

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS FOR REENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

Summary Report

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Introduction

This report summarizes key themes across reports produced through the Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative (CPRI). The purpose of CPRI is to use data to promote shared learning across the Open Doors Youth Reengagement system and nationally about promising youth reengagement practices and program models. We greatly appreciate the young people, program staff members, and partners who shared their perspectives on how Open Doors programs are making a difference in their lives and in their communities.



I know that my journey is not linear. But I'm just proud of the confidence and dedication I put into myself."

– Fresh Start at Tacoma Community College student

Youth reengagement programs are a critical community resource

More than four million young people in the United States age 16 to 24 have disconnected from the K–12 education system prior to completing high school or have not yet entered the workforce,¹ with rates of disconnection growing in many states and communities since prior to the pandemic.² In Washington state, 10.1 percent of the 85,240 students in the 2022 high school graduation cohort were classified as unenrolled from school, with higher unenrollment rates for students who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native, Latino/a/x, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.³ Additional analysis finds proportionally more students in the 2022 graduation cohort who were unenrolled from school were from families with low incomes or had experienced homelessness during high school compared with the overall 2022 graduation cohort in the state of Washington.⁴

Multiple factors contribute to disruptions in a young person's high school education. In a recent Community Center for Education Results⁵ report, young people in the Seattle area participating in Open Doors described three key barriers to school engagement: racial bias and negative school climate, insufficient academic supports, and unmet basic needs such as access to housing. This is in line with national data showing an increase in student disengagement due to a combination of “push” factors related to school context⁶ and circumstances students face in their daily lives and communities.⁷

A deeper understanding of promising strategies for reengaging young people in learning is critical in providing all young people with equitable access to educational and economic opportunities. Individuals who participate in school or work during adolescence and early adulthood report better health outcomes and are more likely to be employed, earn more, and own their home, than those who were disconnected as young people.⁸ Successfully reengaging young people in learning is therefore of crucial importance and will benefit them as individuals and contribute to the economic health and overall well-being of our communities.

Open Doors: Washington's statewide youth reengagement system

Washington state's Building Bridges legislative workgroup's recommendations in 2007 and 2008 led to legislation (RCW 28A.175.075) tasking the state's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to develop a statewide approach to dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval. The recommendations encourage partnerships among state agencies, districts, colleges, and community-based organizations to provide instruction and services to support students in remaining engaged or reengaging in school in order to ultimately become productive members of the community.⁹ In 2010, state legislation (ESSHB 1418) charged OSPI with developing "a statewide dropout reengagement system and to provide appropriate educational opportunities and access to services for students age sixteen to twenty-one who have dropped out of high school or are not accumulating sufficient credits to reasonably complete a high school diploma in a public school before the age of twenty-one" (RCW 28A.175.100). The state established the Open Doors Youth Reengagement Program as its dropout retrieval system for older youth and young adults.

The Open Doors model

OSPI oversees administration of Open Doors programs, which receive about \$9,300 of state funding per full-time enrolled student.

Core elements of the program model include:

- **Partnerships.** Districts may operate their own program or partner with diverse providers (e.g., colleges, for-profit entities, education service districts, or community-based organizations) to offer instructional and comprehensive student support.
- **Pathways.** Students may earn a GED and participate in postsecondary or work readiness education (GED-plus), earn a high school diploma, obtain career training, and/or earn college credits, certificates, or a two-year degree.
- **Program requirements.** Legislative guidance (RCW 28A.175.100, WAC 392-700) requires the program to be performance based, to include individual student case management, and to offer a minimum of two hours of face-to-face contact each month.

Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative

In 2021, Education Northwest, OSPI, National League of Cities, and Achieving the Dream came together with funding from the Ballmer Group and Kaiser Family Foundation to launch the Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative (CPRI).

The purpose of CPRI is to use data to promote shared learning across the Open Doors system and nationally about promising youth reengagement practices and program models.

Working with an advisory committee of local and national experts, Education Northwest facilitated a series of collaborative inquiry activities to explore four guiding questions of interest to the field.

