

Executive Summary

Engaging Disconnected Young People in Education and Work

**Findings from the Project Rise
Implementation Evaluation**

Michelle S. Manno
Edith Yang
Michael Bangser

October 2015

mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

Executive Summary

Engaging Disconnected Young People in Education and Work Findings from the Project Rise Implementation Evaluation

Michelle S. Manno
Edith Yang
Michael Bangser

October 2015



Project Rise is one of five evidence-based programs that were incorporated as part of the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) grant to the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City and the Center for Economic Opportunity. The SIF is a federal program administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. It catalyzes a unique public-private funding model in which each federal dollar must be matched by private and local contributions. Matching funds for Project Rise have been provided by Bloomberg Philanthropies, Open Society Foundations, The Rockefeller Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Goldman Sachs, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, the Haas Foundation, Hall Family Foundation, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, Kansas City Power and Light District, Newark Public Schools, New York Community Trust, Nicholson Foundation, The Pinkerton Foundation, the Prudential Foundation, Tiger Foundation, United Way of Greater Kansas City, United Way of Kansas City Young Leaders Society, the Valentine Perry Snyder Foundation, and Victoria Foundation.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following funders that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The Kresge Foundation, Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and The Starr Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

This material is based upon work supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) under Grant No. 10SIHNY002. Opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, CNCS or the Social Innovation Fund.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our website: www.mdrc.org.

Copyright © 2015 by MDRC®. All rights reserved.

Overview

Educational attainment and early work experience provide a crucial foundation for future success. However, many young adults are disconnected from both school and the job market. Neglecting these young people can exact a heavy toll on not only the individuals but also society as a whole, for example, through lost productivity and tax contributions, increased dependence on public assistance, and higher rates of criminal activity.

Project Rise served 18- to 24-year-olds who lacked a high school diploma or the equivalent and had been out of school, out of work, and not in any type of education or training program for at least six months. After enrolling as part of a group (or cohort) of 25 to 30 young people, Project Rise participants were to engage in a 12-month sequence of activities centered on case management, classroom education focused mostly on preparation for a high school equivalency certificate, and a paid part-time internship that was conditional on adequate attendance in the educational component. After the internship, participants were expected to enter unsubsidized employment, postsecondary education, or both. The program was operated by three organizations in New York City; one in Newark, New Jersey; and one in Kansas City, Missouri.

The Project Rise program operations and evaluation were funded through the federal Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a public-private partnership administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City and the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity led this SIF project in collaboration with MDRC.

Key Findings

This report describes how the Project Rise program operated at each local provider, including the extent to which the participants were engaged and achieved desired outcomes.

- Participants were attracted to Project Rise more by the education component than by the internship opportunity.
- More than 91 percent of program enrollees attended at least some high school equivalency preparation or, less commonly, high school classes. On average, those who attended class received almost 160 hours of instruction. About 72 percent of enrollees began internships; over half of the internship participants worked more than 120 hours.
- Although participants received considerable case management and educational and internship programming, the instability in participants' lives made it difficult to engage them continuously in the planned sequence of activities. Enrolling young people in cohorts with their peers, as well as support from case managers and other adult staff, seemed to help promote participant engagement. The education-conditioned internships appeared to have had a modest influence on encouraging engagement for some participants.
- Within 12 months of enrolling in Project Rise, more than 25 percent of participants earned a high school equivalency credential or (much less commonly) a high school diploma; 45 percent of participants who entered with at least a ninth-grade reading level earned a credential or diploma. Further, about 25 percent entered unsubsidized employment in this timeframe.
- It may be important to consider intermediate (or perhaps nontraditional) outcome measures in programs for disconnected young people, since such measures may reflect progress that is not apparent when relying exclusively on more traditional ones.

Preface

Educational attainment and positive early work experience provide an important foundation for future success, yet too many high school dropouts (and some graduates) become seriously disconnected from further school and work. Developing effective ways to reengage this population is a pressing public issue, since some employers find it difficult to attract qualified workers, and taxpayers face financial and social costs if large numbers of young people are unemployed.

The search for solutions must account for the diversity within the population of disconnected young people. This group of 16- to 24-year-olds, for example, includes individuals with a high school degree or equivalency certificate who are neither seeking work nor further education; those who left high school without earning a degree or credential; those who may find sporadic, low-wage work; and those facing specific challenges, such as child care responsibilities, substance abuse, or involvement with the juvenile justice or criminal justice systems.

Project Rise, which operates under the auspices of the federal Social Innovation Fund, focuses on disconnected young people ages 18 to 24, offering them a combination of case management, community projects, classroom education, and internships. All enrollees lack a high school degree or equivalency certificate, have been out of school and out of work, and have not engaged in any other sustained program activity for at least six months. This report presents important findings for policymakers, program operators, and funders on the experiences of the five local providers that offered Project Rise to these disadvantaged young people.

