The Impact of Summer Youth Employment Programs on Academic Outcomes in Boston

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Education, Labor Markets

Location: Boston, MA, United States of America

Sample: 4,235 youth ages 14-to-24 years old

Target group: Students Urban population Youth

Outcome of interest: Dropout and graduation Enrollment and attendance Aspirations Socio-emotional development

Intervention type: Employment

Research Papers: School's Out: How Summer Youth Employment Programs Impact Academic Outcomes

Partner organization(s): Boston Mayor's Office of Workforce Development (OWD), Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD), Third Sector Capital Partners, William T. Grant Foundation

Only 78 percent of low-income students graduate from high school on time, fueled by challenges such as chronic absenteeism, which disproportionately hurt students of color. Researchers evaluated the impact of Boston's Summer Youth Employment Program, which uses a lottery to provide youth with part-time work and skills training during the summer, on students' educational outcomes. The program significantly increased high school graduation rates among participating students, partly by reducing dropout and absenteeism rates.

Policy issue

In the United States, only 78 percent of low-income students graduate on time, fueled by challenges such as chronic absenteeism which has seen rates potentially doubling during the Covid-19 pandemic. Barriers such as structural racism have made these challenges larger for students of color, who experience higher rates of absenteeism and lower rates of graduation than their white classmates. Without effective solutions to these challenges, millions of students will lose out on the education they are entitled to, which will cement lifelong economic consequences and racial disparities.

Researchers and policymakers, with the hope of closing academic achievement gaps along socioeconomic lines, have increasingly focused on how time spent outside of the classroom, including early work experience, can affect student outcomes. For example, Summer youth employment programs (SYEPs) place qualifying youth, often from low-income households, in a part-time, paid job with a local government agency, community organization, or business for the summer. Cities, with the help of state and federal grants and local philanthropic support, subsidize participants' wages. Some SYEPs aim to increase skills and access to mentorship over the summer with the specific goal of improving future educational outcomes (like school attendance, grades, and graduation) for students. Can out-of-school programs, such as SYEPs, and time spent outside the classroom have an impact on

student outcomes?

Context of the evaluation

The Boston Mayor's Office of Workforce Development operates a citywide SYEP designed to connect approximately 10,000 youth with employment for six weeks each summer. Youth in the program are paid the state minimum wage to work for up to 25 hours per week at one of about 900 local employers and receive an additional twenty hours of job-readiness training. The job-readiness curriculum is designed to support youth with both practical job skills (e.g., drafting resumes and cover letters) and "soft" skills such as conflict resolution and communication. Employers are a combination of private companies, nonprofits, and city agencies. All Boston residents between the ages of 14 and 24 are eligible to apply to the SYEP. Youth apply through local intermediaries under contract with the Mayor's Office, like Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) with whom the researchers partnered for this project.



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Details of the intervention

Researchers evaluated the impact of ABCD's SYEP program on student outcomes. In 2015, 4,235 youth applied to the SYEP through ABCD. Due to the high number of applicants, ABCD used a lottery system to select youth for participation in the program, randomly offering jobs to 1,186 youth and not offering jobs to 3,049 youth in the comparison group. Applicants were predominantly youth of color (over ninety percent), with roughly fifty percent identifying as Black or African American. There were also slightly more women and girls, with just over half of applicants identifying as female.

Researchers matched program data to administrative school records and followed students over four years after the program to estimate the impact of being offered an SYEP job on both high school graduation rates and other educational outcomes, such as attendance and grades.

Results and policy lessons

SYEP participants were 4.4 percentage points more likely to graduate high school on time compared to students in the comparison group, an increase of 7 percent. This was partly due to the SYEP having a positive impact on students staying in school, decreasing the dropout rate among program students by 2.5 percentage points. The SYEP also increased attendance by 2.4 percentage points (an increase of 2.7 percent), mainly by reducing the number of unexcused absences by 2.1 days and reducing chronic absenteeism by 5.9 percentage points. Program students also saw an increase in their GPA in the first year following the SYEP, but the benefits faded in the second year unless they were accepted into the SYEP again the following summer. The program had no impact on reducing course failures.

This research provides robust evidence that SYEPs can positively impact graduation rates, helping more students reach graduation by improving their attendance and reducing their dropout rates. Simple estimates of the cost-benefit ratio suggest that the program produces more than $2 in long-term benefits for every $1 put in. This suggests that SYEPs can not only improve educational outcomes, but do so effectively, providing cities a cost-effective strategy for tackling challenges in education.

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