Collaboration Overview

The City of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Unified School District work in partnership to reengage youth who have dropped out of high school and assist youth who have graduated high school but are not currently employed. The collaboration is primarily based out of the city’s YouthSource Centers, where youth receive a full assessment and are subsequently referred to appropriate education- or employment-related placements.

Components of the collaboration follow:

- Conducting outreach activities to identify youth for services
- Co-locating Los Angeles United School District Pupil Services and attendance counselors at YouthSource Centers
- Infusing a youth-centered approach to assessment and referral to services

Promising practices used in the collaboration include:

- Using research data to inform decision making
- Finding creative solutions to complex systemic challenges
- Conducting frequent needs/resource assessments
- Making smart investments that benefit youth
- Making continuous improvements and addressing sustainability

The collaboration has learned the following lessons during its work:

- Negotiating a shared commitment
- Rolling with resistance
Collaboration Purpose

The City of Los Angeles’ Economic and Workforce Development Department (EWDD) and Workforce Investment Board (WIB), and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) are working together to improve outcomes for out-of-school/out-of-work youth. Based out of YouthSource Centers operated by the city, collaboration partners provide academic advising, employment training programs, and other services to youth who have dropped out of high school prior to graduation or have graduated but are not yet enrolled in postsecondary education or in the workforce.

About the Collaboration

Los Angeles’ YouthSource Centers are operated by EWDD/WIB and funded through the Federal Workforce Investment Act and a $12 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Workforce Innovation Fund. Sixteen YouthSource Centers are located throughout Los Angeles, each in an area identified as having a large out-of-school/out-of-work population. EWDD/WIB operates two Centers directly and contracts out the operation of the other 14 Centers to nonprofit groups. The YouthSource Centers provide resources and assistance to help youth advance toward high school graduation and realize their postsecondary or employment-related aspirations.

Prior to the LAUSD-EWDD/WIB collaboration, the YouthSource Centers provided services to youth who were seeking employment or had dropped out of high school. However, the Centers had limited capacity to provide outreach and identify the youth who could benefit from the supportive services being offered. In contrast, LAUSD had the capacity to identify youth for services and was serving the highest risk youth in the school district, including those who had dropped out of school, but did not operate the scale of relevant services provided by the YouthSource Centers.

LAUSD had a list of about 20,000 students who had dropped out of school or were at risk for dropping out. Although the YouthSource Centers were in a position to benefit from this list as a basis for initiating targeted outreach efforts, strict laws prohibited the sharing of students’ educational information and records with other agencies and systems. The two systems needed to find a way to work together and reengage students and refer them to YouthSource Centers where they would find many relevant services. In 2009, EWDD/WIB and LAUSD identified a comprehensive strategy for working together to conduct targeted outreach and to improve outcomes for youth who are out-of-school/out-of-work. Their collaborative efforts include conducting community-based outreach to identify the youth; co-locating LAUSD Pupil Services and Attendance (PSA) counselors at the YouthSource Centers; and implementing a youth-centered approach to assessment and making appropriate referrals. These activities both satisfy and surpass the expectations of funders and other key stakeholders, representing a proactive commitment to doing whatever it takes to achieve positive youth outcomes.
Collaboration Structure

Conducting Outreach Activities to Identify Youth for Services

The PSA counselors conduct outreach by making presentations to other LAUSD departments, including School Mental Health, Nursing, and Counseling. These presentations allow counselors to reach a large population by educating other staff, who work with high-risk students, about this valuable resource. The YouthSource Centers are also integral to the LAUSD Truancy Diversion Program in which PSA counselors collaborate with the Los Angeles School Police to serve students who have violated the Daytime Curfew Law. YouthSource staff and PSA counselors also conduct joint efforts and reach out to community agencies that serve youth or their families.