CPRI is not an evaluation of Open Doors Youth Reengagement, but an effort to combine multiple forms of data to spark system-wide dialogue about what is working—and what can be improved—to help Open Doors students reach their goals. These reports are resources for an ongoing conversation. The work builds upon and complements longitudinal research on Open Doors students by ERDC¹⁰ by looking at these issues in relation to program characteristics and across multiple cohorts of students.

CPRI Guiding Questions

1. What are the short- and long-term outcomes of effective Open Doors programs?
2. Which Open Doors programs are meeting these indicators of effectiveness?
3. What are effective program models and strategies for promoting youth reengagement and postsecondary success through Open Doors?
4. What are the most important program and student outcomes for continuous learning and improvement to work toward and track across the Open Doors system?

CPRI activities, methods, and products

Open Doors is a rapidly growing statewide youth reengagement system with diverse providers and program models.¹¹ CPRI offers a snapshot of the system at a particular point in time as well as an in-depth look at promising practices and outcomes in six programs. Below is a summary of our activities and products from 2021–23, all of which can found on the Open Doors Summit website: <https://opendoors-summit.ednw.org/materials/>.

- **Open Doors Theory of Action** was developed in collaboration with CPRI advisory committee members and with input from over 150 program staff members across the state. The theory of action provides a summary of Open Doors' intended goals, strategies and outcomes and serves as a foundation for this data work.

- **Washington State Open Doors Youth Reengagement System: Students Served and Program Outcomes 2015–2021** describes statewide trends in program and student data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center (ERDC). This report represents the longest longitudinal look to date at both student and program-level data across a large reengagement effort.
- **In-depth program profiles.** Education Northwest also used program and student data to identify programs with positive outcomes for students who are most impacted by social, economic, and educational inequity. Using this data, along with input from the CPRI advisory committee, we identified programs to profile as examples of promising practices and outcomes. Across most outcomes, the selected programs had above-average outcomes compared to programs that offered the same pathway and also demonstrated better-than-expected outcomes¹² for students who are historically undeserved in education. We also considered program size, location, provider type, and student characteristics and experiences to select sites that represent the diversity of program models and communities across the state.

To understand the programs and their context from multiple perspectives, Education Northwest collected data both in person and online (including five site visits) via interviews and focus groups with 88 individuals as well as through review of various artifacts.

Programs Profiled

- **High school diploma pathway.** Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance and Federal Way—Truman Campus
- **GED-plus pathway.** ESD 113 Gravity—Olympia and SkillSource-Wenatchee
- **College pathway.** Skagit Valley College and Tacoma Community College

Interview and Focus Group Participants

- **32** current or former students
- **12** program leaders (directors, managers)
- **26** program staff members (instructors, case managers, navigators)
- **12** district staff members (district/school administrators, counselors)
- **Six** community partners (at four sites)

Key Findings

In the sections below, we summarize key takeaways from across these CPRI products. We start by describing the overall system and student population, illustrating statewide themes with data from the profiled sites. Next, we offer insights from the profiled sites regarding promising program and partnership practices that benefit students.

