

New York City's Young Adult Literacy Program

Case Study on Using Evidence for Improvement

PREPARED BY: THADDEUS FERBER AND ALEX SILEO

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Overview

This issue brief is part of a new series of publications from the Forum for Youth Investment (the Forum) that focuses on how policymakers can better use evidence to improve the lives of children, youth, and their families. This brief follows the Forum's recent report [*Managing for Success: Strengthening the Federal Infrastructure for Evidence-Based Policymaking*](#), which provided a landscape scan of the federal infrastructure for evidence as of January 2017 and recommended ways in which policymakers could better coordinate and strengthen the use of evidence across the federal government.

The report organized the recommendations into three categories: elevating evaluation, integrating multiple types of evidence into decision-making processes, and using evidence for the purpose of improvement. This brief serves as a case study for the third category of recommendations and will look at how the New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity improved the Young Adult Literacy program.

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Using Evidence for Purposes of Improvement

Evidence can be used in a variety of ways. Often it is used to justify increasing or decreasing funding for a particular program through the annual budgeting process. Whereas that may be a worthy way to use evidence, such use generally will be limited. It is unrealistic to think that policymakers will increase funding for every program that is backed by reliable evidence given ongoing budgetary constraints at all levels of government. It is similarly unrealistic to think that funding will be eliminated for every program that lacks reliable evidence as programs may have constituencies who will support such programs regardless. The problem a particular program is attempting to solve will also not resolve itself after cuts are implemented.

Both such uses can quickly take on a partisan nature, which limits their reach and can trigger a backlash against the creation and use of evidence itself. There is less incentive to use evidence if evidence of impact does not necessarily lead to funding increases and evidence of little or no impact does not necessarily lead to the consideration of new approaches.

A third option is needed if advocates are going to scale the use of evidence so that it becomes a pervasive feature of how government operates at all times. This third option can include both broadening the types of evidence that is conducted (including but not limited to impact evaluations) and broadening the ways that it is used. The Forum's report *Managing for Success* highlighted how policymakers should use evidence to improve programs outside of the regular budgeting process.

Improvement through the use of evidence can take many forms. Policymakers can incorporate a pay-for-success model into their work that provides funding based on results achieved rather than services delivered—encouraging a focus on improvement. Officials can introduce new or modified program components into their current model based on new research or evaluations. Policymakers have also started to use performance data to test small-scale interventions that incorporate behavioral science insights.

What all of these strategies incorporate is strong attention to the use of evidence in all its forms, with careful attention to each form's strengths and weaknesses, throughout the policymaking process. This often requires supports within a program that can inform policymakers about how that program is being run and what effects it is having on its target population as well as clear strategies or processes to incorporate new findings into ongoing theories of change.

This issue brief will focus on the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity), the Young Adult Literacy program (YAL), and the decision to add an internship component for students in the program as a means to increase attendance and retention. The brief will present the evidence that led to this change as well as the initial results from multiple evaluations demonstrating the change's success.

The Young Adult Literacy Program

NYC Opportunity has a broad mandate to “use evidence and innovation to reduce poverty and increase equity” by advancing “research, data and design in the City’s program and policy development, service delivery, and budget decisions.”¹ The office seeks to use evidence to scale effective strategies across the city. In addition to the evaluation efforts detailed below, NYC Opportunity utilizes rigorous performance management techniques to track implementation and outcomes measures for each of its programs, ensure that programs are meeting annual performance targets, and establish the foundation for more intensive evaluation efforts.

NYC Opportunity identified literacy as a potential service area as “in New York State, approximately 30% of young adults between the ages of 16 and 18 and 22% of young adults between the ages of 19 and 24 have ‘below basic’ literacy skills.”² To respond to this challenge, NYC Opportunity created YAL in partnership with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) which administers the program.

YAL is a “a free program that helps youth ages 16-24 who struggle with reading, writing, and math prepare for high school equivalency (HSE) classes. Participants can attend pre-HSE classes and get support at community-based organizations (CBOs) and public libraries in NYC.”³ Participants typically have reading skills between the fourth- and eighth-grade levels. The City offers literacy and numeracy classes as well as case management services to cohorts of approximately 20 students for months at a time so that program participants can advance multiple grade levels, enter HSE programs, and ultimately find a job.

The majority of students participate in the program for multiple two- or three-month sessions, with four sessions offered per year. Services at the time of the first evaluation “were provided for at least 12 hours per week,” and the students “had continued access to social support from caseworkers, social workers, and other support personnel.”⁴ While the model has been enhanced over time, the underlying programmatic structure remains the same.