Student Recovery Day is an annual event in which LAUSD partners with EWDD/WIB to get the word out that youth who are out-of-school/out-of-work are valued and that resources and support are available to get them back on track. Community volunteers, along with staff from schools and the city, focus their efforts on bringing students back to school or into employment counseling or related services. Typically, 1,000 volunteers gather for a morning training to get information about how they will work together to successfully reach youth. Some of the volunteers spend the afternoon making phone calls to families whose children have stopped attending school or have low attendance and are at risk. Other volunteers go into the community and talk to business partners about the importance of school and ask for their support in refusing to provide services to students during school hours. Additional volunteers conduct home visits and invite youth to reengage in school and work. The home visits, in particular, receive a considerable amount of media coverage; the volunteers are sometimes accompanied by high-profile individuals (e.g., mayor, superintendent, board members). In the past, Student Recovery Day was conducted on a small scale exclusively by LAUSD but has since grown into a larger and more impactful event through the collaboration and involvement of multiple stakeholders.

Co-Locating LAUSD Pupil Services and Attendance Counselors at YouthSource Centers

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) restricts the ability of schools to share information about students with other systems. Despite the benefits of FERPA in protecting confidentiality, it can be a barrier for external systems that want to collaborate with school districts.

Conversations and joint creative thinking by EWDD/WIB and LAUSD resulted in having LAUSD PSA counselors co-located in each YouthSource Center with exclusive access to LAUSD student data. This strategy allows the Centers to have access to relevant information through the counselors, while still honoring and maintaining confidentiality. Funding for the counselors is evenly split between EWDD/WIB and LAUSD.
Infusing a Youth-Centered Approach to Assessment and Referral to Services

Stakeholders agreed that a primary focus for the collaboration is to help youth determine the best program for meeting their needs. The collaboration is centered on what works best for youth and not just what is best for the collaborating agencies and systems. A youth-centered approach is evident from the time a youth walks in the door at a YouthSource Center for an assessment and continues through the receipt of an appropriate referral.

Many youth who are out-of-school/out-of-work have experienced challenges, including behavioral problems or poor testing performance. They may be teen parents or have a disability that makes transportation to a school or work setting challenging. The key stakeholders in the collaboration agreed that upon walking into the YouthSource Centers, youth should receive a full educational and psychosocial assessment to reveal the barriers that may have impeded them from finishing school or gaining employment.

Questions in the assessment address students’ school enrollment and academic histories as well as what is currently happening in their lives. This information aids the on-site LAUSD PSA counselors in identifying needs and available resources that can be leveraged to help meet the needs of youth and their families. On the basis of the assessment, an appropriate referral to an education and/or workforce site is made. In addition, referrals are made to any other services that may support students in being successful. All stakeholders have agreed not to insist that students attend LAUSD schools or education centers that the YouthSource Centers operate. Students can go to a community college or pursue an online program. There are also flexible options for youth to connect with employment opportunities.

Promising Practices

Using Research Data to Inform Decision Making

Through their work with young people in Los Angeles, both LAUSD and EWDD/WIB recognized the pervasiveness of youth’s disconnection from work and school. However, the data presented in a report from Northeastern University crystallized the need for a partnership to improve outcomes for youth who are out-of-school/out-of-work. The report indicated that approximately 100,000 out of 500,000 Los Angeles youth, ages 18 through 24, had either dropped out of high school or had graduated but were not employed or enrolled in a postsecondary institution. This was the first time that the scope of the problem was laid out clearly, prompting a sense of urgency and a need for action. A shared alarm at the report’s findings fostered the collaborative efforts among key stakeholders from LAUSD and EWDD/WIB to address the problem. When both entities received additional funding to serve this population, it was clear that these new findings caused a shift in perspective—participating agencies would be taking this problem much more seriously.

Finding Creative Solutions to Complex Systemic Challenges

The partners have worked successfully across youth-serving systems while still honoring confidentiality policies. FERPA restricts the sharing of school districts’ student data (e.g.,
educational records) with other youth-serving systems and can pose a challenge to other systems that want to work collaboratively with the education system. In light of FERPA, two separate data systems are maintained in YouthSource Centers. One data system is maintained by EWDD/WIB and is used, in part, to track the number of individuals coming into the Centers to work with LAUSD staff. The other data system, maintained by LAUSD, includes students’ educational and attendance records. Because of FERPA, EWDD/WIB and its nonprofit contractors cannot access LAUSD’s data. The LAUSD counselors co-located at the YouthSource Centers are the only individuals with access to school district data. Once a youth enters services and receives an orientation and an assessment, he or she is asked to sign a consent form allowing the case managers, social workers, and counselors to have conversations to help determine the best type of services for the particular youth client.

