

Project Imo

YOUTH PROMISE CAREER PATHWAYS INAUGURAL REPORT



COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION
OF EASTERN
Connecticut



Celebrating youth engagement.



Executive Summary

Youth Promise is a three-pathway approach to bright futures. Participants are offered immersive career development and leadership skills programs with a community service component to build critical 21st century workforce and life skills. Program activities are structured for afterschool, in-school, summer intensive, and workshop delivery. These help youth build critical relationships and empower them to build core competencies and skills.

Our launch of the Youth Promise Career Pathways program in 2023 began with our partners at NAFI CT and expanded with our partners at the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut. Throughout the 16 months of initial program delivery, the generosity of our partners enabled free programming for over 100 youth through over 700 hours including formalized programs and drop-in teen center workshops and events.

During early stages of the initiative, the team opted to realize a very tangible expression of “meet them where they’re at.” Expanding our programming space early to open with a teen center model, the team was able to build key relationships with youth in the region and begin the process of helping youth see the value in the Youth Promise program. This enabled strong recruitment from the community, as well as partner organizations. It further illustrated our core philosophy when working with youth- when given the opportunity, youth choose engagement. During the first 16 months of our program space operating teen center hours, 44 youth signed up for free membership into the center, which hosted 305 hours and saw 572 sign-ins by members.

The Youth Promise programming was delivered in partnership with NAFI CT, the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, the Connecticut Social Equity Council, Windham Public School’s Phoenix Academy, Trigo Pizza, Willimantic Fire and Police Departments, the Northeast Family Federal Credit Union, Windham Area Interfaith Ministry, Windham Health and Human Services, Windham Prevention Coalition, GROW Windham, The Farmer’s Cow Calfe’ and Creamery, Windham Recreation, CT Office of the Arts, and several dedicated individual professionals in the region.



Formal Youth Promise programming ran concurrent in-school and afterschool programs, as well as two summer intensive program cohorts and two overnight camping trips. Teen center services opened up in support formal programming included teen open hours, maker space programs, specialized workshops, and individualized mentoring. During formal programs, youth were asked to engage with a variety of assessments including perceptions of growth and self-capacity, awareness of regional career availability, and specific awareness of 21st century workforce skills as identified by the World Economic Forum.

The deep partnerships that brought the Youth Promise Career Pathways initiative to fruition have provided rich experiences for youth in the region as well as strong foundation for the future.

Program Demographics and Engagement

The Youth Promise program continues to successfully engage youth through dynamic activities aimed at building personal and professional skills essential for future career success. By fostering an environment of growth, learning, and self-discovery, the program has empowered participants to explore their potential and align their aspirations with actionable goals.

Participant Demographics and Engagement- Spring Afterschool & Summer Intensive Cohorts

- 22 unique participants across 25 sessions, totaling 156 hours of engagement, translating to 1284 learning hours.
- A diverse cohort including 19 males, 2 females, and 1 nonbinary participant, with a broad ethnic representation, primarily Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin (8 participants), followed by White (6 participants), African American (6 participants), Multiracial (1 participant) and Asian (1 participant).
- Age distribution from 12 to 18 years old, with the majority falling within the 15 to 17 age group, ensuring targeted engagement at a critical developmental stage.

Participant Demographics and Engagement- School Cohorts

- 36 unique participants across 27 sessions, totaling 135 hours of engagement, translating to 1395 learning hours.
- A diverse cohort including 27 males, 11 females, 1 nonbinary person, and 2 not reporting demographic information.
- Age distribution from 12 to 19 years old, with the majority falling within the 14 to 18 age group, ensuring targeted engagement at a critical developmental stage.

Afterschool Fall Drop-in Programs

- Demographic data not obtained
- 87 maker space visits by youth across 19 programs totaling 76 program hours



Youth Promise Skills

The Youth Promise program focuses on a variety of immersive, educational, and fun learning activities that connect youth both directly and indirectly to skills and competencies valuable for future education, employment, and life.

