Guinn CENTER

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL POLICY REPORT

Out-of-School Youth in Southern Nevada:

A Focus Group Analysis on Challenges Faced by Out-of-School Youth and Service Providers

Jaylin Hendricks

Research Analyst, Guinn Center
Lead Researcher

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1664 North Virginia Street
Mail Stop 0289
Reno, NV 89557

GUINNCENTER.ORG

(775) 682-5083   info@guinncenter.org

ABOUT THE GUINN CENTER

The Kenny Guinn Center for Policy Priorities is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy center addressing key challenges faced by policymakers in Nevada. We are affiliated with the University of Nevada, Reno, with researchers and collaborative partnerships at NSHE institutions across the state.

Founded in 2014 by a group of Nevadans who sought to advance new policy choices based on sound research, sensible and pragmatic thinking, and bold ideas, the Center is named for the late-Governor Kenny Guinn.

Our mission is to advance evidence-based policy solutions for Nevada through research, public engagement, and partnerships.

REPORT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The analysis and recommendations found in this report are those of the Guinn Center and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of United Way of Southern Nevada or Workforce Connections.

Views expressed by subjects and participants in this report are their own.

Introduction

In recent years, Nevada—at both a statewide and, in some cases, local county level—has seen a decrease in graduation rates and increase in chronic absenteeism (the percentage of students who are absent more than ten percent of enrolled school days).[1] Between the 2018-2019 and 2021-2022 school accountability years, Clark County School District (CCSD), in particular, saw a decrease in its graduation rate from 85.2 percent to 80.9 percent.[2] Chronic absenteeism in CCSD increased from 21.9 percent to 40.6 percent over the same time period.[3] These statistics, in part, provide some background as to why the topic of youth school dropouts has become an increasingly relevant and important subject in the conversation of youth education in Nevada.

To better understand the reasons young people in southern Nevada leave school as well as what types of resources best help young people (both while in-school and after they have left), the Guinn Center—in collaboration with Workforce Connections—facilitated two focus groups on these topics in 2022. This report summarizes and analyzes key findings from those groups. Focus group outcomes in this report are contextualized, when appropriate, with conclusions from related existing literature at both a state and national level.

The Guinn Center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan policy center affiliated with the University of Nevada, Reno. Workforce Connections is southern Nevada's Local Workforce Development Board and oversees the One-Stop Delivery System for southern Nevada's Local Workforce Development Area.

Background and Methodology

For this report, the Guinn Center—in collaboration with Workforce Connections—facilitated two 90-minute focus groups: one with out-of-school youth and one with out-of-school youth service providers. Participants in each of these groups were presented with a set of ten questions related to two main inquiries:

1. What are the primary reasons young people leave (or "drop out" of) school?

2. What resources best help young people succeed in their educational- and career-related goals (both while they are in school and after they have left)?

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[1] Nevada Deparement of Education. "Chronic Absenteeism." Available: https://doe.nv.gov/SafeRespectful Learning/Chronic_Absenteeism/

[2] Nevada Department of Education. "Cohort 4Yr Graduation Rates (Reported for Prior School Year)." Data Interaction for Nevada Accountability Portal. Available: http://nevadareportcard.nv.gov/di/report/summary_4? report=summary_4&scope=e32.y16.y19&organization=c2484&scores=Graduation_Rate,n_Graduate,n_Total,n_ AdjustedDiploma,n_AdultDiploma,n_AdvancedDiploma,n_AlternativeDiploma,n_CertHSA,n_Clgandcareerready Diploma,n_HSE,n_StandardDiploma&num=20&page=1&pagesize=20&domain=cohort4yr&

[3] Nevada Department of Education. "Chronic Absenteeism." Data Interaction for Nevada Accountability Portal. Available: http://nevadareportcard.nv.gov/di/report/reportcard_1?report=reportcard_1&scope=e33.y16.y19& organization=c2484&fields=309,310,311,313,318,320&hiddenfieldsid=309,310,311,313,318,320&scores=144 6&num=160&page=1&pagesize=20&domain=chronicabsenteeism&

Participants were all local to southern Nevada, specifically Clark County, as focus groups were held in-person at the office of Workforce Connections. Participants from both focus groups were recruited from one of the following organizations involved in youth workforce development services:

