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Engaging Idaho Out-of-School Youth

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) provides funds to create opportunities for youth ages 16-24 who are not working or in educational programs, otherwise known as out-of-school youth (OSY). Participation in WIOA programs can be low because of difficulties engaging OSY. The Idaho Workforce Development Council (WDC) partnered with Idaho Policy Institute (IPI) to identify creative and proven strategies to engage OSY. To do this, IPI reviewed existing literature and worked with regional representatives from the Idaho Department of Labor (IDOL) and educational institutions across the state to conduct focus groups and phone interviews with OSY recently engaged in WIOA programs.

The literature review found that successful programs help youth build relationships with supportive adults such as mentors or caseworkers, and other youth to foster a sense of belonging and community. Similarly, literature shows that OSY respond well to direct outreach from other youth or efforts designed by youth. Successful programs also offer unique education opportunities and partner with community organizations to recruit youth and create work experience opportunities.

Findings from interviews and focus groups align with themes found in the literature. Specific interview findings are listed below:

• Learning opportunities should accommodate learning disabilities and mental health
• Youth desire to learn job application, interview, and networking skills
• Programs should have more community relationships to connect participants with work experiences closer to their desired area of interest
• Youth appreciate caseworkers and would like a stronger relationship with them
• Interviewees mostly heard about the program from family and friends
• Youth recommend recruiting through social media with updated materials using empowering language and success stories
• Satisfactory employment and financial stability are main motivators for participation
• Youth value educational opportunities and the associated financial assistance
INTRODUCTION

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), passed by Congress in 2014, provides funds to create opportunities for youth ages 16-24 who are not working or in educational programs, otherwise known as out-of-school youth (OSY). These opportunities include job and technical training, assistance in increasing educational attainment, and more. Participation in WIOA programs can be low because of difficulties engaging OSY. The Idaho Workforce Development Council (WDC) partnered with Idaho Policy Institute (IPI) to identify creative and proven strategies to engage OSY. The questions guiding this project are:

1. What are the barriers to engaging OSY in Idaho’s WIOA program?
2. What are best practices to engage OSY in Idaho?
3. What do OSY in Idaho desire in workforce development opportunities?
4. What program strategies align to the research findings to support Idaho’s OSY?

To answer these questions, IPI first reviewed existing literature referencing successful WIOA programs, initiatives successfully reaching OSY, and methods for preventing disconnection in vulnerable populations.

IPI also worked with regional representatives from the Idaho Department of Labor (IDOL) and educational institutions across the state to conduct focus groups and phone interviews with OSY. Focus groups were held in person and were facilitated by representatives from educational institutions across the state (Appendix A). Phone interviews were conducted by a WDC intern. Participants were recruited by regional IDOL representatives using word of mouth, flyers, and a press release. Participants were mostly former OSY now enrolled in WIOA programs.
BACKGROUND

Idaho offered the first WIOA youth programs in June 2016, serving both in and out of school in the first programmatic year (PY) (June 2016-July 2017). In-school youth were only eligible for enrollment in the first PY. Table 1 displays participation counts, as well as estimates of total OSY for each year.

**TABLE 1: OSY PARTICIPATION AND POPULATION ESTIMATES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population Estimates</th>
<th>Idaho WIOA Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>22,600</td>
<td>548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>29,200(^1)</td>
<td>476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>28,200(^2)</td>
<td>627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>N/A*</td>
<td>618</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2019 population estimates not yet available

IDOL, as the WIOA Youth Service Provider, currently engages youth through the following approaches:

**Adult Education (AE)**- AE staff refer eligible AE participants to IDOL.

**Homeless/Foster Organizations**- IDOL establishes relationships with Health & Welfare offices, foster care providers, and homeless shelters which may have some leads on these youth.

**Schools**- IDOL staff visit school counselors, resources officers, and Migrant-Seasonal Farmworker (MSFW) outreach coordinators to connect to vulnerable populations, and alternative schools. Eligible youth may have siblings, friends, or acquaintances in school who can make referrals.

**IDOL internal connections**- Staff regularly reach out to internal partner program staff from the Employment Service, Unemployment Insurance, MSFW, and Veteran’s Services for insight to potential referrals.

**Health Departments**- Idaho Health and Welfare, Women, Infants and Children (WIC), Local Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) programs; and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies help IDOL reach out to low-income, pregnant, and parenting youth.
Community-based organizations—Housing authorities, faith-based organizations, community action programs, Community Council of Idaho, and many other agencies across the state provide referrals.

