partners for meaningful change

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Evaluation of the Newark Opportunity Youth Network (OYN) Initiative

2019–2020 Local Evaluation Report

SUBMITTED TO:

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Opportunity Youth Network (OYN) is a public-private partnership that launched in 2016 with the mission of helping Newark thrive by reconnecting young people ages 16 to 24 who are not in school and not working. OYN-Newark estimates that there are approximately 7,000 such disengaged youth in Newark.[1] Its strategy for reconnecting these youth and helping them to succeed involves (1) reengaging and connecting youth with viable youth development programs; (2) expanding and better coordinating alternative education options, including alternative district schools, charter schools, and programs run by community-based organizations providing high school or equivalent degrees; (3) bringing together community leaders to improve youth-related policy; (4) promoting data-sharing to coordinate services and promote accountability; and (5) collecting feedback from youth on their needs to improve every aspect of OYN's operations. As its name suggests, OYN is a network, and is currently composed of four partners:

- The *Reengagement Center* (operated by OYN), the Newark community's central hub for intake, assessment, and school reenrollment;
- LEAD Charter School, the state's first alternative charter school;
- Two community-based organizations: New Community Corporation and La Casa de Don Pedro

Newark OPPORTUNITY YOUTH NETWORK *A YouthBuild Newark Initiative*

Newark-based OYN is an alternative learning program and a recognized national leader in delivering strong outcomes for minority and low-income students, offering students the opportunity to earn high school diplomas and gain real-world skills to help participants begin to improve their outcomes. OYN's mission is three-fold:

- To establish exceptional, world-class public schools and education programs for opportunity youth that harness the intelligence and positive energy of low-income young people.
- To prove young people can achieve positive post-secondary outcomes despite overwhelming odds.
- To advocate for change public policies that inhibit their success.

In 2019, OYN-Newark expressed an interest in commissioning a systematic evaluation of its efforts, by exploring three overarching themes: the experience and perceptions of participating youth, the achievement outcomes of current and former participants (i.e., alumni), and challenges and key areas for improvement. OYN engaged in exploratory conversations with Metis Associates – an independent evaluation consulting group out of New York City – and contracted the firm to conduct an evaluation to explore various key questions about OYN's effective implementation under the three above overarching themes.

Metis is a national research/evaluation firm, headquartered in New York City, that brings more than 41 years of successful experience in field-based public education research/evaluation and information management in support of mission-driven organizations such as OYN-Newark. Metis has conducted various studies in the Newark area for over 18 years and is familiar with the education landscape of the city. Recently, Metis completed a comprehensive evaluation of Newark's South Ward Community Schools Initiative (SWCSI) under contract with the Newark Trust for Education. Earlier work in Newark included Living Cities, CDC project evaluation, Newark Public School's Safe Schools Healthy Students initiative, and others that provided Metis significant familiarity with district, school, and community contexts.

[1] Data provided by OYN via previous studies conducted on the number of disengaged youth in Newark.

II. Evaluation Design

Metis's evaluation was designed to assess the implementation and outcomes of OYN's comprehensive services. Based on Metis' review of OYN's program design and current status of implementation, it proposed to conduct an initial multi-method study of the implementation and early impact of OYN initiatives that focused on the various "high priority" evaluation questions. The evaluation questions covered three overarching themes, Specifically, the target evaluation questions of the study were:

Experiences and Perceptions of Participant Youth

1. What is the demand for the *Re-engagement Center*?
    - What are the experiences that drive young people to the Center?
    - What are the characteristics of young people who come to the Center?
    - What drives young people to engage with OYN, as opposed to other re-engagement options in Newark?
2. What do the *Reengagement Center* trends suggest about the needs and experiences of young people across the city of Newark?
3. What is the experience of the young person once they engage and enroll with an OYN partner?

Participant Achievement Outcomes

4. Of those who come to the *Re-engagement Center*, what proportion go on to complete on-boarding and enroll with an OYN partner? What are the characteristics of those who complete on-boarding and enrollment vs. those who disengage during the process?
5. To what extent do individual development plans (IDPs) support staff and students in achieving desired outcomes? How consistently are IDPs implemented, and how helpful are they to students and staff?
    - To what extent are enrolled young people achieving the goals laid out in their IDPs, including social-emotional, academic, postsecondary, employment, recidivism, and health outcomes?
6. What is the level of retention and completion of programming at each of the OYN placements (i.e., at LEAD or other CBOs)? What are the characteristics of those who remain in their programs vs. those who disengage?
7. How do student outcomes vary by their treatment experience?

Challenges and Implications of Findings

8. What challenges, if any, are associated with OYN meeting its goals?
9. What implications do the study findings have for policy and/or systems change?

To address these questions, Metis worked with OYN staff to develop the appropriate methods and tools, and held ongoing evaluation check-in conference calls to keep the evaluation moving forward steadily. The evaluation was guided by three overarching themes: customer (i.e., youth, families) experience, customer outcomes, and opportunities for growth. The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach that draws data from multiple sources and respondent groups. The paragraphs below describe the data sources and evaluation methods used to address the program's evaluation questions:

- ✓ **Student record data.** Metis staff collected student-level outcome record data to address the study's proposed evaluation questions related to students' demographics, academic performance, graduation, and other pertinent data. Data were obtained for all participating students enrolled in the 2017-2018 school year (N=143) and for 230 of the 242 students enrolled in the 2018-2019 school year (95%).
- ✓ **Youth evaluation survey**. In November 2019 and January 2020, Metis administered a survey to youth currently engaged with OYN through LEAD Charter School and its partners, and with alumni of LEAD, respectively. The surveys were designed to collect participants' perceptions regarding their experiences with the various key components of OYN, what led them to seek out services at OYN, what kept them at the school, and their feedback on how the network could continue to improve the way it serves youth. Surveys were completed by 84 current and 87 former OYN participants for a total of 171 completed surveys.
- ✓ **Staff evaluation survey**. In December 2019, Metis administered a staff survey to all staff of OYN partners including teachers, school-based counselors/social workers, other health professionals, administrative staff, custodians, and anyone else that serves an OYN site and has had the opportunity to observe youth. The evaluation survey was designed to collect participants' perceptions regarding how effective OYN has been at meeting its participants' needs, what they believe brings youth to seek OYN services, what they believe is responsible for keeping youth involved, their feedback on how OYN can better serve youth, and how OYN can best support staff. Surveys were completed by 28 staff members.
- ✓ **Focus groups with current and alumni youth**. Metis conducted two focus groups with youth—one with 14 currently-participating youth and another with eight OYN alumni, both in November 2019. The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain more in-depth information regarding youth experiences in the key program components delivered by OYN, and also to gather feedback that would help inform the program's decision-making going forward.
- ✓ **Focus groups with parents of participating youth**. Metis conducted a focus group with a sample of six parents/guardians of participating youth in November 2019. The purpose of the focus group was to learn about parents' perceptions regarding how OYN has served their young people, how they view their young person's experience at OYN in comparison to previous school-experiences, and how else OYN can best serve youth and families going forward.
- ✓ **Workshop observations**. Two workshops were observed over the course of the project year to provide staff with some feedback on the content and information shared, gain context to inform the development of appropriate data collection instruments, and add context to support the quantitative and qualitative data collected through various methods.
- ✓ **Review of program documentation.** Throughout the school year, Metis collected and reviewed program documentation, including workshop descriptions, previous evaluation reports, and program component materials, as well as other pertinent information.

III. FINDINGS

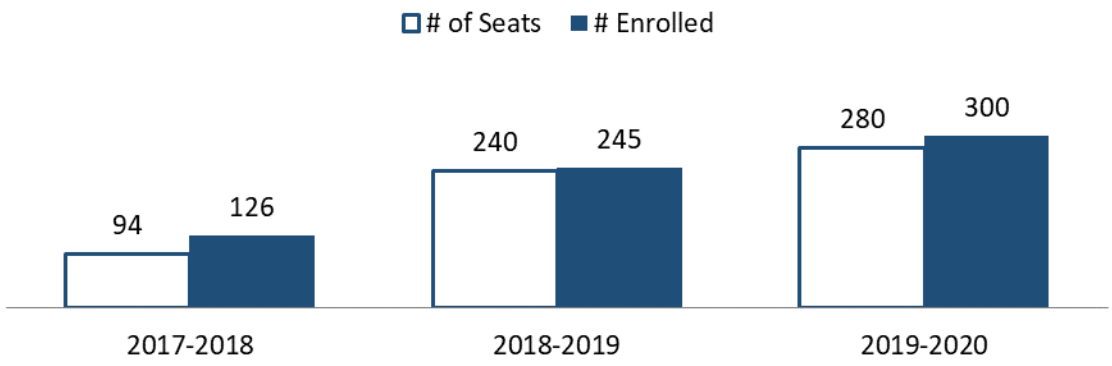
As described earlier, there were a number of target evaluation questions for the 2019–2020 evaluation of OYN. The sections below present the findings, to the extent that data were available, for each of these questions, grouped by common theme.

Pre-Enrollment Experiences of Participating Youth

Demand for Reengagement Center

- **Demand for opportunity youth programming in Newark exceeds the number of available seats.** Since 2017, OYN programs have received approximately 3,900 applications from youth seeking to re-engage in school and complete their secondary education, and have conducted intake and assessment for 1,434 youth, including 782 youth in 2017-2018 and 652 youth in 2018-2019. However, the number of available seats in OYN programs is limited. For example, LEAD Charter School had 92 seats available in the 2017-2018 school year, 240 seats in the 2018-2019 school year, and 280 seats in the 2018-2019 school year. Each year, the number of students enrolled actually exceeded the number of available seats (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Available Seats and Enrollment Numbers for LEAD Charter School

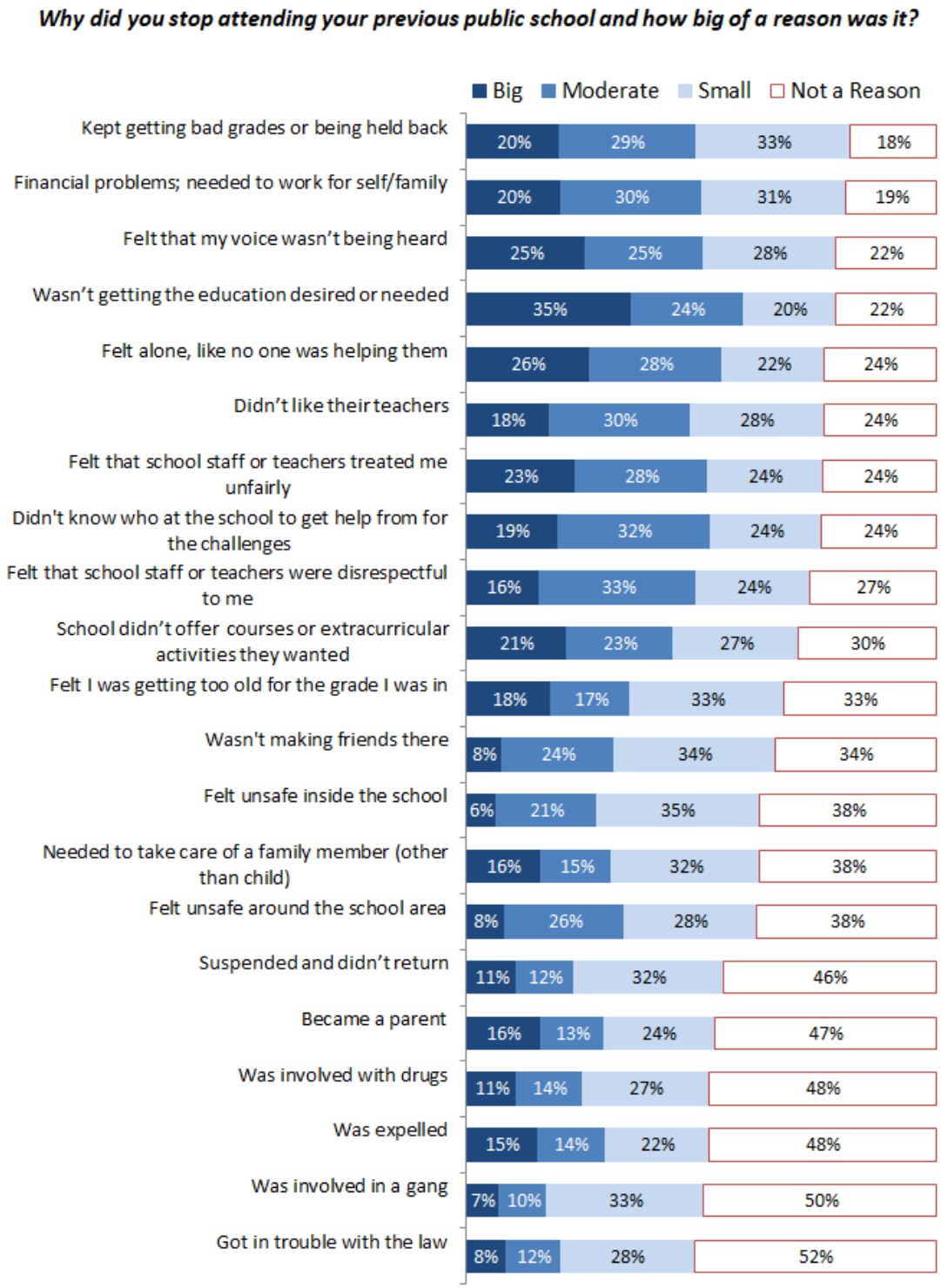


The sections below provide evaluation findings on the experiences that drive young people to the Reengagement Center, the characteristics of young people who come to the Center, and why youth choose to engage with OYN, as opposed to other re-engagement options in Newark. The findings below were extracted from various data sources, including: surveys and focus groups with current and former (alumni) participating youth, staff surveys, a parent focus group, and program application data.

