

Evaluation Report Brief

YouthBuild USA: Postsecondary Education (PSE) Initiative

What is the community challenge?

There is growing recognition of the increasing importance of a postsecondary credential to long-term labor market success. Only a small percentage of GED recipients, and low-income youth generally, enter postsecondary education and earn a degree. According to one study, less than half (47%) of 16-to 24-year-olds with a GED enter postsecondary education, and only 12 percent of those had graduated within eight years of entering.

What is the promising solution?

YouthBuild USA is a national nonprofit organization that supports more than 260 local YouthBuild programs across the United States. YouthBuild's PSE Initiative is a five-year effort to create new pathways to and through postsecondary education by: (1) improving the academic preparedness of YouthBuild participants; (2) increasing college transition preparation and support; and (3) providing continued support into postsecondary education.

Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: Postsecondary Education (PSE) Initiative

Subgrantee: YouthBuild USA

Grantee: New Profit, Inc.

Focus Area: Youth Development

Focus Population: Youth and young adults ages 16-24

Communities Served: Low-income, economically disadvantaged youth across the U.S.

What was the purpose of evaluation?

The evaluation of YouthBuild USA's PSE Initiative began in 2011 and finished reporting in 2016. Brandeis University's Center for Youth and Communities conducted the implementation study for the evaluation. Data from a separate impact evaluation conducted by MDRC were then incorporated into the final evaluation report. The goal of the impact and implementation evaluations was to provide an in-depth understanding of the strengths and challenges of the YouthBuild PSE approach and a strong level of evidence of the program's impact on participants. The implementation study included survey data from 275 alumni and data from interviews with over 750 participants and staff collected through 5 years of site visits. The impact study was a randomized control trial with program participants at 12 sites in 11 states. Approximately 330 YouthBuild PSE participants completed surveys at 12 months and 30 months after program completion; results were compared to responses from about 160 similar non-participating youth.

What did the evaluation find?

As a subgrantee of New Profit, Inc., YouthBuild USA engaged an independent evaluator, the Center for Youth and Communities, to evaluate the implementation and impact of its PSE Initiative. In addition to collecting its own data, the Center used data from a RCT impact study conducted by MDRC for the U.S. Department of Labor.

- The PSE model was successfully implemented in each of the sites, but PSE was not a single, static model; rather it grew and evolved over the full five years of the initiative.
- The data from the 12- and 30-month surveys suggest that YouthBuild PSE participants were statistically significantly more likely to participate in a wide range of education, training, and personal development services than the control group members, including college preparation activities ($p < 0.000$; Cohen's $d = 0.73$), a job certification program ($p < 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 0.47$), and leadership development training ($p < 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 0.79$).

- PSE participants were significantly more likely to attain a secondary credential (high school diploma or equivalency credential [$p < 0.000$, Cohen's $d = .61$]), to enroll in vocational training ($p < 0.011$, Cohen's $d = .27$), and to enroll in a 2-year or community college ($p < 0.050$, Cohen's $d = 0.22$) than control group members.
- PSE participants were significantly more likely than control group members to engage in volunteering ($p < 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 0.67$).
- The evaluation did not find impacts on short-term employment and earnings outcomes to date; it may be that those benefits take some time to occur. One more survey is planned at 48 months that may show evidence of longer-term impacts.



Notes on the evaluation

The impact evaluation met the SIF criteria for a strong level of evidence due to its use of a multi-site RCT and its ability to demonstrate program effectiveness for at least one confirmatory outcome. It is worth noting that the impact evaluation did not include all sites as originally planned and the sites included in the study were not randomly selected from all sites nationally. This represents an important limitation and a threat to the generalizability of the study. However, the sites selected were geographically diverse and participants were also from diverse ethnic backgrounds. For the implementation evaluation, the response rates to the implementation surveys were relatively low (18.5%). However, it appears the participants who did respond to the survey were broadly representative of the program's participants, and the implementation findings are supported by interviews conducted during site visits.

How is YouthBuild USA using the evaluation findings to improve?

Evaluation of the PSE program suggested that one of the major lessons learned with regard to implementing a postsecondary program on a large scale is that staff should be open to flexibility. While the PSE "model" was successfully implemented in each of the sites, there was no single, static model; it evolved based on the challenges and needs faced by the participants and the program staff. The overall findings from the evaluations point YouthBuild and other PSE programs toward the need for:

1. Individualized and comprehensive financial, academic, and social supports at all stages (before college, during the transition to college, and during college);
2. The positive influence of caring, knowledgeable staff who provide these supports and help the young people break the pathway into clear, manageable steps; and
3. The importance of both flexibility and learning from experience.

The content of this brief was drawn from the full evaluation report submitted to CNCS by the grantee/subgrantee. The section of the brief that discusses evaluation use includes contribution of the grantee/subgrantee. All original content from the report is attributable to its authors.

To access the full evaluation report and learn more about CNCS, please visit <http://www.nationalservice.gov/research>.

Evaluation At-a-Glance

Evaluation Design: Randomized controlled trial (RCT) impact evaluation and implementation evaluation

Study Population: Low-income economically disadvantaged youth and young adults aged 16-24

Independent Evaluators: The Center for Youth and Communities, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University (implementation study) and MDRC (impact data and analysis).

This Evaluation's Level of Evidence*:
Strong

*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), 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 U.S. The SIF invests in three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.