Skill Focuses

These reflect a combination of social emotional learning skills (SEL) as well as the World Economic Forum's identified 21st century workforce skills.

- Communication
- Creativity
- Collaboration
- Critical thinking & problem solving
- Initiative
- Adaptability
- Curiosity
- Persistence & grit
- Leadership & followership
- Social & Cultural awareness
- Financial literacy
- Planning
- Self-awareness & self-management
- Negotiation skills
- Perspective taking
- Goal setting
- Cultural & Civic literacy



Youth-Identified Skill Development and Career Awareness

At program onset, participants expressed a keen interest in developing a wide range of skills, highlighting:

- **Soft skills-** Communication, creativity, emotional intelligence, goal setting, and teamwork
- **Career skills-** A substantial understanding of in-demand career skills including problem solving, critical thinking, and adaptability
- **Awareness of opportunities-** Varied levels of awareness regarding local hiring opportunities, training and education programs, support for career development, networking opportunities, and entrepreneurship.

Youth Promise Activities

“ *I just figured if I was having fun, they’d have fun too.* ”

- Dr. Samuel Picking, Professor Emeritus, University of Connecticut, inspiration for *The Dead Poets Society* as portrayed by Robin Williams.

At the core of the Youth Promise initiative learning are immersive and fun activities that serve to challenge youth to step out of their comfort zones, build relationships, explore new ways of perceiving and interacting with their environment, build a shared and prosocial reality, and have fun. It is within these experiences that youth practice the skills, reflect upon their performance, and adapt these reflections into that new understanding.

The Youth Promise Career Development programs focused on combining a diverse array of learning experiences to accommodate a wide variety of youth approaches, learning preferences, and group dynamics. Group work is central to the Youth Promise methodology. Youth were encouraged to try different experiences and providing voice and choice were core practices to help youth build ownership of their own paths as well as building accountability for individual and shared success.

Sample Program Activities

- Challenge course initiatives
- Hiking
- Camping & trip planning
- Conservation planning
- Mountain biking



- Arts & crafts
- Journaling
- Mock small business exercises
- Creating SMART goals
- Developing resumes
- Practice interviews

- Gardening
- Harvesting
- Food planning and preparation
- Creating a small business plan with a group



- Public service career and emergency planning exercises
- Guest speakers and professionals
- Video, audio, digital content creation
- Maker space integrations

YOUR COMPANY NAME HERE

BUSINESS PLAN CHECKLIST

Business development is essential for growth and success in any industry. Whether you're starting a new business or looking to expand an existing one, it's important to have a solid strategy in place. Here are four essential tips for business development.

- 01 What is your company?**
 - Why do customers need your product or service?
 - What is your business concept or model?
 - How will your company operate?
- 02 Market Analysis & Communication**
 - Who are your target audiences?
 - What specific ways do you want to connect with them?
 - What messages do you want to send to each group?
- 03 Business Finances**
 - How will you generate revenue?
 - What expenses will you incur?
 - How much money do you need to make to be profitable?
- 04 What do you need to get started?**
 - Who is on your team? Who can give you advice?
 - What resources do you need to launch your essential product or service?

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Project Imo
Youth Promise Career Development Program

Market Analysis & Communication

Advocating for your business

Who needs your product or service?
Specificity is the key to good communication

How do you connect with each group?
Do we post on Facebook to reach teens?

How do you let them know they NEED your product or service?

P1 of 2

Program Practices Findings

Each of the formats of the Youth Promise launch had different targeted focuses and practices, hours of operations, service communities, and other factors influencing which activities were chosen and how they were implemented. Some activities were critical for each of the school, afterschool, and summer programs. Staff engaged youth participants in several key practices that enhanced youth engagement and buy-in for the program. Most significant of these practices were community values commitments, cooperative activity planning, youth stipends, and cell phone restrictions.

Community Values Commitments

Based upon adventure education full value commitment activities, youth engaged in discussions around behavioral norms and expectations that included key adult guided safety and cell phone use and included youths' own opinions of acceptable behavioral practices. This allowed youth to have a voice in the rules and expectations governing their stay in the program but also in increasing self-awareness and mutual accountability for less-successful behaviors.