Previous School Experiences of Opportunity Youth

OYN youth, both current and alumni, disengaged from their previous schools for different reasons. Understanding these reasons helps staff at OYN to consider areas that are vital for addressing the needs of its incoming participating youth. As such, current and alumni OYN youth were asked to select the key reasons why they disengaged from school (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Reasons Why Youth Disengaged from School – *Youth Survey (N=160)*



The top five reasons (small, moderate or big) that caused students to disengage from school included:

- Performing poorly academically or repeatedly being held back (82% identified this as a *small*, *moderate* or *big* reason),
- Needing to support self/family because of financial problems (81%),
- Feeling that their voice wasn't being heard (78%),

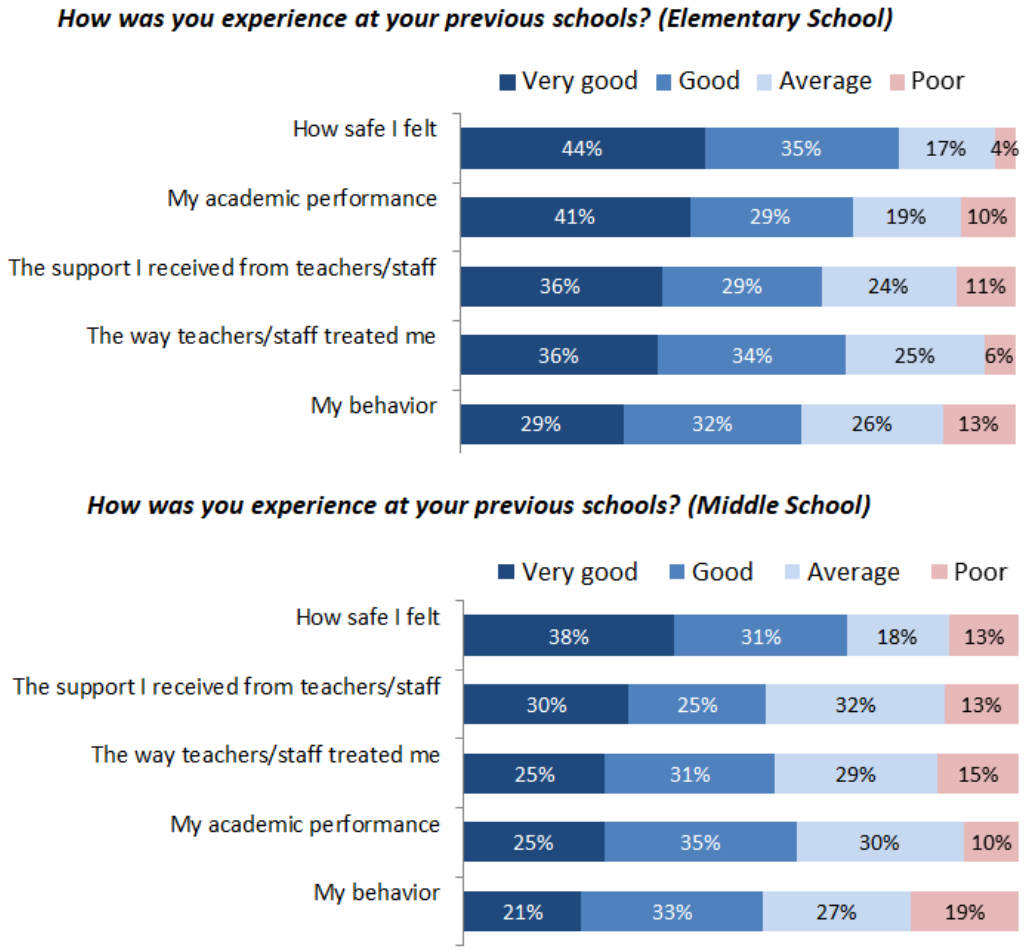
- Feeling they were not getting the desired education needed (78%), and
- Feeling alone, like no one was helping them (76%).

The areas identified by the majority of youth as being moderate or big reasons for disengaging from previous schools were:

- Youth feeling that they were not getting the desired education needed (59% identified this as a *moderate* or *big* reason),
- Feeling alone, like no one was helping them (54%),
- Believing that teachers or other school staff were treating them unfairly (51%), and
- Not knowing who to receive help from at their former school for their challenges (51%).

OYN youth perceived their experiences in school as having gotten worse after elementary school. As shown in the figure below, students generally felt safer, believed they performed better academically, and felt that they received better support from teachers and staff in elementary school than they did in middle school.

Figure 3: Youth Experiences at Previous Schools – *Youth Survey (N=160)*



When asked for more in-depth information regarding disengaging from school, youth focus group participants shared their belief that their previous school experiences were marred by stringent disciplinary rules and staff that were uninterested in working with them. They described instances where

they felt that staff were generally dismissive of their needs, would not take time to better understand their points of view, or did not provide adequate academic assistance after they missed school time because of disciplinary consequences. When reflecting on these points, one participant argued, "*That sets [youth] up for failure in real life.*"

Parents also shared during their focus group that, before enrolling in OYN, students struggled with both personal issues at home (including a loss of a parent) and school-related issues, such as academic struggles and disciplinary consequences. Students were generally disconnected from school and some had no other option but to transfer. One shared that no other school besides OYN would accept their child, who was interested in technology but did not have passing grades.

Factors Driving Interest in OYN Programs

Reengaging youth by providing an attractive alternative to continuing their education is among the key strategic approaches OYN considers when designing their programs. As such, staff and youth were asked various questions regarding why OYN seemed like a good choice for them and reasons why they may have chosen OYN over other alternative programs in the Newark area.

Attributes that Promoted Initial Interest in OYN

- **Among the various reasons that youth were initially interested in OYN, wanting to change their trajectory was strongest.** The majority (87%) of responding youth reported that "…wanting to better plan for my future" was a *moderate* to *big* reason for their initial interest in OYN (Fig. 4). Other compelling reasons included the desire to complete high school (89%) and wanting to find a place where they were treated better (71%). These same three factors were reported by staff as the top reasons why they felt youth were driven to engage with OYN.

Figure 4: Reasons for Youth Initial Interest in OYN/LEAD – *Youth Survey (N=155)*

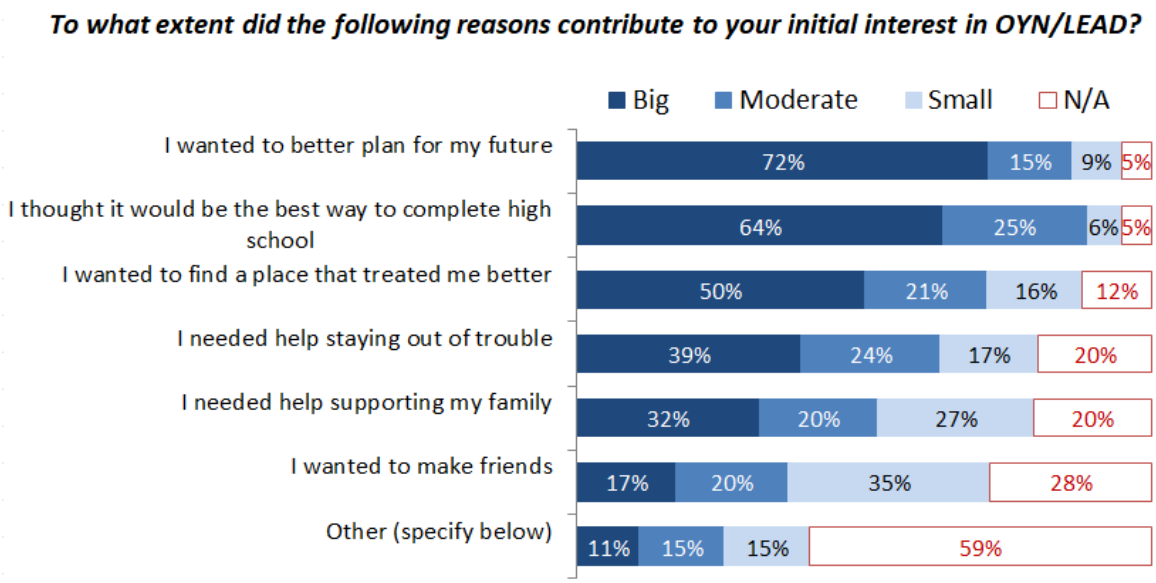
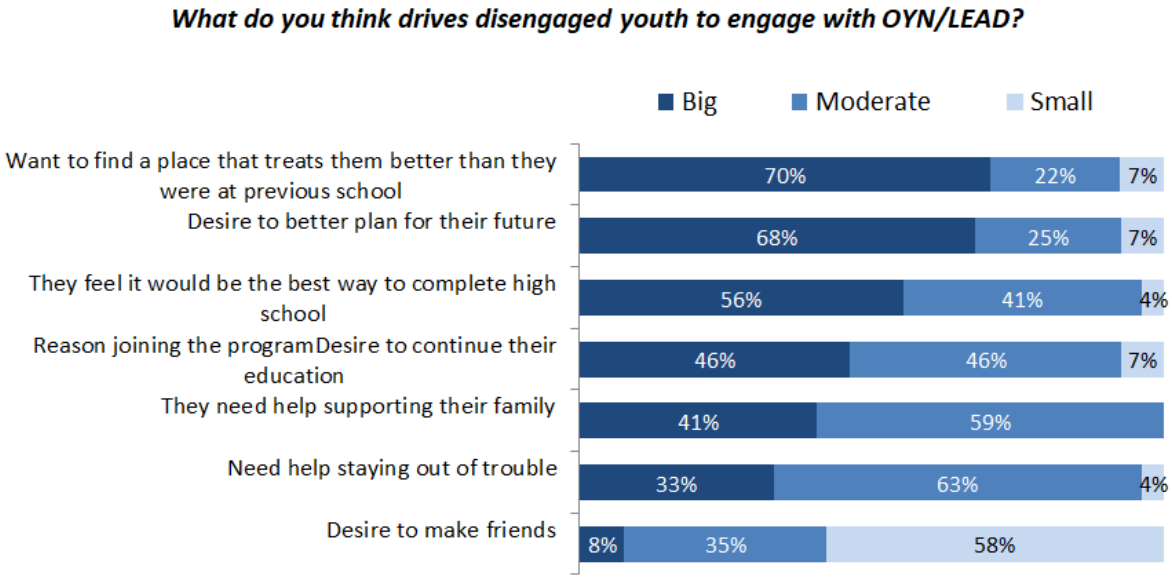


Figure 5: Factors that Create Demand for OYN – *Staff Survey (N=28)*



Youth focus group data supported these, as they shared that **initial youth interest in the Reengagement Center was fueled by a belief that they had exhausted all other options**. Youth indicated that the only other alternatives included night school, GED classes, or continuing to transfer to other public schools until being informed they could not attend anymore. OYN presented an opportunity for youth who were still looking for an education. Youth seemed to resonate with the sentiment that one focus group participant shared: "*I felt like if I [simply] got my GED, that was me copping out, and I didn't want to cop out.*"

Youth also added being genuinely interested in OYN programming, as **the design of the program was different from other options they were aware of, and thus made them believe they may have different outcomes as a result.** They explained that OYN would not only help them get back on track for high school graduation, but would provide them with a unique and enhanced experience. They were interested in the ability to finish early, the extra help in college and career planning, and the opportunities to earn credits toward college degrees and certifications available. Students generally believed OYN would provide a "*better learning environment*" and a "*fresh start*" where they could become "*better than [they] were before*." They expected that this school program would be in direct contrast to their previous educational experiences, which was particularly encouraging, as one participant explained:

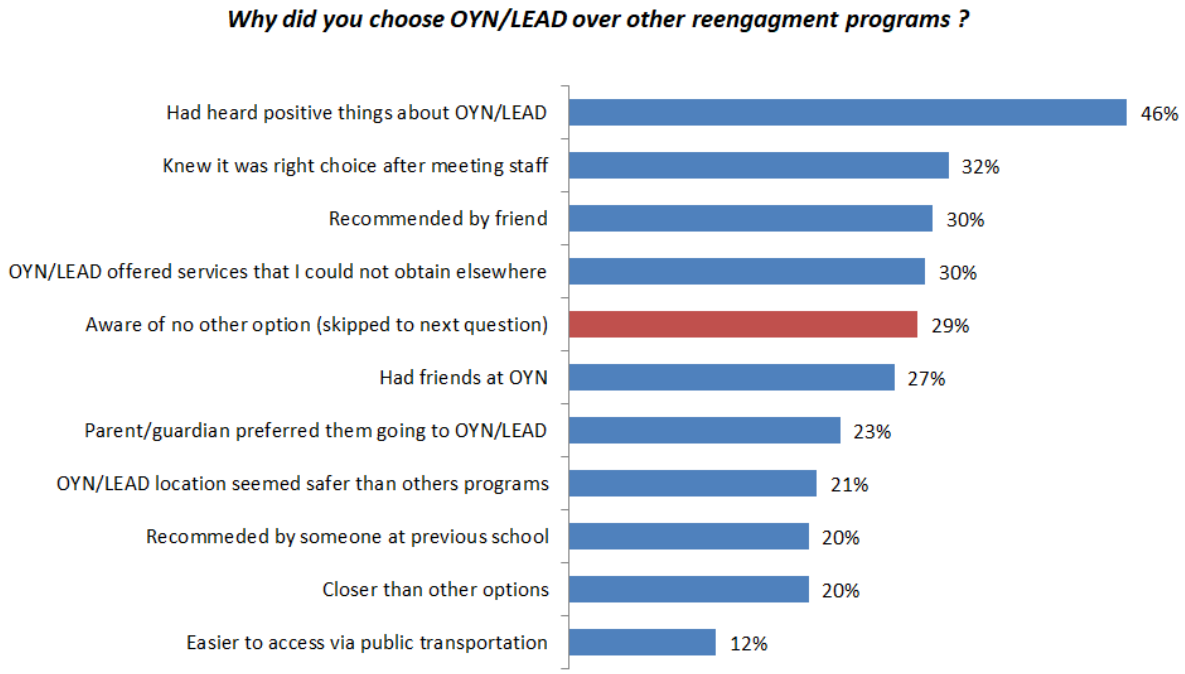
> ***"I exhausted all my options… I thought this might work for me because it's not the same as other schools."***
> ***-OYN Alumnus***

> *"I exhausted all my options. The only option I had [otherwise] was just transferring to different schools and that still did not work for me… When I first applied to LEAD, in a sense that's what I was doing. But when I heard the back story, 'Oh it helps you catch up with your credits… and then it has the CTE programs for nursing,' that appealed to me because I'm starting my career in a sense. I have a one up on other people that may be in that same career path. So I thought 'this might work for me.' I still wasn't sure, but I thought this might work for me because it's not the same as other schools."*

Youth Choice of OYN Over Other Alternative Programs

- **The greatest proportion of youth were attracted to OYN specifically because of positive word-of-mouth feedback.** Nearly half of responding youth (46%) indicated selecting OYN over other reengagement options in Newark because they "heard positive things about" the program. It is also noteworthy to point out that nearly a third of students were influenced by other reasons, such as believing it was the right choice after meeting the staff (32%), learning that the program had services not available in other programs (30%), and because it was directly recommended by a friend (30%).