The providers' experiences demonstrate both the promise and the challenges of serving disconnected young people. Enrolling individuals in groups (or cohorts) of 25 to 30 participants, for example, appeared to promote bonding through a combination of peer support and positive peer pressure. Nevertheless, Project Rise staff found, as have others, that it can be difficult to continuously engage disconnected young people with limited skills in a planned sequence of activities that leads directly to the desired educational and employment outcomes.

The Project Rise experience thus underscores the value of exploring interim measures that document participants' active engagement and improved educational, work, and social skills, as opposed to relying solely on traditional program outcome measures of degree or certificate attainment and sustained unsubsidized employment. Any such standards would still need to hold providers accountable for helping participants make genuine progress, but would recognize that young people who experience extended periods of disconnection confront significant challenges in making the transition to mainstream adulthood.

Gordon L. Berlin
President, MDRC

Acknowledgments

The writing of this report would not have been possible without the dedication and energy of the administrators and staff at all the provider organizations involved with Project Rise between 2011 and 2015. Key individuals include: Bruce Carmel, Jordana Belke, and Milagros Cabreja at FECS; Greg Rideout, Kristina Sepulveda, Erica Pollock, Takiyah Weekes, and Larry Williams at Henry Street Settlement; Alissa Levine, Christina Zagari, and Dina LiMandri at Kingsborough Community College; Kenneth Karamichael and Rick Matera at Rutgers T.E.E.M. Gateway; and Clyde McQueen, Kirk Proctor, Andrea Robbins, Sandra Walker, and Sonny Williams at Full Employment Council.

Other people contributed greatly to the implementation of the Project Rise program through technical assistance and consulting. We thank Pardeice McGoy, Sandra Escamilla, Annie Moyer Martinez, Kerry Odom, Louise Grotenhuis, and Maria Garcia from the Youth Development Institute, and Greg Holly from Workforce Professionals Training Institute.

We are especially grateful to our colleagues at the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity and the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City, who managed the entire New York City Social Innovation Fund (SIF) project, worked closely with the providers to raise the SIF match funds, brought providers together to share best practices and experiences through the SIF Learning Network, and monitored providers' performance. In particular, we thank Carson Hicks, Patrick Hart, Sinead Keegan, Emily Firgens, Brigit Beyea, and Annel Hernandez for their commitment to Project Rise.

At MDRC, Gayle Hamilton led the evaluation activities. Christine Johnston served as a liaison with Project Rise programs and provided valuable information about program operations. Alissa Gardenhire led the early qualitative research design, data collection, and analysis efforts. Alexandra Bernardi and Leila Kerimova assisted in acquiring, processing, and analyzing the quantitative data.

Also at MDRC, particular thanks are due to Hannah Dalporto and Alexandra Bernardi, who assisted with qualitative data collection and analysis, among many other tasks. Gratitude also goes to Ari Oppenheim, who conducted the cost analysis, as well as Dan Bloom, John Martinez, and James Riccio, and MDRC consultant Peter Kleinbard, who provided feedback on report drafts. Rob Mesika coordinated the report's production, and Crystal Ganges-Reid helped with the production of the exhibits. Herb Collado and Diane Singer assisted with fact-checking. Christopher Boland edited the report, and Stephanie Cowell and Carolyn Thomas prepared it for publication.

Finally, our deepest gratitude goes to the young people who participated in the Project Rise programs and allowed us to learn from their experiences.

The Authors

Executive Summary

In the United States, 6.7 million young people ages 16 to 24 are neither in school or college nor working.¹ As many as 1.6 million of these “disconnected” young people have reached age 18 yet lack either a high school diploma or the equivalent.² Their disconnection from both school and work means that they are not accumulating the important human capital and labor market skills that provide a critical foundation for future success. Neglecting these young people can exact a heavy toll on not only the individuals but also society as a whole, for example, through lost productivity, increased dependence on public assistance, and higher rates of criminal activity. In recognition of this concern, Congress recently passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which places increased emphasis on employment and training services for disconnected young people who are out of school.³

This report presents program implementation findings from an evaluation of Project Rise, a program launched in mid-2011 that drew on the research and operating experiences from other programs for at-risk, out-of-school young people. The Project Rise programs, which enrolled a new group (or cohort) of participants approximately every six months, were still operating as of fall 2015. The operators included three organizations in New York City and one each in Newark, New Jersey, and Kansas City, Missouri. The program model was designed to facilitate the reconnections of young people ages 18 to 24 who do not have a high school degree or the equivalent, read at least at a sixth-grade level (but with half required to read between sixth- and eighth-grade levels), have been out of school and work for at least six months, and have not participated in any other education or training programs in that time. The intent was to attract participants who had limited skills and were among the more disadvantaged individuals within the overall disconnected young adult population; program staff were expected to refrain from actively screening out difficult-to-serve applicants who satisfied program eligibility criteria.

