"Movements are born of critical connections rather than critical mass."

~Grace Lee Boggs
IN THIS GUIDE

Educate Texas has developed this resource to outline the core principles and best practices for Opportunity Youth (OY) reengagement programs in the state of Texas. More than three years of work in the field has given us the chance to incorporate the voices and insights of Opportunity Youth at every turn, and to highlight the potential for strategic collaborations at the national, state, and local levels.

USE THIS GUIDE TO:
• Understand the OY landscape in Texas
• Develop reengagement programs that provide rigor and support
• Evolve programs through periodic self-assessment

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Opportunity Youth Landscape</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Educate Texas</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Recommendations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Opportunity Youth a Priority</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Four Core Principles of Quality Programs</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promising Practices: Self-Assessment Tool</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation: Partnerships</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation: Programming</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get Started</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank You</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH LANDSCAPE + OUR ROLE

Texas has more Opportunity Youth than the national average.¹
Opportunity Youth are young people ages 16-24 who are neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor market.¹

The proportion of Opportunity Youth is

NATIONWIDE
11%
That’s 1 in 9 young adults²

TEXAS
13%
That’s 462,000 young adults

RURAL TEXAS
27%
Nearly double that in urban areas³

In areas of

The proportion of Opportunity Youth reaches

³These are pre-COVID-19 statistics. We expect these numbers will increase because of the challenges faced from COVID-19.²

Three initiatives over three years.
Educate Texas works side by side with our partners across the state to empower students to realize their dreams and fuel a thriving Texas. Since 2017, Educate Texas has participated in three major efforts to engage Opportunity Youth with resources and programming to support their continued education and career development. Through these programs, we have learned a lot about what works.

1. Bridge to College and Career Success—Houston
2. Rural Opportunity Youth Landscape Analysis
3. Texas Opportunity Youth Summit

A more complete list of programs serving Opportunity Youth in Texas is included on the Get Started page.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

THE PROMISE

Reengaging the growing number of Opportunity Youth in Texas will improve the quality of life for our younger generations and boost the Texas economy in the process. The global COVID-19 pandemic threatens to erase the gains we have made over the last decade. This is the critical moment to make reengagement a priority across the state.

THE PREMISE

In order to better serve Opportunity Youth and increase engagement, we must create youth-centered programs while strengthening regional collaborations and partnerships.

“The number of young people in this country who fall through the cracks is alarming. They are disconnected from school, the workforce, and the means to reach their full potential. The greatest way to ensure our nation’s economic vitality is to ardently invest in our youth today.”

—Alfreda Norman, Senior Vice President, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas
MAKING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH A PRIORITY

Every young person deserves to be taken seriously by an adult who sees their potential. Most successful adults can recall one or two early mentors who had a profound effect on their education and careers. Many disconnected youth never have this transformative experience until they “click” with someone who champions them.

WHEN WE DON’T ACT

Money Lost

The lost earning potential over the lifetimes of Opportunity Youth in the Houston area alone is estimated at $27 BILLION\(^1,2\)

WHEN WE DO

Money Made. Money Saved. Health and Security

For every person we reconnect to work or school, the federal government receives nearly $12,000 in annual tax revenue and SAVES OVER $35,000 A YEAR in foregone incarceration\(^3\)

Connected youth are\(^4\):

9X MORE LIKELY to have medical coverage

45% MORE LIKELY to own a home

Facing the pandemic

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, college enrollment for Black and male students has declined.\(^4\)

One in four of the country’s young people risks disconnecting in the coming months of the pandemic.\(^5\)

I always wanted to be a nurse, but I didn’t have much support from those around me; Ascend gave me the courage to pursue my dreams and believe that I can do better for myself.”

~Jennifer, BCCS Participant

GET TO KNOW ALL PARTICIPANTS WELL

Strong personal relationships are at the center of youth reengagement. Many disconnected youth distrust institutions and the adults within them, often for good reason. Authentic connection between program staff and participants is essential for building trust and restoring self-confidence, laying the foundation for participants to build substantive and satisfying careers.