Figure 6: Reasons Why Youth Choose OYN Over Other Programs – *Youth Survey (N=155)*

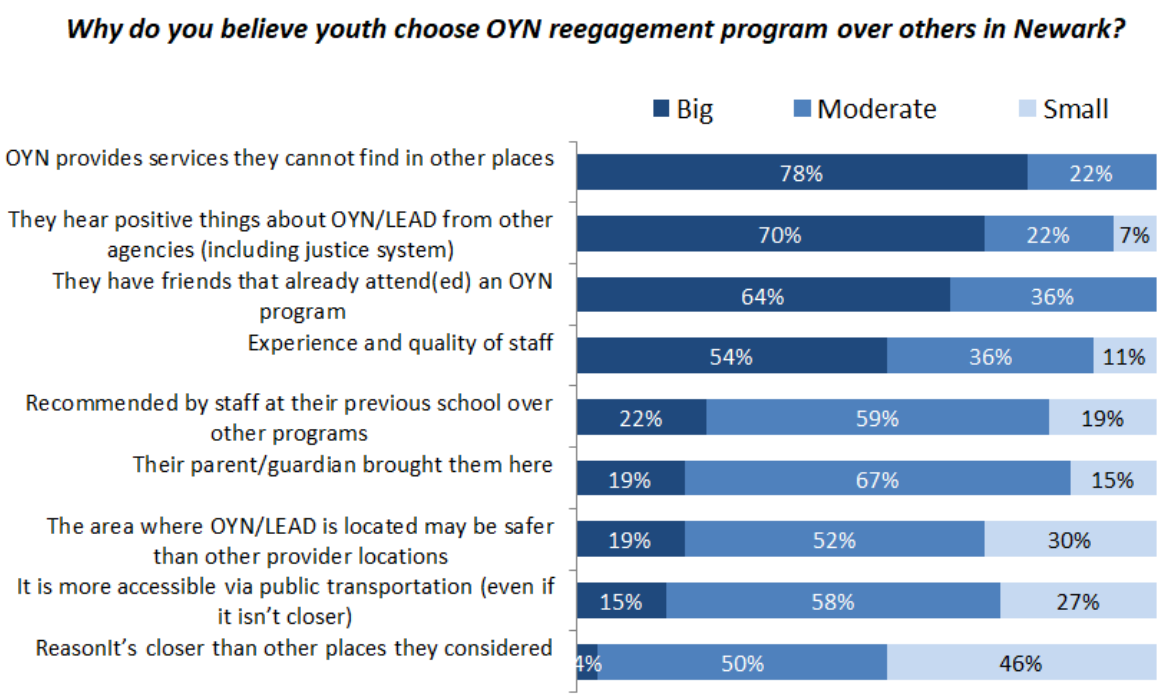


Some youth listed other reasons for choosing in open-ended survey comments. Students most often mentioned the robust opportunities offered around job-readiness and post high school preparedness, wanting to pursue a better education for themselves, and that their impressions of staff made them feel comfortable engaging with OYN. Other unique reasons shared included: staff made the process seem easy and understandable, it was their last option after attempting others, the focus of the school is on making positive changes, and the academic schedule was convenient for their life circumstances (needing to work, etc.).

Parents echoed the same sentiments during their focus group. They indicated that students had transferred between numerous other schools in an attempt to earn high school credits before registering at OYN. They knew that students wanted a different approach than previous schools that included more hands-on experiences and generally more options for the future. OYN provided their children with that unique opportunity.

- **Most surveyed staff (78%) believed that a *big* reason why students choose OYN over other Newark-area options is that it provides them with services they cannot find in other places.** Other areas listed as *big* reasons why youth choose OYN included hearing positive things about OYN/LEAD (70%) and having friends that already attend the program (64%).

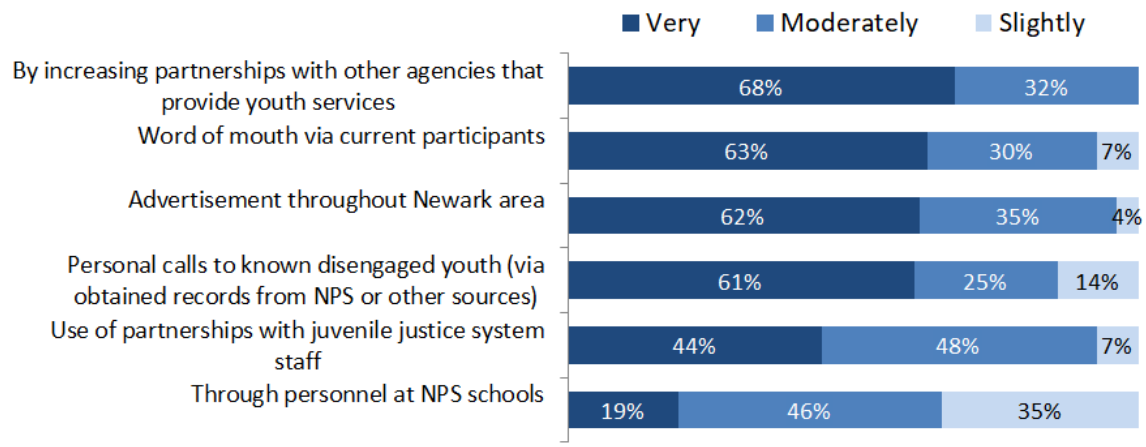
Figure 7: Perceived Reasons Why Staff Believe Youth Choose OYN Over Other Programs – *Staff Survey (N=28)*



Reaching Disengaged Youth in Newark

- **Staff reported that there are various effective ways to reach disengaged youth in Newark, starting with increasing partnerships with other agencies in the city.** Over two-thirds (68%) of surveyed staff believed that increasing partnerships with agencies is a *very* effective way to reach disengaged youth, and all staff believed that it was at least *moderately* effective. Over 92% of staff also indicated that word of mouth, advertisement, and partnerships with the juvenile justice system were also at least *moderately* effective ways to reach disengaged youth.

Figure 8: Perceived Effective Ways that OYN Can Reach Disengaged Youth – *Staff Survey (N=28)*



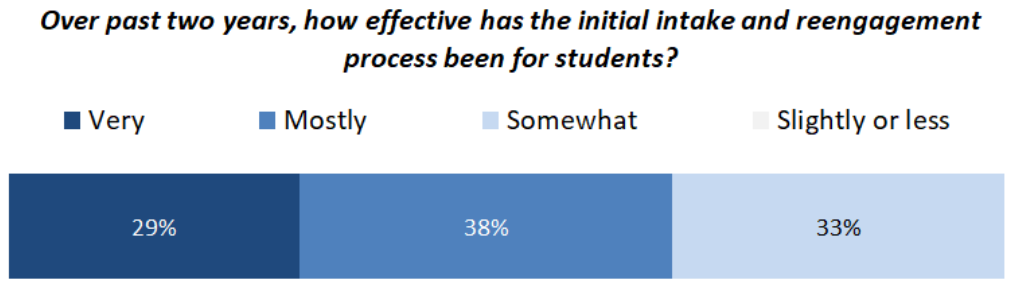
Program Onboarding and Reengagement Experience

The OYN utilizes the Re-Engagement Center as a portal for all transfers of significantly off-track students and the placement of all returning out-of-school youth. The onboarding process consists of an intake/application phase, followed by assessment, placement and follow-up phases. In this section we present findings on youth perceptions of particular aspects of the re-engagement process.

Perceived Effectiveness of Initial Intake and Reengagement Process

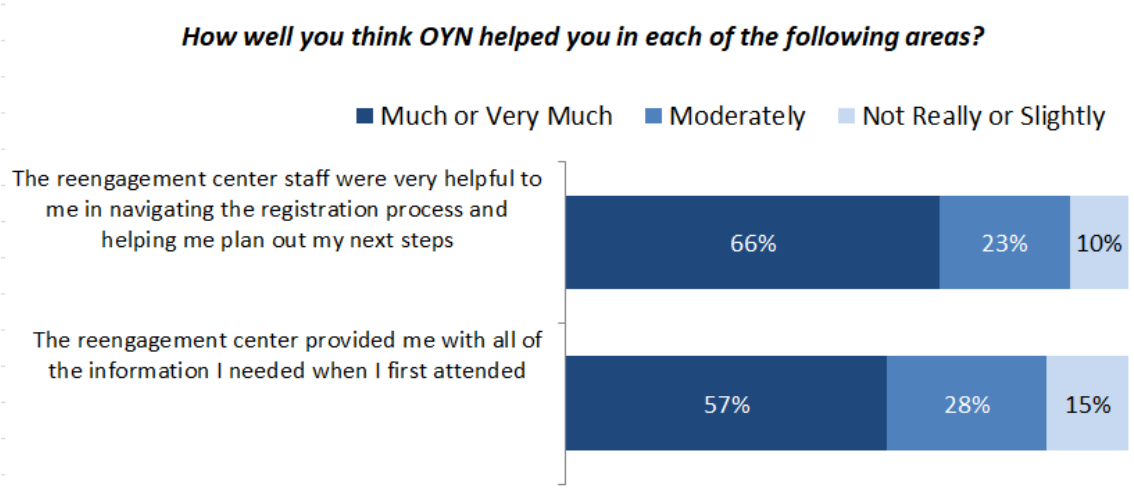
- **OYN staff generally believed that the intake process was effective.** The majority of responding staff (67%) believed that the intake and reengagement process was *mostly* or *very* effective for students. However, a notable third (33%) of respondents believed it was only *somewhat* effective.

Figure 9: Perceived Effectiveness of Reengagement Process – *Staff Survey (N=24)*



- **Youth taking part in the initial reengagement process generally believed that OYN staff were helpful in assisting them and providing information, but there seems to be room for improvement.** The majority of youth believed staff there to be *much* or *very much* helpful in assisting them to navigate the registration process (66%) and providing them with the information needed (57%). However, relatively large proportions of respondents (33% to 43%) also believed OYN to be *moderately* or less helpful in these two areas, respectively, indicating that further exploration may be needed as to which aspects of the engagement process could be improved.

Figure 10: Support Provided by OYN During Reengagement Process – *Youth Survey (N=146)*



Youth participating in the focus group described the initial intake process as "easy," that enough information was given to understand general expectations, and that staff made them feel welcomed. The youth truly appreciated how the staff interacted with them. As one commented, "*You are able to talk to whoever you want [among the staff] because you feel comfortable,"* and another added "*they treat you like family.*" The youth also shared that staff clearly tried to gauge students' commitment levels from the beginning, which helped set the standard.

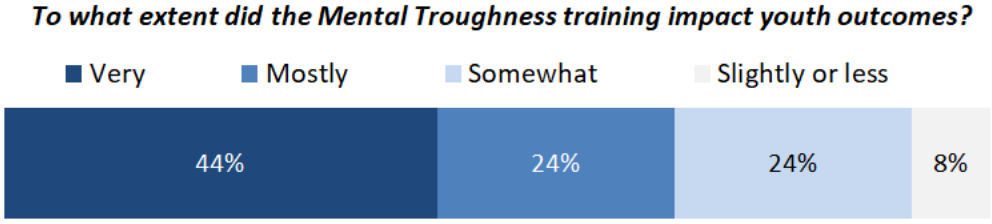
> ***"...they treat you like family"***
>
> ***-Youth member***

Mental Toughness Training

The Mental Toughness training is an important component of the onboarding process that is designed to prepare and inspire youth to participate in OYN programs. In addition to setting the tone and expectations for the year, Mental Toughness training helps to lay the foundation for students to acquire critical thinking, decision-making and self-advocacy skills, continue to build relationships between students and staff, and to build a cohesive, safe, supportive peer group. Staff and youth perceptions of the Mental Toughness Training component are summarized below.

