young people.

Data Systems

Data collection is critical for the Opportunity Works effort not only to measure participants' characteristics and outcomes for external reporting, but also because the Back on Track framework explicitly lists as a program-level output that, "Staff continually use data to assess progress, customize learning, and enhance instructional strategies." Data collection and usage is developing at all of the sites, and there were notable gains from the start of the SIF grants began in mid-2015 through the site visits in late 2016.

In all sites, the data capacity of the partnership has improved through SIF grant support. Four sites built or are in the process of building new data systems, while the other sites have continued to enhance existing systems. Six of the seven sites use or are building Efforts-to-Outcomes (ETO) or Salesforce systems. San Francisco also uses a legacy content management system for their Roadmap to Peace project. Santa Clara County uses Excel for data entry and reporting but cleans the data using SPSS.

Much of the data for these systems are collected through intake processes, and sites that had developed common intake forms noted that to be an important way to ensure consistency in the measurement of baseline characteristics. Sites varied in how often and which measures collected at intake are updated; some focus on outcomes, program activities, and employment but do not regularly update other baseline indicators.

Bringing data from other sources into the Opportunity Works systems presented an opportunity at some sites and a challenge at others. South King County and Philadelphia developed memoranda of

understanding to access K-12 and higher education records for participants. Other sites, such as Santa Clara County, had more difficulty negotiating data sharing with the public school system.

Staff members at several sites conduct supplemental tracking in Excel beyond the formal system. For example, Philadelphia coaching staff have additional Excel systems to track student engagement and risk factors beyond the measures in the ETO system. In San Francisco, the staff developed a temporary informal tracking system for African-American participants in Excel because the content management system can only track Latino youth who are part of Roadmap to Peace. The staff will transfer the data on the African-American participants into a forthcoming Salesforce system, which will compile data on all Opportunity Works participants.

The sites' systems have some additional limitations. Staff discussed the challenge of measuring gains in existing systems, which are designed to track static indicators. They also noted that it can be challenging to track measures of trauma that the young people have experienced. In addition, sites like Hartford, where the Opportunity Works services fits into partners' program flow in different ways, have struggled to determine common and appropriate measures of service receipt, struggling with notions like "attendance" in self-paced programming. Overall, the sites noted that they need to further develop quality assurance procedures, as some items within the sites' system had high levels of missing or inconsistent entries. Several of these issues could be partially remedied through thoughtful system design (e.g., growth measures, trauma indicators, and restricted field values), but challenges are likely to remain, given the complexity of the partnerships and service offerings within sites and the intensive reporting requirements for Opportunity Works.

Data Usage

All of the Opportunity Works partnerships are composed of a collection of diverse organizations, which have varying levels of data sophistication and differing cultures of data usage. Even organizations that have a history of data tracking and utilization may format the data in a way that makes it difficult to extract summative snapshots from the system, such as heavy reliance on case note documentation. Some backbone organizations had existing data systems that were more focused on compliance reporting than on meaningful case management. Changing the culture and structure of data collection and usage has been a process for backbone organizations and service providing partners alike.

All sites have recurring forums to discuss data-related issues. At least four of the sites hold monthly data-specific meetings, and other sites have monthly partner meetings on a range of topics that include data. However, there is variation in the level of partner staff that attend these meetings. While some sites include coaches and other direct-service staff in these cross-organizational discussions, others are more oriented toward partner leadership. Sites that include the direct-service staff tout the importance of using these meetings to promote data use in coaching and case management.

In several sites, the backbone organization has made explicit efforts to train partners in data collection and usage. For example, this is a component of the Opportunity Works intervention in New Orleans—the provision of professional development and technical assistance to help partners build data capacity. In other sites, like San Francisco, partner organizations are providing technical assistance to each other.

Across most sites, the backbone organization is more likely to use data collected for Opportunity Works for strategic decision-making than the partner organizations. For example, the Philadelphia Youth Network conducted an analysis of young people who had left programming before completion to strategize about how to improve retention. Several backbone organizations indicated that they would like to share useful data across the collective impact partnership.

Lessons

The lessons outlined below came across in multiple sites through conversations with backbone organizations, partners, and participants. They may be valuable to others considering taking a collective impact approach to help opportunity youth reengage and move toward academic and career success.

Design

When first thinking about program design, several sites emphasized the importance of having a strong understanding of the local labor market and the population to be served. The needs of opportunity youth vary by exact age (e.g., ages 16–17, 18–19, and 20–24) as well as by the opportunities and barriers they may face in the specific community. The sites indicated that design should be sensitive to these needs. One valuable way to get this insight is to engage program partners at multiple levels to

get feedback—from leadership to direct service staff—and possibly also young people themselves, who would have unique insight on what service offerings would be salient and valuable to themselves and their peers. The Back on Track framework offers substantial flexibility to make the intervention fit the context of the community and the youth population.