REDEFINE SUCCESS

Quantitative data does not fully capture the myriad positive impacts reengagement programs have on their participants’ lives. It may be tempting to define a program’s success in terms of scalability or quick results, but it can take years of support and relationship-building for most disconnected young people to begin a program, let alone complete it. To improve program completion rates over time, we must include measures grounded in how youth measure their own success, meeting them where they are and celebrating milestones along the way.

HARNESS THE POTENTIAL OF PARTNERSHIPS

No single program can do it all, so strengthen your model by coordinating efforts with other reengagement programs, with high schools and colleges, with corrections departments, homeless shelters, social services, mental and physical health care providers, and business leaders, policy-makers and funders near and far. The collective capacity of partnerships can create lasting, positive change regionally and statewide.

EVOLVE THROUGH THE INSIGHTS OF YOUTH VOICE AND CHOICE

The participants in any reengagement program are the heart of the operation. Their lived experience is the most valuable gauge we have for what works. Not only will including their insight improve your program, but it will improve engagement and morale. Rather than getting Opportunity Youth to “do” a program, invite them to co-create a more just world.
PROMISING PRACTICES: SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

A guide to shaping, assessing, and evolving your program.

This four-part assessment is aligned with our four core principles for effective programming. Reflect on the indicators of excellent programming listed here, ask whether they are present in and applicable to your organization, and see our suggestions for improvement.

Get to Know All Participants Well (1 of 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>EVIDENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PERSONALIZED SUPPORTS: Case management, advising, and mentorship are customized to meet the unique needs of each participant.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory outcomes.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequately challenged.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining agency</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making incremental progress</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Improvement</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain low participant-to-case manager ratios.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrate timely and regular check-ins to ask participants if they are:</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequately challenged</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining agency</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making incremental progress</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARING NETWORK: Programs foster a support structure for participants based on personal relationships.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Improvement</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate directly and regularly with participants’ existing contacts, including family, service providers, educators, employers, and mentors to shore up support.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WARM REFERRALS: Participants connect with and actively utilize community services to persist in working towards goals.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Improvement</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinate participant referrals with staff at other programs, services, and resources in the community, and help them navigate the processes to receive appropriate and timely assistance.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEER-TO-PEER ENGAGEMENT: Participants have developed social bonds and supportive relationships with one another throughout the program.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Improvement</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create participant cohorts to engage in program and social activities together.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage participants to recruit peers to the program.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**PROMISING PRACTICES: SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL**

A guide to shaping, assessing, and evolving your program.

**Redefine Success (2 of 4)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>EVIDENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT-DRIVEN APPROACH: Participants understand and influence the direction of their path towards professional and personal success.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLABORATIVE GOAL SETTING: Rigorous and realistic goals are established with participants, rather than for them.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS: The program accommodates participants’ needs and schedules. It allows for shifting plans and goal adjustments.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROGRESS ASSESSMENT: Qualitative and quantitative data and feedback are collected to elucidate short, medium, and long-term progress.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Suggestions for Improvement**

- **PARTICIPANT-DRIVEN APPROACH:** Build self-confidence by recognizing and celebrating interim milestones and successes along the path to larger goals.

- **COLLABORATIVE GOAL SETTING:** Use motivational interviewing techniques to discover participants’ passions to inform education and career goal setting.

- **FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS:** Regularly ask participants to identify current and anticipated barriers to progress and modify strategies accordingly.

- **PROGRESS ASSESSMENT:** Gather and analyze data through focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Use data and feedback to improve program strategies and the participant experience.
## INDICATOR

COMMITTEE ECO SYSTEM: The program coordinates with organizations, initiatives, and local leaders to increase the efficacy of services throughout the community.

### ASSESSMENT
- Present
- Not present
- Not applicable

### EVIDENCE

**Suggestions for Improvement**
Understand community resources and gaps in service by conducting a landscape analysis of local programs, education providers, career counseling, social services, etc. See Appendix D for links to sample community surveys.