Snapshot of the Open Doors system

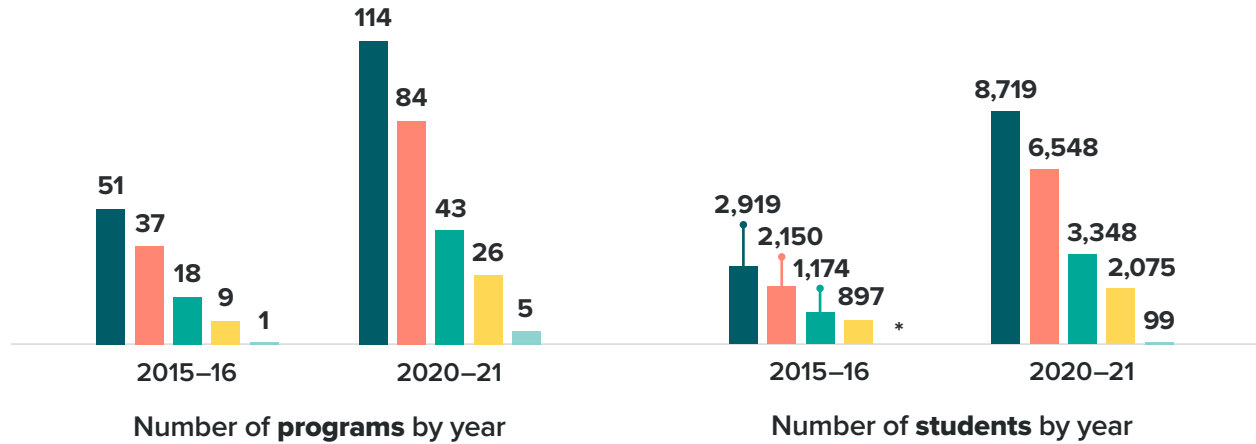
FINDING 1

The number of Open Doors programs and students is growing, with programs available in half of Washington’s school districts.

- **Open Doors experienced significant growth**, from 51 programs serving 2,919 students in 2015–16 to 114 programs serving 8,719 students in 2020–21 (figure 1). Enrollment was highest in 2018–19 (10,594 students) and then decreased during the pandemic (the end of the 2019–20 school year and the entire 2020–21 school year).
- **Open Doors has a broad reach across Washington, with current programs evenly distributed across rural and nonrural locales.**
- **Open Doors includes a diverse set of provider and pathways options.** District-run programs had the largest total student enrollment in 2020–21, but for-profit-run programs have experienced the largest increase in student enrollment over time.
- **Most programs (84) offer the high school diploma pathway**, followed by GED-plus (43), college (26), and career (5).

Figure 1. The number of Open Doors programs and students served has increased

- All programs in the dataset
- High school diploma pathway programs
- GED-plus pathway programs
- College pathway programs
- Career pathway programs



*Fewer than 10 students in career pathway program.

Note: Figure illustrates number of Open Doors programs (left figure) and students enrolled (right figure) by school year overall and by pathway offered. Open Doors programs that had 10 or more students across the 2015-16 and 2020-21 school years and were active in 2020-21 are included. For number of programs and students by year see statewide systems report (Hodara et al., 2023).

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center and publicly available data on Open Doors programs.

Open Doors students

Disparities in the rates of youth disconnection point to systemic and structural barriers that push young people out of school. The transition away from high school is often a slow process, and the result of an accumulation of factors.¹³ Learning is disrupted by experiences such as housing, food, or financial insecurity; frequently moving homes or schools; having caregivers who are incarcerated; negative school climate and disciplinary policies, bullying, or discrimination.¹⁴ Despite these barriers, young people want to achieve their educational and career goals. Connection and supportive relationships with caring adults who believe in them is key motivator for reengagement.¹⁵

FINDING 2

Young people enroll in Open Doors for a variety of reasons.

Our team spoke with 32 current and former students from six profiled programs. In interviews and focus groups, they described a range of structural and personal factors that influenced their disengagement from comprehensive high school and decision to reengage through Open Doors. In line with national research, the school environment were a major factor for students.¹⁶

- **Negative school climate and bias.** Young people described the climate and culture of their previous comprehensive schools as negative, with low adult and peer expectations. Some also discussed punitive and high-surveillance school environments as having led them to disengage. Others shared how structural and interpersonal bias, racism, homophobia, and transphobia led to bullying and a lack of safety and belonging at previous schools.
- **Insufficient mental health resources.** Students and program alumni described a lack of support for their mental health and social anxiety and how previous school environments heightened anxiety, leading to absences and disengagement.
- **Caring for family members or children.** Young people who became parents or had to care for family members discussed how the lack of a flexible schedule or support led them to disengage from their comprehensive high school or start to seek out alternatives.
- **Seeking an online learning environment.** Other students cited in-person learning as the challenge, leading to lower grades and motivating them to look for online and/or hybrid learning options.



It's super non-judgmental in here ... They won't judge you for how you look or what you wear or what you do. It's just nice to be able to be in that kind of environment rather than just trying to be somebody else. Putting your fake face on in front of everybody."