In cohorts of 25 to 30, participants were expected to engage in a sequence of activities over 12 months, including case management, high school equivalency instruction,⁴ job-

¹Clive R. Belfield, Henry M. Levin, and Rachel Rosen, *The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth* (Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012).

²Michael Bangser, *Reconnecting Young Adults: The Early Experience of Project Rise* (New York: MDRC, 2013).

³Kisha Bird, Marcie Foster, and Evelyn Ganzglass, *New Opportunities to Improve Economic and Career Success for Low-Income Youth and Adults: Key Provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)* (Washington, DC: CLASP, 2014).

⁴During the study period reflected in this report, there were significant changes to high school equivalency testing. In January 2014, as is described in more detail in the report, new test options were introduced in several states along with a revised General Educational Development (GED) test. In this report, the term “GED” refers specifically to the official GED test or preparation for the GED test; the term “high school equivalency” is an umbrella term used to refer collectively to all test, preparation, and instruction options.

readiness training, and a paid 18-week internship that was conditioned on maintaining adequate attendance in the educational component. After the internship, participants were expected to make the transition to unsubsidized employment, postsecondary education, or both; this transition was supposed to occur about six months after program enrollment for most participants, though some were expected to require more time. The core elements of Project Rise were the cohort structure, case management for the full 12-month program length, the education-conditioned paid internship, and financial incentives (for example, \$100 for taking a high school equivalency test or a gift card for completing a certain number of internship hours).

This report is based on work supported by the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. SIF combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the United States. Project Rise was part of the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) SIF project, which was led by CEO and the Mayor’s Fund to Advance New York City in collaboration with MDRC.

Overview of Project Rise

Project Rise was a newly designed program when adopted by the program providers. Each program operator was a large, well-known nonprofit with experience serving disconnected young people. (Table ES.1 presents the characteristics of each organization operating Project Rise.)⁵

Although the designers envisioned Project Rise as a specific set of activities, they deemed some flexibility in program flow as essential to allow the providers to tailor the program components to their organizational context and to individual participants’ particular circumstances. The cohort approach was intended to foster group cohesion and peer support among the participants as a means to bolster program engagement. In addition, case managers were expected to meet regularly with participants throughout the 12-month program period, in order to identify supports needed to promote participants’ program engagement; case managers were responsible for either providing the supports or coordinating referrals to appropriate services.

As the first step in the program, the young adults engaged in a three- to six-week “pre-internship” period, with activities such as goal setting, career exploration, and job-readiness

⁵The FECS Bronx Youth Center, which housed Project Rise and other youth programs, transferred the oversight of Project Rise to another New York City multiservice agency, The Door, in spring 2015.

Table ES.1

Project Rise Providers and the Youth Services They Offer

	FEGS ^a	Henry Street Settlement	Kingsborough Community College	Rutgers T.E.E.M. Gateway	Full Employment Council
Program location	South Bronx, New York City.	Lower East Side, Manhattan, New York City.	Southern tip of Brooklyn, New York City.	Inner city Newark, New Jersey.	Kansas City, Missouri.
Description of organization	Multiservice organization. Offers home care, housing, employment, workforce development, education, counseling, and prevention programs for young people and adults, including recent immigrants and those with disabilities.	Multiservice organization. Offers a range of social services and arts and health care programs, including transitional and supportive housing, job training and placement, and senior services.	An initiative of the Center for Economic and Workforce Development at the City University of New York Kingsborough Community College. Provides workforce training and college-readiness programs.	Rutgers (the State University of New Jersey) Transitional Education and Employment Management (T.E.E.M.) Gateway provides education, employment assistance, and other support services to at-risk and disconnected youth.	An American Job Center (One-Stop) for the greater Kansas City area. Provides federally funded job training for youth and adult job-seekers; also serves employers.
Other youth services and programs offered by organization	Programs for out-of-school, unemployed young adults including Young Adult Internship Program, mentoring, transitions to college.	Young Adult Internship Program, Summer Youth Employment Program.	Skills and career training for hospitality, food service, and health care industries.	Programs to increase work-readiness skills. Youth Education Center and Employment Success Center offer youth development services.	Education with job training/experience, juvenile offenders program, Workforce Investment Act, summer youth employment.