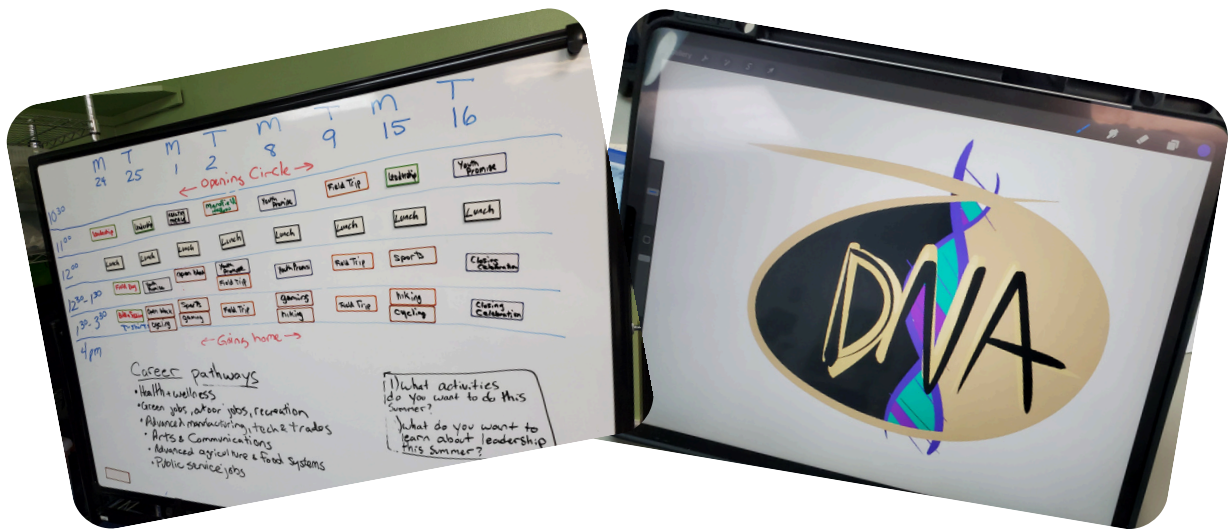
Cooperative Activity Planning

Within the first two days of each cohort, youth were engaged in an immersive process of setting the activity calendar for the following four weeks. Staff presented a large magnetic dry erase board representing the days and session times for the month. Dry erase magnets represented activity blocks within the day/time scheduling matrix. On a portion of the numerous dry erase magnets were activity topic areas aligned with the Youth Promise Career Development framework. These were explained to the youth participants as critical areas of activities essential for developing specific skills and stipends. The remaining dry erase magnets were blank and to be filled in by the group after discussion and democratic negotiations.

Staff explained to the youth the scope of available activities and asked the participants to build lists of desired activities, durations, and placement within the schedule. They engaged in purely quantitative brainstorming of possible activities followed by qualifiable discussions of likes, dislikes, negotiation, and decision making. As in any group process, certain voices tended to rise to the forefront and staff facilitated group inclusion of all voices, enabling specific discussion about group process and ensuring each person had a say in their program. At the end of these sessions, approximately two hours long, the calendar was set with the knowledge that it could change as needed for a variety of reasons.



During the process, youth often identified the “Youth Promise” blocks as things they needed to “get through” to have fun. While staff explained that these were activity-based, it was very clear that they viewed adult-set activity as work. This is consistent with much research on child and adolescent perception of similar dynamics. An example of experiential learning occurred as youth routinely set the “Youth Promise” blocks in the morning to “get through them early” and have fun in the afternoon. Outdoor activities such as cycling, hiking, and sports were frequently placed in the afternoons for recreational purposes (even through staff always used those periods to reflect on key 21st century workforce skills such as planning, communication, etc.). During the hottest weeks of the programs, such outdoor activities taking place in the afternoon were often prohibitively hot. While staff monitored ultimately for program safety, one day it was exceedingly warm on an afternoon activity and prompted a collective discussion on rearranging the calendar to accommodate the environment. This was an example of youth seeing the consequences of their choices in a very real way, while still working within the acceptable limits of program safety set and monitored by staff.