1. Youth Advocate Program (YAP);

2. HELP of Southern Nevada;

3. C2 Global Professional Services; and

4. Equus Workforce Solutions.

Workforce Connections, in collaboration with these organizations, assisted in the recruitment process. Participants for the youth focus group were required to meet two qualifications. At the time of recruitment, participants had to:

1. Either be an active or prior user of these organizations' services; and

2. Either be currently or previously categorized as an "out-of-school youth" as defined by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) guidelines.[4]

Participants in the service provider focus group were also required to meet two qualifications. At the time of recruitment, participants had to:

1. Be an active employee of one of these organizations; and

2. Be working in either a management or programmatic capacity in their position.

Specifically, The Guinn Center requested that organizations each provide two staff members to participate in the focus group: one staff member who oversees service provision (manager, supervisor, director, etc.) and one staff member in a programmatic position who works more directly with youth in providing services (predominantly "Career Coaches").The service provider focus group consisted of a total nine participants with a nearly 50/50 split in the number of managerial/programmatic staff in attendance (with five participants in attendance holding positions in the managerial category and four being based in programmatic positions).

Note that this report heavily emphasizes themes central to these focus group conclusions; so, it does not deeply address certain topics relevant to discussions regarding youth leaving school. For instance, existing literature observes that race and ethnicity play a noticeable role in indicating which student populations are more or less likely to drop out of school.[5] However, participants in

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[4] Workforce Connections. 2021. "Workforce Connections: Programs, Services and Activities: Eligibility for WIOA Title I Services." YTH-040-01. Available: https://nvworkforceconnections.org/wp-content/uploads/bsk-pdf-manager/2021/04/YTH-040-01-Eligibility-for-WIOA-Title-I-Services-Rev-No.9-04-27-2021-2.pdf

[5] Marquessa LaBrett Chappell. 2011. "Ethnicity, Gender, and High School Dropouts: A Case Study." Ph.D. Dissertation, Western Carolina University. Available: https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/wcu/f/chappellm2011.pdf

these focus group discussions did not heavily address this as a primary contributing factor to youth dropouts.

Focus Group Findings

Focus Group with Out-of-School Youth

The focus group held for out-of-school youth consisted of 12 participants. Participants in this youth focus group were presented with the following questions:

1. Let's all get introduced. As we go around the room, please state your first name and how you found out about your program.

2. How would you describe your overall experience with school?

3. How would you describe your overall experience leaving school?

4. What were the main reasons you stopped attending school?

    a. Did you face any specific challenges which made attending school particularly difficult?

5. Did you have any resources you found to be especially helpful when you were attending school?

    a. If so, what were they? If not, what resources do you wish you would have had?

6. Did you experience any barriers in learning about or accessing resources while you were in school?

7. Have you faced any additional challenges since leaving school?

    a. Have any of the challenges you faced previously improved or become more difficult?

8. What types of resources have best helped you accomplish your educational and career goals since you have been out of school?

9. Have you experienced any barriers in accessing resources since you have been out of school?

10. Do you have any additional questions or comments before we end this focus group?

As participants arrived at the focus group, they were given a printout that included this list of questions. Focus group facilitators encouraged participants to review the questions prior to the start of the session. Facilitators aimed to cover every question on this list, starting with Question 1 and working chronologically through Question 10 while allowing participants to guide the flow of conversation as much as possible. This resulted in, for instance, some questions being asked out of order, being discussed for a longer (or shorter) amount of time than others, or being discussed more than once.

The following section summarizes the main outcomes of this focus group by reviewing prominent themes that arose out of the discussion of these questions. Where appropriate, these themes are then complemented with research conclusions from related local and national research.

Concurrent Challenges

Questions in this focus group gave participants the opportunity to voice their experiences with challenges they faced that most influenced their decision to leave school (as well as issues they may have struggled with once they left school). Most participant responses to questions touching on these topics noted that youth who find themselves in a position where they are likely to leave school (or have already left school) are often struggling with a multitude of concurrent challenges which influence their school-related decisions, as opposed to any one particularly influential challenge.