The collaboration has also helped prevent youth who need services from slipping through the cracks. Previously, to help staff assess the best placement, youth who are out-of-school who walked into one of the YouthSource Centers would be asked, “How many school credits do you have?” Often, these young people had no idea and were told to go back to the school they previously attended to get this information. For a variety of reasons, many students were unwilling to do this and would subsequently not return to the YouthSource Center and therefore never receive assistance. Finding a creative solution to improve this process allows youth who walk into one of the Centers to be greeted by staff who already have access to their educational records and can therefore begin connecting them to appropriate services.

Conducting Frequent Needs/Resource Assessments

Needs and resource assessments have been conducted over time in this collaboration to gather information for program planning and improvement. Several examples illustrate the use of needs/resource assessments:

- Counselors routinely map out the issues that families bring in and assess family needs and gaps in services. For example, many families said that they were struggling because of a lack of childcare. Subsequently, questions were asked internally about what could be done to provide more information or resources to help meet this need.

- YouthSource staff administered a survey to identify staff members’ professional development needs. The survey results illuminated important areas to address. For example, staff expressed a need for more information about dealing with difficult situations between a parent and a student.

- Data on dropout rates were considered when planning the locations for YouthSource Centers so that they are placed in areas with the greatest need for services.

Making Smart Investments That Benefit Youth

Making the collaboration successful involves leveraging resources from EWDD/WIB and LAUSD, as well as those from the nonprofits that are contracted to provide services. By analyzing outcomes of the collaborative efforts, LAUSD recognized the impact of its investment. After committing to pay for half the counselor positions, LAUSD is seeing substantial numbers of students coming back to school, thus reducing the drop-out rate and the average number of absences.
On the EWDD/WIB side, there is an understanding that the collaboration is comprehensive and should be integrated into the operations of the entire youth-serving system instead of being viewed as something special, experimental, and set off to the side. For this reason, EWDD/WIB has been willing to make a serious commitment to this work. An additional attraction that helped seal the investment for EWDD/WIB is access to a variety of in-kind resources provided by LAUSD. For example, EWDD/WIB can now refer youth to LAUSD’s health clinics and school mental health centers.

Making Continuous Improvements and Addressing Sustainability

The Malcolm Baldrige quality principles are used to guide continuous quality improvement across the 16 YouthSource Centers. The Centers also apply performance standards developed by the California Association for Professional Excellence (CAPE).

In the work activities of the collaboration, when something does not work at the YouthSource Centers or if something requires improvement, there is a focus on truly trying to fix the problem rather than simply assigning blame. In addition, open communication channels exist between LAUSD and EWDD/WIB so that when a problem arises, it can be dealt with immediately through a phone call. The issue does not have to wait until a scheduled meeting to be addressed. Stakeholders have attempted over time to implement this rapid communication process across the 16 YouthSource Centers.

The level of enthusiasm for the collaboration is high not only among leadership but also among staff members. Buy-in across multiple staff levels helps promote deeper absorption of the work into the existing infrastructure, thus contributing to sustainability. On the LAUSD side, staff are highly educated and passionate, with years of professional experience in schools and proven expertise in working with youth. The EWDD/WIB staff is slightly smaller, but the team is equally knowledgeable, passionate, and committed. New staff members from both systems (LAUSD and EWDD/WIB) join the collaboration through participating in shared training events, thus helping to ensure that the collaboration continues and matures over time and does not depend on the efforts of just a few current staff.