Youth Stipends

A critical part of engaging youth and supporting the buy-in process were clearly identified youth stipends. These stipends were contingent upon several factors set by staff and youth. Key staff factors were a minimum of 75% attendance, stipend alignment with identifiable educational or career aspirations, and cell phone restrictions during program activities. Youth led factors related to abiding by the community values commitments they set.

The stipends were available for participation in the spring afterschool, each of the two summer sessions, and the overnight program. These were cumulative and youth could voluntarily defer their stipend for an aggregated amount later for staff to spend on their behalf. Youth meeting the requirements of each and attending every session could ultimately earn a stipend of \$900 over 88 hours of programming. They were told the stipends must fall within the behavioral contingencies explained above and they needed to follow a set process to justify and obtain the items purchased on their behalf. They needed to spend time considering a career or educational goal, determine expenses that would help them achieve that goal, be within their stipend budget, and present a justification for the expenses to the staff.

Youth were required to provide specific items for staff to purchase, links to the retail website, explanations of how those connected with their goals, and a breakdown of the budget. This presentation could be in an email or other document. Several youths opted to create Power Point or Google Slide presentations justifying their expenses. Staff were stringent in adherence to the stated guidelines and several youth were required to “go back to the drawing board” for their justifications. As these were not qualifying expenses for a public charity, they had to account for sales tax within their budget. Many youth opted for technology to support their goals, one youth opted for a bicycle so he could commute to his volunteer jobs and school, and many youth listed basic needs like clothing in their requests. The economic situation of many youth participants fell below the poverty line with the vast majority being eligible for free or reduced price lunch in school. The stipend program was found to be not only a powerful motivator, but also an educational process. It also allowed the youth to be key participants in providing for their own basic needs while supporting low income families in the region.

One notable outcome of the program was reflected in the stipend program. Often, youth had a balance in their budget after presenting their purchases. When asked if they wanted to purchase more items, every single youth with a balance offered to give their remaining funds to other participants who didn't have enough funding to make their full list of purchases. This spoke highly to the level of community they created and the relationships they worked on throughout the program.



Cell phone restrictions

On the first day of each session, youth were introduced to the stipend concept, the requirement that cell phones be stored by staff throughout most of the day was explained. Youth generally were not happy with this but, understanding the stipend process, they saw an immediate value to the process of what they called “cell phone jail”. During the course of numerous discussions surrounding the impact of cell phones on daily life, learning, work, and mental health all indicated that youth are keenly aware that phones are not a broadly positive factor in their life. They expressed concerns over bullying, obsessive phone behaviors, and more. They acknowledged that not having phones helped them engage but drew a clear distinction between the Youth Promise program and school. They said that the Youth Promise program was a fun, optional program so it was easier to set aside phones to stay engaged. They said that school was not enjoyable, and they viewed the phones as a distraction from the classroom they needed.

Staff noted a marked increase in youth engagement when phones were not present. The overall consensus from staff was that limited phones made a tremendous difference in the efficacy of the program.

Youth Promise Partnerships



NAFI CT is a multi-service agency that provides programming, consultation, and individualized support services to youth, families, and adults in a variety of settings across Connecticut. Their core services include foster care, developmental services, residential treatment, and in-home services and consultations. They take a respectful and dignified approach to all care services, with the mission of empowering individuals and strengthening families.

For three years running, the partnership between Project Imo and NAFI CT has brought immersive programming to youth across Connecticut. In 2023, NAFI CT was awarded a career readiness program grant through Congressionally Directed Spending championed by Senators Blumenthal and Murphy. Together, Project Imo and NAFI have opened Base Camp in Willimantic and brought afterschool and summer programs to youth through our shared Youth Promise program.