The challenges focus group participants most frequently referenced were struggles with mental health and substance abuse issues. Multiple participants spoke about their personal experiences struggling with a variety of mental health challenges. These hardships included struggling to cope with a variety of life stressors such as family instability at home, feelings of hopelessness, and feelings of loneliness. Some youth also spoke about struggles living with psychiatric disorders and challenges with finding effective and affordable treatment services.

Multiple participants additionally spoke about personal challenges related to becoming a parent, including struggles managing unexpected pregnancies. Participants also spoke about the challenges of balancing parenting while simultaneously attending school, working, and striving to make career advancements (gaining higher wages, transferring into a new career field, et cetera).

Some participants dealing with substance abuse spoke about a connection between their abuse struggles and mental health challenges. One young person in particular spoke about drinking alcohol every day before school to cope with feelings of loneliness and isolation then continuing to drink even once they had made friends—drinking at that point had become a social activity and point of connection.

Existing literature—reports, surveys, and studies, among others—that have analyzed the main challenges facing youth today report similar conclusions as those identified by participants in this focus group. Specifically, struggles with substance abuse and mental health were frequently mentioned in relevant literature. For example, the *Behavioral Health Wellness and Prevention 2022 Epidemiologic Profile* recently released by Nevada's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) provides a comprehensive overview on the current state of youth behavioral health in Nevada and addresses both these topics (substance abuse and mental health) in their findings.

Key findings of this report noted that the percentage of Nevada high school and middle school students who self-reported feeling sad or hopeless as well as the percentage of high school students who self-reported considering or acting upon certain suicidal thoughts and actions rose to an all-

time high in 2020.[6] Similar trends are reflected in national data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated youth mental health issues that were reported to be on the rise even before 2020.[7]

Frustration with School Experiences

While a few focus group participants noted that they had a "fine" experience with school before they left, most expressed frustration toward various aspects of their school experience. Most of these frustrations involved participants feeling that they had received a poor quality of education or that the education they received was not useful or relevant to their lives. One young person in particular spoke about experiencing a noticeable drop in the overall quality of education they received after moving to (and attending school in) southern Nevada after previously living out-of-state.

In addition to frustrations regarding the quality of school curriculum, focus group participants expressed feeling unsupported during their time spent in school in a variety of ways. Participants wished they had more opportunities in school to learn about skills they considered important to their lives and, in particular, skills related to pursuing additional educational opportunities such as learning how to apply for financial aid or student loans.

Participants additionally felt unsupported by school staff while in school, especially by their teachers and counselors. They expressed feeling generally unsupported, while some young people had specific instances about which they felt particularly negative. For instance, one young person spoke about their personal struggles resulting from having components of their Individualized Education Program (IEP) unmet while in school. Multiple young people noted that although they struggled in the traditional school environment, they were able to thrive once they entered alternative programs (led by service providers) after they had left school. They stressed the positive impact receiving one-on-one support in these programs had in their lives and indicated that they wished schools offered more opportunities for students to receive one-on-one support and individualized tutoring.

Participants' views on this matter echo issues with Nevada school curriculum and staffing addressed by existing literature on this topic. In recent years Nevada has struggled with a statewide teacher shortage that was only exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-19. The State of Nevada addressed this issue with a variety of methods in recent years, including increasing recruitment of teachers from out-of-state, temporarily allowing for the hiring of emergency substitutes, and incentivizing new

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[6] Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Analytics. 2023. "Behavioral Health Wellness and Prevention 2022 Epidemiologic Profile: Nevada." Available: https://dhhs.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/dhhsnvgov/content/Programs/Office_of_Analytics/Bureau_of_Behavioral_Health_Wellness_and_Prevention,_Epidemiologic_Profile_for_Nevada,_2020.pdf

[7] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "New CDC Data Illuminate Youth Mental Health Threats During the COVID-19 Pandemic." CDC Newsroom. March 31, 2022. Available: https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html

teachers to enter the workforce via offers for tuition assistance and stipends for student teaching.[8] In addition to teacher shortages, data shows that Nevada schools are failing to meet recommended student-to-provider ratios for school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors. According to a 2022 report by DHHS, Nevada (statewide) would need 3.7 times as many school psychologists, 35 times as many social workers, and twice as many counselors in schools to meet recommended ratios.[9]

Considering the highly positive feedback participants expressed regarding their experiences accessing resources from service providers, these facts emphasize the important role providers play in delivering supplemental support for students in areas for which schools may be struggling. If youth in the general student population are facing challenges due to teacher and other staffing shortages, youth at risk of leaving school—who are often dealing with a myriad of additional personal challenges—are likely feeling the effects of these issues even more acutely.

