

Youth who drop out of school risk missing out on good jobs and economic stability. Many begin programs to continue their education and get back in the workforce, but they don't always finish those programs, often dropping out and leaving them no closer to landing fulfilling work. Could we make it easier for students to complete these alternative training programs? We worked with the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development to understand the barriers that keep them from completing their education, whether traditional or alternative, and to design new ways for them to access better work and more fulfilling lives.

Background

Out-of-school youth face pronounced challenges to earning fulfilling, stable, well-paying jobs. These individuals, aged 16-24, are not enrolled in school or not active in the workforce, and are predominantly from Black, Latinx, and low-income communities. Without focused support, these youth remain trapped in a cycle of exclusion from crucial job and educational opportunities, stifling their personal well-being and economic stability.

In New York City, the number of out-of-school youth has declined over the past decade, but that decline has stalled since the pandemic, increasing young people's vulnerability, especially in high-wage, high-growth employment. Today, approximately 16% of NYC's 16- to 24-year-olds are considered out-of-school youth.

In response, the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development launched the Advance & Earn program in 2020. Advance & Earn provides comprehensive training, including high school equivalency preparation, vocational skills, and work readiness, and pairs these training with paid internships. This combination not only equips these youths with essential skills but also instills a sense of confidence and agency that helps youth pursue education and jobs. The program underscores the critical role of tailored educational pathways in fostering long-term employment success and societal inclusion.

Despite the potential benefits of this program, many participants drop out, notably from its flagship programming helping students acquire their high school equivalency. Over the past year, the Department of Youth and Community Development and NYC Behavioral Design Team worked to understand the behavioral barriers that limit student participation in the

Highlights

- Young people often drop out of workforce-development programs because of inflexible program logistics, because their expectations did not match the reality of those programs, or because they need more and clearer support.
- We designed a range of ways to better help these youth stay involved, including flexible ways to participate, clearer communication of support, and more consistent expectations.
- NYC's Department of Youth and Community Development will phase in these designs in coming years, and will evaluate how these low-cost behavioral designs help more youth participate in and complete educational program.

program and collectively design solutions that meet the needs of out of school youth and enhance program retention.

What is the Advance & Earn Program?

The Advance & Earn program, administered by the Department of Youth and Community Development and operated through a network of community-based organizations in New York City, provides free educational and work readiness training to youth aged 16–24 who are not currently engaged in education or employment. The program is structured to cater to diverse needs within this demographic by offering three distinct service levels.

For participants who have not yet achieved their High School Equivalency (HSE), the program sorts students into one of two pathways based on their academic performance assessed through standardized testing:

- **Pre-HSE Instruction:** Tailored for students who read below an eighth-grade level, this track emphasizes literacy and math preparation, work readiness, college and career exploration, and includes a weekly participation stipend.
- **HSE Preparation:** Aimed at students who read above a ninth-grade level, this track prepares them for the GED test and offers advanced academic instruction, industry credentialing, paid internships, and job placement assistance.

For individuals over 18 years old who enter the program with a high school diploma, the **Advanced Training** track provides specialized instruction in high-demand fields such as healthcare, construction, and culinary arts. This track also includes work readiness programs, further education and career exploration, paid internships, and job placement support.

Across all tracks, the Advance & Earn program provides comprehensive case management support, connecting participants with various wrap-around services to aid their progress outside the classroom. This integrated approach equips young individuals with the skills, knowledge, and support needed to navigate and succeed in the workforce.

Why are youth dropping out?

To understand why youth are not taking advantage of these programs, we must understand the experiences of those most affected by it and the situations they find themselves in. Gaining direct feedback from those who have left the program was crucial to understanding why participants drop out or disengage from the Advance & Earn program. This required us to adopt various methods to reconnect with and learn from former participants who had dropped out.

- **Interviews:** We conducted a dozen semi-structured interviews with former participants, including those who dropped out of the program and those who persisted until its completion.
- **Online Survey:** While only completed by a few dozen disengaged students, this survey helped us gain broader insights into the reasons participants leave the program.

- **Case Notes:** We read over 100 participants' case notes—detailed records of each participant's progress, as chronicled by their program case manager.

Together, these approaches helped us identify key behavioral barriers affecting students' ability to stay engaged in the program:

1. **Students often enter Advance & Earn with mismatched or incomplete expectations about its requirements.** Many students we heard from were surprised to learn about certain aspects of the program once they began. Additionally, not all community-based organizations consistently enforced participation in all program components, further complicating students' understanding and expectations.
2. **Students self-tailor their program experience to align with their personal goals.** Although the program requires students to participate in work readiness classes and internships, many students we heard from enter Advance & Earn with the perception that it primarily offers GED prep or vocational training, as these are the aspects most heavily emphasized in outreach efforts. Even after realizing the program requires other components, students focus their participation on the components that most directly meet their immediate needs or expectations.
3. **Students fail to meet participation requirements when the consequences of not engaging in the program are not clearly stated or enforced.** For instance, participants shared with us that the program's attendance policies are often not consistently conveyed or reinforced. Students who miss days typically face no immediate repercussions. Combined, these behaviors hinder students' ability and willingness to comply with program expectations.
4. **Catching up is difficult.** With courses occurring almost daily and content building progressively, falling behind can quickly become overwhelming for students, leading many to drop out.
5. **Students have incomplete knowledge of support options.** The community-based organizations that run Advance & Earn offer students a wide variety of wraparound support services that can help them personally and keep them engaged in the program. These services range from hands-on assistance applying for benefits programs, food pantries, childcare, mental health counseling, and more. Information about such support is communicated infrequently and through limited channels. As a result, many students were unaware of the full suite of support services their organization provided, and these useful services were underused. We hypothesized that this further contributed to the program's drop out rate.
6. **Students perceive support options as inadequate.** For those who manage to get linked to support services, some found them inadequate. For example,

students shared that some community-based organizations struggle to meet the demand for personalized learning support.