Staff from both organizations worked together to provide programs, operational support, transportation options, connected social services, and mentorship to youth in the program.

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The Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut plays a pivotal role in the Youth Promise Program, serving as a key intermediary in the allocation of funds from the Connecticut Social Equity Council's (SEC) Community Reinvestment Pilot Program. Their involvement is critical in targeting communities in Eastern Connecticut, particularly New London, Norwich, and Willimantic/Windham, which have been disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs.

Our partners at the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut brought to life the immersive school-based Youth Promise program which provided 1395 learning hours for the youth at the Phoenix Academy in Windham. Because of the partnership with the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, 36 high school students were able to engage in weekly career development learning, 21st century skill development, 8 field experiences, and meet with 13 guest speakers from a variety of industries.

The Connecticut Social Equity Council played a pivotal role in this initiative. Funded in part by the SEC's Community Reinvestment Grant, the Youth Promise Program at Phoenix Academy is a testament to the Council's commitment to healing and supporting communities historically affected by the war on drugs. The SEC's approach is multifaceted and deeply collaborative, focusing on developing a comprehensive community reinvestment plan.

Program Data

The summer intensive, afterschool, and school-based Youth Promise programs all included assessments intended to gauge impact from a variety of perspectives.

Methodology

Youth were asked a series of questions utilizing our web-based online questionnaire. Depending upon the program format, assessments were requested before and after the program with longer programs having intermittent assessments. Of particular note, youth were often highly resistant to assessment, often citing what amounts to “assessment fatigue” due to the constant testing and various assessments taking place in school.

Youth were provided a list of various workforce skills. They asked to rank the top 5 skills they would like to grow during the program, the top 3 skills they believe necessary for a successful career, and were given ‘fill in the blanks’ and ‘comments’ options additional to these rankings. These skills were:

- Problem-solving
- Communication
- Conflict Resolution
- Creativity
- Emotional Intelligence
- Goal setting
- Leadership
- Digital Skills
- Critical Thinking
- Time management
- Teamwork
- Adaptability
- Self-Reflection
- Decision-making
- Public Speaking
- Community Engagement
- Other (please specify)*

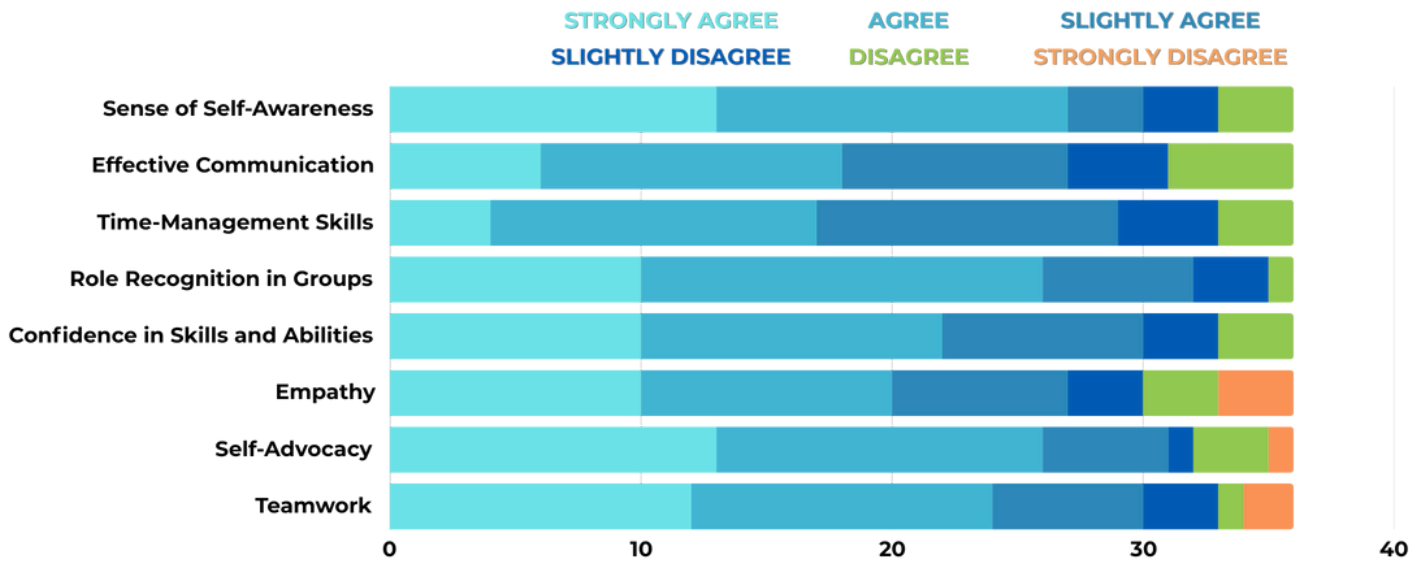
Youth were also provided a 5 point Likert scale to identify the knowledge and awareness of local companies hiring, training and education opportunities, in-demand career skills, support programs and resources for career development, networking opportunities, and entrepreneurship and self-employment options.