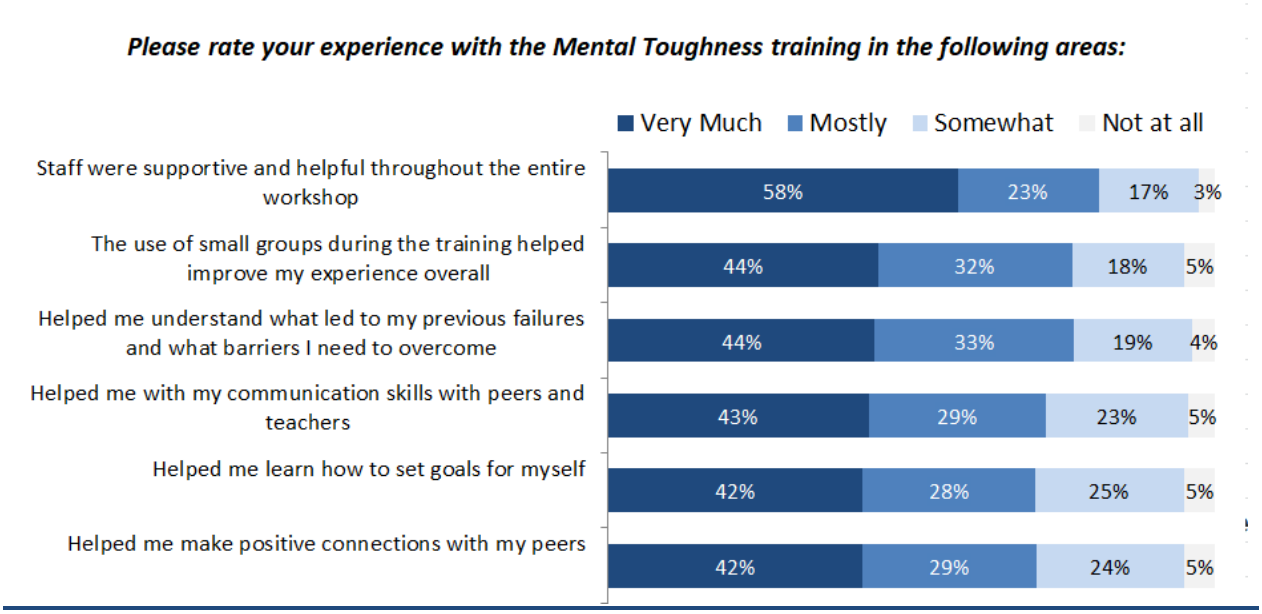
- **The majority of surveyed staff reported that that the mental toughness training positively impacts youth outcomes.** The great majority of staff (92%) indicated that the training impacts youth outcomes at least *somewhat*. More than two-thirds believed that the training *mostly* or *very much* impacts youth outcomes.

Figure 11: Perceived Impact of Mental Toughness Training – *Staff Survey (N=25)*



- **The mental toughness training is viewed favorably by youth as an important part of their immersion into the program, despite the prevailing belief that the training is challenging.** A notable majority of students provided favorable ratings on indicators measuring the effectiveness of the mental toughness training. Over three-quarters of respondents believed that the staff support, use of small groups, and learning to make personal improvements based on understanding previous failures were *mostly* or *very much* effective. At least 70% provided similar ratings for the remaining areas (communication with peers, setting personal goals and forging positive connections with peers).

Figure 12: Youth Experience with Mental Toughness Training – *Youth Survey (N=155)*



Youth focus group participants shared that the mental toughness training was challenging both physically and socially. Students had to learn how to work with different personalities and communication styles, forcing them to practice teamwork in a way they had not done before. Some students complained about the physical aspect of training, but overall the youth understood the value of the process. According to the youth, the training emphasized leadership, collaboration, friendship, patience, and discipline. It helped students "open up," become more willing to listen to others, and get to know their classmates in the program. As one youth put it, "*It's all about getting to know your peers… [and] trying to break you out of the mindset.*" The process seemed to have been successful in accomplishing that: one student realized that she was not alone in her struggles as others had encountered similar barriers. Another developed a new sense of discipline that he has applied regularly since then. Someone else discovered that they were an effective and encouraging leader. The impact of the process is best described by the youth themselves:

- *I had to learn how to work better with people…Having to understand that at one point or another, whatever one person did affected everybody. And even though I didn't really appreciate that, I had to learn to accept that you are going to have to work with people wherever you go. You can't do everything on your own.*
- *That was the main thing- community building. If we couldn't get along with each other or anything, then we couldn't step out of the building. Why would we be fighting each other if we were supposed to be building up the school and leading? That was the main objective from mental toughness. And if we couldn't push people to come back the next day and try it, it was like… there's no community. Because we're not helping the people next to us… It taught me- I don't care where you are from, I don't care what beef we had- we are going to squash it and try something different. It taught me how to step out of my scenery.*

> ***"I learned the lesson that in order to be successful in life, you are going to have to do stuff that you don't want to do. You are going to have to step out of your comfort zone…[its] contributing to my success in life altogether"***
>
> ***-Youth member***

Parents that participated in the focus group were asked about their knowledge of their young person's experience with the Mental Toughness training. Even though the process was not emphasized during registration, parents were aware of the training because their young person would talk about how challenging the process was. Some parents' comments regarding the Mental Toughness training are provided below.

- *"My daughter said she enjoyed mental toughness training. She learned a lot and mentioned having to do community service and that it encouraged her to want to do more things for her community."*
- *"Sometimes youth being unengaged prolonged the process of everybody else getting what they need throughout the day. That was her only complaint. Other than that, she says all positive things."*
- *"They had to do things they're not used to… talk in a circle, yoga, community service. It was hard for them."*

Youth Experience in OYN Programs

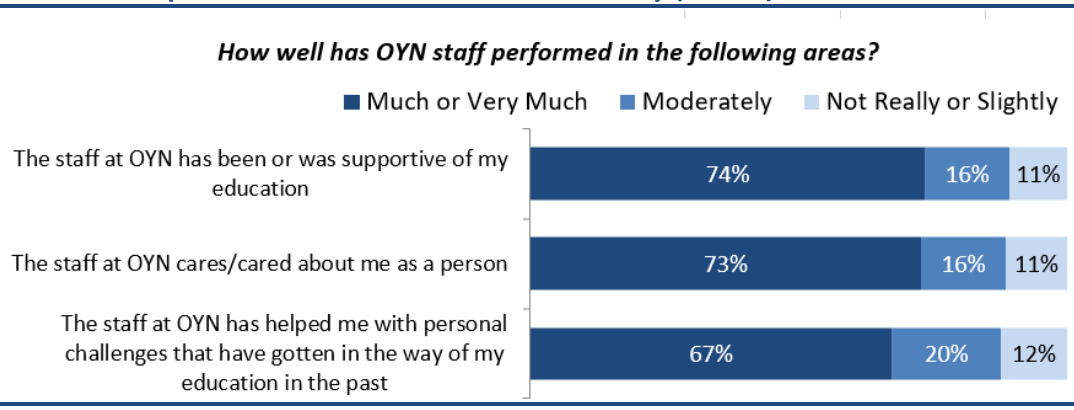
This section explores the experience of youth after starting to receive programmatic services, including youth perceptions of the program environment, the perceived effectiveness of academic supports received, and other areas addressed by the program.

Program Environment

Student-Staff Relationships

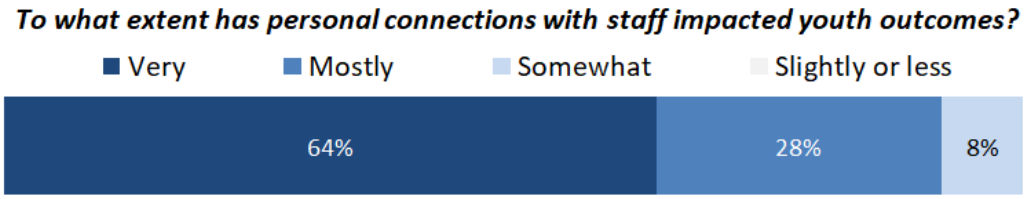
- **Participating youth think highly of OYN staff and how much they have impacted them.** Nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents rated that staff are *much* or *very much* supportive of their education and that staff at OYN *much* or *very much* care(d) about them as people (73%). Another two-thirds (67%) or more *much* or *very much* believed that staff have helped them with personal challenges that have gotten in their way in the past.

Figure 13: Youth Experience with OYN Staff – *Youth Survey (N=141)*



- **Staff strongly believed that they are impacting youth outcomes.** Over 90% of surveyed staff rated *mostly* or *very* when asked the extent to which they believe that personal connections with staff has had an impact on youth outcomes. The remaining 8% believe that their efforts are *somewhat* impactful.

Figure 14: Perceived Impact of Personal Connections w/ Staff on Youth – *Staff Survey (N=25)*



During focus groups, youth spoke about their appreciation for staff, particularly in contrast to the relationships youth had at their previous schools. As one student shared, "*here they give you space and if you get upset, then it's like, 'Okay let's talk about it.' They go through a process to show that they really*

care." The youth also shared that the consistent reminders from staff to push them "*to do the right thing*" helped them to develop good habits over time. OYN staff were unique in their commitment to students "*who are used to being let go*" and several alumni indicated that the close relationships they developed with staff continued to date. The youth generally believed the fact that students are allowed to work at their own pace in the process is a true strength of the program.

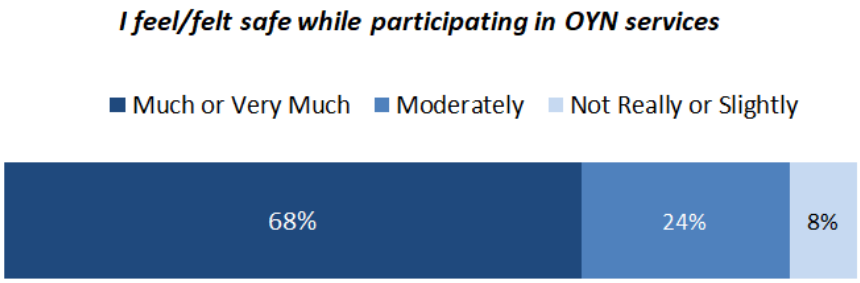
> ***"Here they give you space and if you get upset, then it's like, 'Okay let's talk about it.' They go through a process to show that they really care."***
>
> ***-Youth member***

Parent focus group participants added that OYN staff have been very welcoming, helpful, and effective communicators. All interviewed parents agreed that the school does a good job of communicating with parents and they are always aware of what is happening. They generally seemed very pleased with OYN staff and its outreach, noting that all staff were very nice and helpful in their interactions with parents. Interviewed parents gave a lot of credit to the staff and the school environment for the positive change they witnessed in their children. As one parent commented, "I thought my daughter was going to be a drug addict, but now she's 90% better. She's going to school. She's doing her homework. She's doing much better. I don't know if it's the teacher or it's the scenery."

Safety

- **The majority of youth feel safe while at OYN, but a notable third of students also feel *moderately* safe or less.** Youth survey findings show that 68% of students *much* or *very much* believed they were safe while taking part in OYN services. An additional 24% also reported feeling *moderately* safe.

Figure 15: Youth Perceptions of Safety – *Youth Survey (N=139)*



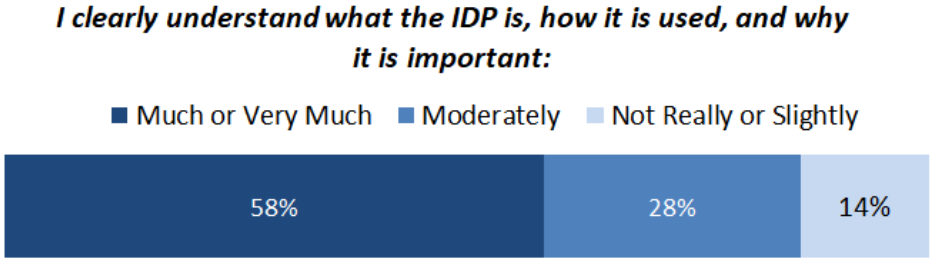
Instructional Supports

Individual Development Plans

Individual Development Plans (IDP) developed for youth served by OYN and its partners is central to the program's interventions and goal-oriented roadmaps used to support each youth member's educational journey at OYN. Each youth established two goals in three domains: academic goals (e.g., completing assignments, improving grades, etc.); social-emotional goals (e.g., build healthy relationships, self-regulation skills, etc.); and post-secondary goals (e.g., draft resume, apply for college/job, etc.). Here we present youth and staff perceptions of the effectiveness and use of the IDP goals.

- **The majority of youth reported that they clearly understand the IDP and its importance.** Approximately 58% of responding youth believed they *much* or *very much* understand the IDP, how it's used, and why it is important. Another 28% believed they *moderately* did.

Figure 16: Youth Comfort and Understanding of IDP Goals – *Youth Survey (N=144)*



All youth focus group participants shared that developing IDPs was an important step in the process of getting started in the program. Initially, it was challenging for the youth since many had not thought of larger goals at that point and had never been required to work through, or write down, the steps of how they would accomplish a goal. The existence of the IDPs, and the staff's support through regular check-ins, was overall helpful though. The process got students organized, made them accountable, initiated the pursuit of their goals, and helped them begin to think about their next phase in life. Youth also appreciated that they were required to make backup plans because it "*help[ed] us not to give up when we hit the slightest obstacle*." Staff were intimately involved with this process as participants said staff would remind them of important dates related to their goals (like job fairs), help them either "*fix it or come up with a new idea"* if things did not go according to plan, and providing counseling. Students generally believed the process and the staff "*open[ed] up doors*" for them. Some wished they could get more out of the IDP process, like *"direct connections with jobs/sites"* or more training on "*how to prepare because once you have to leave your plan you are confused since it's not what you expected."* Several participants summarized the impact that IDP plans had on them in the long run:

> ***"I never was in a situation before LEAD where I had to make a plan… to see where I was going to go. It was different, but it was good too because it got me thinking about the future."***
>
> ***- OYN Alumnus***

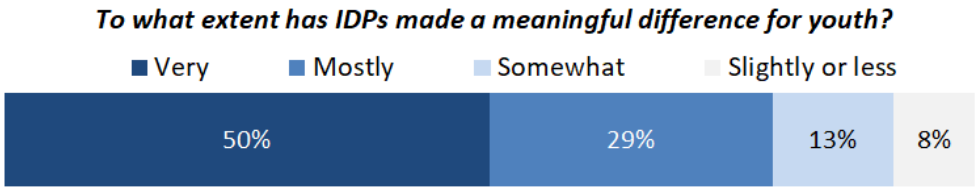
- *I never was in a situation before LEAD where I had to make a plan… to see where I was going to go. It was different, but it was good too because it got me thinking about the future. It got me to actually try to solidify what I wanted to do rather than just say I'm going to do this and then not do it. And then be in a situation where I keep making empty promises to myself.*
- *I feel like everyone has goals, but where we go wrong is not setting the steps that we need to take in order to achieve those goals. That's what my plan did for me… If I didn't know about certain steps, I wouldn't be in college because no one ever told me. So it gave me that exposure and it helped guide me. It helped me really plan for life after high school.*
- *I still use mine to this day. I make a new one every time I walk in this building… because life has different challenges. You never know what's going to hit you and when I first made mine, I thought everything was going to go exactly the way I planned.*

> ***"[The IDPs] help us not to give up when we hit the slightest obstacle."***
>
> ***- Youth member***

But then I… had to stop doing certain things because of a situation I didn't have any control over… [LEAD and the IDP process] taught me better ways around the situation.