Social and traditional media—Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are used to reach out to youth. Local Spanish-language radio stations are used to recruit migrant and seasonal farmworker youth.

IDOL community outreach—Staff walk the streets to talk to youth throughout the community and to post program flyers in areas popular to youth. Staff also go door-to-door through low-income housing complexes and targeted neighborhoods.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disconnection of OSY can often be attributed to an individual’s relationships with family, school, community, society, culture, and history during critical development years. The quality of each relationship can protect a youth from disconnection or increase the risk. For example, positive family relationships offer support and encouragement, while negative family relationships may cause tension and stress. Ideal interventions focus on amplifying and improving the positive aspects of relationships and addressing potential risk factors from negative relationships.

Prevalent themes found in successful initiatives include relationship building, youth involvement, education initiatives, and community partnership.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The two most common relationships built through OSY programs are mentor and peer relationships. In addition to providing support, mentors can help connect youth with social services and job opportunities. Youth benefit most from having a mentor who provides specific care, offers stability, and has shared experiences. Mentorship lasting longer than the tenure of a program can provide youth with stability as they transition into independence.

Peer relationships benefit OSY and programs. A cohort approach builds a sense of community and benefits participant well-being. Cohorts also help with program retention and participation, allowing youth to feel less isolated.
YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

Program design and recruitment efforts benefit when youth are directly involved.11 Hiring youth and program alumni to serve as outreach workers and develop relationships with OSY can increase participation.12 Utilizing youth to develop and design ad campaigns for social media platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook) increases recruitment success.13

EDUCATION

Most OSY offerings help further the education of participants, most often through GED assistance.14 Job Corps specifically engages participants in academic and vocational training and is one of the few programs shown to increase income of OSY participants.15 Successfully increasing education in OSY requires non-traditional methods reducing barriers that may have caused initial disconnection.16 These methods may include trauma informed instruction, education pathways oriented toward careers, and improving basic skills classes.17

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Community partnerships benefit programs, participants, and the community.18 Community organizations can help with recruitment by promoting to potential participants.19 Organizations that agree to participate in job-training benefit from having additional employees while participants benefit from making professional connections in a local environment.20 These professional connections allow youth to gain advantages usually reserved for those in the upper middle class, creating a path for upward mobility.21

PROCESS

The research process of this project accounts for successful strategies identified in the literature. IPI worked with community partners, involved youth in the research design, and engaged educational institutions to make connections with youth.

STAKEHOLDERS

Engagement of stakeholders is imperative to successful OSY programming. Throughout this research, IPI identified stakeholders and potential partners for future WIOA projects. These organizations are currently working on similar goals of engaging OSY or preventing at-risk youth from disconnecting.

Some identified stakeholders include:
Idaho’s regional education institutions (Appendix A)
Idaho’s juvenile justice system (corrections and probation services)

- Shelters and organizations designed for vulnerable youth, including those experiencing homelessness (Idaho Youth Ranch, Women’s and Children’s Alliance, etc.)
- Tribal communities (educational managers for the Coeur d’Alene, Nez Perce, and Shoshone-Bannock Tribes)
- Alternative high schools or charter schools designed for at-risk youth

IPI contacted many of these stakeholders to ask for assistance in identifying OSY who were willing to participate in focus groups and phone interviews. Though ultimately no youth were recruited via these stakeholders, the contacts expressed enthusiasm for future partnerships and the outcomes of the research.

Future collaboration between WDC, IDOL and these stakeholders may increase OSY engagement and create more comprehensive and community-focused programs.

**ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

The challenge of engaging OSY is exemplified in this project. IPI wanted to collect input directly from OSY across the state. Surveys are often preferred to reach a large and representative sample of a population. However, due to the nature of disconnection, there is no useful repository contact information for OSY. As a result, IPI decided to conduct focus groups rather than a survey.

IPI sought to recruit both current and recently reconnected OSY. Regional IDOL representatives assisted in focus group participant recruitment. Flyers and a press release were distributed throughout communities and via email to those receiving unemployment benefits. Recruitment materials contained information about the research, the location of the focus group, the time commitment (one hour), and compensation ($50 gift card for each participant).