Many sites found recruitment to be an unexpected challenge. The difficulty was often less about finding youth in the target population, but more about finding target youth who were *ready* for meaningful program engagement, especially intensive postsecondary bridging experiences. Anticipating and planning for recruitment and retention challenges can save the energy of shifting focus partway through implementation.

Sites cautioned that it is important to ensure that organizations logically coordinate multiple program offerings or sequential steps and that young people are supported in accessing them. Academic institutions, in particular, often have inflexible procedures and schedules. The school year may not align well with the timing of when young people are ready to enroll or with other program elements. In addition, if there are multiple academic institutions at the table, it can be valuable for them to talk to each other to ensure that students can transfer and otherwise coordinate their schooling in reasonable ways. It is good to recognize and try to work through the alignment of program elements early in planning.

One specific design suggestion was that programs should think about offering nonacademic content that extends beyond traditional schooling models, where opportunity youth have not been successful in the past. Introducing opportunities for socialization and cultural capital-building, college- and job-readiness skill development, and personal confidence-building has led to popular programs that are perceived as more successful in helping young people. This movement beyond academics is a strong tenet of the Back on Track framework; the sites and participating youth echoed its importance.

Another suggestion was for backbone organizations to ensure that new interventions embedded into existing programming, such as postsecondary bridging services introduced within reengagement centers, are incorporated seamlessly. This offers an uninterrupted continuum for youth that may increase retention and improve outcomes.

Finally, strong technical support from the funder or another organization well versed in the framework can be valuable at the planning stage and throughout implementation. JFF's ongoing coaching provided a critical support for many sites.

Selecting and Working with Partners

Many lessons from sites relate to partner relationships, which are central to the collective impact approach. Backbone organizations cautioned that it is important to select partners carefully. It may be useful to work with organizations where there are strong existing relationships, but it can also be valuable to branch out to bring new skills to the table. It is necessary to have partners with a range of service offerings and strengths to address the young people's various needs. It is also helpful to define the roles and expectations of partners clearly from the outset. When new partners come to the table, establishing trust is a necessary first step, but it can take time.

Backbone organizations also found that it paid off to give partners a chance to create a common language, alignment, vision about the program, and data/tracking procedures through regular partner meetings. These meetings are an opportunity to learn, engage, and coordinate and should allow for interaction on multiple levels, among leadership, management, and direct service staff. It may be necessary to offer training to partners on the program goals, data collection and usage, and other key issues or skills, such as motivational interviewing for coaching staff.

Data

Several sites emphasized that it is valuable to build a data culture, which is an iterative and interactive process. For program success, and in alignment with the Back on Track framework, partners need to capture useful and usable information that can be used to inform programming, not only to meet reporting requirements. Shared data can allow staff across organizations build a "conspiracy of support" for participants.

Staffing and Working with Youth

The Back on Track framework is personnel intensive, and hiring the right staff members is a critical ingredient for success. Just as it is important for program designers to understand the context and the needs of youth, it is critical for individual staff members to have a thorough understanding of the population they are working with—either because they come from a similar background or they can relate in other ways. Key characteristics of successful staff members are that they are relatable, set and maintain high expectations for youth, understand young people's backgrounds, and demonstrate that they care.

Organizations emphasized that staff should have an opportunity to build trusting relationships with the youth as part of the program design. Several sites emphasized that one-on-one advising is critical. The "caring adult" is a powerful figure in the lives of opportunity youth, but establishing a relationship takes time and attention. Ensuring a reasonable staff-to-student ratio may be necessary to maintain quality services and minimize the chance of burnout.

Young people's barriers loom large, especially around housing, transportation, debt, the need for income, hunger, mental health, transportation, and unsupportive social networks or family members. Programs and staff members may want to think about how to help young people balance their need for immediate income with investment in their education, perhaps through stipends or other earning opportunities so they can offset the opportunity costs of pursuing their education.

Framework

One important take-away that reflects on the Back on Track framework is that it is difficult to have meaningful postsecondary bridging without strong enriched preparation. Conversely, it is hard to promote an attractive enriched preparation program without identifying postsecondary bridging opportunities as a next step. The Back on Track framework was not originally conceived as separable, and the experience of the sites suggests that there are inherent challenges to focusing solely on one phase of the framework. The phases may be inherently intertwined. The revised Back on Track framework released in 2016 reflects this lesson and has built in redundancies to make the intervention more robust at each phase.

Another lesson is that the framework may need to incorporate some earning opportunities for youth. The pressing need for income is a fundamental barrier that affects program progress and success.

Scale and Sustainability

The next step is for sites to consider scale and sustainability of elements of the Back on Track framework, both within current service locations and in new service locations. Within the grant period, most of the considerations around scale and sustainability pertain to current service locations. After the grant period, the effort may move into new organizations or venues for service delivery.