(continued)

Table ES.1 (continued)

	FEGS	Henry Street Settlement	Kingsborough Community College	Rutgers T.E.E.M. Gateway	Full Employment Council
Special resources available to Project Rise participants	Certified Human Resources Administration (HRA) provider, ^b mental health counseling, clothing closet.	Certified HRA provider.	Certified HRA provider and various support services, such as food pantry, clothing closet.	—	Computer lab, job club, hiring fairs.

SOURCE: MDRC staff interviews and organization websites.

NOTES: ^aThe FEGS Bronx Youth Center, which housed Project Rise and other youth programs, transferred the oversight of Project Rise to another New York City multiservice agency, The Door, in spring 2015.

^bParticipants receiving cash assistance can use their participation in programs to fulfill the cash assistance requirements for New York City.

preparation (which included workshops on resume writing, interview skills, and soft workplace skills). The young adults also took part in community service activities during the pre-internship period, which were designed to build relationships among members of the cohort, as well as help the community. Moreover, participants began attending education classes for about 15 hours a week during this period, to prepare for the General Educational Development (GED) exam or other high school equivalency tests.

After about six weeks, and once participants had demonstrated adequate attendance in their education classes (each provider determined the policies defining adequate attendance), program staff placed participants into internships, paid at the rate of the state minimum wage, for approximately 10 to 15 hours a week. The internships could last up to about 18 weeks or a total of 180 hours. Participants had to maintain satisfactory attendance in academic instruction to continue the internship, thereby rendering the internship an incentive for participants to engage in education. As part of their paid work time, participants were expected to attend weekly group sessions, which provided an opportunity to reflect on work experiences, reinforce job-readiness skills, continue to explore careers, and foster peer support.

By about six months after program enrollment, participants were supposed to have completed their internships, and it was hoped that some would have passed a high school equivalency test. At that point, the staff facilitated participants' transition into unsubsidized employment, postsecondary education or training, or both, although this stage of the program was less structured than earlier ones. Program staff expected young people who had not passed a high school equivalency test – often those who started with lower baseline reading levels – to continue to work toward that goal. (Figure ES.1 depicts the program model as designed.)

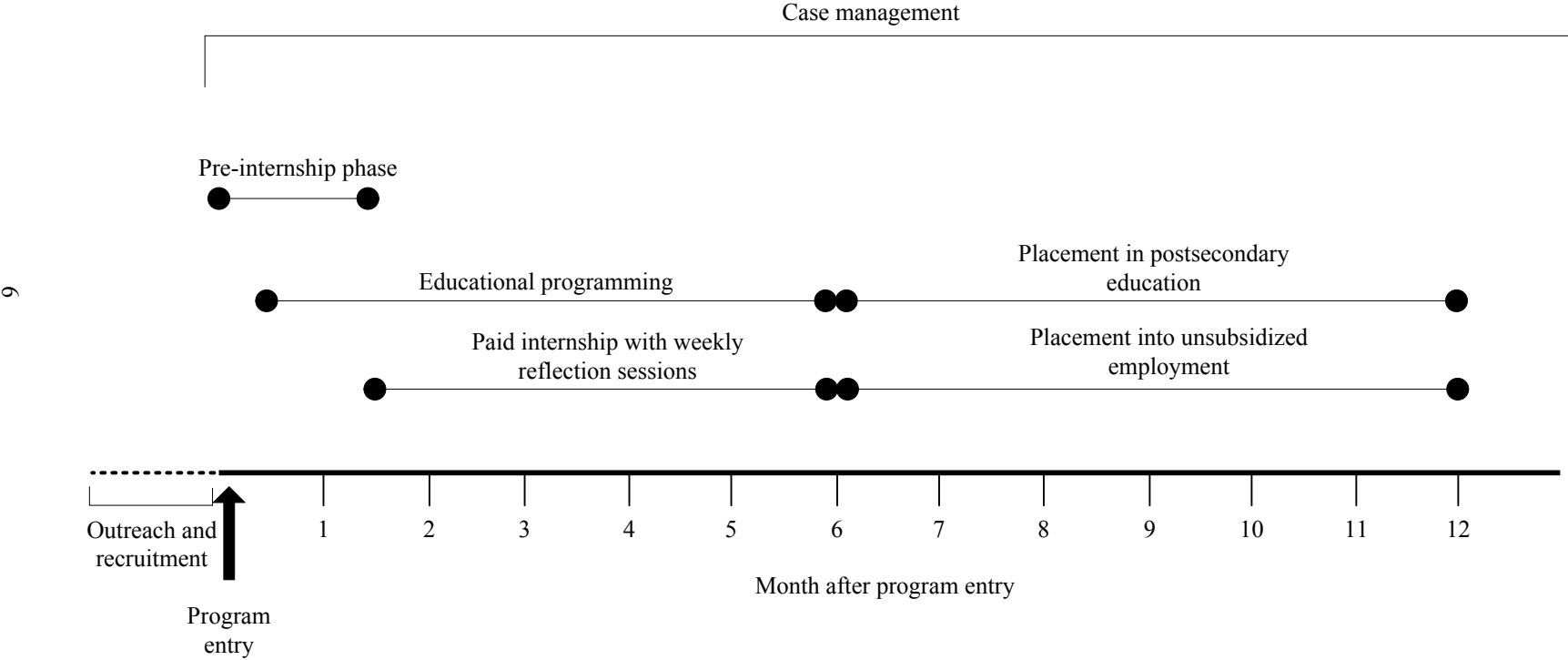
Project Rise staff at all sites benefited from ongoing technical assistance to strengthen their program services. Most of the technical assistance used a youth development approach, which emphasizes the strengths of every young person and opportunities to develop social, cultural, and civic competencies to help them achieve desirable outcomes.