- 7. The program doesn't always meet students' expectations.** When participants' expectations for the program are unmet, they drop out of the program or a specific component. For example, insights from our survey highlighted that many students experienced substantial delays in the internship matching process and many students were dissatisfied with their internship placements, finding them to be irrelevant to their vocational path or failed to provide satisfactory hands-on experience.

Of note, our research revealed that the barriers particularly affected two sub-populations of students:

- 1. Those who enter the program with challenging life circumstances:** We heard from many students that they entered the program while managing challenging external circumstances in their personal lives, such as having caretaking responsibilities of a newborn or having to maintain a full-time job to support their relatives. This made it difficult for those students to regularly attend classes or catch up after absences, prompting them to quit the program or to prioritize the aspects of the program they are able to participate in.
- 2. Those whose life circumstances change partway through the program:** We discovered that some students who were initially enthusiastic about the program faced unexpected personal challenges midway through the program. These challenges could include changes in accommodation, family emergencies, or health problems of themselves or their family members. These challenges can disrupt their studies, cause them to miss classes, and eventually lead to dropping out of the program.

Reimagining the Advance & Earn Program

With these insights in mind, the Department of Youth and Community Development and ideas42 reimagined how the Advance & Earn program could be structured to overcome the barriers we uncovered. We collectively crafted a concept that not only aimed to enhance student engagement and reduce dropout rates but also addressed deeper, systemic barriers identified during our diagnosis phase.

Our recommendations sought to introduce new, tailored participation tracks while preserving the original educational tracks—Pre-HSE, HSE, and Advanced Training. In addition, we proposed significant changes to the program's internship model.

New Participation Tracks: While the program's three original participation tracks (Pre-HSE, HSE, and Advanced Training) effectively sorted students by their academic progress, we proposed four new, additional options, or sub-tracks, to better group students by their individual needs and circumstances. These options maintained the original track's fundamental requirements but offered students greater variety and flexibility in course scheduling (e.g., weekend only), format (e.g., hybrid), and pacing (e.g., 10 weeks vs. 20 weeks). These additional participation options address the behavioral barriers to participation and, we hope, will help more youth complete the program.

- **Crash Course Option:** Tailored for those unable to attend weekday sessions, this option compressed the program into intensive weekend sessions, ideal for students with caretaking duties or those seeking rapid completion.
- **Online Option:** This feature offered a blend of live and recorded sessions, along with virtual case management and remote internships, allowing participants to overcome geographical and scheduling barriers, and pursue certifications aligned with their career goals.
- **Re-Enrollers Option:** For those re-enrolling in pre-HSE and HSE tracks, this path allowed participants to resume where they left off rather than restarting. It also allowed them to craft a more personalized program journey, helping them avoid repetition and stay motivated in the components that they are willing and able to participate in.
- **Experienced Worker Option:** Aimed at participants who were already employed but seeking to enhance their skills or gain a GED, this path provides tailored workforce development courses and does not require an internship, thus appealing to the participants who want to keep their current income-generating activities or simply wouldn't benefit from participating in available internships given their already substantive work experience. This track has the potential to boost program enrollment, given that being unemployed is a highly restrictive requirement of the Advance & Earn program.

Internship Model Revisions: Addressing the delays with internship placements, we recommended streamlining the approval process to 1-2 weeks, providing stipends during waiting periods for financial stability, and clarifying potential delays early in the intake process.

Other Recommendations Report: We also compiled a list of more tactical, behaviorally informed recommendations for making the program more effective. Recommendations included:

- **Improving Expectations and Understanding:** We proposed standardizing and clarifying program expectations through enhanced onboarding materials and consistent communication, including detailed FAQ guides and regular policy reinforcement.
- **Enhancing Support Visibility and Accessibility:** We aimed to increase the visibility of support services with onboarding sessions, detailed handbooks, and continuous reminders, supplemented by innovative methods like a "service match" quiz to tailor support to individual needs.
- **Reinforcing Engagement and Consequences:** To clarify the consequences for nonengagement, we suggested making the benefits of participation and the drawbacks of disengagement more apparent, using strategies framed around loss aversion and consistent enforcement of participation policies.

The Department of Youth and Community Development plans to gradually integrate these changes into the program over the next few cohort cycles.

Takeaway

Engaging out-of-school youth in education and workforce development is a complex challenge. The issues that caused them to quit work and school often persist and negatively affect their participation in further programming. Therefore, program providers must continuously experiment, assess, and adjust their approaches to better cater to the diverse needs of their students. The Department of Youth and Community Development in New York City initiated the Advance & Earn program, which exemplifies this ongoing journey.

Our partnership with the Department of Youth and Community Development highlights the crucial strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of workforce development initiatives. Educational and training efforts need to adapt to the specific challenges and aspirations of out-of-school youth. By providing new, flexible ways for out-of-school youth to participate while still achieving program goals, we hope that more young people stay engaged in these valuable programs.

If you are interested in a deeper dive into our findings or in exploring potential collaborations, please reach out to us at nycbdt@ideas42.org.