They were asked to select from a list of tools they have to achieve their desired career:

- Strong professional relationships or networks
- Clear career plans or goals
- Effective interview and communication skills
- Technical skills or expertise
- Relevant education or training
- Certifications or qualifications
- Experience in related roles or projects
- Supportive mentors or advisors
- Knowledge of industry trends and developments
- Personal qualities or strengths (e.g., resilience, creativity)
- Financial resources or funding options
- Access to relevant job opportunities
- Other (Please specify)

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

Asked to describe their personal perceptions



TOP 5 SKILLS TO GROW

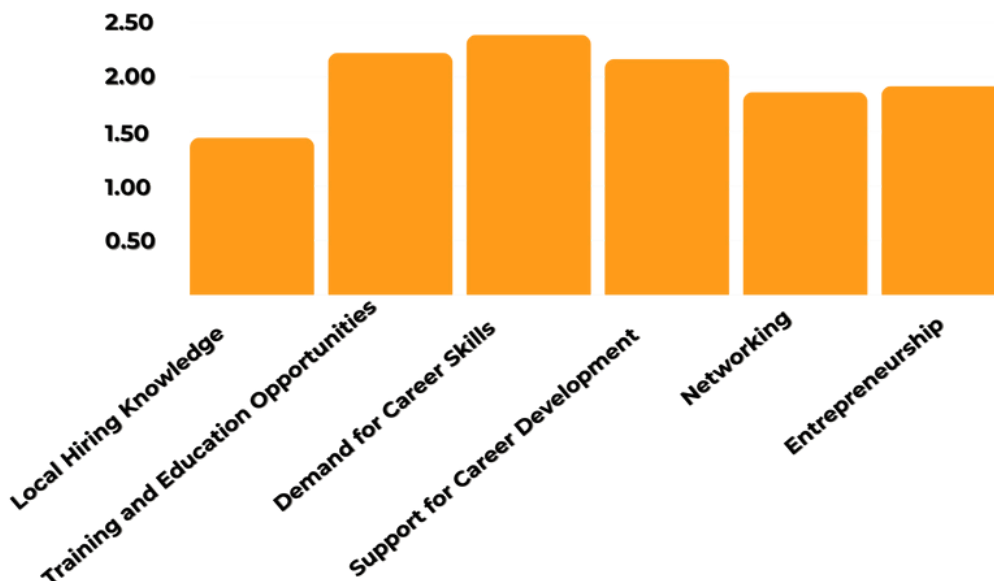
- #1 Problem Solving
- #2 Creativity
- #3 Communication
- #4 Goal Setting
- #5 Conflict Resolution

TOP 3 SKILLS FOR CAREER

- #1 Problem Solving
- #2 Communication
- #3 Teamwork

Weighted averages from all participant responses

AWARENESS OF CAREER OPPORTUNITIES



Participants indicated they anticipate learning about leadership, teamwork, communication, and even technical skills. Specifically outlining “Speaking Skills” and “Tech Creativity”. It is also important to note Awareness of Career Opportunities all found an increase from mid-year to end of year programming

Program Performance Measures & Outcomes

At the onset of program development, several key program performance measures were identified by partners. Some of these included program participation metrics, numbers of youth served and programs delivered, numbers of community partners engaged for site visits, workshops, and speaking engagements, and the number of regionally relevant career pathways youth chose to explore.

