

Youth Opportunity: The Lessons, Legacy, and Impact on Community Practice

BALTIMORE

In Brief (2000-2005):

- In 2000, Baltimore was awarded a \$38 million Youth Opportunity Grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.
- YO! Baltimore targeted 10,000 young people, ages 14-21, living in the city's most impoverished neighborhoods.
- Since opening its doors, YO! Baltimore has engaged more than 4,300 young people in array of workforce and education programs.
- YO! Helped more than 1,600 young people gain valuable educational credentials (post-secondary degree, high school diploma/GED/vocational skill credential).
- YO! filled more than 2,000 jobs in Baltimore City for more than 600 different employers.
- YO! participants entering the labor force earned wages at a rate 44% higher than a comparable peer group.
- YO! participants 18 and older had one-third fewer arrests and convictions of crimes than a comparable group. Participants were also half as likely to be arrested for a violent offense as the comparison group.

The Youth Opportunity Story: Changing the Landscape for Youth in High Poverty Communities

In May 2000, the United States Department of Labor launched the Youth Opportunity Grant program, a national demonstration initiative designed to overhaul the youth services delivery system created under the auspices of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. Youth Opportunity Grants were awarded to 36 high-poverty urban, rural, and Native American communities. These communities were among the most economically distressed communities in the nation, all characterized by high dropout rates, high youth unemployment rates, and greater incidence of juvenile crime, violence, and gang activity.

The Youth Opportunity (YO) Grants—ranging from \$3.1 to \$43.8 million over five years—provided the resources to put in place comprehensive approaches at considerable scale. YO called for the creation of a comprehensive youth service system providing skills training, basic education and work experience, the involvement of caring adults, and developmental opportunities to assist young people in successfully transitioning to adulthood and becoming responsible citizens. In communities that received YO grants, all resident youth were eligible for the program. Youth Opportunity Community Centers were created to provide safe and accessible places where youth could increase their education and employment skills, and receive long-term supportive services, such as life skills training and mentoring. Communities also built partnerships among public, private, and nonprofit organizations to leverage resources and expand outcomes. At the heart of the YO story are the thousands of youth whose lives have been changed because of the opportunity to participate in YO and the access these programs provided to the tools and resources that youth needed to prepare for the future. **Simply put, YO changed lives.**

YO! Baltimore has changed the mindset of many youth who believed they would not succeed because they were denied the chance to succeed.

I am a black female who became a statistic. That word was so clear in my head that I thought that I would never get back in school. I thought I would be on welfare and on drugs. But with the help of God and the Career Academy I got back in school...

YO! Baltimore Participant

The Lessons: YO! Baltimore

By implementing a service delivery philosophy that relied on highly skilled youth service professionals and neighborhood-based youth centers, YO! Baltimore not only became a hub for training and education but also for relationship and community building among residents young and old. YO! Sites were safe havens where caring adults gave young people the resources, skills and opportunities they needed to stay on track and to get back on track to achieve their goals.

YO! Baltimore had three straightforward goals:

- Increase labor market skills and gain career-starting employment;
- Raise educational attainment rates; and
- Fully tap young people's potential for becoming productive and self-supporting citizens.

*What help me the most is...
I learn {ed} to take my life serious
if I want to go somewhere in life,
but who help me the most is Mr.
Dodson. If it was not for him I
WOULD be a dropout.*

YO! Baltimore Participant

These programs made great strides in a relatively short period of time. The YO! Baltimore experience is similar to that of many of the other YO sites across the country. Community leaders learned that with sufficient resources,

*Everything has worked to my
advantage. I got my GED, I'm
involved in plenty of programs
and I have a resume to get a Job.*

YO! Baltimore Participant

strategic cross-systems planning and collaboration, adequately trained staff, and a broad service delivery network (including colleges, universities, community-based, nonprofit, and business organizations), they could significantly improve educational achievement and ability to compete in the labor market among out-of-school youth and those most at risk of dropping out. YO! Baltimore is a example of how collaborations with secondary and post-secondary institutions can increase educational options for under-credit, over-age students and those who have dropped out. Through YO, Baltimore developed a "funds following students" credit

recovery program for out-of-school youth. The YO program partnered with Baltimore City Public Schools to re-engage high school dropouts and re-enroll them in community-based diploma programs run by contract providers. Participants were able to earn a regular high school diploma in a small, community-based learning environment that addressed their unique academic needs, individual strengths and circumstances.

The Legacy

Despite short-lived federal funding, the work begun through the Youth Opportunity initiative continues to thrive. Today, Baltimore still invests in the YO delivery system and continues to see results - educational and workforce gains for both in-school and out-of-school youth. YO! Baltimore participants are working more and earning more money, and have lower dropout rates and higher GED attainment than non-participants in the city.

The Youth Opportunity approach works. In 2008, the Department of Labor released an independent evaluation of the YO initiative, that shows positive results and highlights effective practices for serving youth. During the grant period, YO communities enrolled 92,000 mostly minority youth – 48 percent of them out-of-school. The evaluation found that for this population, grantees were able to increase educational attainment, Pell Grant receipt, labor market participation, and employment rates and earnings. The evaluation showed that investing adequate resources in building community capacity to serve youth can shift the life chances of low-income youth.

Sources:

Changing Minds / Changing Lives: Baltimore's Youth Opportunity Story, YO! Baltimore, http://www.yobaltimore.org/Documents/impact_yo_impact_report.pdf

CLASP Website, "Fact Sheet: The Youth Opportunity Grant Evaluation" <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/FACT-SHEET-FROM-the-YOUTH-OPPORTUNITY-GRANT-EVALUATION.web.pdf>

Linda Harris, *Learning from the Youth Opportunity Experience*, CLASP, 2006, <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/0283.pdf>

Jobs, Internships, And Training

Youth Opportunity sites were very successful in connecting youth to internships and employment opportunities.

- 23,652 internship opportunities were created
- 28,302 youth were placed in short-term unsubsidized jobs
- 18,456 youth were placed in long-term unsubsidized work
- 23,478 were engaged in training

Cross-Systems Collaboration

Seventy-eight percent of the communities blended staffing and/or resources from at least three youth-serving systems—local school district, juvenile justice.