- **The majority of staff reported that the IDPs make a meaningful difference for youth.** Nearly 80 percent of responding staff indicated that the IDPs *very much* or *mostly* made a difference for youth.

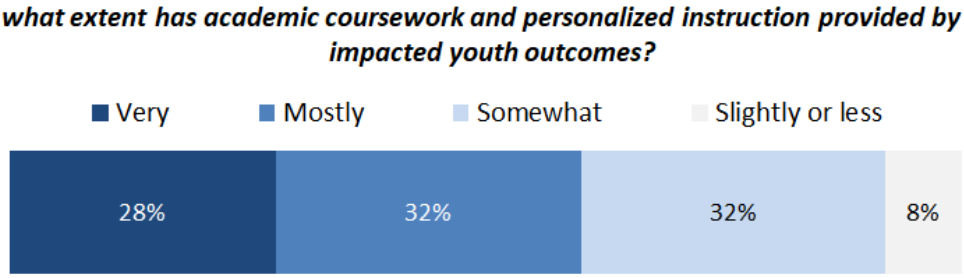
Figure 17: Perceptions of Effectiveness of IDPs – *Staff Survey (N=26)*



Academic Coursework and Instruction

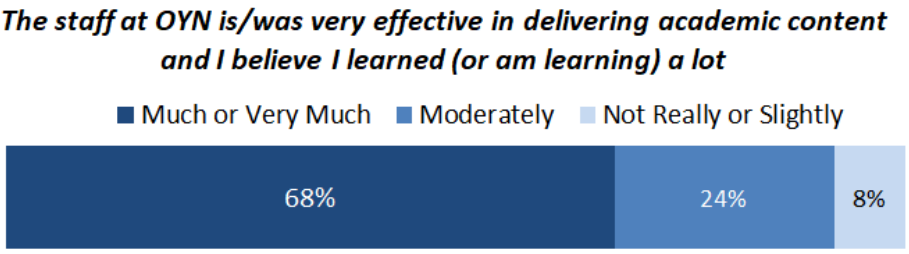
- **The majority of OYN staff perceived that the academic coursework and personalized instruction had a positive impact on youth outcomes.** Nearly all surveyed staff (92%) felt that the OYN academic instructional program was at least *somewhat* impactful. A little less than two-thirds of responding staff (60%) believed that OYNs impact on youth outcomes was *mostly* or *very* impactful.

Figure 18: Perceived Impact on Youth Academic Outcomes – *Staff Survey (N=25)*



- **Over two thirds of youth believed that staff provided effective academic instruction.** Sixty-eight percent of youth reported that OYN staff were *much* or *very much* effective in delivering academic content, and that they are learning more as a result. When including those that provided a rating of *moderately*, the percentage increases to 92% of youth respondents.

Figure 19: Perceived Effectiveness of Staff Academic Support – *Youth Survey (N=141)*



Youth focus group participants generally believed that the academic level of the coursework was appropriate. Some youth felt that the academic coursework was not starkly different than what they were given at previous schools and that some of the assignments felt easier than they expected. Some youth also shared that they did not take the initial placement test seriously because of their general feelings of disinterest in school, and that perhaps this resulted in the assignment of some coursework that did not meet their expectations.

Overall, parents believed that their children were performing better in school. Their reviews of how students changed as a result of OYN were quite positive:

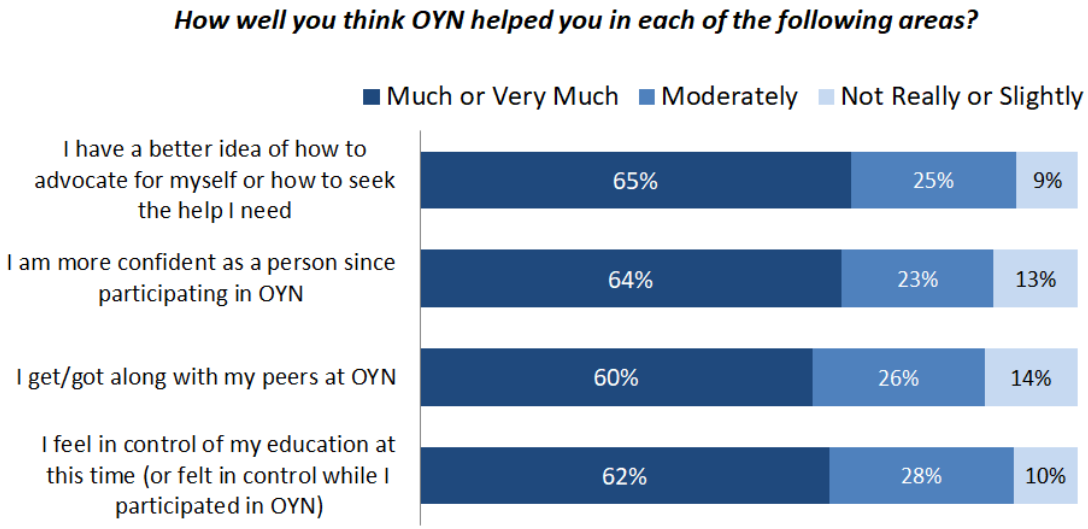
- *My child is not the same as she was before. I'm really surprised to see outstanding work.*
- *I've never seen my son so eager to want to be in school...*
- *My daughter even helps her sister with homework now.*
- *I probably would have gotten several calls by now… she's late, she's skipping class. I'm surprised by the girl I see today. I'm very proud as a parent. She's doing phenomenal. If she continues at this rate, the sky is the limit.*

> ***"I've never seen my son so eager to want to go to school. The first day of school, I didn't know where to get the uniforms from and he was crying that he couldn't go to school. He really wanted to go. I've never seen him like that all his years going to school."***
>
> ***- Parent***

Non-Academic Supports

- **Youth believe they are gaining more than just academic advancement while at OYN.** Youth were asked the degree to which they believe that OYN has helped them in non-academic areas important to their personal growth. Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents believed *much* or *very much* that they have a better idea of how to advocate for themselves (65%) and feel more confident overall since participating in OYN (64%). When including those that also rated these as *moderate*, those figures increase to 87% and above. The findings were nearly as strong in regards to respondents' feeling in control of their education and getting along with their peers in school (over 86% *moderate* or above).

Figure 20: Perceived Impact of OYN on Other Non-Academic Areas – *Youth Survey (N=139)*



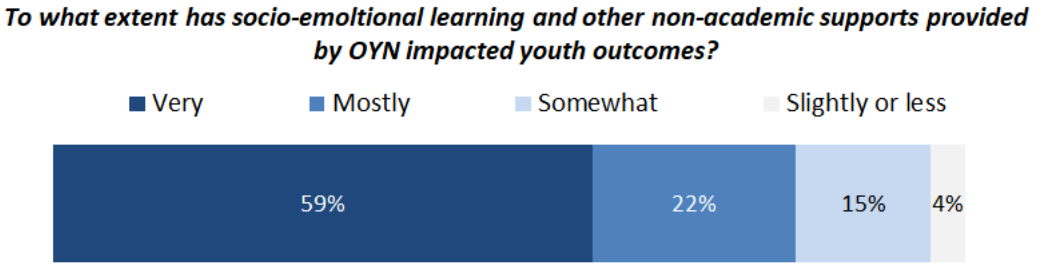
In open-ended comments, youth also described the most effective ways that OYN has been able to help them in non-academic areas, including job skills training, guidance on creating goals and helping them take steps towards achieving them, and learning to prioritize what is most important. The direct support provided by OYN staff to youth helped them learn important life-skills and make life-long decisions, and increased their overall confidence. For example, alumni shared that being given the opportunity to take on leadership roles in the classroom when finishing ahead of peers provided them with encouragement and confidence.

Parents also stated that their children received additional support outside of traditional academics. During their focus group, parents spoke about how their children were able to take advantage of technology-based trade programs and unique trips to medical universities for first-hand experiences. They also believed that the emotional support and general encouragement their children received impacted their trajectory.

> ***"After seeing my daughter thrive with the really good grades, she's going to a University for a forum that will give her first-hand experience for what it's like doing surgeries and being with other doctors..."***
>
> ***- Parent***

- **Finally, staff believe that OYN is impacting youth in their non-academic areas as well, including socio-emotional learning skills.** Over 80% of staff provided a rating of *mostly* or *very* when asked to rate the extent to which socio-emotional learning and other non-academic support have impacted youth outcomes.

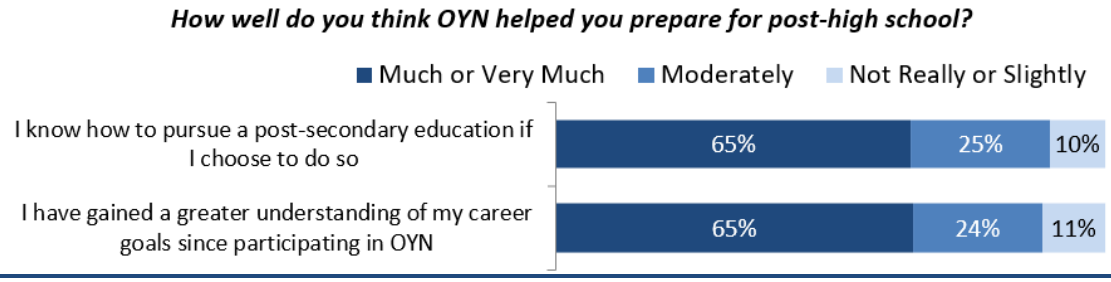
Figure 21: Perceived Impact on Youth Outcomes in Non-Academic Areas – *Staff Survey (N=27)*



Post-Secondary Supports

- **The vast majority of OYN youth feel better prepared for life post-high school.** At least 89% of youth survey respondents believed that OYN helped prepare them *much* or *very much* to pursue a post-secondary education (90%) and helped them gain a greater understanding of their career goals (89%).

Figure 22: Perceptions of Support for Post-High School – *Youth Survey (N=140)*

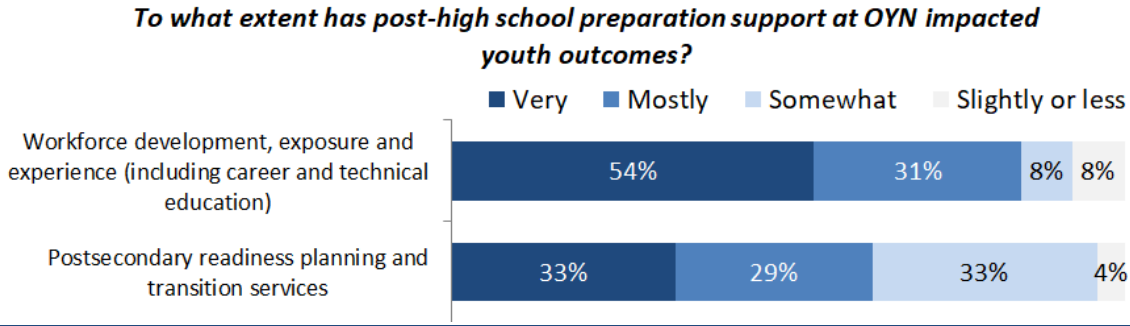


Youth focus group data indicated that students took advantage of a variety of post-secondary supports including: dual enrollment classes, housing assistance, job and internship searches, interview preparation, reference requests, college research, research on possible funding sources, and application support. One student shared that a staff member went so far as to help her set up a physical as a part of application requirements. Another student strongly believed that she would have been overlooked by the college that accepted her had it not been for the OYN support in making the right connections with the college and in pursuing specific scholarship opportunities suggested by OYN. The conversation also revealed that while many additional supports are offered to students, the onus is on the youth to ask for the support and take advantage of it. These opportunities are shared during LEAD charter school Town Hall meetings and posted on the walls, but not everyone tunes in to realize those offerings. Still, most alumni students reported taking advantage or were at least aware of additional supports than alumni have access to. One alumnus said that the internship that she landed with OYN's help had since turned into a full-time employment opportunity.

> ***"[OYN] provides [job-readiness, college planning, and housing help] to everyone. It's dependent on the person to take advantage of it."***
>
> ***- OYN Alumnus***

- **Staff believe that the OYN workforce development component was more effective at impacting youth outcomes than the program's postsecondary readiness services.** Approximately 85% of responding staff believed that youth participation in workforce development experiences was *mostly* or *very* impactful, whereas 62% felt that youth participation in postsecondary readiness services was *mostly* or *very* impactful. Overall, the great majority of staff felt that both of these components was at least *somewhat* impactful.