– SkillSource-Wenatchee student

FINDING 3

Open Doors serves a diverse group of students with a high proportion of students who are impacted by disparities.

Appendix B provides a summary of student characteristics and high school education experiences. See the statewide systems report for more detail.¹⁷

- **Between 2015 and 2021, most Open Doors students (82%) enrolled when they were 18 or younger.** Among these students, 38 percent entered the program with six or fewer of the 24 high

school credits required to graduate. On average, students enter the program with 9.5 credits and a GPA of 1.3.

- **Nearly 80 percent of Open Doors students (2015–2021) experienced economic insecurity,** defined as eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. Close to a quarter of students also experienced homelessness.
- **Half of Open Doors students (2015–2021) identified as people of color.** We compared the characteristics of Open Doors students expected to graduate in 2022 with the overall Washington graduation cohort for the same year and found that the racial-ethnic identity of students in the two groups is similar.
- **Open Doors serves a higher proportion of students who identify as male and students eligible for additional services and supports than does the Washington education system overall.** Compared to the overall 2022 graduation cohort, a higher percentage of Open Doors students were eligible in high school for free or reduced-price lunch, experienced homelessness, received special education services, were classified as English language learner students, or had an active 504 plan.

Promising practices and outcomes

Through the program profiles, we explored the Open Doors Theory of Action in the context of six programs in which young people who are most impacted by inequity are reaching their goals. In interviews and focus groups, students relayed how they personally grew through their participation in Open Doors. They also described specific program features that helped them to stay engaged and make academic progress.

The practices identified by students, district and program staff members, and community partners align with the broader literature about the importance of a relational, personalized approach to reengagement. Below we describe the practices and outcomes most often identified by students across these six different program models and communities, along with information from the statewide systems report as context.

FINDING 4

Students reconnect with learning, and stay engaged with learning, when Open Doors programs offer a positive learning environment grounded in relationships and trust.

To reengage in school, young people benefit from a mix of emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental support from a network of adults and peers.¹⁸ Across the six profiled programs, students and staff both emphasized the importance of these relationships in helping young people to reconnect, and stay connected, in learning.

Insights from profiled programs

The percentage of students who enrolled six months or more consecutively (or met their pathway goal) is higher in all the profiled programs than the average across programs in the same pathway. Similarly, the percentage of students who earned at least one indicator of academic progress is also higher in most of the profiled programs. Below we offer student perspectives on how these programs promote sustained engagement and academic progress. See profiles for additional examples.

- **Students describe an overall program climate in which they feel accepted, respected, and supported by both staff members and peers.** They emphasize that these relationships play a critical role in their sustained engagement and academic progress.
- **Students experience a new sense of belonging,** often for the first time, in an educational setting in which they can be themselves without fear of judgement or distraction. Staff members make students feel comfortable asking for help, while students inspire each other to stay focused on their academic and career goals.

Table 1 summarizes key program strategies and practices that foster a positive learning environment and that students value. These examples offer youth perspective on the types of relationship-building strategies and practices outlined in the Open Doors Theory of Action. They also point out the importance of supporting relationship building and socioemotional development across all staff members and aspects of the program, including instruction.

Statewide Perspective

Fifty-three percent of Open Doors students enrolled for at least six months consecutively or met their pathway goal while **74 percent** achieved an indicator of academic progress.



A lot of the people here are adults and a lot of them are in the same situation as me. They didn't finish their high school diploma and they really wanted it and they're passionate about it, so are coming here to do it. So, everyone's kind of on the same page here."

– Skagit Valley College student

Table 1. Dimensions and features of positive learning environments valued by Open Doors students

Dimensions	Features of positive learning environments
Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “No judgement” culture where youth can be themselves and focus on learning • Small-group environment facilitates individual support and relationship building • Formal and informal opportunities for student input and feedback on program activities • Multi-day orientation to new opportunities/expectations of the setting
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive, respectful, and encouraging tone across the entire staff team • Personalized interactions between staff members and youth in program and community • Frequent, proactive communication using multiple methods • High expectations from staff members combined with support to meet them
Peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peers are motivated to learn and “want to be there” • Intergenerational and/or adult learning setting values lifelong learning • Community-building activities online and in person facilitate a sense of belonging

FINDING 5

Students reach their pathway goals despite barriers when Open Doors programs provide case management along with personalized and relevant learning.