After four weeks of recruitment, 13 youth from two out of six regions expressed interest in participation. After calling and emailing with these youth, five attended their respective focus groups. Most of these youth were recently
reconnected OSY youth. Of the youth who did not participate, some confirmed they would be able to attend and did not show up, while others were unresponsive to multiple contact attempts.

Due to the challenge of engaging youth in focus groups, IPI determined a more direct approach may be more successful. For this approach IDOL representatives recruited youth who started a WIOA program within the past six months. Each region provided a list of youth willing to participate in a phone interview. Phone calls were done within two weeks of the participants expressing interest. Out of 49 interested youth, 22 representing all six regions were interviewed by phone. Nonparticipants were either unresponsive to multiple contact attempts, no longer interested in participating, or provided the wrong phone numbers.

FINDINGS

Interviews and focus groups asked youth about their motivations and goals for reconnecting to employment and education, their successes and challenges related to the program, and how the program could better reach other disconnected youth.

OUTREACH

Respondents learned about WIOA from family members, friends, high school classes, direct contact with IDOL, and referrals from other organizations such as Life’s Kitchen, the Industrial Commission, Idaho State Police, and Maximus Workforce. Respondent family and friends heard about the program by completing it themselves, seeing advertisements, internet searches, and through their own employment at IDOL. Many respondents, like those who recommended the program to them, have already recommended it to others.

Most respondents see social media as a useful way to reach OSY. Improving social media strategies, such as including youth in the development and design of outreach materials, could increase engagement. Respondents recommended using positive, supportive, and empowering language when advertising the program, as well as updating visuals on materials and using success stories from former participants.

Public outreach efforts, such as presentations in high schools, partnerships with career centers, and a referral system with human resource departments were also suggested. Overall, respondents expressed the need for information to be available in more places to increase awareness.
OSY MOTIVATIONS

Respondents are motivated to reconnect to education and the workforce by the desire for more personal stability and independence, obtaining satisfactory employment, and being able to help their families and children financially.

Many respondents understand the value of furthering their education to reach these goals. They value the WIOA program because it connects participants with educational opportunities and helps with any application and enrollment processes. The financial support WIOA provides for education was identified by respondents as critically important when considering the program.

A supportive caseworker provides continued motivation for participants to continue in the program. Many of the OSY interviewed mentioned their caseworker by name while describing the benefits of the program. Caseworkers help participants if they make mistakes and create safe places for participants to ask for support or advice.

PROGRAM CHALLENGES

Respondents experienced difficulties during the application and onboarding process. Specific problems include excessive paperwork, confusion on required documents, time to complete the application, and time to process the application. Participants felt onboarding lacked comprehensive explanations of program nuances, all available work and education opportunities, and costs associated with the program. One interviewed youth was assigned a caseworker at the beginning of the application process who assisted them throughout it, kept the participant up to date on the status of the application and then assisted in onboarding. This early relationship prevented the challenges and confusion experienced by others.

Another challenge is the lack of flexibility in the structure of the program. OSY may have learning disabilities or mental health conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, anxiety or depression that require innovative educational programs. A lack of support and accommodations for these conditions may have led to a youth’s initial disconnection. Interviewees shared that having daily classes can be overwhelming and discouraging. As a result, these populations may benefit from uniquely designed education programs with a decelerated curriculum, more time for completion, and individual support. Strategies may involve instructional videos, one-on-one tutoring, and dividing curriculum into more manageable sections.
Transportation can also be a barrier to participation. The choices of training locations are limited and may not be conveniently located for youth. Even with the available vouchers, public transportation is not available in most rural areas in the state. As a result, some participants may rely on others to get them to work or school. Rural OSY may benefit from an increase in virtual programs.

**DESIRED PROGRAM QUALITIES**

Respondents are most interested in learning skills that help them find satisfactory employment. These skills include finding jobs relevant to interests, applying to jobs, interview skills, resume writing, networking, and professional communication. Many respondents also feel developing skills directly related to their desired careers would increase opportunities for satisfactory employment.

IDOL currently connects participants with education opportunities and jobs that align with their career interests. However, connections could be improved by helping OSY network with potential employers to increase their employment opportunities following completion of the program. Interviewees suggested IDOL partner with major employers in the region to improve chances of participants being hired in jobs more aligned with their goals.