Figure 23: Perceptions of Support for Post-High School – *Staff Survey (N=26)*



Participant Outcomes

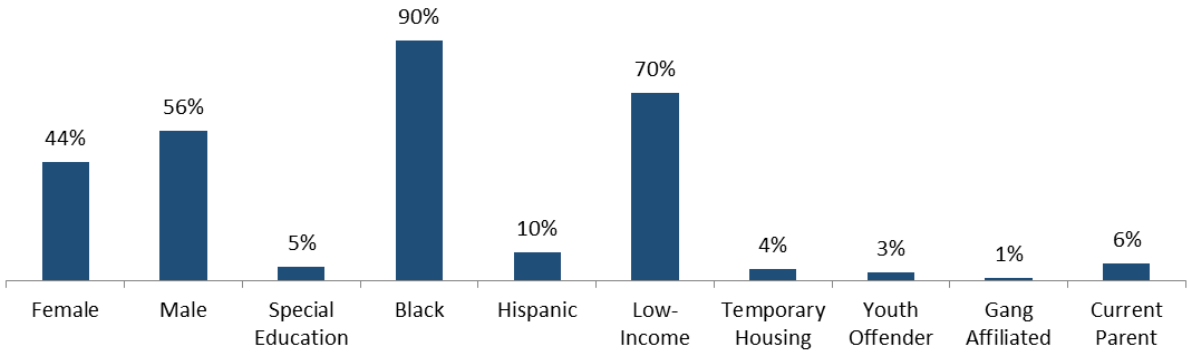
In this section, we provide data on the characteristics of youth enrolled in OYN programs, as well as data on IDP goal achievement rates, program retention rates, and program graduation rates. Findings are presented by year of program entry (i.e., 2017 or 2018 cohorts) or by academic year in some cases (i.e., all active students enrolled during the 2017-2018 or 2018-2019 school years). Finally, youth perceptions of their future outlook (after OYN) are presented.

Characteristics of Enrolled Youth

As noted above, 143 youth were enrolled in an OYN program in 2017-2018 (2017 cohort). In 2018-2019, that number increased to 242 youth (2018 cohort). All 143 youth in the 2017 cohort were enrolled in the LEAD Charter School. Among the 2018 cohort, 187 youth were enrolled in the LEAD Charter School, 31 were enrolled at La Casa, and 11 were enrolled at NCC.[2]

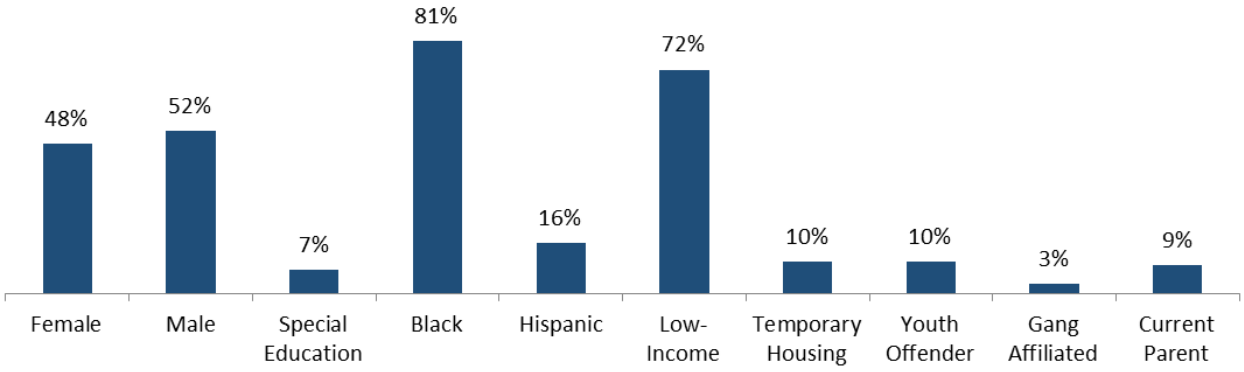
- **The majority of enrolled youth were students of color from low-income households.** As shown in Figure 24, all students placed in an OYN program in the 2017-2018 school year were Black (90%) or Hispanic (10%). Seventy percent were low-income (based on free or reduced-price lunch eligibility). Much smaller percentages had children of their own (6%), lived in temporary housing (4%), had a prior arrest record (3%) or were known to be gang-affiliated (1%). Approximately five percent were eligible for special education services. The 2018 cohort was similar demographically, though with much higher rates of students with risk factors (i.e., children of their own, living in temporary housing, etc.).

Figure 24: Demographic Profile of Students Enrolled in the 2017-2018 School Year (2017 Cohort) – *Student-Level Demographic Data (N=143)*



[2] Program information was missing for 12 students from the 2018 cohort.

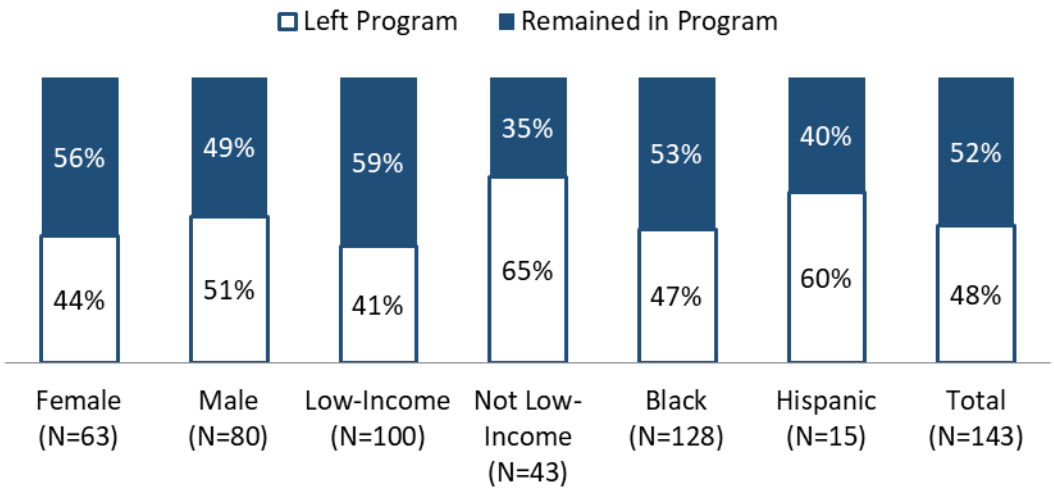
Figure 25: Demographic Profile of Students Enrolled in the 2018-2019 School Year (2018 Cohort) – *Student-Level Demographic Data (N=230)*[3]



Program Retention Rates

- **More than half of students enrolled in an OYN program in the 2017-2018 academic year remained in the program the full academic year.** Of the 143 students who first enrolled in an OYN program in the 2017-2018 school year, 52 percent remained in the program (N=74). The program retention rate was highest among female students (56%) and students living in low-income households (i.e., not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) (59%).

Figure 26: 2017 Cohort Program Retention Rates by Demographic Group – *Student Level Program Retention Data (N=143)*

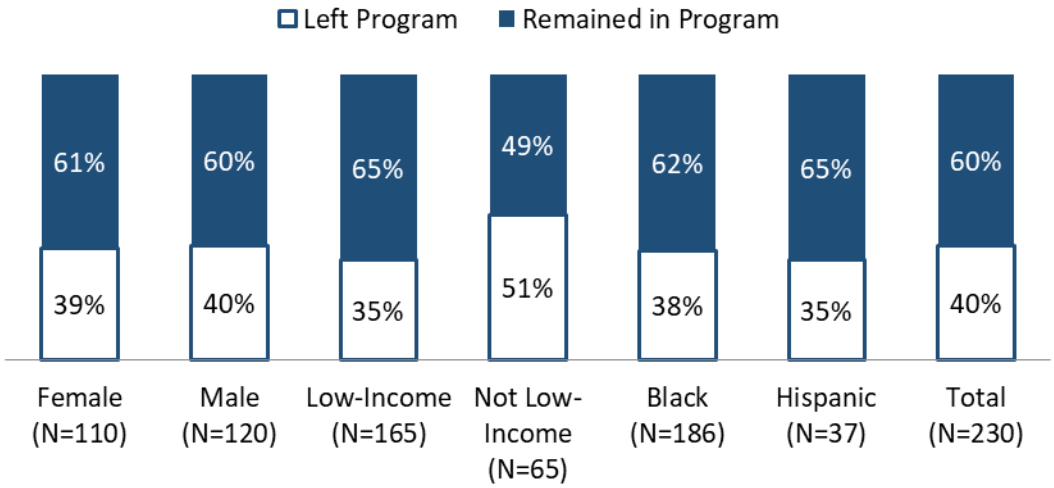


- **The program retention rate was higher among students in the 2018 enrollment cohort, with 60 percent of students remaining in the program the full academic year.** Hispanic students and students living in low-income households had the highest retention rate among the subgroups

[3] Demographic data were not available for all 242 students enrolled in the 2018-2019 school year.

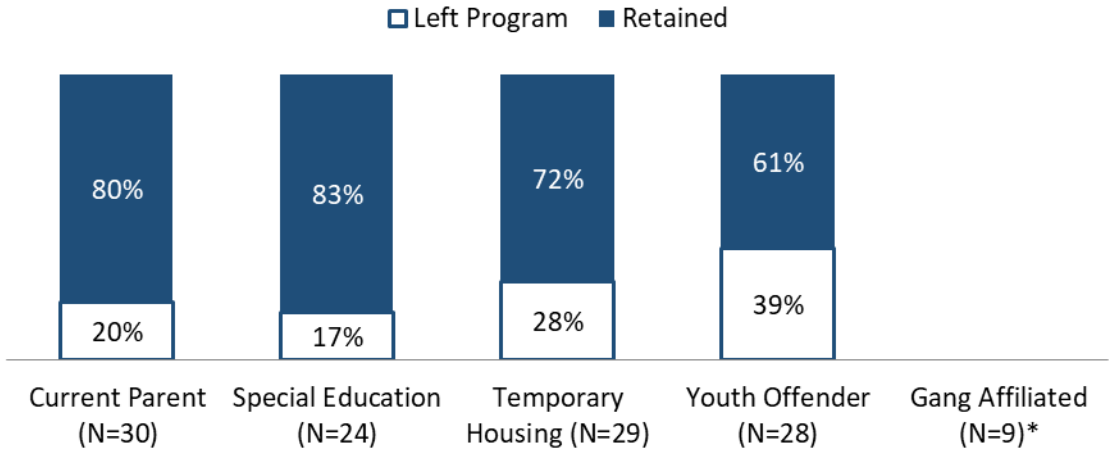
(65%). Otherwise, the program retention rate was fairly consistent across other demographic groups.

Figure 27: 2018 Cohort Program Retention Rates by Demographic Group – *Student Level Program Retention Data (N=230)*



- **The program retention rate among special populations was higher than the average program cohort retention rates.** Program retention rates for students from special populations (i.e., living in temporary housing, prior arrest record, etc.) are shown in Figure 28 for the 2017 and 2018 cohorts (the data were combined across years due to the low numbers of cases each year). Despite the additional risk factors faced by students from these special populations, the majority (at least 61%) remained enrolled in an OYN program. Program retention rates were highest for students with disabilities (83%) and students with children of their own (80%).

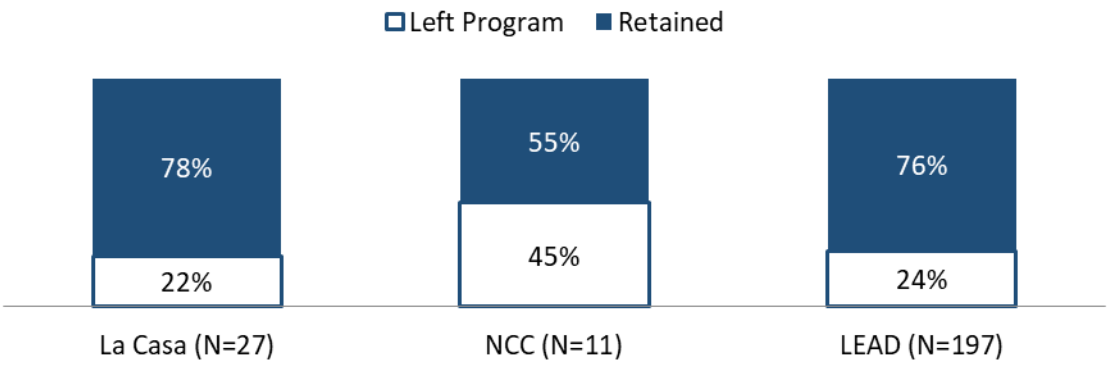
Figure 28: Program Retention Rates for Special Populations (2017 and 2018 Cohorts Combined) – *Student Level Program Retention Data*



*Data are not shown when there are fewer than 10 cases.

- **Program retention rates were highest at LEAD and La Casa.** The majority of students enrolled at LEAD (76%) or La Casa (78%) during the 2018-2019 school year remained in the program. At NCC, the retention rate was slightly more than half (55%).

Figure 29: Program Retention Rates by Partner (2018-2019 School Year) – *Student Level Program Retention Data*



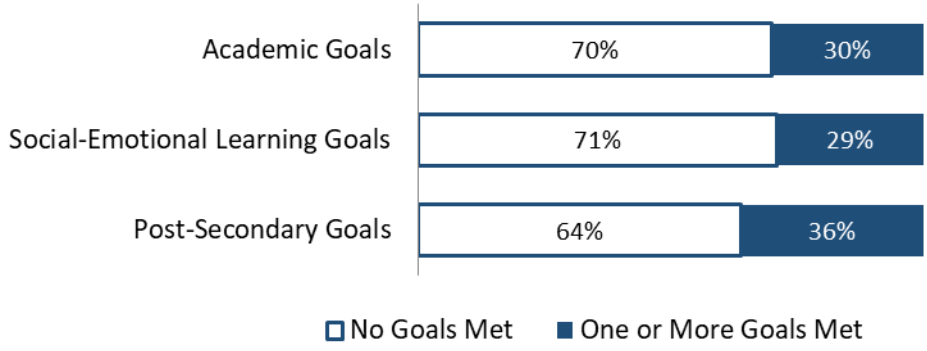
Staff were asked to comment on the biggest reasons why students remain engaged in OYN. Responses included personal relationships with staff and feeling a sense of community; improvement in their self-esteem and a recommitment to want to become better at improving their academics; wanting to take full advantage of the workforce development and CTE (career and technical education) courses and certifications; feeling they are taking steps to further their goals in a safe space; and seeing themselves getting closer to graduation.