Many Open Doors students are achieving their pathway goals despite academic and economic barriers. Looking at the statewide data from 2015–2021¹⁹ we see that:

- **Twenty-two percent of students who experienced homelessness** in high school earned a GED in a GED-plus pathway program
- **Forty-eight percent of students in special education** in high school earned at least 15 college credits in a college pathway program
- **Thirty percent of students who began Open Doors at 19 years old or older and closer to graduating** earned a high school diploma in a high school diploma pathway program
- **Twenty-two percent of students who began Open Doors at 18 years old or younger and far from graduating** earned a GED in a GED-plus pathway program

Statewide Perspective

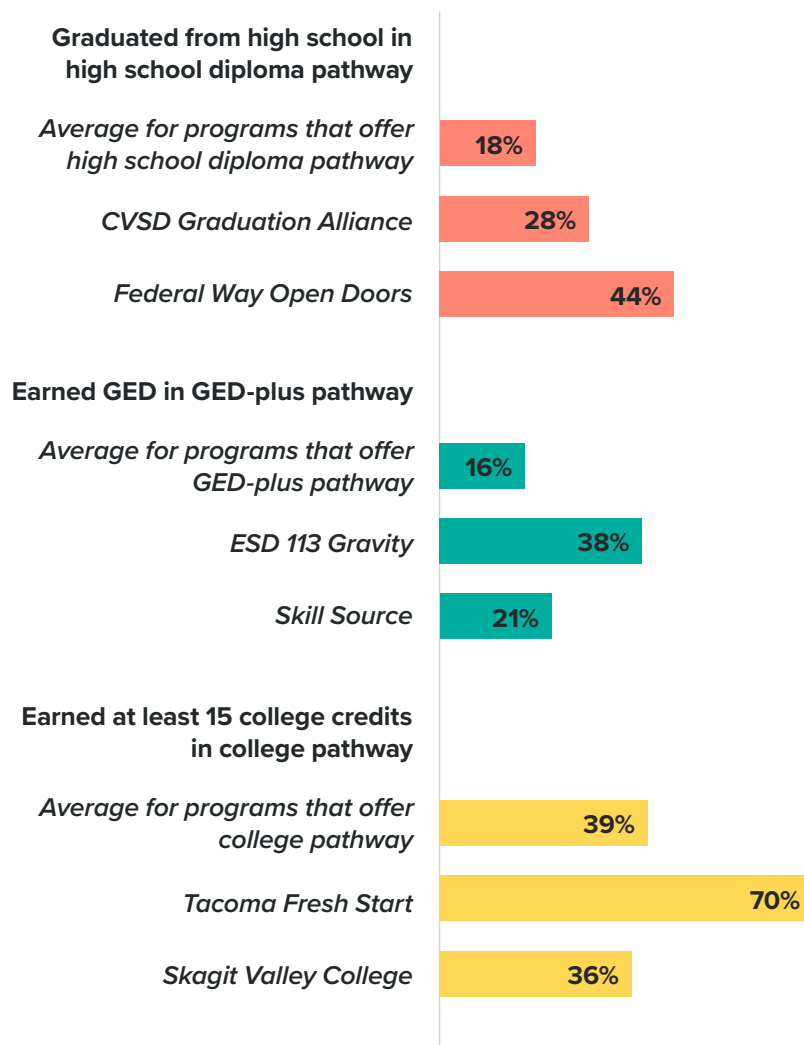
One in four Open Doors students (2015–21) earned a high school diploma or GED during their time in the program.

Insights from profiled programs

Young people experience disruptions in their high school education for various reasons. Accordingly, successful reengagement programs provide multiple options for education and career pathways aligned with each student’s individual priorities and needs.²⁰ Open Doors offers programs the flexibility to meet young people where they are with a responsive blend of instruction and case management support.