Scale within the Grant Period

While many sites intended to achieve larger scale within the grant period, several encountered unexpected difficulties achieving their enrollment targets. A particular challenge is that some sites faced constraints on the population they could serve. For example, the Philadelphia E^3 Centers are funded by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Department of Human Services funding, which constrains enrollment to youth ages 16–21. Meaningful scale may require sites with similar restrictions to find additional support to expand the potential recruitment pool, which would likely occur after the end of the SIF grant.

In addition, many of the service partners are still developing their systems and program models, which makes it risky and challenging to scale quickly. For example, partners in New Orleans indicated some reservations about program expansion. Programs and services continue to evolve in their current scale, and these adjustments may need to slow down before expansion.

Many sites have sought more scale during the grant period but have faced recruitment challenges, limiting the size of their programs. Many sites have made modifications to their service delivery approach in response to identified recruitment issues.

Scale and Sustainability after the Grant Period

Most sites are committed to and interested in sustaining the Back on Track framework and scaling it beyond the original service locations. The greatest challenge to these plans is identifying and securing replacement funds beyond the term of the SIF grant. However, moving beyond the original service locations may provide funding opportunities. New Orleans, for example, has identified new partners and service locations that may come with additional resources. It is unclear, however, if these opportunities will materialize.

Other sites, including Hartford, have experienced various political and economic uncertainties that call into question their ability to sustain or effectively scale current interventions. In particular, Hartford faces the challenge of multiple career pathway initiatives happening at once, making it difficult to establish a united front around one initiative. This appears to be a problem of coordination and communication.

At the time of the fall 2016 site visit, the Opportunity Youth Partnership in Santa Clara indicated they were not yet actively exploring opportunities for expansion, but instead looking to solidify

internal processes and current service provision strategy should they be successful in identifying new funding streams to continue the work. Santa Clara's low program enrollments may make it more challenging to make the case for sustainability.

In contrast, the strong system-wide partnerships between government and partners delivering the intervention in South King County and San Francisco seem to put the sites in a better position in their sustainability efforts. South King County has been working closely with the King County government from the outset to forge a viable, sustainability plan. At present, it appears that the local government has the infrastructure necessary to taking on the work, along with an increased tax levy that will generate $5 million annually for opportunity youth efforts. Furthermore, King County received seed funding from the Raikes Foundation to hire a reengagement system manager and outreach position, with a commitment that these would become county-funded positions in the long term. Although funding appears to be less certain, the Community Center for Education Results and Seattle Education Access expressed interest in expanding their intervention to additional sites throughout the county. Similarly, because the Opportunity Works program easily fits within the service model of the city of San Francisco, there is commitment from the city to provide a five-year funding stream from 2018 through 2023.

In both San Francisco and South King County, the intervention was embedded into a preexisting structure of systems and services. For example, in South King County the Seattle Education Access education advocates are co-located in reengagement centers and work closely alongside case managers and other counselors at those centers. This wrap-around model of support appears seamless to most participants, most of whom do not even realize the advocates work for a different agency from where the youth receive services. This deep embedding of Opportunity Works services may make it easier to justify the continued investment in these enhanced supports.

Discussion

This report documents important qualitative findings about the operations, challenges, and successes of Opportunity Works programming in seven diverse communities. The research team hopes that the findings from this effort will be useful to inform the field about the promise of the Back on Track framework to move opportunity youth forward in their lives.

In reviewing this work, it is critical to reflect on the challenges faced by opportunity youth. Although social services are inadequate to meet the needs of all individuals in any community, opportunity youth face additional barriers and therefore have more acute service needs:

- A large portion of the opportunity youth served in these programs are male and do not have children, while many government support services focus on serving parents with children.
- Opportunity youth with children may be able to access some supports more easily, but child care tends to be a struggle nationwide, and the time, monetary, and emotional responsibilities of having children presents a challenge to school completion in itself.
- Some of the youth are of an age that they would be expected to receive support from their parents or apply for supports through their parents, but many live on their own or have parents who are not willing or able to provide those supports.
- No community has been able to resolve the deep issues around housing instability and homelessness, mental health, and child care, among other challenges.
- One of the largest challenges to program engagement and success is the pressing need for income so that young people can support themselves and their family members.

Even the most well-designed program will struggle without having some strategies in place to offset these barriers.

Meanwhile, the availability of a caring adult that is relatable, believes in the potential of the young person, and can show them opportunities for development and growth is one of the most salient aspects of programming across all sites. Young people expressed a strong desire to have mentors who look like them, believe in them, and will push them further than they push themselves. They expressed a desire to be challenged and held to high standards, though programs may also want to consider how to ensure that there is a meaningful safety net as well as supports to offset the struggles that are beyond their control.

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