Number of Youth Served, Participation Metrics, and Number of Sessions

- A total of 59 unique participants were engaged in defined, cohort or school based programming, 1 weekend overnight camping trip, 1 full day first aid certification workshop, and an additional 87 visits to drop-in afterschool maker space programs.
- During the cohort based programs, all youth attended over 50% of the available programming and 90% of youth enrolled participated in over 75% of program dates.
- Each of the 2 summer cohorts had 16 sessions, the afterschool spring cohort had 8, and there were 19 drop-in programs available during the fall of 2024. The school-based program had 27 sessions.
- Through the support of two key partners, NAFI CT and the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, a total of 72 Youth Promise sessions were delivered free of cost to youth in the launch of the program.

Number of Community Partners Engaged

- 14 organizations from the following industries: nonprofit management, public safety, banking, human services, recreation, the arts, food service, agriculture, faith-based organizations, education, mental health, and public health.

Number of Regionally Relevant Career Pathways Explored

The Youth Promise Career Pathways model focused on 6 career pathways with a strong presence and relevance to jobs in northeastern Connecticut. Youth we provided opportunities to explore these through a variety of projects, group work, field experiences, and Project Imo's maker space. Particular focus was highlighted on the intersectionality of interests and jobs. An example of how this manifested is when having youth explore how a digital artist can support a manufacturing facility or farmer. The pathways explored were:

- Advanced manufacturing, technology, and trades
- Advanced agriculture and food systems
- Health care and healthy living
- Public Service
- Outdoor education, recreation, and green jobs
- Arts & Communications



LESSONS LEARNED

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Transitioning to a more voluntary student enrollment approach led to a noticeable increase in engagement, underscoring the importance of autonomy and choice in educational programs

DEEP CONNECTIONS

Activities that resonated with students fostered deep connections, highlighting the need for content that aligns with their interests and the value of sustained engagement

INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT

The program's population demonstrated a clear need for personalized learning supports, with significant improvements observed in self-reported metrics related to key workforce skills

BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES

Initial disengagement and behavioral issues pointed to a broader disinterest in school and extracurricular activities, emphasizing the challenge of engaging students in additional programs

ATTENDANCE VARIABILITY

Fluctuations in student numbers and school attendance affected program consistency, presenting challenges in maintaining regular participation

MENTORING AND TECHNOLOGY

Shifting from individualized mentoring to technology-based learning paths has opened new avenues for self-guided exploration, adapting to the students' evolving needs and interests

FLEXIBILITY IN LEARNING STYLES

Participants showed improved engagement when activities catered to different learning styles and interests, emphasizing the importance of diverse and flexible learning opportunities.

ROLE OF FUN IN LEARNING

Participants frequently mentioned "fun" as an outcome, indicating that enjoyment plays a crucial role in maintaining engagement and motivation in educational programs.

BEST PRACTICES

DIVERSE ACTIVITIES

Offering a variety of activities enhances engagement by catering to different learning styles and interests

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Establishing core relationships lays the groundwork for effective career development learning

INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING:

Tailoring activities to meet the unique needs and interests of each participant has proven crucial for re-engagement

STAFF ALIGNMENT

Integrating youth work with staff engagement amplifies the program's impact, creating a cohesive support system

REFLECTIVE GROWTH

Encouraging self-reflection helps students recognize their strengths, fostering a growth mindset

FOSTERING FUN AND ENJOYMENT:

Ensuring that learning activities are enjoyable can significantly enhance student engagement and retention.

ENCOURAGING PEER INTERACTIONS

Facilitating opportunities for participants to learn from each other and build strong peer relationships can foster a supportive learning environment.