Departure of High-Achieving Students from School

Multiple focus group participants expressed that they were academically high-achieving before leaving school, with high GPAs and even straight A's in some cases. These participants did not consider traditional education to be a good fit for them for a variety of reasons, including beliefs that: (1) the classes taken were not challenging enough; (2) the material taught would not be helpful for their long-term goals; and (3) the overall structure of traditional classes was not effective for them.

Some of these participants were able to access alternative programs once they left school in which they were able to better accomplish their goals. One student, in particular, noted that shortly after leaving school, they were connected with an early college program in which the student especially thrived. They graduated from this advanced program sooner than they would have at the school they were previously attending. Additionally, multiple students who identified as high-achievers in school stated that after leaving school they have found a more long-term educational and career "fit" by attending schools which offer training in trades (as opposed to the coursework taught in mainstream education).

Some national studies in recent years have made a move to categorize certain high-achieving youth as "at-risk," as research has shown that these young people are more likely to suffer from mental health issues—specifically, higher rates of anxiety and depression—and struggle more with

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[8] Nevada Department of Education. "Incentivizing Pathways to Teaching: 3,840 Pre-Service Nevada Educators to Receive Grants while Completing Coursework or Student Teaching." Available: https://doe.nv.gov/FedRelief Fund/Incentivizing_Pathways_to_Teaching__3,840_Pre-Service_Nevada_Educators_to_Receive_Grants_while_ Completing_Coursework_or_Student_Teaching/

[9] Stephanie Woodard, Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, Senior Advisor on Behavioral Health. "Improving Access to Behavioral Health Care in Nevada." Exhibit Prepared for the Nevada Legislature, Joint Interim Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, July 21, 2022. Available: https://www.leg.state.nv. us/App/InterimCommittee/REL/Document/27967

substance abuse than some of their peers.[10] With additional supports, high-achieving youth can work toward overcoming these obstacles. This concept seems applicable to both youth in these national studies as well as local youth participating in this focus group. This seems especially relevant as multiple self-identified "high-achievers" reported having struggled in a traditional educational setting and thriving once they were able to receive supports via involvement in alternative pathways.

High-achieving youth may not always have equitable access to helpful resources, such as additional mental health services or alternative educational pathways such as charter or trade schools. This seems especially true for at-risk youth who are already struggling with additional challenges. Discussions from this focus group seem to indicate that workforce development-oriented service organizations may help to fill this gap in resource access to certain youth populations and improve overall outcomes for these young people.

Additionally, efforts to retain high-achieving youth on the state level often target students entering college. Consider, for example, the state's provision of Nevada's Millennium Scholarship program, which provides financial support for high-achieving students attending one of Nevada's in-state colleges after graduating from high school.[11] Focus group participants reported struggling to navigate topics like financial aid and scholarships when considering college. High-achieving, disadvantaged youth lacking knowledge and access to resources on how to navigate education and careers beyond high school may be facing additional pressures that could lead to discouragement from school altogether.

Feedback on Service Providers: Serving a Long-Term Role

In this focus group discussion, participants' input regarding their experiences accessing out-of-school resources through their respective programs touched less on specific program components and more on overall program themes. For instance, multiple participants noted that they greatly prefer receiving services from staff they find relatable in some way (with whom they have shared cultural backgrounds, lifestyles, gender identities, et cetera). Participants expressed that they feel much more comfortable engaging in open conversations with staff whom share these similarities as they feel these individuals understand their struggles on a personal level.

Participants had mostly positive overall feedback regarding the quality of services they have received from their respective programs. Notably, multiple young adults in this group mentioned that their experiences with these providers had been so positive that they had utilized resources multiple times over the course of a few years. In one instance, a young adult who had utilized services previously

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[10] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2019. Vibrant and Healthy Kids: Aligning Science, Practice, and Policy to Advance Health Equity. Jennifer E. DeVoe, Amy Geller, and Yamrot Negussie, eds. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Available: https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/25466/ chapter/1#ii

[11] Nevada State Treasurer. "Governor Guinn Millennium Scholarship (GGMS) Information." Available: https://www.nevadatreasurer.gov/GGMS/GGMS_Info/

to obtain employment re-engaged in services to help them accomplish new career-related goals such as finding an improved, higher-paying job.