Lessons Learned

Negotiating a Shared Commitment

An initial obstacle involved how the collaboration would be supported. Within a climate of significant spending cuts in LAUSD, board members were asking why money should be invested in a city location rather than a school location. Also, many of the schools were overwhelmed with pressures to improve test scores and other high-accountability tasks. It was therefore important for the staff heading the collaboration to share the research about this population and to communicate with the school board, the superintendent, and many people within the school district that it was necessary to do things differently and to base activities and programs on an understanding of the importance of reengaging students who were out of school and work.
Some EWDD/WIB stakeholders felt that LAUSD—being a billion dollar organization—didn’t really need the city’s help. However, others recognized that many of the youth who leave school do so because they either need or want to work. EWDD/WIB has unique services that can help them find an internship or other opportunities to work and earn money. Also, the vast majority of the resources that youth are referred to beyond the 16 YouthSource Centers are provided by LAUSD. An understanding of these benefits helped ease EWDD/WIB stakeholders’ initial concerns.

Rolling With Resistance

At the onset of the collaboration, it was sometimes a challenge to keep everyone focused on why the collaboration was important. Key stakeholders realized the importance of staying positive and focusing on what needed to get done. To address potential resistance, it was sometimes necessary to provide additional information to people who did not understand how the collaboration would work. It was occasionally necessary to work around people who were not yet on board, instead going to the people who would keep the collaboration moving forward and who believed in the work.

Whenever there is a systems change effort, small things arise (e.g., negotiating office space, figuring out who pays for office supplies). However, the small things tended to fall away after the stakeholders got to know one another and realized the multiple benefits of the collaboration.

Accomplishments

In July 2012, the City of Los Angeles formally approved 13 YouthSource Centers as “Drop-Out Recovery Centers” with a certified LAUSD Pupil Services and Attendance counselor co-located in each Center. Since then, the number of YouthSource Centers has increased to 16. The following are accomplishments documented after the YouthSource system’s first year of program implementation (July 1, 2012–June 30, 2013):

- 8,534 young adults used the YouthSource Centers. Grown from an informal entity to a formalized council recognized in legislation.
  
  This number represents young adults ages 16 through 24, although the majority were 18 or older. These young adults came through the door seeking education and job training assistance in their communities. Each was provided with a program overview and an opportunity to meet with an LAUSD counselor and staff to review progress toward high school completion. Some also received information and support related to employment options.

- 5,394 young adults received academic advisement from an LAUSD counselor.
  
  The young adults met with an LAUSD counselor to review their transcripts and to get a better understanding of the remaining credits they needed to graduate. They also received guidance about developing an education plan to successfully complete their secondary education.

- 2,910 young adults enrolled into the YouthSource System.
This number represents youth who formally enrolled in the U.S. Department of Labor’s Workforce Investment Act-funded youth training program. Each participant received 12 months of intensive education and job training assistance, which included paid work experience, work readiness, career exploration and guidance, occupational skills training, tutoring, computer training, college preparation, mentoring, and alternative high school services.

- 972 high school dropouts were successfully recovered and returned to school. These young people were recovered by the YouthSource System, returned to school, and enrolled in one of the YouthSource Centers.

- The YouthSource System has accessed additional sources of funds to serve an estimated 1,000 youth who are out-of-school through the Community Development Block Grant, the Los Angeles County Probation Department, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, and the U.S. Department of Labor.

- $12 million grant was secured to expand the city’s Dropout Recovery System. The U.S. Department of Labor identified Los Angeles as an awardee of the Workforce Innovation Grant to serve an additional 1,200 youth and young adults over a three-year period. The additional funds supported the creation of three additional YouthSource Centers, expanding the system to 16 Centers citywide.

- 1,243 LAUSD dropouts were recovered during the 5th annual Student Recovery Day. The YouthSource System partnered with LAUSD on September 14, 2012, to conduct door-to-door home visits in an effort to provide youth and their families with a myriad of city resources and to bring them back to school.

**Resources**

- LAUSD Office of Student Health and Human Services: [http://notebook.lausd.net/portal/page?_pageid=33,129737&_dad=ptl](http://notebook.lausd.net/portal/page?_pageid=33,129737&_dad=ptl)

- City of Los Angeles Economic and Workforce Development Department: [http://ewdd.lacity.org/](http://ewdd.lacity.org/)

- Article about one of the leaders of this collaboration (Dr. Debra Duardo): [http://ampersand.gseis.ucla.edu/debra-duardo-from-drop-out-to-drop-out-preventer/](http://ampersand.gseis.ucla.edu/debra-duardo-from-drop-out-to-drop-out-preventer/)