KEY TERMS

YAL: Young Adult Literacy program
NYC Opportunity: Mayor’s Office for Economic Opportunity
HSE: High School Equivalency
DYCD: Department of Youth and Community Development
CBOs: Community-Based Organizations

After launching in 2008, YAL showed some promising results, but struggled to retain participants and developed an internship component aimed at increasing program attendance and retention.

YAL showed promising initial results in terms of supporting gains in literacy and math skills for participants. An initial evaluation in 2011 demonstrated that “participation in the overall YAL program is associated with an increase in the participants’ literacy skills . . . by approximately one half a grade level over the course of the eight week summer session.”⁵

Similarly, participants saw an increase in math skills by over half a grade as well during the same eight-week summer session. As this evaluation used a single-group pretest–posttest design, this initial analysis was only correlational.

Despite these initial promising results, programs like YAL can frequently struggle to retain participants as young adults may have different expectations about what literacy programs can help them achieve and how quickly they can do it. The goal of programs such as YAL is often to help young adults get back on track for HSE classes.



Youth who are looking to make this jump quickly in order to secure a better job or pursue postsecondary education options may miscalculate how long this can take as they have higher needs than youth who are not disconnected from the standard education system.

This misconception can cause programs such as YAL to have lower attendance or retention rates, which can damage the program's success rate. Many participants may also have external factors keeping them from participating such as competing family or economic priorities as well.

As administrators and program staff initially organized and oversaw YAL, retention of participants was a concern—particularly for participants who might leave over the summer break and not return to the program in the fall. As the program began and the issue of retention became a larger concern for both program operators and NYC Opportunity, the program expanded its focus on improving participant retention.

To attempt to address this concern, NYC Opportunity introduced an internship component into the program. Participants would have the opportunity to participate in internships or group projects for a minimum of 12 hours per week for eight weeks and receive stipends each week based on their internship attendance rates.⁶

Participants would be eligible for the internship only if their attendance rate for the standard literacy instruction component was high enough (at least 75 percent of literacy class hours during the week).⁷ The primary goals of this internship component were to incentivize class attendance and program retention.

First Evaluation—Does Providing Internships during the Summer Increase Attendance and Retention?

As NYC Opportunity piloted an internship component for YAL, its office contracted with an independent evaluator to better understand the new component's effect on student engagement in the program as well as attendance and retention.

The internship component was added to five separate program sites (out of nine included in the overall study) with randomization of the internship component occurring at the site level as opposed to the individual level.⁸ The study first collected information about the program's overall effect on participant achievement through a single-group pretest–posttest design (this part of the study is only correlational as there is no control group for comparison purposes). The study also collected information about the program's internship component specifically and its effect on literacy and math achievement, attendance, and retention. This portion of the analysis used randomization to compare the internship participants with a control group of participants from other sites so that evaluators could make causal inferences about the internship component.⁹

Evaluators collected monthly performance data from each site to inform their study, including data on participant demographics, literacy program attendance, internship component attendance, the number and amount of stipends received by participants, and participant retention and completion. The study collected a range of qualitative data as well through interviews with staff, site visits, and participant focus groups.¹⁰

The evaluation results showed increases in attendance and retention for those participating in the internship component.

The study found that the internship component had a statistically significant and positive effect on participants' attendance rates. Over the course of the summer, the average participant attended 66 percent of literacy classes, but the treatment group (internship participants) had an attendance rate of 75 percent compared with 57 percent for the control group.¹¹

The study also found that internship participation led to higher levels of program retention with members of the treatment group having a 91 percent retention rate versus 79 percent for members of the control group.¹²

Quantitative data on participant literacy and math achievement growth (how many grade levels each participant advanced throughout the course of the summer) showed that internship participation had no effect on the treatment group's literacy skills but did improve that group's math skills “by approximately 1.11 grade levels more than the control group.”¹³

The study then dove deeper into the relationship between the level of internship participation and literacy class attendance to see whether higher attendance in the internship component led to a higher attendance in the classroom component. The program data showed that “the more internship hours a participant attended, the more literacy class hours they typically attended.”¹⁴ It is important to note that for this part of the study, the data include information only on participants in the treatment group and are not causal.

NYC Opportunity scaled the internship component to all sites based on the first evaluation's positive findings related to program attendance and retention.