In this section, we offer examples of promising practices by which profiled Open Doors programs provide both **academic instruction and wraparound support**. In these examples, the percentage of students who reached their pathway goal is typically higher than the average across Open Doors programs in the same pathway (figure 2). See profiles for additional examples.

Figure 2. The percentage of students who met goal is higher in most of the profiled programs than the average across programs in the same pathway



Note: All profiled sites have better than expected outcomes.

Source: Authors’ analysis of data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center.

- **Students in the profiled programs develop their academic efficacy and confidence as they persist through challenges with support.** In interviews and focus groups, students spoke with great pride about their commitment and effort in pursuing and completing their goals through the program.
- **Students also build the skills, connections, and mindsets to take their next steps in their education and/or career.** Through career-connected learning, many students identified or pursued postsecondary learning or employment.
- **Students value academic opportunities and instructional support that is personalized and relevant.** Most commonly, students are drawn to the flexible schedule and student-driven, self-paced nature of learning in these programs. They appreciate the individual academic support available during classes and access to career-connected learning and post-secondary transition support.
- **Case management supports reduce barriers and increase access to opportunities.** Staff members cultivate relationships with district, campus, and/or community partners who provide wraparound services and resources to support overall health and well-being. Staff members also develop trust with students to encourage them to reach out when they need help and access support. Programs often coordinate case management across teams (and sometimes with partners) through strategies such as weekly huddles and/or a student information database.



... after taking that first college class, I was like, 'I do not belong in this class. This is for kids that know, that [have] already been in high school and middle school here. I don't know none of this.' But, just doing it and having these people push me too, be like, 'You can do it. You can do it.' Because I didn't know a lot of English either ... I got a three-point something on my GPA in that class ... Getting out of my comfort zone was my biggest accomplishment. I think that's a big one for doing more in life."

– Federal Way Open Doors student



[Staff members] reach out to you five times a week. Or if you accomplish something, say you got a class done early or you got a class done on time and you were struggling, they will send you paragraphs on how proud they are of you and how much they support you ... And that built a lot of trust."

– Central Valley School District Graduation Alliance student

Examples of program practices that help reduce barriers to opportunity:

- **On-site wraparound services** (e.g., social worker) or transportation to reduce barriers to accessing off-site services.
- **Material support** such as meals, gift cards, work clothes, or supplies to support student participation in learning opportunities.
- **Staff members visit students** at home, work, or at community events.

Practices that make learning personalized and relevant for students

- **Flexible learning schedule.** Programs offer multiple options for when (day, night, weekend) and how (in person, online, hybrid) students participate in learning.
- **Student-driven, self-paced learning.** Students collaborate with staff members to develop an individualized learning plan, often in addition to the Washington High School and Beyond Plan. They revisit the plans on a regular schedule and update as the student's interests and goals evolve. Students can move through their courses and tests at a pace that fits their needs.
- **Individualized academic support.** During group sessions, instructors connect individually with students to clarify content and check in on progress. They also offer supplemental instruction to fit individual learning styles and needs.
- **Career-connected learning.** Students explore their interests through course content, project-based learning, and/or paid work experiences in the community.
- **Post-program transition support.** Programs provide career counseling, job placement, and/or support for completing college applications and FASFA.

FINDING 6

Strong community partnerships expand the capacity of programs to serve students well.

Students and staff members in profiled programs highlighted the benefits of formal and informal partnerships, describing their role in student barrier reduction, keeping young people connected, and providing students with a seamless experience of support services. **Strong communication** was a cross-cutting partnership practice. Sites described approaches to building and maintaining organizational partnerships for student identification, wraparound supports, career services, college navigation support, student placement, or transfers. Among the six programs profiled, urban and suburban programs each discussed having relatively more informal partnerships than did programs in more rural areas—possibly due to proximity to more community resources in more densely populated regions.