Focus group discussion seemed to indicate that, especially in instances where youth feel particularly connected to and emotionally supported by staff, the positive impact of utilizing program resources can last beyond just the provision of initial supports.

Focus Group with Out-of-School Youth Service Providers

The focus group for out-of-school youth service providers consisted of a total of nine participants. Participants in this service provider focus group were presented with the following questions:

1. Let's all get introduced. As we go around the room, please state your first name and the organization you are representing. Additionally, briefly explain your background working with youth.

2. What would you consider to be the most impactful factors which contribute to youth leaving school?

3. What types of resources have you found most helpful in preventing youth from leaving school?

4. How would you describe your overall experiences providing resources to both in-school and out-of-school youth?

5. What obstacles have you faced in providing resources to both in-school and out-of-school youth?

6. What types of challenges faced by in-school youth have you found most difficult to provide resources for?

    a. What about those challenges has been difficult to accommodate?

7. What types of challenges faced by out-of-school youth have you found most difficult to provide resources for?

    a. What about those challenges has been difficult to accommodate?

8. What types of resources have you found most helpful in assisting out-of-school youth with achieving their educational and career goals?

9. What feedback, if any, have you received from in-school youth regarding their experiences accessing and utilizing your provided resources?

    a. What feedback, if any, have you received from out-of-school youth regarding their experiences accessing and utilizing your provided resources?

10. Do you have any additional questions or comments before we end this focus group?

Perspectives on Challenges Faced by Youth

In their focus group, staff from organizations which provide services to out-of-school youth noted that—in their experience—the factors which most influence youth to leave school relate to gang violence, instability at home, and the pressure many young people face to take on additional family responsibilities (such as working to provide additional income for the family). Participants also noted that young people are frequently dealing with a multitude of concurrent challenges, such as struggling with being unhoused as well as dealing with mental health issues.

Participants also acknowledged the variety of challenges youth face in school, in addition to these outside factors. They expressed that they believe the quality of education in southern Nevada has become noticeably worse over time. Participants voiced that teachers seem less engaged, schools are less committed to success of individual students, et cetera. Because of this perspective, staff noted that they believe the most successful pathways for students are often non-traditional.

Experiences Working with In-School Youth

The population of in-school youth service provider organizations serve are defined by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) guidelines.[12] Multiple service provider focus group participants noted that while in-school youth seem to benefit the most from the services they offer, youth in-school are often the hardest to reach for a variety of reasons. In their view, in-school youth seem to be more concerned with certain stigmas regarding accessing services than out-of-school youth. They noted that in-school youth are often more reluctant to accept services as these youth feel that they "have it together" and do not need assistance. Additionally, staff stated that in-school youth are more likely to feel worried about their peers "finding out" that they are utilizing these services than out-of-school youth.

Participants also noted that working with different types of youth populations comes with varying logistical challenges. For example, the school schedules of in-school youth often overlap with organizational business hours which can make it challenging for providers to schedule times in which they can meet with youth (especially on a consistent basis).

Frustrations with Navigating Existing Systems

Another theme prominent in the service provider focus group was frustrations expressed by multiple participants regarding certain negative interactions the youth they serve have with outside groups/organizations, as well as logistical challenges between participants themselves and staff from other organizations with whom they collaborate. For instance, building upon the criticism raised by participants that the overall quality of education has declined in recent years, staff also noted that schools tend to be "quick to kick kids out" due to behavioral or other related issues. Participants noted this approach tends to exacerbate existing challenges faced by young people in these stressful

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[12] Workforce Connections. 2021. "Workforce Connections: Programs, Services and Activities: Eligibility for WIOA Title I Services." YTH-040-01. Available: https://nvworkforceconnections.org/wp-content/uploads/bsk-pdf-manager/2021/04/YTH-040-01-Eligibility-for-WIOA-Title-I-Services-Rev-No.9-04-27-2021-2.pdf

situations, as opposed to resolving the underlying issues causing behavioral problems (such as struggles students may be experiencing related to family instability at home).