After the initial evaluation showed positive results in terms of program attendance and retention (a primary cause of concern among program staff), the internship component was expanded and added as a core component to all sites. Each site would operate four nine-week internship cycles annually with an average of twelve participants each cycle. NYC Opportunity also expanded the number of sites in FY2012 through additional funding from the Young Men's Initiative, a citywide effort to decrease disparities faced by young men of color. This increased the total number of sites at both libraries and CBOs from 12 to 17 as of August 2012.¹⁵

Second Evaluation—Does Providing Internships during the Rest of the Year Increase Attendance and Retention?

After scaling the internship component, NYC Opportunity still wanted to better understand some of the long-term effects of the YAL program, which now included an internship component, on the same measures from the first evaluation (program retention, program attendance, math and literacy scores, etc.). The evaluators gathered demographic data, attendance and enrollment data, internship participation data, exit date data, and literacy and math skills test data to evaluate the effect of the internship component on long-term outcomes using regression analyses. The correlational study looked at data from July 2009 until December 2010 as opposed to the first study, which looked only at data from the summer of 2009.¹⁶

In terms of the program's overall success, the evaluation found that "participants reading at the fourth to sixth grade level upon entry had significantly higher attendance rates than any other group."¹⁷

This result is particularly promising given that the program's main target population is participants at this reading level. The evaluation examined participant's test scores and found that participation in the program was associated with an increase in participants' literacy and math skills as well.¹⁸

Internship participation leads to higher attendance and retention, but not gains in literacy or math skills.

For the 2013 evaluation, the internship component was now a year-round feature of the program and had been expanded to all sites. Analysis of this component showed that "there was no significant difference in literacy or math gains" between participants who enrolled in the internship portion of the program and those who did not.¹⁹ The analysis did find that participants in the internship component had "statistically higher attendance rate[s] and longer enrollment than non-internship participants."²⁰

The internship was increasing attendance in the program (the primary goal of introducing the component in the first place) despite no direct relationship between attendance and literacy or math outcomes.

Retention continued to be a major concern for both NYC Opportunity and individual YAL sites. Rates of retention across the YAL sites could vary from 27.5 percent to 97.4 percent. As the study notes, participants "have to make large gains in order to have the skills needed to enter to take the GED or enter a GED preparation class."²¹ The study also notes that "participants who have more time between tests" or are retained in the program for a longer period of time "make larger gains in literacy."²² The evaluation also found that internship participants had higher retention rates with "internship participants [enrolling] on average 206 days (over 6 months) compared to 141 days (over 4 months) for non-internship participants."²³

The report concluded by noting that "the internship component of YAL appears to be a key component in increasing classroom attendance. Challenges still exist in finding ways to improve outcomes, but overall YAL is having a positive influence on the academic skills of disconnected youth."²⁴

NYC Opportunity considers how integrating academic and workforce components could potentially better serve participants.

Following this evaluation, DYCD administrators encouraged service providers to better align internship preparation activities with classroom instruction, including infusing common concepts and language across both components, and enlisted support from technical assistance providers to design and implement these enhancements.

This decision was further reinforced by the City's emerging interest in bridge programming that incorporates sector-specific academic instruction and pathways to sustained employment or HSE programs.

Third Evaluation—What Explains the Variation in Results across Sites? How Can NYC Opportunity Improve YAL in the Future?

MDRC conducted an implementation study to better understand what qualities were associated with higher-performing sites and what directions the program could move in going forward. In FY2013, YAL was still in 17 separate sites based in libraries or CBOs. The program continued to have three components: academic classes, case management, and internships.²⁵

MDRC conducted site visits to five separate locations chosen both for their variation in program performance as well as their differing organizational structures (three were CBO-based and two were library-based). The site visits included multiple visits to each program site to interview staff, conduct focus groups with program participants, and observe programmatic activities.²⁶

Evaluation results suggested a number of potential best practices and remaining challenges as well as ad hoc efforts to better integrate internship and classroom efforts.

The study focused on a number of topics relevant to each of the locations such as how students were enrolled in the program, how teachers organized their lessons as well as their classroom, and how each organization provided social services to enrolled students. A portion of the implementation study focused on each location's ability to integrate the internship component into the broader program.

By the time of the 2015 evaluation, many sites presented the internship component as a mandatory part of their programming during participant enrollment. Still, it was difficult to enroll participants in the internship given their other work or family obligations that prevented them from devoting more time to the program.