The Evaluation

The Project Rise evaluation is an implementation analysis, which focuses on understanding how each provider operated the program and engaged the young people it served. The evaluation sheds light on the intervention's potential to engage disconnected young adults in education and work and presents practical lessons for policymakers, funders, and program operators who may be interested in implementing a program similar to Project Rise. The evaluation, however,

Figure ES.1

Schematic Depiction of the Project Rise Model



cannot determine the *impacts* of the program — that is, the extent to which participants' employment and educational outcomes can be attributed to Project Rise — without a control or comparison group.

The evaluation focuses on answering three primary sets of questions:

- Within the overall population of disconnected young adults, what were the characteristics of the participants who entered Project Rise, and what drew them to the program?
- How did the different providers implement the program model, and what adjustments did they make over time?
- What were the duration and intensity of the participants' engagement in the program, and what outcomes did participants achieve during the 12-month program period?

In answering these questions, the report examines the providers' recruitment processes, the characteristics of the young adults who enrolled, and how the organizations adapted the multi-component model to their local environments and individual participants. In particular, it documents providers' efforts to address a key challenge that programs serving disconnected young adults typically encounter — how to substantially engage young people who have been disconnected from school and work for an extended period of time. Finally, the report describes the levels of participants' engagement in the program, the points at which engagement was most likely to drop off, the characteristics of those most likely to continue or cease engagement, and participants' outcomes 12 months after entering the program. (Appendix B in the full report presents a cost analysis of Project Rise.)

Implementation of Project Rise

The implementation analysis of Project Rise used a mix of quantitative and qualitative data collected on enrollees from the first through sixth cohorts. (Appendix C in the full report describes the data collection in more detail.) Quantitative data presented in this report include enrollees' individual characteristics at the time of enrollment, program participation data through 12 months after enrollment for participants in the second through fifth cohorts, and detailed data on recruitment and enrollment for young people who showed interest in participating in the third cohort. (Appendix A in the full report presents aggregate baseline information on all participants in the first through eighth cohorts.) MDRC also gathered qualitative information about program operations from program staff at several points in time, collected participant perspectives about the program and their experiences on multiple occasions, and observed program operations.

- **The five Project Rise programs attracted disadvantaged young adults; the participants were demographically diverse with low educational attainment, limited job experience, and a variety of potential barriers to school and work.**

While Project Rise program staff used both objective and subjective (such as staff assessments of young people) criteria to screen applicants, relatively few applicants who satisfied the eligibility criteria were screened out from program enrollment because they were considered less work-ready. Project Rise program operators did, however, require interested participants to comply with multiple steps in the enrollment process, and a number of potential enrollees essentially screened themselves out by failing to attend scheduled appointments.

By design, the young people enrolled in Project Rise between August 2011 and December 2013 had notably low educational attainment, low reading levels, and limited job experience. Their average reading levels (from Tests of Adult Basic Education, or TABE) were below ninth grade and their average math levels were below seventh grade, indicating that their academic skills at baseline were generally not near the level needed to pass a high school equivalency test. Participants were evenly distributed by age (18 to 20 and 21 to 24), and about half of them were female. About one-third were Hispanic, and half were black. Most lived with family members, and many were custodial parents (27 percent) or expectant parents (8 percent). About half of Project Rise participants had been arrested in the past, although only 15 percent had been convicted. Participants were also low income, with 60 percent living in households receiving food stamps and more than half having public health insurance. (See Table ES.2.)

- **Contrary to expectations, participants were motivated to join Project Rise primarily by the educational component, rather than by the paid internships. However, some participants viewed the paid internships as an added “bonus” that set Project Rise apart from other high school equivalency programs.**

More than 90 percent of participants reported that they came to Project Rise at least in part to get their high school diploma or equivalency certificate, whereas 54 percent cited the paid internships as a goal of their participation. It was originally expected that internships would be the primary motivator for participants to engage in education. While most participants interviewed in focus groups or individually described the program primarily in terms of their educational classes, many also saw the internships as something that set Project Rise apart. Typical GED and high school equivalency courses do not include a work experience component.