Relatedly, staff also noted that certain organizations seem quick to move unhoused youth through their shelter facilities. This particular issue leads to a variety of challenges for both these young adults—as housing instability often brings about a multitude of other stressors for youth—as well as service organizations who must collaborate with the shelter facilities. For instance, the mobility and transient nature of unhoused youth can make it difficult for providers to consistently contact and support the needs of these young people.

Participants also noted that young people in need of their services often must pass through or interact with multiple organizations to access a variety of needed resources and supports, and youth can become easily disengaged due to the complexity of these interactions. The operational and reporting requirements of organizations often requires youth to navigate and complete large quantities of paperwork, answer difficult, personal questions, and other intimidating elements that can easily overwhelm those who are already struggling in various areas of their personal lives. This is especially relevant considering service provider staff noted that students today often experience issues of instability within the home, and requirements related to the completion of paperwork often requires the involvement of students' parents or guardians, at least to an extent.

The overwhelming and complex nature of all these requirements contributed to participants stating that, in many ways, providing emotional support to young people as they navigate services is one of the most important roles for providers when supporting the success of these individuals. Providers further emphasized that even small acts of emotional support can go a long way in terms of positively contributing to the success of these individuals. Students seeking the services of these organizations often do not have a supportive home environment to return to at the end of every day, so staff support might be the only active encouragement certain young people receive in their lives.

In addition to these challenges faced by youth, participants noted that the need for young people to access multiple services simultaneously can create a variety of logistical issues that can make it more difficult for providers to effectively support youth with needed resources. For instance, staff noted that it can be difficult for them to consistently meet with young people, as they often need to dedicate time to meet separately with other organizations. In this discussion, participants noted a hope for greater cohesion between relevant service providers going forward to ensure that they are all able to serve youth as effectively as possible and reduce the logistical and emotional burdens that navigating such processes and programs can cause.

Impact of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Work Restrictions

Workforce development boards across the country—including Workforce Connections—receive funding from WIOA for workforce development initiatives. Focus group participants additionally noted that various restrictions imposed on service providers by WIOA—including guidelines limiting certain percentages of funding to "out-of-school" and "in-school" youth—negatively restrict the work they do. They noted, for instance, that the federal nature of the WIOA funding they receive prevents

them from being able to offer services to certain student populations—namely, those with DACA status (or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals).

Participants noted that in instances in which providers must deny services to DACA youth, they are able to direct these young people to other non-federally funded organizations, such as food banks. However, in terms of support related to workforce development topics—such as career-readiness and education fulfilment—there are few helpful resources available to DACA students. Providers also noted that, from their perspective, these students at times are both in most need of the services they offer and the most ready and willing to access and accept them.

In addition to DACA students, multiple participants expressed their needing to turn down other young adults attempting to access services as, at times, they do not have the capacity to take in any additional referrals. Staff noted that one of the main causes of this is funding restrictions imposed by WIOA which restrict the amount of funding organizations may spend on certain categories of youth. In recent years, this limit was set to specify that no more than 25 percent of funds can be spent on in-school youth, and at least 75 percent on out-of-school youth.[13] This funding split represents an increase from the former requirement (pursuant to the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) that at least 30 percent of funds must be spent on out-of-school youth.[14] This funding restriction has meant that, at times, even if organizations more broadly had the capacity to support additional young adults seeking services, staff were unable to provide them with services (if these youth were in a category that had already maxed out its funding capacity).

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) (which administers WIOA) does provide states the opportunity to submit a waiver, on an annual basis, to request a temporary adjustment of these funding restrictions. Most commonly, these waivers (in place for states who have requested and received one) shift funding restrictions to the amounts of 50% for in-school youth and 50% for out-of-school youth (a 50/50 split). Staff noted that acceptance of these waivers and subsequent funding adjustments in recent years has helped alleviate these issues and allowed them to better serve young adults seeking their services. However, according to these organizations, adjustment of these percentages on an annual, waiver-based basis has created various logistical issues. Participants noted that, for instance, given there is no long-term guarantee that these waivers will continue to be accepted, organizations struggle to make plans for long-term growth and expansion of services to additional youth. Staff are therefore hesitant to make any programmatic changes or improvements that may result in young people being put in a position whereby their services might be taken away if waivers are not continuously re-approved.