REGIONAL COLLABORATION: Cross-sector partners collaborate to reengage Opportunity Youth in the region.

### ASSESSMENT
- Present
- Not present
- Not applicable

### EVIDENCE

**Suggestions for Improvement**
Set shared goals, regular meetings, and common principles to guide partnerships and create consistencies among different players. Delineate clear roles and responsibilities in a partnership agreement to foster a culture of teamwork and encourage partners to apply their strengths.

RESOURCE SHARING: Resources and practices are transparent and shared freely, increasing equitable access throughout the region.

### ASSESSMENT
- Present
- Not present
- Not applicable

### EVIDENCE

**Suggestions for Improvement**
Create a shared and easily accessible online location that stores resources and tools, allows for transfer of knowledge, and includes opportunities to learn from one another.

SERVICE COORDINATION: A standard intake process enables clear and effective referrals to match individuals with programs that meet their goals and needs.

### ASSESSMENT
- Present
- Not present
- Not applicable

### EVIDENCE

**Suggestions for Improvement**
Standardize the collection of metrics during participant enrollment to streamline transfers and co-management.

FUNDER ENGAGEMENT: Partnerships proactively and frequently communicate with potential and current funders.

### ASSESSMENT
- Present
- Not present
- Not applicable

### EVIDENCE

**Suggestions for Improvement**
Attract foundations and philanthropic partners by forming strategic partnerships that increase reach and capacity.
**PROMISING PRACTICES: SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL**

A guide to shaping, assessing, and evolving your program.

## Evolve through the Insights of Youth Voice and Choice (4 of 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>EVIDENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONSISTENT FEEDBACK:</strong> The program gathers participant feedback throughout the process.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>o Not present&lt;br&gt;o Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suggestions for Improvement</strong>&lt;br&gt;Engage participants in a <a href="#">focus group</a> to elicit insights and suggestions for program improvement.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT:</strong> Participant feedback and data inform the program’s evolution.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>o Not present&lt;br&gt;o Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suggestions for Improvement</strong>&lt;br&gt;Identify themes from focus group and survey findings to drive change.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEADERSHIP ROLES:</strong> Opportunities for participants to lead and co-design aspects of the program are structured into the plan of action.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>o Not present&lt;br&gt;o Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suggestions for Improvement</strong>&lt;br&gt;Provide a forum for participants to organize their own youth council. Connect the youth council to the leadership team to address barriers and potential solutions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTENTIONAL SKILL-BUILDING:</strong> Participants develop agency, autonomy, awareness, and self-advocacy skills.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>o Not present&lt;br&gt;o Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suggestions for Improvement</strong>&lt;br&gt;Integrate activities that allow participants to enhance skills in low-risk environments, such as group trainings and work-based learning experiences.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MEANINGFUL RECOGNITION:</strong> Participants are rewarded for their contributions in ways that are significant to them.</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>o Not present&lt;br&gt;o Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suggestions for Improvement</strong>&lt;br&gt;Ask participants who join a panel discussion or speak at an event what type of thank you gift would be most useful and how they prefer to be recognized.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IMPLEMENTATION: PARTNERSHIPS

Evolve practices with your community in mind.

There is no universal formula for reaching and reengaging all Opportunity Youth in all communities. In place of a formula, we offer implementation recommendations to inspire further development of your OY program.