Student Achievement

IDP Goal Achievement

- **In the 2018-2019 school year, approximately one-third of youth had achieved at least one of their IDP goals.** IDP data were available for 69 students actively enrolled at LEAD Charter School during the 2018-2019 school year. As shown in Figure 30, approximately 30 percent of students had achieved one or more of their academic and social-emotional goals, and 36 percent had achieved one or more of their post-secondary goals during the 2018-2019 academic year.

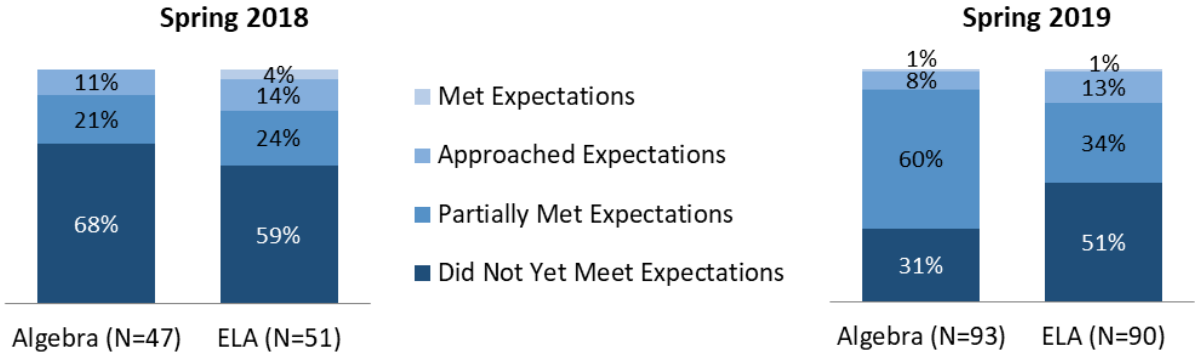
Figure 30: IDP Goal Achievement – *2018-2019 Student-Level IDP Data (N=69)*



State Assessment Performance

- **Students performed better on state assessments in Algebra and ELA in spring 2019 than in spring 2018.** New Jersey State Learning Assessment (NJSLA) data were available for students from LEAD Charter School who were tested in Algebra or ELA in spring 2018 (N=62) or spring 2019 (N=110).[4] The percentage of students at least *partially meeting* expectations in Algebra increased from 32 percent to 69 percent from 2018 to 2019, and from 41 percent to 49 percent in ELA.

Figure 31: NJSLA Achievement Rates, Spring 2018 and Spring 2019 – *Student Level Achievement Data*



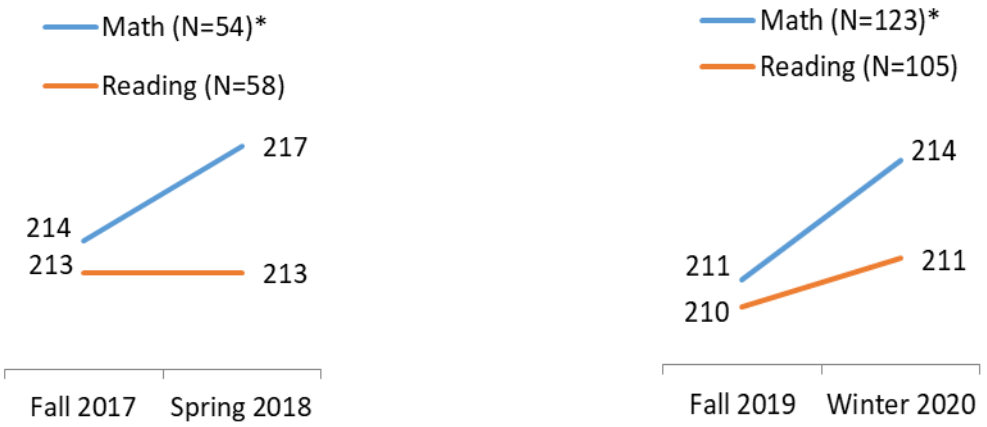
NWEA Assessment Performance

- **Students at LEAD Charter School demonstrated significant growth in math.** The analysis below shows the NWEA performance of students with both pre (fall) and post (winter or spring) scores during the 2017-2018 and 2019-2020 school years.[5] In both years, students demonstrated statistically significant increases in their math scores. In reading, students performed similarly from pre to post in 2017-2018, and demonstrated a slight increase from pre to post in 2018-2019 (though the change did not reach statistical significance).

[4] Students typically take NJSLA tests in Algebra and ELA once during their tenure in high school (or until they achieve a passing score). A total of 21 students had NJSLA scores for both school years; however, the majority of students (N=150) had scores from only one administration (either spring 2018 or spring 2019).

[5] NWEA data from the 2018-2019 school year were determined to be invalid and therefore are not reported. Instead, scores from the fall 2019 and winter 2020 administrations are shown (the NWEA was not administered in spring 2020 due to school closings caused by the coronavirus pandemic).

Figure 32: NWEA Matched Scores, Fall 2017-Spring 2018 and Fall 2019-Winter 2020 – *Student Level Achievement Data*

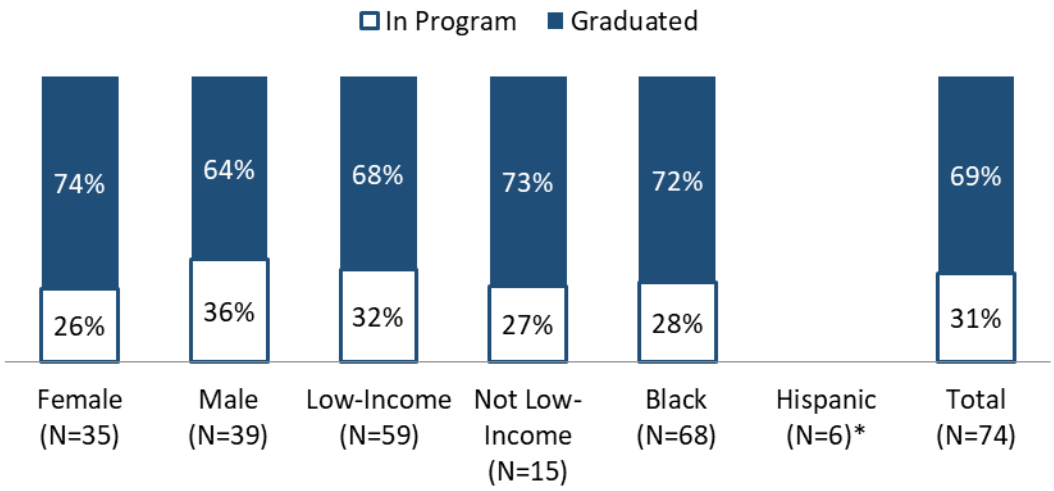


*Denotes a statistically significant increase from fall to spring, based on a paired samples t-test.

Program Graduation Rates

- **By spring 2019, the majority of students enrolled in an OYN program in the 2017-2018 academic year had received their high school diploma.** Of the 74 students who remained enrolled in an OYN program in the 2017-2018 school year, 35 students graduated from the program in spring 2018 (after their first year) and an additional 16 students graduated in spring 2019 (after their second year), for a two-year cohort graduation rate of 69 percent. The graduation rate was slightly higher among female students (74%) and students not living in low-income households (73%).

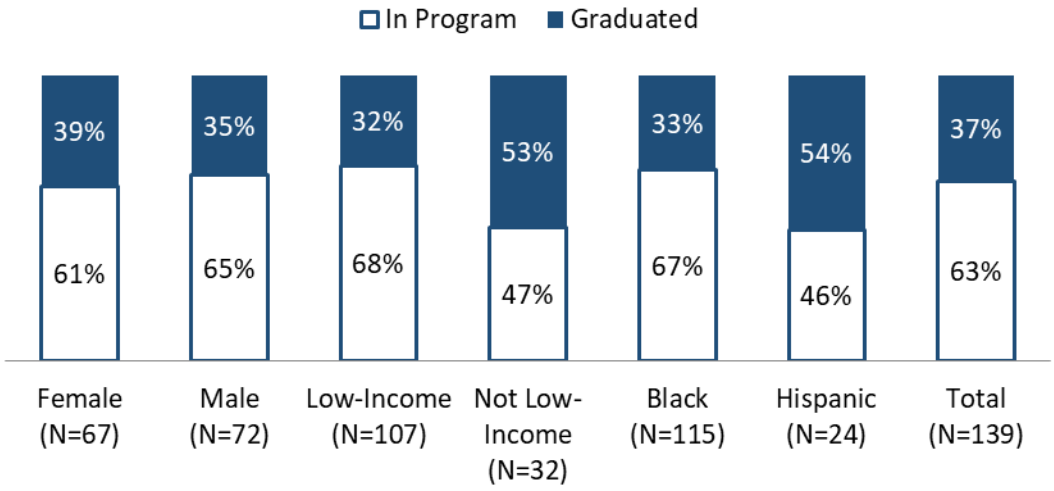
Figure 33: Two-Year Graduation Rate, 2017 Cohort – *Student Level Program Graduation Data (N=74)*



*Data are not shown when there are fewer than 10 cases.

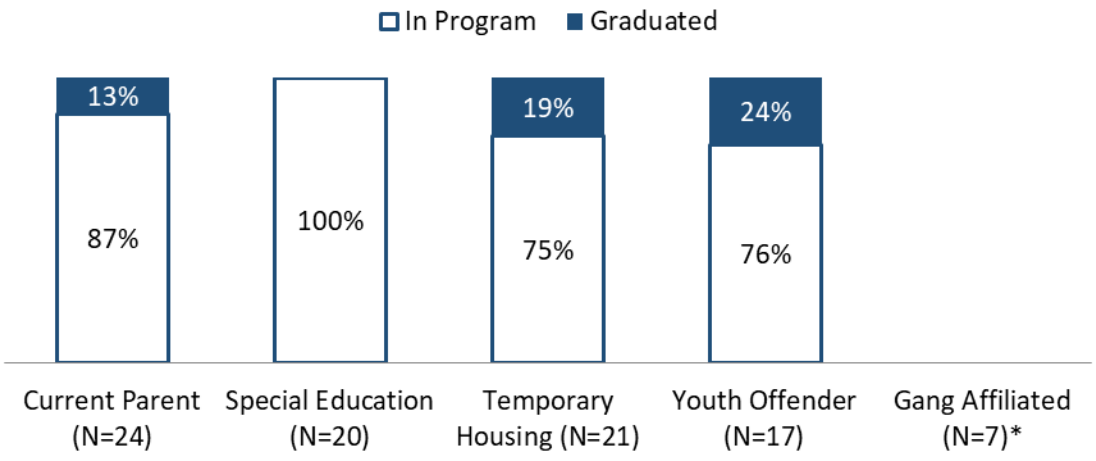
- **After one year in an OYN program, more than one-third of students enrolled in the 2018-2019 academic year had received their high school diploma.** Of the 139 students who remained enrolled in an OYN program in the 2018-2019 school year, 51 students graduated from the program in spring 2019 (after their first year), for a one-year cohort graduation rate of 37 percent.

Figure 34: One-Year Graduation Rate, 2018 Cohort – *Student Level Program Graduation Data (N=139)*



- **Students from special populations were less likely to graduate after one or two years, compared to their peers.** Program graduation rates for students from special populations are shown in Figure 35 for the two most recent academic years. The data were combined across years due to the low numbers of cases each year; however, the majority of cases were from the 2018-2019 school year. The data show that the graduation rate among students with criminal backgrounds was 24 percent, followed by students in temporary housing (19%). Approximately one in 10 students with children of their own graduated from the program in spring 2019, and no students with disabilities graduated in either year.

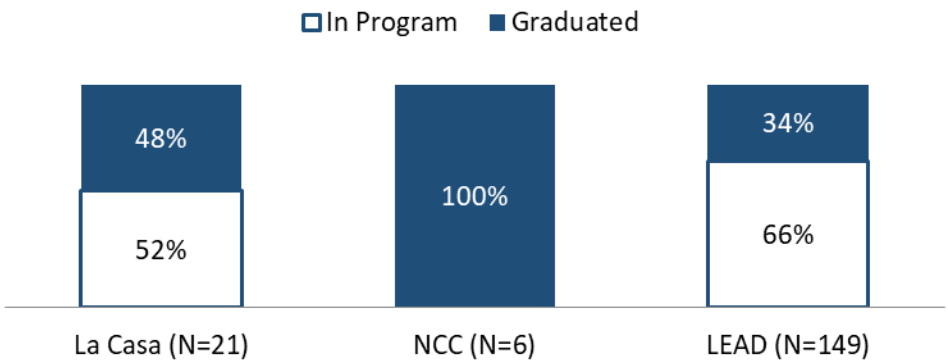
Figure 35: Program Graduation Rates for Special Populations (2017 and 2018 Cohorts) – *Student Level Program Graduation Data*



*Data are not shown when there are fewer than 10 cases.

- **The graduation rate among students enrolled in a partner program during the 2018-2019 school year ranged from 48 percent at La Casa to 100 percent at NCC.** Nearly half of the 21 youth enrolled at La Casa during the 2018-2019 school year, and all six students enrolled at NCC, graduated in spring of 2019. At LEAD, approximately one-third of enrolled youth graduated in spring 2019. The results should be interpreted with caution given the large difference in population sizes.

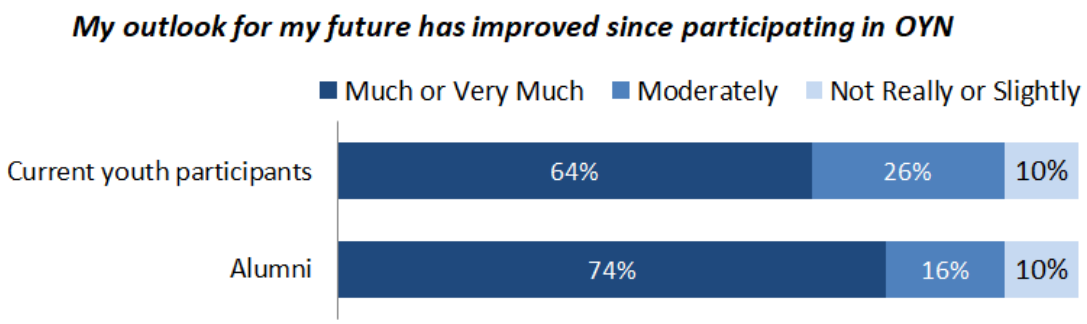
Figure 36: Graduation Rate by Partner, 2019 Graduates – *Student Level Program Graduation Data*



Future Outlook and Post-Secondary Placements

- **Youth participants reported improvements in their future outlook that endured post-graduation.** Nearly two-thirds of current youth participants (64%) indicated that their outlook for the future has improved *much* or *very much* since participating in OYN. This proportion increased to 74 percent among alumni youth respondents.