A review of the DOL's record of state waiver applications (and waiver decisions) in recent years reflects that Nevada is not the only state struggling under this funding guideline. Of all waiver

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[13] State of Wisconsin, Department of Workforce Development. 2016. "Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA): Program Guidance for Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth Programs." Available: https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/wioa/pdf/py15-wioa-title1b-prgm-guidelines-update.pdf
[14] 20 C.F.R. § 664. Available: https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-20/chapter-V/part-664

requests (for matters related to WIOA guidelines and restrictions) submitted by states nationwide to the DOL for years 2020, 2021, and 2022, slightly over 50 percent included requests for adjustments of this 25 percent/75 percent split.[15] Nevada's waiver requests for these years included requests for adjustments to this split; in the case of Nevada, they repeatedly requested (and were approved) a 50/50 split. During these three years, the DOL overwhelmingly approved most states' requests—including Nevada's—for waivers related to this funding distribution.

In addition to these records, an implementation study that was funded by DOL underscores the additional challenges states have faced related to accommodating this funding split.[16] This study noted that the service provider landscape can vary greatly state-to-state, and while most state respondents interviewed for this study expressed concern with this funding shift, others had no issue with it. Extremes varied from certain states having to rely on local partnerships and other funding sources to supplement gaps they experience in providing services to in-school youth, to certain local boards reporting that they served no in-school youth (during the identified time period).

In addition to workforce boards having reported facing logistical issues with service provision due to this funding allocation, respondents of this study noted concerns with the potential negative impacts this requirement could have on youth. Specifically, "some respondents noted that helping youth with barriers stay in school would be more efficient and less costly than waiting until after they dropped out, which could also create additional trauma for this population."[17] Although the implementation study did not include Nevada in its list of states analyzed, supplemental research—such as findings from these focus groups or research conducted by local workforce development boards—help situate challenges faced in Nevada in a broader, more national context.

Conclusion

Concluding Remarks

With some exceptions, the majority of themes and outcomes uncovered by these focus group sessions aligns with findings in relevant existing literature. Additionally, certain themes were identified by both the out-of-school youth and the out-of-school youth service providers focus groups. For instance, both groups acknowledged the important role that service providers play in providing emotional support for youth accessing their resources.

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[15] U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. "WIOA Waiver Information." Available: https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wioa/waivers

[16] U.S. Department of Labor, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy. 2021. "Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Implementation Study: Title I and Title III Core Programs." Available: https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/WIOA-implementation-study

[17] U.S. Department of Labor, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy. 2021. "Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Implementation Study: Title I and Title III Core Programs." Available: https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies/WIOA-implementation-study

Conclusions from the Out-of-School Youth Focus Group

Participants in the youth focus group expressed difficulties with a variety of challenges that have been widely acknowledged to pose obstacles for youth in school, including struggles with mental health and substance abuse. Participants also discussed challenges less-widely known in current literature that contribute to youth dropouts, such as the emotional and mental struggles faced by youth who self-identify as high-achieving in school.

Overall, participants in the youth focus group spoke highly of the supports they have received from their respective service provider organizations and critically of their experiences attending school. They spoke about the positive long-term impacts these supports have had on their lives and noted many specific accomplishments achieved with the support of these service providers, such as early graduation from college programs and increased wages. These testimonies speak to the role these organizations play in filling gaps within support systems faced by students in southern Nevada, whether that be in the form of providing young people with needed emotional support to navigate challenging life circumstances or connecting youth with educational programs and career opportunities that better suit their needs.

Conclusions from the Service Provider Focus Group

Themes from the focus group for service providers touched on challenges faced by youth but primarily related to challenges faced in providing resources to this population. The main challenges in service provisions identified by participants of this group include struggles faced in collaborating with organizations in the processing and provision of youth services, and limitations resulting from WIOA funding restrictions.

The challenges identified by participants related to these WIOA restrictions are, to some extent, shared by other workforce development boards and agencies in states across the nation. This is exemplified by the high number of waivers submitted to DOL by many states requesting temporary funding adjustments, as well as the outcomes of an implementation study which collected feedback on states' perspectives of these restrictions.

