

CEO RESPONSE TO MDRC EVALUATION OF THE YOUNG ADULT LITERACY PROGRAM

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The Young Adult Literacy program was designed to fill a gap in services for young people with basic education needs. High school equivalency (HSE) programs generally serve participants reading at the 8th grade level or above and very little has been available for young people with 4th-8th grade reading skills.¹ In addition, few literacy programs are specifically designed for the needs of young adults.² To address these needs, the Young Adult Literacy program was launched in 2008 by Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) in partnership with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), Brooklyn Public Library, New York Public Library, and Queens Public Library. The program was expanded by the Young Men's Initiative in 2011.

The Young Adult Literacy program provides young adults ages 16-24 who are out of work and out of school and read at the 4th-8th grade levels with targeted instruction specifically tailored to their needs and interests, case management and support services, and a project-based learning or internship component. The service providers do this within a youth development framework and focus on serving young adults at particularly low literacy levels. Individual providers have considerable flexibility from CEO and DYCD to implement these components differently within this framework.

Seeking to study implementation challenges and programmatic best practices across a selection of Young Adult Literacy sites, CEO contracted with MDRC to conduct an implementation evaluation, focusing on five programs that represent the geographical and organizational diversity of the program. The evaluation included sites operated by both the public library systems and community based organizations, as well as sites also housing the YMI Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS) literacy program serving young adults on probation.³ The evaluators completed visits to each site to conduct observations of the classroom and internship components, interviews with staff, and focus groups with participants.

This MDRC evaluation report documents some of the core challenges of implementing a literacy program for young adults, including participant attendance and retention, teacher and other staff turnover, and engagement of students with sometimes widely different skill levels. In addition, programs report challenges with striking a balance between enforcement of program requirements and flexibility to accommodate participants' life circumstances.

A key challenge highlighted within the report is the management of student expectations when many young adults enter the program anticipating they will be able to earn their HSE diploma relatively quickly. This is especially challenging given the long journey to HSE completion facing young adults entering the program at the lowest literacy levels. A prior evaluation of the program by Westat showed that those participants entering at the lowest grade levels make the greatest gains – approximately 2 grade levels in literacy and math.⁴ Even with these impressive gains, however, a young adult at the 4th grade level would still need to advance two more grade levels beyond these documented gains to be able to enroll in a HSE preparation course. Over the 18-month period examined in the

¹ Note that in January 2014, New York State replaced the GED with the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) to award high school equivalency degrees.

² See Flugman, B., Perin, D., and Spiegel, S. (2003) "An Exploratory Case Study of 16-20 Year Old Students in Adult Education Programs";

Hayes, E. (1999) "Youth in Adult Literacy Programs" Review of Adult Learning and Literacy: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=524>.

³ CEPS was launched in 2012 by YMI in partnership with the Department of Probation, to replicate the same model as Young Adult Literacy but specifically serving young adults on probation.

⁴ See Westat (2013) "Follow-up Evaluation of the CEO Young Adult Literacy Program: July 2009-December 2010."



Westat evaluation, just 40% of Young Adult Literacy participants reached a point where they could transition to a higher level HSE class.

The MDRC evaluation also documents some key strategies programs are using to overcome these challenges or enhance their success. These include:

- Strong team coordination
- Use of full-time instructors
- Allowing time for lesson-planning
- Fostering a sense of community among students and staff
- Early and ongoing goal-setting
- Clear articulation and reinforcement of program norms
- Linking to on-site HSE programs

This evaluation has already informed CEO's strategic planning and operations for the program. A new set of providers was selected through a competitive Request for Proposals for fiscal year 2015. CEO, in partnership with DYCD, is drawing upon lessons from this evaluation to support the first year of implementation for these new sites and remains committed to improving the program using the lessons from this and other evaluations.

Prior evaluations of the program have also shaped CEO's implementation of Young Adult Literacy in important ways. For example, the first evaluation of the program by Westat tested the potential impact of adding paid internships to the model by randomly assigning this component to about half of programs. It showed positive effects on attendance and retention and led to the incorporation of internships across all Young Adult Literacy sites.⁵ These findings have also continued to inform CEO's interest in pairing subsidized jobs for young adults with other services like education. CEO's Work Progress Program is one example of this strategy.⁶ CEO has also used the lessons of Young Adult Literacy to inform the development of Project Rise, one of its federal Social Innovation Fund programs.⁷

Looking forward, CEO will continue to partner with DYCD and others to ensure that the lessons of Young Adult Literacy, Project Rise, and other programs are informing youth programming across the city. CEO remains committed to pursuing the implementation and evaluation of effective strategies to meet the needs of disconnected young adults reading at low literacy levels and connect them to pathways that further their education and careers. CEO is working closely with the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development to support the development of quality programs that help improve career pathways for young adults.⁸

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⁵ See Westat and Metis (2011) "CEO Young Adult Literacy Program and the Impact of Adding Paid Internships."

⁶ For more information on the Work Progress Program, see Branch Associates (2014) "Implementation Study of the Center for Economic Opportunity's Work Progress Program and NYC Recovers."

⁷ For more information on Project Rise, see MDRC (2013) "Reconnecting Disconnected Young Adults: The Early Experience of Project Rise."

⁸ See <http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/931-14/de-blasio-administration-overhaul-workforce-development-focus-good-paying-jobs-/#/0>