Moreover, program staff had mixed reviews of whether they thought the education condition of the internship increased participation in the education component. Some thought that it did not make a difference, while others believed that it may have helped motivate some

Table ES.2
Characteristics of Study Participants at Time of Enrollment,
Cohorts 2, 3, 4, and 5

Characteristic	Full Sample
Highest grade completed was 10th grade or lower (%)	57.5
Ever employed (%)	65.0
Average number of months of employment	6.1
Worked part time (1-34 hours per week) (%)	61.5
Earned less than \$200 per week (%)	44.7
Gender ^a (%)	
Female	50.6
Male	49.3
Age (%)	
18-20 years old	55.0
21 years and older	45.0
Race/ethnicity (%)	
Hispanic/Latino	36.4
Black/African-American	53.6
Has children (%)	34.2
Lives with children at least half the time (%)	26.8
Self, spouse, or partner currently pregnant (%)	7.5
Lives with parent or other relative (%)	73.2
Receives food stamps/SNAP (%)	57.9
Receives welfare/TANF (%)	14.8
Receives publicly funded health coverage (%)	60.4
Ever arrested (%)	48.8
Ever convicted of a crime (%)	15.4
Sample size	628

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Project Rise baseline information forms.

NOTE: ^aOne sample member provided a response of “other” to the baseline question on gender.

participants to attend classes but not across the board. The fact that the internships were short term and minimum wage, with little chance of becoming permanent jobs, may have limited the desired effect of encouraging class attendance.

- **Each provider’s somewhat different organizational purpose, institutional history of serving particular populations, staffing structure, and staffing interests influenced how they each implemented the model’s components.**

While variations in program components across sites were modest, collectively and cumulatively they made programs “feel” a bit different at each site, particularly when combined with the institutional settings in which they operated. Rather than having a unified character, the Project Rise programs tended to adopt the culture of the individual host organizations. For example, the Kingsborough Community College program placed more emphasis on postsecondary education, partly by encouraging participants to engage in various college activities such as credit classes and campus-wide lectures or activities. Despite these differences, program participants described roughly similar experiences with Project Rise, suggesting that the program could be operated in a variety of contexts by different types of organizations.

- **Project Rise scheduled and delivered more hours of high school equivalency instruction than do most adult education programs. About one-fourth of participants earned a high school equivalency credential or (much less commonly) high school diploma within 12 months of enrolling in Project Rise.**

While participants who entered the program with at least a ninth-grade level more commonly earned this credential (45 percent earned it within 12 months), almost 13 percent of participants with reading levels below ninth grade also attained this credential. Project Rise staff and participants viewed completing high school or earning a high school equivalency certificate as an important milestone in the reconnection process, particularly since it is a prerequisite for enrolling in postsecondary education or training and is a minimum requirement for many entry-level jobs. However, since the average reading and math levels of entering Project Rise participants were generally not close to the level needed to pass a high school equivalency test, it is not surprising that more participants did not earn a high school equivalency credential within 12 months. A very limited analysis of available educational gains data based on TABE scores showed some increases in math and reading levels for participants who began the program with low reading or math skills, despite their not earning a credential while in Project Rise.

Except at one provider, the classes offered to Project Rise participants were for Project Rise participants only. Common instructional methods included group projects, peer learning, worksheets, independent work, and some one-on-one teaching. Instructors heavily emphasized

math, as it was often the weakest subject for participants. In later cohorts of the program (those after cohort five — the last one examined in this report), staff adjusted instruction to account for changes in the GED test and the addition of other high school equivalency test options; starting in January 2014, the focus of the tests changed from reading comprehension to content knowledge. With the new test, students must possess some background knowledge in areas such as social studies and science to successfully complete the test. This change is widely considered to have made the tests more difficult.

More than 90 percent of Project Rise participants attended at least some high school equivalency preparation or, less commonly, high school classes. Those who participated in educational instruction attended classes, on average, for 161 hours over 50 days. Project Rise participants engaged in much more education instructional hours than did participants in most other adult education preparation courses or programs that have been studied.⁶ Many participants cited the instructors as the key ingredient in making Project Rise’s classes different from (and preferable to) their former high school classes.

- **Project Rise participants received a large dosage of internship experience, although the internships were implemented unevenly. Internships largely reinforced the soft skills needed in the world of work, such as punctuality and professionalism, rather than developing specific career paths.**

To identify Project Rise internships, providers tended to leverage existing relationships with employers involved in the organization’s other internship programs, but also actively sought to develop new employer relationships, particularly if a participant’s interest warranted it. While staff made an effort to connect internship placements with a participant’s career interests, this connection was sometimes tenuous. Participants reported mixed feelings about their internships, often describing situations of unexpected duties and supervisors who did not serve as mentors, contrary to what was intended.

