

Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative Reflections and Learnings 2024-2025

In August 2024, the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions' Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) partnered with the Balmer Group to grant four communities with investments to boost pathways for Opportunity Youth.

The Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative, led by Colorado Youth for a Change, received \$500,000 in year one to scale placed-based strategies with a history of positive youth outcomes in Denver and Aurora. The learnings and impact have been widespread, and we're pleased to share more!

Thanks to our Partners:

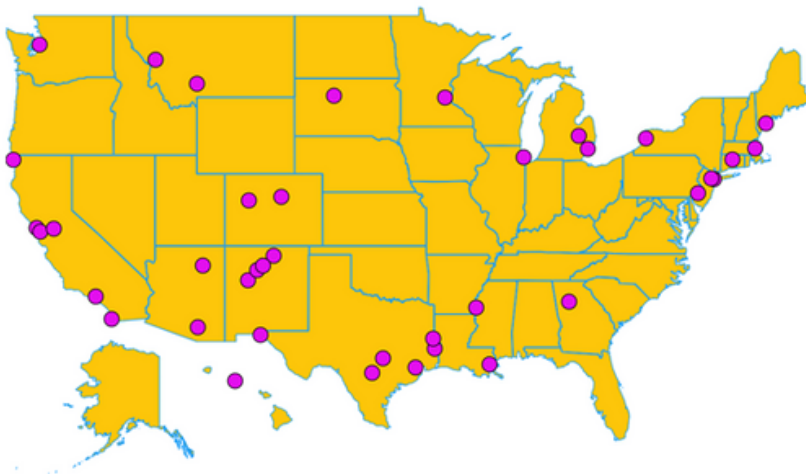
- Aurora Public Schools
- City and County of Denver
- City Year Denver
- Colorado Youth for a Change
- Denver Public Schools
- Eckerd Connects NextGen
- HYPE (Helping Youth Pursue Excellence)
- Mile High Youth Corps
- YAASPA
- Zero Dropouts



**IN DENVER AND AURORA, 12,963
YOUTH AND YOUTH ADULTS
AGES 16-24 ARE DISCONNECTED
FROM SCHOOL OR WORK
(COMMON MEASURES, 2023).**



Opportunity Youth Forum Communities



"Youth Mental Health Corps has made it possible for me to get an education that otherwise I would not have gotten. I am now interested in a career in social work and/or counseling. I have many more job options open with the credential that YMHC helped me achieve. I think it is essential for young adults to work with students. The students feel seen, relatable, safe, and supported in a way that may otherwise be unavailable to them."

2024-2025 Impact

Out-of-School Youth Services:

Outreach was provided to 2,798 youth and young adults who were disconnected from high school in the 2024-2025 school year. 444 youth reengaged in school through these combined efforts and are charting new paths toward graduation, post-secondary, and workforce opportunities.



\$750,000 LEVERAGED FOR METRO DENVER

OVER 5,000 YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS 16-24 RECEIVED SUPPORT

In-School Youth Services:

In-school support was provided to 2,657 youth at risk of dropping out based on chronic absenteeism and/or low number of credits. Research shows these two indicators are strongly aligned with the chances of a young person persisting through high school and into post-secondary. In fact, students who are chronically absent are 7x more likely to leave school without a diploma (Panorama Education), and 94% of those served last year remained enrolled in school.



508 YOUTH EARNED A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA OR GED

237 YOUTH ENROLLED IN POST-SECONDARY

Out-of-School Time Services:

Other community supports and opportunities (summer and afterschool programs, internships, apprenticeships, AmeriCorps service opportunities, and job readiness classes) were provided to 881 youth and young adults.



152 EARNED AN INDUSTRY RECOGNIZED CREDENTIAL

312 YOUTH OBTAINED EMPLOYMENT



Before coming to Next Online, Ashley struggled with 'everything in general, and school'. But since her time at Next Online, and with the support of Zero Dropouts, she has found a place to excel. "I gained hope for recovery in life. Coming to Next Online was great. They were helpful and supportive. Everyone here was so accommodating. I was anxious. But they found a way to help me."

After completing the GED, Ashley wants to start working and then eventually go back to school to become a nurse. The Next Online program will continue to work with her and explore options with partners like the Denver Workforce Center and Advance EDU with CSU Global.