The following partnership strategies emerged across site profiles (see profiles for additional examples):

- **Co-location and integrated infrastructures.** The role of embedded structures and physical co-location of partners in improving student access to services and promoting cross-organization communication. This includes braiding funding from multiple sources to expand the resources, services, and opportunities available to Open Doors students.
- **Culture of data and resources for continuous improvement.** The importance of establishing a partnership culture around learning and the role of shared information and funding for student success (e.g., the use of integrated databases for monitoring student progress).
- **Cross-organizational trust and shared values.** The role of a student-centered orientation and shared understanding of how to support local young people. Program staff members also reflected on how organizational trust grows over time and involves mutual accountability.
- **Engagement in an ecosystem of community resources.** An orientation towards the broader landscape of community resources and awareness of how the program fills a regional resource gap. The perspective of local services and informal partnerships as opportunities to enhance student support and connection (e.g., use of community partnerships to deepen students' in-class learning) and improve community outcomes. This is supported by hiring local staff members with community knowledge and networks.

Considerations for further reflection and discussion

1. What insights from this report can programs and schools use to effectively engage and support young people in reaching their goals—especially those most impacted by social, educational, and economic disparities?
2. How does this information relate to the intended strategies, practices, and outcomes outlined in the Open Doors Theory of Action?
3. How can Open Doors partnerships use data like these to continuously refine and improve their work with young people, and what capacity and support do they need to do so?
4. What does the information shared in this report tell us about the role that youth reengagement program partnerships play in our communities, including the development of strong partnerships that expand opportunities and resources for youth?

Recommended Citation

Petrokubi, J., Cooley, S., Fujita-Conrads, E., Hodara, M., & McLennan, D. (2023). *Community Partnerships for Reengagement Initiative Summary Report*. Education Northwest.

Appendix A. Characteristics and High School Experiences of Open Doors Students (2015–16 to 2020–21)

TABLE A

Gender	Percentage
Male	56%
Female	44%
Non-binary	<1%

TABLE B

Race/ethnicity	Percentage
American Indian or Alaska Native	2%
Asian	3%
Black or African American	8%
Latino/a/x	27%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	2%
Two or more races	8%
White	50%

TABLE C

Program participation and experiences in high school as of 2020–21	Percentage
Free or reduced-price lunch	78%
Learning assistance program	29%
Experienced homelessness	22%
Special education	18%
504 plan	10%
English language learner	10%
English language learner and received special education services	2%
Migrant education program	2%

TABLE D

Average high school academic progress upon enrolling in Open Doors	
Average cumulative high school grade point average	1.3
Average cumulative high school credits earned	9.5

TABLE E

Student age and cumulative credits upon enrolling in Open Doors	Percentage
Younger (18 or younger) and far from goal with six or fewer high school credits	38%
Younger (18 or younger) and closer goal with more than six high school credits	44%
Older (19 or older) and far from goal with 12 or fewer high school credits	10%
Older (19 or older) and closer to goal with more than 12 high school credits	8%

Note: All data originally came from Comprehensive Education Data and Research System data files and are students' high school records. Total sample size is 27,964 students who participated in Open Doors between 2015–16 and 2020–21.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Washington State Education Research and Data Center.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁰ Education Research and Data Center. (2020). *Outcomes of the Open Doors Youth Reengagement Program*. <https://erdc.wa.gov/publications/student-outcomes/outcomes-open-doors-youth-reengagement-program>
- ¹¹ Hodara, M., Fujita-Conrads, E., & Petrokubi, J. (2023). *The Washington State Open Doors Youth Reengagement System: Students Served and Program Outcomes 2015–2021*. Education Northwest.
- ¹² We conducted regression analysis to estimate each program's *predicted* outcome given its urbanicity, student count per year, average student characteristics (average gender, age, race/ethnicity, and indicators of status for free or reduced-price lunch, special education, 504 plan, English language learner, homeless, learning assistance program, and migrant education), and average academic achievement in the year before the student entered Open Doors (prior GPA, credits earned, and days enrolled). With all this data, regression modeling can predict an average outcome given a set of program and student characteristics. Some programs have *actual outcomes* that are *higher* than their predicted outcomes—they are overperforming expectations given the challenges their students face. We looked most closely at these programs for profile site selection.

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