Almost three-fourths of participants began an internship. Among those who started internships, 51 percent worked for more than 120 hours. On average, participants who were placed in internships worked 34 days and earned more than \$900 in wages. The reasons for par-

⁶For example, the Young Adult Literacy program, also supported by CEO, offered an average of 96 hours of literacy, math, and job training instruction to young adults to prepare them for a GED class. See Westat and Metis Associates, *Evaluation of the Young Adult Literacy Summer Internship Study: Final Report* (New York: NYC Center for Economic Opportunity, 2011). In addition, although not a perfect comparison, La Guardia Community College’s GED class — a textbook-based adult GED preparation course — is a 60-hour class taught over nine weeks. For more details, see Vanessa Martin and Joseph Broadus, *Enhancing GED Instruction to Prepare Students for College and Careers: Early Success in La Guardia Community College’s Bridge to Health and Business Program* (New York: MDRC, 2013).

ticipants either not starting or starting but not completing internships were similar: insufficient attendance in education classes, lack of interest in or satisfaction with their internship placements, or barriers — such as child care needs or other responsibilities or appointments — that limited their ability to sustain engagement with Project Rise. A few participants moved into unsubsidized employment before their internships were over.

- **The Project Rise model included multiple components designed to encourage participant engagement, including peer relationships within the cohorts and connections with caring adults. Many participants credited these program aspects for their continued engagement or reengagement throughout the program period.**

As desired, enrollment in cohorts appeared to have benefits, in part because it provided a vehicle to promote bonding among participants through a combination of peer support and positive peer pressure. Bonding was promoted, in part, by organized group activities such as community service. Participants described peer connections as a motivating factor for staying involved, and some participants described their lasting connections with cohort members beyond their active program engagement. Participants also touted connections with caring adults — including case managers, instructors, and other staff — as promoting their continued program participation. Participants used adjectives such as “invested,” “relentless,” “kind,” and “passionate” to describe the Project Rise staff — adjectives that they would not often use to describe adults they encountered in school or other programs.

- **Despite these efforts to promote engagement, it was difficult for the Project Rise providers to engage participants continuously in the planned sequence of activities. Forty percent of the participants exited the program before the end of the 12-month program period.**

Project Rise participants took multiple pathways to reconnect with school and work, and most of them did not proceed continuously or at the same pace through the planned sequence of program components. Many participants encountered life issues such as child care problems or housing instability. Some participants had lapses in education attendance that precluded their placement in internships, although they continued to attend education classes, albeit less regularly. Some began internships but did not complete them and still reconnected to postsecondary education or unsubsidized employment.

Overall, participants who were placed in an internship were less likely to leave the program and more likely to stay engaged, attain a high school equivalency credential, and make the transition to unsubsidized employment or postsecondary education. (The internship placement did not necessarily *cause* the continued engagement; it is quite possible that the participants who were more able to consistently engage in the program were also more likely to be placed into an

internship.) However, general program attrition was high; 40 percent of all Project Rise enrollees exited the program before the end of the 12-month program period.⁷ The reasons for program exits reflected a mix of staff- and participant-initiated actions, with the most commonly reported reasons being participants' poor attendance, loss of interest in the program, and behavioral problems.

- **Within the 12-month program period, more than one-fourth of participants reported achieving the longer-term goals of obtaining unsubsidized employment, enrolling in postsecondary education, or both.**

About one-fourth of Project Rise participants reported beginning an unsubsidized job within one year, and 7.5 percent entered postsecondary education, which could include college courses or job-skills training. These outcomes are not surprising, particularly since only slightly more than one-fourth of participants earned a high school equivalency credential during the program period. Moreover, research suggests that it often takes longer than 12 months for disconnected young adults with limited skills to reach these milestones, and reaching them may require more intensive case management or other supports than Project Rise provided; it is also possible that young adults who failed to reconnect with work or school within 12 months did so later, or that those who initially reconnected within 12 months became disconnected again later.⁸ Data limitations preclude more long-term analysis of the extent to which these young adults may have later reconnected and stayed connected. (As noted in Appendix A, estimates of unsubsidized employment and postsecondary education rates are likely conservative because it was difficult for program staff to track participants' progress once they were no longer engaged in the program.)