Lessons Learned: High School Reenrollment

A built-out logic model, internal systems, training, and processes are critical components to scaling good work across communities. Coupled with increased capacity and a commitment to collaboration and the formula looks right! What we had to learn in year one is how much context also matters, as well as considering how much flexibility can exist while adhering to the core program model. The qualitative and quantitative data gathered in year one will ensure that improvements are made for year two.

What do we mean by “context?” Below are factors we’ve had to consider as we adapt services to meet the needs of more young people.

“I feel accomplished! CYC made sure I received the help I needed at home and at school! She (CYC staff Nelly) advocated for me when I couldn’t!” 2025 Graduate

High School Reenrollment:

- Are there diverse school options for youth to return to that take into consideration age, number of credits, and responsibilities outside of school like work or caring for family?
- Is the school enrollment process a burden for students and families?
- Are open enrollment windows realistic and timely?
- How quickly are schools dismissing students so that outreach and reenrollment support can kick in?
- For those low on credits and pursuing a GED, what’s the sales pitch to the GED as means to the end, not the end itself?
- As we expand technology to meet the needs of students and build in more flexibility through online options, how are we preparing students to navigate online platforms and communication norms?
- How do we build community between staff, students, and peers in an online setting? Even when things are virtual, we’re still hearing a desire to be in person on occasion.
- We can provide students with equipment and training, but not having a stable location to learn or access to stable internet can create additional challenges.

Infusing Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing, and Purpose (BMWPP) into this work is central to the Denver Opportunity Youth Initiative. Interviews and focus groups with youth have revealed the following information that guides our work:

- Shared culture and background among peers and with adults is important
- Must be allowed to make mistakes
- When adults ask questions about how youth are doing and what they want to do in the future, it makes them feel accepted
- Wellbeing: safety concerns within schools are a challenge and adults don’t always recognize this
- Young people need breaks from their phones and social media; there are mixed messages on social media about future/jobs/college/how to make money
- Routines are good
- Being part of a cohort builds a sense of belonging
- Accomplishing things and being recognized for these matter
- Families offer strength and room to grow for some, while others strive to “break family cycles”

Lessons Learned: Post-Secondary Enrollment

A learning curve exists in understanding post-secondary options, programs, waitlists, and application processes. The landscape is rapidly changing, and there are so many complexities to navigate alongside young people.

- Often in high schools, technology resources and staff training are centered around college (especially 4-year college), so it can feel daunting to guide a young person through other pathways like pre-apprenticeships or apprenticeships; non-degree credentials that lead to a living wage; or other paid training opportunities.
- There can be a fear of steering young people toward proprietary programs that cost money and don't help deliver jobs. This can cause apprehension to have these conversations and explore all options toward a living wage.
- An abundance of information and opinions exist online for young people to navigate regarding college and careers, but it can be difficult to discern. Making space for these conversations is critical.
- Families are an important part of these conversations too, so how do we make career and post-secondary exploration more collaborative?

"This year, I've witnessed firsthand how critical our support becomes after high school graduation. For many students, the transition into adulthood is filled with uncertainty. Supporting our recent graduates through intentional post-secondary planning isn't just about college access—it's about economic mobility, generational change, and affirming their worth and capability. Through this work, I've strengthened community partnerships including IT and cybersecurity pathways and have brought in culturally responsive mentoring to the young women in our programs." Desirea Thames, Youth-Self Sufficiency Liaison hired to support this work in Denver Public Schools

Lessons Learned: Relationship Building

Building relationships and trust is another critical component of scaling and can't be expedited. In addition to building relationships with students, trust and information sharing had to be established with counselors, principals, and other school leaders to support student transitions and hand-offs.

While systems, processes, and technology were in place to scale this work, the relationship-building piece must be individualized. We're grateful for a three-year investment in the Scaling Youth Outcomes Cohort, because stronger student outcomes will be achieved as these relationships grow over time. Concurrent/CTE pathways, work-based learning, post-secondary options, and the landscape of the workforce are all changing rapidly. It's critical that adults who are supporting young people can pair relationship-building skills with the exploration of options that exist during the transition to adulthood.