**SHARE**

- Systematize communication between staff and the partners who will support participants’ transition to college and the workforce
- Share your vision, challenges, and success stories with your partners, and listen for theirs
- Develop strong referral partnerships to send and receive potential participants to one another
- Coordinate start dates with other OY programs in order to give participants a field of options
- Host or attend a regional summit for program leaders, youth delegates, and funders to nurture a strong community of practice

**CONNECT**

- Engage with high schools and community colleges to help reconnect youth who recently stopped-out
- Connect with social services and shelters to access OY unlikely to be on school rosters
- Partner with organizations in neighborhoods with high OY rates and bring your recruitment practice into the neighborhood
- Consider inviting current and potential partners to cross-sector staff trainings
- Build time into the program schedule for regular engagement with partners

**BUILD**

- Identify gaps in the OY program ecosystem
- Evolve programming or pursue new partnerships to close gaps in service
- Use data and participant feedback to drive program changes
- Standardize aspects of the intake process to make referrals simpler
- Seek partners who can provide services, like comprehensive medical coverage and care to increase program appeal

Continue to revisit these steps as you build and strengthen partnerships in your region.
**IMPLEMENTATION: PROGRAMMING**

**Strive for youth-centered programming.**

- The starred practices began as direct recommendations from Opportunity Youth in our BCCS programming and Focus Groups. They are a reflection of our own efforts to incorporate youth voice in formulating best practices.

---

**REACH**

- Employ peer recruits and involve OY in outreach design
- Distribute printed and digital communication materials through multiple channels, including social media
- Target outreach to OY and parents/guardians, including workplace outreach
- Meet and spend time with OY where they are

---

**RECRUIT**

- Assign a consistent adult point of contact or case manager to each participant
- Cultivate longterm relationships with prospective participants; recruitment may take multiple outreach attempts
- Focus intake on meeting participants’ immediate needs
- Be flexible on communication formats; one-on-one meetings, cohort meetups, texts, calls, and emails
- Employ people who reflect the race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status diversity of your prospective participants

---

**SUPPORT**

- Have at least one direct contact at state and local service agencies that can provide wrap-around support, including mental health services
- Consolidate programs, when possible, to make completion more attainable for busy participants
- Address participants’ transportation needs wherever possible; offer bus passes or gas cards
- Designate support for college and social service applications

---

**TRAIN**

- Use career search engines like ONET and WorkInTexas.com
- Practice mock interviews and provide constructive feedback
- Celebrate interim milestones; embrace the power of ritual with a graduation ceremony
- Tailor learning opportunities to participants’ skill level and interest
- Attend to the transition time between program stages; build in case manager support during these gaps

---

**ASSESS**

- Use qualitative feedback from focus groups, surveys and testimonials to influence decision-makers and funders, and to improve program design
- Educate your team on human-centered design and employ this framework for problem solving at all organizational levels
- Apply data insights and lessons learned to adjust and continuously improve program design and service delivery

---

Continue to revisit these steps as you adapt and develop youth-centered programming.
GET STARTED

It starts with partnership.
Partners can jumpstart your funding efforts, provide inspiration for program development, and increase your outreach potential.

National Initiatives & Resources
• American Youth Policy Forum: Opportunity Youth
• The Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum
• The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP): Opportunity Youth
• JFF: Opportunity Youth
• Measure of America: Youth Disconnection
• National League of Cities Resource Library: Reengagement

Texas Regional Collaboratives & Initiatives
• Austin Opportunity Youth Collaborative
• Bridge to College and Career Success (BCCS)
• Dallas 100,000 Opportunities Initiative
• East Texas Collaboratives led by San Augustine and Jasper Independent School Districts
• Greater Houston Opportunity Youth Collaborative
• San Antonio NXT Level Youth Opportunity Center
• South Texas College, Career, and Technology Academy at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District

LEARN MORE:
This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of every initiative and resource in Texas that supports OY. Search online for additional services, and inquire with local workforce boards, community colleges, school districts, and government and community organizations.

POTENTIAL FUNDER?
Conduct requests for proposals to identify existing programs you can support.
Look for programs aligned with our four core principles.
Consider long-term (5+ years) grants for new programs.