Future Research Needs

Areas for further research to better understand challenges faced by youth and service providers on the topic of school dropouts and the provision of workforce development resources may involve the facilitation of additional focus groups, along with supplemental surveys to probe more deeply into conclusions from these (and any future) focus groups. Additionally, as Nevada was not included in the 2021 implementation study regarding operationalizing WIOA changes, the provision of a similar study (focused on processes and outcomes in Nevada) might help further contextualize Nevada outcomes on a nationwide basis.

Policy Considerations

In addition to these areas for future research, organizations working in the field of youth workforce development—such as Workforce Connections and its youth service providers (Youth Advocate Program, HELP of Southern Nevada, C2 Global Professional Services, Equus Workforce Solutions, etc.)—may wish to also take note of the following policy considerations.

Updates to Service Provision Policies, Practices, and Procedures

While participants in the youth focus group voiced mostly positive feedback regarding their experiences utilizing services from providers, they noted a need for greater representation and diversity in the pool of staff from whom young people receive services. Awareness of the demographic composition of youth in Clark County can help inform the types of populations service providers should aim to represent in their staffing. For instance, data from the Nevada Report Card—a data interface which "provides State, district and school level reporting data to the public in a user friendly format"—for the 2021-2022 school accountability year shows that student enrollees of color in the school district for that year neared 80 percent.[18] Service providers might aim not just to meet traditional workplace staffing policies and practices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, but also work to ensure those goals are being met in a way that is thoughtful about the populations of young people they serve.

In addition to this youth feedback, participants in the focus group for service providers identified another potential area for operational change by workforce development partners: Additional outreach via expanded business hours. In their focus group discussions, service providers noted the importance of the services they provide to in-school youth but also noted that they face challenges in accessing this population of young people as school schedules frequently conflict with standard organizational business hours. Staggered or expanded business hours may help close this resource gap as well as the expansion of existing programming in outside locations (community centers, libraries, etc.) whose business hours may differ from what certain organizations may be able to offer. This type of adjustment would benefit not just in-school youth but also out-of-school youth, as these young people often have work hours, additional schooling, or parental obligations which additionally conflict with standard business hours.

Additional Staff Trainings on Dedicated Topics

In addition to maintaining "thoughtful" staffing practices, service providers may also want to ensure their training techniques for both new and existing staff members are sensitive to and inclusive of demographic considerations regarding the youth they serve. For instance, as of June 2021, an estimated 75 percent of students in CCSD qualified for free or reduced meals (households at or below

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[18] Nevada Department of Education. "Demographic Profile: Year 2021-2022." Data Interaction for Nevada Accountability Portal. Available: http://nevadareportcard.nv.gov/di/report/reportcard_1?report=reportcard_1&scope=e7.y19&organization=c2272&fields=309,310,311,313,318,320&hiddenfieldsid=309,310,311,313,318,320&scores=573,574,575,805,576,577,806,584,1039&num=160&page=1&pagesize=20&domain=demoprof&

130 percent of the federal poverty line qualify for these meals).[19] Additionally, a 2019 Guinn Center blog post noted that, at the time, the average transiency rate across CCSD schools was 24 percent.[20] Workforce development service providers might ensure that their staff trainings are designed with awareness of and attention to the variety of challenges students face due to demographic considerations such as race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other living considerations.

In addition to these considerations, trainings might also equip service providers with awareness of the variety of mental health issues faced by youth today. Participants in both the focus groups for youth and service providers noted that mental health struggles are one of the most prominent challenges facing youth and that providing emotional support for mental health and other issues is one of the most important roles service providers play in their interactions with youth. Staff trainings related to youth mental health issues might touch on topics relevant to assisting staff in both identifying when young people are struggling with these types of issues, as well as preparing staff on how to best connect young people to resources helpful in resolving these issues.

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[19] April Corbin Girnus. "CCSD to Continue Providing Free Meals for Students Through 2025." *Nevada Current*. October 12, 2021. Available: https://www.nevadacurrent.com/blog/ccsd-to-continue-providing-free-meals-for-students-through-2025/

[20] Nancy E. Brune. 2019. "The Housing-Education Nexus." Available: https://guinncenter.org/the-housing-education-nexus/

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