Although IDOL already provides caseworkers, respondents emphasized the importance of this support and a desire to have a stronger relationship with caseworkers. This could be done by assigning a caseworker before the program begins, having weekly meetings, and having caseworkers who are available in the evenings rather than the traditional nine to five.

**OSY GOALS**

Interviews began by asking OSY where they see themselves in a year and all hoped to be in an education program related to or working in their desired field. Most respondents are interested in working in the medical field as nurses or technical assistants. Other areas of interest include welding, auto mechanics, real estate, marketing, criminal justice, zoology, engineering, and counseling. One respondent indicated that the GED they earn in the program is necessary to join the Navy and earn a degree. Many of these respondents feel WIOA can help them get on the path to reach these goals; however, some expressed a need for a greater variety of program offerings that align more directly with their goals. For example, one respondent saw themselves working on getting a real estate license after completing the program, suggesting that this could be one of the program’s offerings.
Youth commit to WIOA because of the assistance and support they receive that they may not have had access to before. Respondents value their education and want a better life and to find employment in an area that interests them. They are enthusiastic and motivated to complete their education and work programs. They also want to be a role model for other OSY to show them that there are opportunities available to reach their goals.

**PROGRAM EXAMPLES**

Many programs engaging at-risk youth in work and education were identified throughout the research process. Not all programs specifically target OSY, but each implements strategies found throughout the report. Programs successfully implementing these strategies are listed in Table 2. Programs currently operating in Idaho may benefit from emphasizing the strategies during recruitment.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Organization Type</th>
<th>Strategies Implemented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent Family Life Program^22</td>
<td>Local Government</td>
<td>Community partnerships Peer Outreach Youth involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati Youth Collaborative^23</td>
<td>Government/Nonprofit Collaborative</td>
<td>Community partnerships Career readiness Mentorship Relationship building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado School of Public Health Youth Outreach^24</td>
<td>Local Government</td>
<td>Social media outreach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American Youth Center^25</td>
<td>Local Nonprofit</td>
<td>Mentorship Relationship building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@LIKE^26</td>
<td>Local Government</td>
<td>Community partnerships Education programs/support Jobs align with participant goals Mentorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Guard Youth ChalleNGe^27</td>
<td>National Government</td>
<td>Education programs/support Mentorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity Network^28</td>
<td>Local Nonprofit</td>
<td>Educational programs/support Professional skills/networking Work-based learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roca^29</td>
<td>Local Nonprofit</td>
<td>Mentorship Relentless outreach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Technical Institute^30</td>
<td>Local Education Program</td>
<td>Educational program/support Mentorship Professional skills/networking Work-based learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION

Engaging OSY is a process requiring a variety of methods to account for the diverse reasons for disconnection. Responses from Idaho youth align with the findings in the completed literature review. Youth respond well to direct recruitment from other youth or materials designed by their peers. The application process is long and can be discouraging but having a caseworker available throughout can make it more manageable. Once engaged, youth need a supportive caseworker to guide them through the process. Learning and work experiences should be designed to fit unique OSY needs, such as learning disabilities, mental illness, and rurality. Interviewed youth all expressed a desire to be in the workforce and further their education but need the support of WIOA to gain the necessary skills to reach their goals. Community partnerships are valuable to reaching more OSY and creating more work opportunities for participating youth. Overall, WIOA programs are well-designed and with minor adjustments could successfully engage more OSY.
APPENDIX A

IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF LABOR REGIONS

- **Northern**: Benewah, Bonner, Boundary, Kootenai, Shoshone counties
- **North Central**: Clearwater, Idaho, Latah, Lewis, Nez Perce counties
- **Southwestern**: Ada, Adams, Boise, Canyon, Elmore, Gem, Owyhee, Payette, Valley, Washington counties
- **South Central**: Blaine, Camas, Cassia, Gooding, Jerome, Lincoln, Minidoka, Twin Falls counties
- **Southeastern**: Bannock, Bear Lake, Bingham, Caribou, Franklin, Oneida, Power counties
- **Eastern**: Bonneville, Butte, Clark, Custer, Fremont, Jefferson, Lemhi, Madison, Teton counties

REGIONAL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

- **Northern**: North Idaho College
- **North Central**: Lewis-Clark State College
- **Southwestern**: College of Western Idaho
- **South Central**: College of Southern Idaho
- **Southeastern**: Idaho State University
- **Eastern**: College of Eastern Idaho