INTEGRATION OF PRACTICAL SKILLS

Incorporating hands-on activities such as first aid and technical skills training has proven effective in enhancing both hard and soft skills.

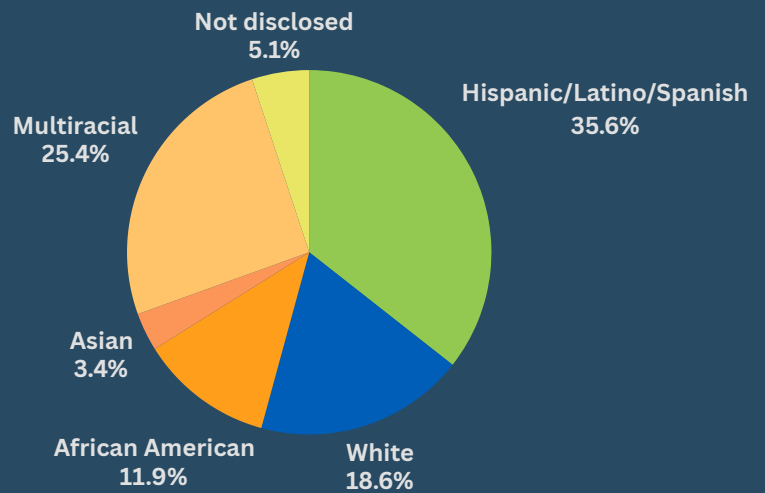
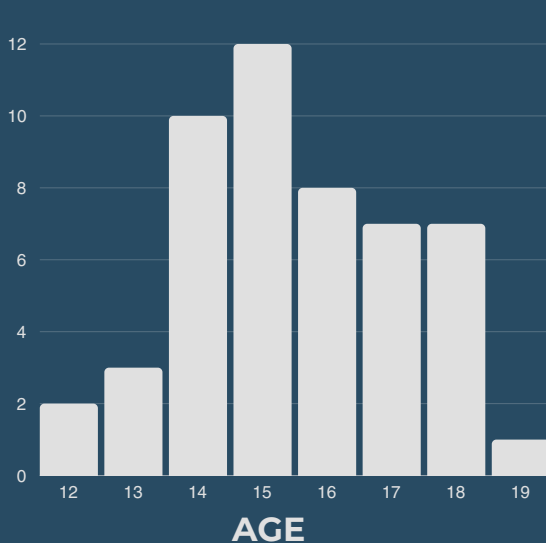
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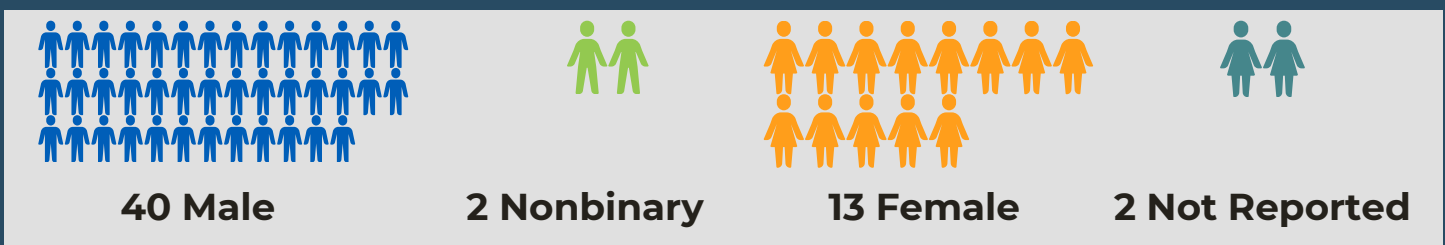
2023-2024 PROGRAM DATA



PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS



59 UNIQUE PARTICIPANTS



18 GUEST SPEAKERS

14 PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to the assessed programs, we provided 24 General Youth Promise After School Programs, engaging 114 participants in a total of 96 program hours, resulting in 456 cumulative learning hours.