The primary goal of the internship was to introduce work-readiness skills to participants and ensure program attendance (which according to previous evaluations was improving). Some sites would attempt to link internships with in-class work, but this was primarily on an ad hoc basis.

One site tried to organize academic activities and an internship around the topic of civic engagement by helping students intern at a CBO, for example.²⁷ The integration of the internship component with academic content would be an ongoing challenge for the program as managers sought to balance the workforce and education components of the program.

Developing strategies to continuously improve upon the internship component was a key focus of technical assistance provided by DYCD-contracted partners to YAL program managers following the third evaluation as well.

The evaluation also uncovered a number of challenges to implementing high-quality programming at each site. One of the largest challenges to retention was managing student expectations. As most students come to the program seeking HSE credentials, they can be disheartened to find out that that credential might be far off (given the program's target population with a fourth-to-sixth-grade reading level). It can also be difficult to keep students engaged in the program given the varying levels of literacy between new and returning students as well as the various outside needs that can interfere with a student's ability to participate in the internship component of the program.²⁸

YAL is now undergoing further evaluation and more formalized efforts to integrate internship and academic offerings within the program through bridge programming.

NYC Opportunity continues to evaluate the program and has focused its continuous improvement efforts on enhancing YAL with bridge programming. Bridge programming combines sector-specific academic instruction, career pathways to HSE programs as well as employment or training opportunities, and other individualized supports.



NYC Opportunity was interested in bringing bridge programming into the YAL program as it would build on the previous findings showing that the internship component could support participants' academic goals. This work was also aligned with New York City's Career Pathways framework which was informing programmatic changes citywide.

YAL integrated bridge programming in seven of the sixteen sites in 2016. A qualitative evaluation showed that many of the sites that were not selected for this enhancement were already implementing some of the identified best practices. The bridge programs and standard sites were essentially too similar to compare to one another in an impact evaluation.²⁹

In 2017, NYC Opportunity chose to start a second phase to this evaluation. This phase involved an impact study that would compare the outcomes of youth enrolled in YAL with those participating in DYCD Adult Literacy programs and pre-HSE programs within public libraries.³⁰ This effort to compare YAL with Adult Basic Education will include analysis of various subgroups within the student population and will attempt to compare YAL with other programmatic interventions (as opposed to pre- and posttest evaluations or a comparison with a control group not receiving any programming).

As the current program nears the end of its current contracts, NYC Opportunity is examining ways to better partner or align its efforts in the education and literacy space with its efforts in the internship and workforce development space.³¹

DYCD, in partnership with NYC Opportunity recently released a concept paper based on these findings as well as findings from their Young Adult Internship Program for a new program called Advance & Earn. This program will support opportunity youth, those disconnected from education and work aged 16 to 24, with literacy instruction, advanced training, case management supports, and job placement or college enrollment assistance.³²

What Can Policymakers Learn from This Case Study?

NYC Opportunity clearly expressed what it intended to learn from each evaluation and designed a methodology to fit those intentions.

NYC Opportunity's evaluation efforts were driven largely by information needs at the time. The first and second evaluations were largely about resolving the core challenge facing the program (attendance and retention), understanding the effectiveness of the additional internship component, and determining whether the internship component was scalable across unique program sites.

Administrators were motivated to conduct a third evaluation based on the need for more qualitative information about what was working across sites and what could explain some of the variations in program data from each site. The goal of that evaluation was to improve current practices based on the information gained from site visits and focus groups.

The current impact evaluation is designed to provide important data of YAL's effectiveness compared to similar programs serving the same population in order to further inform future programming decisions.

Local policymakers need to first understand what information they are hoping to learn before deciding on the type of evaluation that best suits that purpose.

Understanding such intentions can help policymakers as they partner with internal or external evaluators and ensure that they have the necessary data available to understand and improve their program.





Conclusion

NYC Opportunity's efforts to improve the YAL program demonstrate what can occur when policymakers identify potential areas of improvement for their program, match those needs to the correct evaluation technique, and communicate findings are released.

In keeping with NYC Opportunity's approach to evaluation, the evaluation process for YAL occurred over multiple stages and involved different methodological approaches based on the various questions NYC Opportunity and its partners were attempting to answer.

Each evaluation was both an opportunity to learn more about how the YAL program operated and a chance to develop additional questions worth exploring in future evaluations.

NYC Opportunity continues to evaluate its YAL program in order to improve its education and workforce investments in young adults.

Endnotes

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DC Office: 7064 Eastern Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20012
Michigan Office: 301 W. Michigan Ave., Suite 200, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197