“We need to make calculated changes to invest more strategically in our human capital.”
~Participant at Texas OY Summit
APPENDIX A:
OVERVIEW OF BRIDGE TO COLLEGE AND CAREER SUCCESS

Educate Texas collaborated with consultant Hannah Gourgey and JFF to provide technical assistance and funding to the following Houston-based partners:

- Ascend Program at Baylor College of Medicine's Teen Health Clinic
- Career My Way at Capital IDEA
- GRADcafé on the Go from Project GRAD
- Commercial Construction Partnership at SERJobs
- Houston Community College

A strengths-based approach.
Partners matched the talents of Houston’s young adults to the region’s high demand careers in technical fields, healthcare, energy, and skilled trades.

Integrating youth voice.
Partners incorporated participant insights in designing and customizing pathways to education and career reengagement, while providing them with wrap-around services and support. To learn more, visit Edtx.org/BCCS.

REQUIREMENTS FOR LAUNCHING ACCELERATED PROGRAM PARTNERSHIPS

- Research & stakeholder meetings to identify common challenges and resources
- A landscape analysis of available services and organizations
- Building a task force to develop data-driven goals, set priorities, and secure public and private resources
- Communication protocols and community-wide promising practices
- Training a neutral, trusted organization coordinate efforts after the pilot phase
- Careful planning for knowledge transfer, capacity building, and resource coordination to ensure sustainability
APPENDIX B: OVERVIEW OF THE RURAL OPPORTUNITY YOUTH LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

A Cycle of Economic Strain

UP TO 27% of youth in rural Texas are disconnected from both school and the workforce.

THE BAD NEWS?
Rural communities with the fewest educational resources and career opportunities have the heaviest lift when it comes to reengaging Opportunity Youth.

THE GOOD NEWS?
When they succeed, they can revitalize an entire community.

Common Hurdles
While every community has specific needs, patterns emerged in listening sessions with rural communities across the state that explain why there are so many more youth disconnected in rural regions than other locations in the state.

• Lack of resources
• Transportation concerns
• Limited access to broadband and technology
• Depressed local economies
• Disconnect from the nearest urban community of practice

JOIN TO RISE
Following the landscape analysis, two rural communities, St. Augustine and Jasper, engaged with the Aspen Institute’s Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund to support reengagement program development.

2016 Texas Concentration of 16-24 Year Old OY


"Every community, every county is a little different ... each and every one has its own unique challenges.”

Rural Landscape Analysis Participant
Gathering with Intention
On October 15 and 16th, 2019, Educate Texas and the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas hosted an Opportunity Youth Summit in Houston for 115 participants from seven different regions in Texas and a handful of national partners.

Sparking Connections
The summit invited philanthropic partners, community service providers, educators, employers, and state leaders to rally around a common cause and find a path forward. Participants celebrated the web of connections beginning to emerge, and called for the formation of a task force to spearhead the creation of a statewide coordinated response.

For more information, please read the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas report: Opportunity Youth in Texas.

Looking to the Future
In an exit survey, the majority of OY Summit participants agreed on the need for a statewide effort that would:

1. Summarize the opportunity program landscape, allowing Opportunity Youth to research and select the right reengagement option for them.

2. Encourage cross-sector partnerships to improve and streamline the participant experience as they move between programs and services and into postsecondary education and the workforce.

3. Incentivize and inform regional funding and policy work.
APPENDIX D: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Focus Group Resources

- OY Focus Group Guide
- OY Focus Group Questionnaire
- Focus Group Participant Release Form

Partnership Templates

- Partnership Agreement Template for Community Organizations and Community Colleges
- Data Sharing Agreement Template

Landscape Analyses

- Rural OY Landscape Analysis
- Example Landscape Analysis Survey from Houston: Community-Based Organizations
- Example Landscape Analysis Survey from Houston: Community Colleges
Trusted as a change agent in Texas education, Educate Texas works side by side with partners through programs and policies to empower students to realize their dreams and fuel a stronger Texas. As an initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas, we are building thriving communities and a thriving education system to serve all Texas students, with a focus on Black, Latino and low-income students. We partner with school districts, institutions of higher education, businesses, community and civic organizations, and state agencies and policymakers on shared educational priorities so that all Texas students succeed in school, in the workforce and in life.