- **Child care responsibilities seemed to be the characteristic most associated with reducing a participant's ability to engage continuously in the program. Individuals who reported, at baseline, that they had child care responsibilities had lower program attendance rates, fewer internship placements, and lower rates of high school equivalency certificate attainment.**

⁷Project Rise's attrition rate is lower than that of the Young Adult Literacy program, from which 53 percent exited for a reason other than graduation or employment. See Westat and Metis Associates (2011). This finding echoes the data from the Young Adult Internship Program, also supported by CEO, in which about 50 percent of participants completed their internships (defined as attending overall 50 percent or more of the assigned hours, and staying with the program through week 11). See Westat and Metis Associates, *Evaluation of the Young Adult Internship Program (YVIP): Analysis of Existing Participant Data* (New York: NYC Center for Economic Opportunity, 2009).

⁸Dan Bloom, Saskia Levy Thompson, and Rob Ivry, *Building a Learning Agenda around Disconnected Youth* (New York: MDRC, 2010).

Several subgroups of young adults, including those defined by participants' gender, age, enrollment cohort, and whether they were custodial parents, were analyzed. In general, the analyses showed larger differences in program engagement than in program outcomes (including high school equivalency certificate attainment, finding unsubsidized employment, and enrolling in postsecondary education) across subgroups. The largest differences in participation and outcomes occurred between participants who were custodial parents and those who were not. Staff across all providers highlighted inconsistent child care as a significant factor in the ability of participants to fully engage in the program.

Conclusion

The Project Rise evaluation provides important findings about one approach to reconnecting young people who have been out of school and work for a significant period. The findings come at a time when states, local authorities, and providers are implementing the WIOA and expanding programs and services for out-of-school youth, a population that overlaps with the one Project Rise serves.

In general, this evaluation sheds light on the challenges of engaging young people in a multi-component program and equipping them to enter (or reenter) the workforce, continue their education, or both. The finding that few disconnected young people progressed straightforwardly through the specified sequence of program components underscores the importance of providing individualized services. It also appears worthwhile to continue experimenting with enrolling participants in cohorts of their peers. And while combining education and work with other supports is important, the Project Rise experience suggests that the education-conditioned internship that was a core feature of the model may be of limited interest to program providers.

Policymakers, practitioners, and funders interested in implementing programs for young people similar to Project Rise should recognize the need for an adequate level of staffing, especially for case management and the internship component. However, if the program is operating in a less resource-rich environment than existed during the SIF study period, it could be difficult to preserve the low client-to-staff ratio that Project Rise providers enjoyed. In addition, Project Rise staff received technical assistance of a scope and intensity not available to most organizations serving youth.

Other lessons from the Project Rise experience suggest that:

- Individualized plans and services, when balanced with standards and clarity of expectations, are critical to the sustained engagement of disconnected young people.

- Many disconnected young people are interested in enrolling in a program to earn a high school equivalency certificate, but they may need additional motivation during the process to stay engaged.
- Caring staff members and positive relationships with peers, primarily developed through cohort enrollment, promote participant retention.
- Reducing logistical barriers, such as transportation and child care, is critical to persistently engaging disconnected young people in a program.
- Work experience can be valuable for disconnected young people, but providers and funders should support the infrastructure needed to implement quality internships and other workforce components; this infrastructure includes employing staff with job development expertise and with both the time and skill sets needed to effectively coordinate with employers.
- Attention must be paid to helping young people make the transition from program services to long-term employment and education opportunities.
- A 12-month program may not be long enough for many disconnected young people to earn an education credential and secure stable unsubsidized employment.

Interim or nontraditional performance measures should be considered to mark progress in programs for disconnected young people. Such measures may help demonstrate participants' progress that is not apparent in the traditional outcomes of degree or certificate attainment and unsubsidized employment. The youth development field has not yet identified intermediate or nontraditional measures that are acceptable to both practitioners and funders.⁹ Developing such measures might help stakeholders establish meaningful milestones that can assess disconnected young people's progress on their paths to the educational, economic, and social mainstream.

In the three cities where Project Rise was operated, leaders and other members of the youth development field have begun to incorporate lessons from the evaluation into their ongoing initiatives. For example, Full Employment Council in Kansas City used its Project Rise experience to help win major grants to expand services. In Newark, where programs have typically served out-of-school young people until the age of 21, Project Rise has provided lessons to local service providers on extending educational programming to young people ages 22 to 24. In New York City, CEO has used the lessons from Project Rise in current initiatives to overhaul

⁹Richard F. Catalano, M. Lisa Berglund, Jean A. M. Ryan, Heather S. Lonczak, and J. David Hawkins, "Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 591, 1: 98-124 (2004).

the city's workforce development system. The New York City Career Pathways initiative includes restructured work-based learning opportunities for disconnected young people. In addition, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development is currently conducting a pilot program in which participants in the Young Adult Literacy Program can move into the Young Adult Internship Program if they achieve certain education gains.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.