Figure 37: Future Outlook of Students (Current Participants vs. Alumni) – *Youth Survey (N=137)*



The overwhelming sentiment among youth focus group participants, both current students as well as alumni, was that OYN had a significant, positive impact on their futures. Many participants said they were just about done with the education system before OYN. The positive and supportive environment of the school, however, helped them not only complete high school credits, but opened their eyes to new interests, helped them develop a plan for their futures, restored faith that well-intentioned people exist, and created nurturing relationships. OYN helped youth focus group participants "*create a new version*" of themselves and develop more positive outlooks for their futures. Some of their impact statements included:

- *Before I got here, I was struggling… I didn't get that love until I came here… now I want to meet every challenge… I come in here at least 2 times a week to talk to Ms. __ about everything… they've helped me out a lot….Now I'm bettering myself.*
- *They gave me my life back*
- *LEAD helped me become more serious about my future, start working a bit harder toward what I want to do and everything. It helped me with a job that left me with some money for myself and a grant for college.*

> ***"LEAD helped me become more serious about my future, start working a bit harder toward what I want to do and everything."***
>
> ***- OYN member***

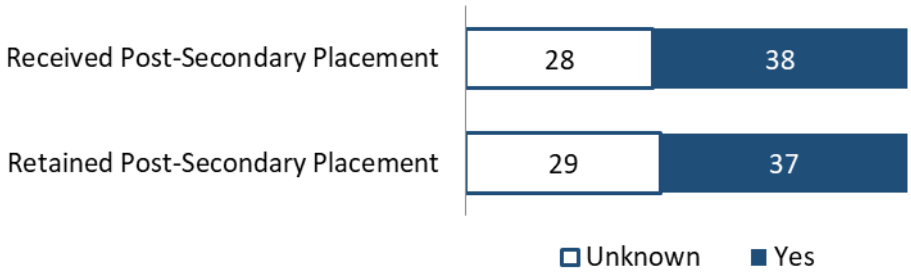
- *I am like the school promoter. Anyone I see who I feel like is just giving up, I say- 'Why don't you just go to LEAD?!' That's my favorite thing to say.' It's the only thing that helped me to open up and tell everyone that we have a voice. For ourselves. … It opened my mind totally different. I can speak up without me being punished for it. It taught me the rights I didn't know about. I probably was never going to vote, until I came here…*
- *It kind of humbled me. It showed me I can be what I used to be academically, in terms of actually caring… going back to honor roll and things like that.*
- *[The program] made me switch my mindset from being stuck in a place to trying to adapt to different things and not being as weak in certain areas… it got me to focus on everything I have in front of me and try to be a better person in general. Now I'm not lost.*

> ***"I am like the school promoter. Anyone I see who I feel like is just giving up, I say—'Why don't you just go to LEAD?!'"***
>
> ***- OYN Alumnus***

OYN also positively impacted parents' outlook on their children's futures. Parents shared that before the program they saw little hope in their children and were fearful that they would end up on the street. Since their children enrolled at OYN, though, they have witnessed a significant turnaround in their behavior and attitude.

- **All contacted 2019 graduates (N=38) received a post-secondary placement (e.g. college, work, technical training program, etc.) within six months of graduating.** Program staff were able to contact 38 of the 66 students who graduated in spring of 2019 to inquire about the status of their post-secondary plans. All 38 graduates indicated that they received a post-secondary placement within six months of graduating, and all but one had retained that placement.

Figure 38: Post-Secondary Placement and Retention Rates, 2019 Graduates *(N=66)*



Opportunities for Program Improvement

Feedback was obtained from various stakeholder groups (i.e., youth, staff, and parents) on how OYN can improve its youth services and overall programming. Below are summaries of how each stakeholder group addressed items related to the improvement of OYN.

- **Youth Perceptions.** Most students had no suggestions for improvement, as they believe that the program is already addressing student needs. Those who did offer feedback suggested providing childcare, being more sympathetic to the issues that youth face, meeting with youth individually, offering more activities, providing counseling services, communicating more positively with students, including more support for the college application process, and hiring more staff.

> ***"Honestly, this program does not need to be improved because when it comes to our personal needs they try their very best to make sure that we are comfortable and we are getting the help that we need."***
>
> ***- OYN Student***

- **Parent Perceptions.** The main support that parents requested for their children was access to college tours, particularly tours of historically black universities. Similarly, one parent suggested bringing college representatives to OYN/LEAD to talk with parents. Ultimately, parents wanted their children to learn more about what college would be like and to open their minds to the idea of pursuing a college degree. Other suggestions for additional support included offering Saturday program, teaching students to write resumes and apply for jobs, bringing in a professional to talk to students about their career path, and encouraging students to maintain a balance between their academic and other areas of life.

- **Staff Perceptions.** OYN staff provided feedback on program operations in several areas:
  - Though several staff noted that the **intake process** did not need improvement, many suggested that the process should be more consistent and less rushed. Other suggestions for improvement included collecting academic data, requiring students to speak to a nurse, and involving families to a greater extent.
  - Many staff agreed that **IDPs** should be updated and referred to more frequently—perhaps monthly. Several staff members shared that IDPs should be more frequently and effectively used to inform program practices, such as by "*using them to create leadership and programming specific for young people.*"
  - Staff suggestions for **improving student outcomes** included more structure, additional options for CTE courses (e.g., culinary, film, hospitality), a larger staff, greater consistency and adherence to the model, more student leadership opportunities, and more frequent outreach and check-ins with students.
  - Some staff shared that they need more **support from OYN** in areas such as classroom instruction, social-emotional development for students, outdoor instruction, and special education. Several staff requested more professional development opportunities, and some staff also noted that they are sometimes overwhelmed when they are given tasks but no accompanying support.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Evaluation findings indicate that OYN provides a comprehensive range of programmatic components, and that supports for participating youth are making a meaningful difference for disengaged youth. The project successfully served 390 students between the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years—the two cohorts that were the focus of this evaluation. Overall, the results suggest a clear positive effect on students' motivation and confidence, desire to complete their education, perceived preparedness to take on challenges after high school, and feeling that they are being provided with a high-quality experience from people who genuinely care for them.

The paragraphs below provide a detailed set of key takeaways from the evaluation, followed by a discussion of the implications of the evaluation findings. Finally, recommendations for continued program improvement are provided.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ According to OYN youth, their primary reasons for disengaging from high school were poor academic performance and needing to support themselves and/or family. Additional reasons included feeling that their voice wasn't being heard, that they were not getting the education they desired and/or needed, and feeling like no one was interested in helping them. Students overwhelmingly expressed their desire for being heard and wanting to feel that their teachers care about them.

- ✓ The root causes of student disengagement from high school actually began in middle school. Youth survey respondents indicated that they generally felt safer, performed better academically, and received better support from teachers and staff in elementary school than they did in middle school.

- ✓ Participating staff and youth agreed that the factors driving student interest in OYN were wanting to change their life trajectory by finishing high school and planning for their future, and wanting to find a place where they would be treated better than at their previous schools.

- ✓ Students are choosing OYN over other similar options mostly because of positive reviews of the program and because they are identifying offerings that appeal to them, including job-readiness trainings/certification and post-secondary preparedness. One of the least common reasons why youth chose OYN was because it was closer to home. This suggests that youth are willing to choose OYN despite distance simply based on it being the better choice. Furthermore, one of the strongest findings of this study is the sense from current and alumni youth that OYN felt like the first place where staff seemed to genuinely care about their needs and did their best to help them.

- ✓ Youth reported that the mental toughness training was very challenging, but also that the experience was to their benefit and prepared them to succeed in the program. It is clear that this initial experience begins to change the mindsets of youth and prepares them to take on tough challenges during their participation after the onboarding process. In addition, youth indicated that developing IDPs was also a unique and important step in the process of getting started in the

program.

- ✓ Youth had very positive perceptions of the degree to which OYN staff have impacted them. These were among some of the strongest ratings provided by youth, specifically around staff being supportive, caring about them, and helping them with personal challenges.

- ✓ A notable majority of youth believe that they are considerably more confident and prepared to advocate for themselves as a result of their participation in OYN. Both currently participating youth and OYN alumni indicated that their outlook for their future has improved since participating in OYN.

- ✓ Surveyed staff reported that the program's workforce development component was more impactful than the program's post-secondary readiness and transition services. However, the majority of surveyed youth reported that OYN helped prepare them to pursue a post-secondary education and helped them gain a greater understanding of their career goals.

- ✓ Over the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years, a little more than half of all enrolled youth remained in an OYN program for the full academic year. Program retention rates were highest among students from special populations (i.e., low-income students, students with disabilities, students living in temporary housing, and students with children of their own) and students attending LEAD and La Casa.

- ✓ Reading and math assessment results indicate that youth at LEAD Charter School are making academic gains over time. For example, students demonstrated statistically significant growth in math in both the 2017-2018 and 2019-2020 school years, based on NWEA results. In addition, greater proportions of students at least *partially met* expectations on NJSLA assessments in both reading and math in spring 2019 than in spring 2018. Finally, approximately one-third of youth at LEAD Charter School had achieved at least one of their academic and/or post-secondary IDP goals.

- ✓ The majority of students (69%) from the 2017 cohort earned their high school diploma within two years (by spring 2019). More than one-third of students from the 2018 cohort (37%) earned their high school diploma within one year, including 34 percent who were enrolled at LEAD, 48 percent who were enrolled at La Casa, and all six youth who were enrolled at NCC. However, students from special populations were less likely to graduate after one or two years, compared to their peers.

- ✓ Many current and alumni youth indicated that their outlook for the future has improved since participating in OYN, and 38 graduates from spring 2019 received a post-secondary placement (e.g. college, work, technical training program, etc.) within six months of graduating.

Implications of Findings

The findings from this evaluation study have several generalizable implications for how our educational institutions can best serve youth from all backgrounds, but particularly those youth from minority and/or low-income households:

- ✓ **Positive relationships with adults within the school setting is a key factor to student success.** Study participants were very clear that they disengaged from high school because they felt like there were no adults in the school who cared about them and their future. Their interest in OYN stemmed in part from wanting to find a place where they would be treated with kindness and respect by the adults in the building, and where their voice would be heard. OYN's relationship-based reengagement process and supportive staffing model appears to be working for many disconnected youth, and are strategies that could be adopted by both traditional and alternative schools seeking to engage (or reengage) at-risk youth.

- ✓ **A single point of failure in many at-risk students' educational trajectory is the middle school experience.** As stated above, OYN youth felt they were safer, performed better academically, and received better support from teachers and staff in elementary school than they did in middle school. This suggests the need to advocate for more relationship-based and restorative approaches in Newark's middle schools, as well as its high schools. To be sure, the issue is not unique to Newark, and any work in this area can inform the wider conversation around systems-level changes needed to prevent student disengagement from traditional school settings nationwide.

- ✓ **Program application and enrollment data indicate that there is more demand for Newark OYN services than there are available seats.** Since 2017, OYN programs have conducted intake and assessment for 1,434 youth; approximately one in four applicants were ultimately placed in an OYN program. This suggests the need for expansion and/or replication of Newark OYN's unique brand of programming in order to meet the demand for services. As noted above, many participating youth had exhausted all of their options before discovering OYN and finding it to be the best fit for helping them achieve their secondary and post-secondary goals. The implication is that, without OYN, many of its youth participants may have remained disengaged from school.

Recommendations

In addition to highlighting some of the implications of the evaluation findings, we suggest the following recommendations for ensuring the continued success of the Newark OYN program:

- ✓ Continue to support the ways in which staff interact with students and are accessible to them when needed. The school could consider developing a youth mentor apprenticeship program where alumni can serve as mentors for new incoming youth and provide an experienced peer outside of the program staff that is available as needed.

- ✓ Youth expressed fairly strongly their desire to foster better relationships and support their families. There are effective relationship-awareness curricula that could further help these youth with the delicate dynamics of communicating with adults, future employers, and most importantly, their families at home. We believe that merging this piece into their education may provide some valuable additional support for something the youth seem to be expressing is very important to them.

- ✓ The data also show that 'word of mouth' was the most common way that youth learned of OYN. The program may consider creating a "youth ambassador" program that further trains and provides some compensation for its youth to "spread the word" or find avenues for having youth

recruit disengaged youth. Community events or partnerships with local social service providers that connect youth with OYN alumni are two possible methods.

- ✓ Explore with youth and staff what aspects of the reengagement process may be contributing to their feelings that the support provided to students during reengagement was only *moderately* or less effective.

- ✓ It appeared that parents were not much aware of the mental toughness training and what occurs during that time. Perhaps the program could share some more information regarding why the program provides this training to their young people, or the program could also communicate with parents after the experience regarding the success that their young person had during the training.

- ✓ Consider providing additional interventions and supports to students from special populations (particularly students with disabilities) to ensure that they are able to meet the requirements needed to obtain a high school diploma.

- ✓ Since the current initial evaluation was necessarily descriptive, and not comparative, and the initiative has now attained greater implementation fidelity, consider investing in/conducting a more rigorous comparative evaluation study of the OYN model to provide further evidence of program effectiveness and impact, the potential for scale, and to contribute to the evidence base for programs that serve opportunity youth populations.